Brokers of Legitimacy: Intellectuals and Politics in Early Republican China

Shakhar Rahav

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol73/iss73/6
This article discusses the role of intellectuals in Chinese politics in the twentieth century. I will argue that intellectuals, particularly what I call political intellectuals, emerged as a category of identity in the early years of the Republic of China between 1912 and 1927. I will then try to argue that political intellectuals positioned themselves as brokers of political legitimacy. Political intellectuals thereby formed a part of a rapidly evolving political culture at that time, one which saw the emergence of mass politics based on political parties.

The historiography of twentieth-century China tends to depict intellectuals after the 1910s as wholly different from earlier intellectuals. Standard textbook accounts rarely mention intellectuals before the 1910s -- with a few outstanding exceptions such as Kang Youwei 康有為, Liang Qichao 梁啓超, or Zhang Binglin 章炳麟.

Yet after the 1910s the term “intellectuals” surfaces increasingly, and the historiography describes a greater number of people than ever as intellectuals who intervene in culture and politics. One might argue that the main thing that changed was not the position of educated elites in politics but rather their role in writing history and that after 1920 they dominated much of the history writing, depicting therefore their own social group as crucial to the events of the time.¹ Others might argue that this is merely a matter of terminology.²

While there is much to support these views, they do not preclude an actual change in the role of intellectuals in society. I therefore propose that not only the historiography changed after 1919 but also that educated elites did indeed carve a new role for themselves in a political culture that they helped remold.

My question then can be formulated as follows: what is it that changed in the role Chinese intellectuals played after 1920?

I will open with a few remarks on the term “intellectual.” Then, I will sketch the role of educated elites, or intellectuals, in the imperial period, the role before the changes took place in the waning years of the Qing and the early Republic. I will then argue that in the late

---


1910s and early 1920s the role of intellectuals changed as they became what I call “brokers of political legitimacy.”

**Intellectuals**

The term “intellectual” was coined at the turn of the twentieth century by nationalist French thinkers as a pejorative term for supporters of the alleged traitor Alfred Dreyfus. These thinkers appropriated the term, and it became their identifier. The term has come to denote social groups and individuals usually based upon their education and occupations that have to do with abstract thinking. As its history shows us, the term itself originated in a context of political strife and, perhaps for this reason, the term often retains its association with politics and with political dissent.

The classical formulation of the intellectual as political dissenter was outlined by Julien Benda in *La Trahison des Clercs*, who accused intellectuals of not living up to an ideal of resistance. For some, the term “intellectual” has come to imply conscientious dissent—speaking truth to power—in the name of higher ideals. We might question whether a term that originated in such a specific context is universally applicable and whether it accurately describes different societies.

For the purposes of this essay suffice it to say that much of the scholarship that discusses intellectuals, in any case, does assume that the term is universally applicable. Indeed, the idea or trope of the loyal intellectual scholar official remonstrating against political power in the name of higher ideal existed in China as well.

**Intellectuals in Imperial China**

In order to understand the position of educated elites in Chinese society in the late imperial period, we must take into account two factors. The first has to do with the institutional setting within which intellectual elites operated. The second has to do with an ethos that this group adopted.

Regarding the institutional framework: the relationship of Chinese intellectuals to the state and their position in society was determined above all by means of the imperial civil service examination system (*keju* 科舉). As early as the second century BCE, the Chinese empire used exams to recruit at least some bureaucrats. Examinations for the civil service began to be implemented again during the Sui dynasty (581-617); and in the course of the Song

---


dynasty (960-1279) the examination system became firmly institutionalized as the premiere channel for attaining government positions. Due to the centralized nature of the Chinese state passing the exams became the most promising channel to attaining and maintaining power, status, and wealth. The examination system tested mastery of classical, canonical texts and commentaries, which were presumed to convey moral principles, which were to direct governance, and the ability to produce texts in a similarly refined style. There were different levels of exams, and the success in the highest level of examinations held in the national capital promised a position in the governmental bureaucracy. Most education in imperial China was therefore directed toward the civil service exams.

In this system, the pinnacle of scholarly knowledge was therefore identified with government position, not merely as a scholar, but as an official. The ideal official was a scholar, and the ideal scholar a dedicated official. The state was ideally taken to be one whose bureaucracy is composed of scholar-officials, ideally men of worth (junzi 君子) who implement a moral order. Naturally, many of the most celebrated cultural figures in Chinese tradition were either officials or had failed to pass the exams. For example, the essayist and poet Su Dongpo 蘇東坡 (1037-1071) was also an official, whereas the renowned poet Li Bai 李白 (or Li Po, 712-770) failed the exams.

This leads to the second point I wish to make, that is, there was an ethos that accompanied the institutional position of intellectuals or educated elites. Ideally, Chinese educated elites were to serve the state. However, rulers themselves were presumed to draw legitimacy from the so-called “mandate of Heaven.” Thus, many of the scholar-officials saw themselves as serving the state, but under the aegis of a yet higher source of legitimacy, or serving the state but beholden to standards that were not identical with the policies of the reigning court.

This ideal was exemplified in the well-known maxim (Xian tian xia zhi you er you, hou tian xia zhi le er le 先天下之憂而憂, 後天下之樂而樂) coined by the Song dynasty scholar-official Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989-1052): “Be the first to worry about the worries of the world, the last to take pleasure in its pleasures.”

This maxim itself is cited to this day by Chinese intellectuals as a justification or explanation for their actions, views, and position in the society. The ideal of serving the state so as to benefit the society by imparting moral principles to the ruler (not as a scholar-official but as an independent adviser) was exemplified by the ancient scholar Mencius (Mengzi 孟子) in the text that bears his name. Most of the Mencius consists of dialogues between the itinerant scholar (though not an official) Mencius, and kings of kingdoms in the pre-imperial period. In these texts Mencius remonstrates with the

---

6 For the persistence of this image, which is also self-serving, see for example Davies, Worrying About China (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.17 and passim; Perry Link, Evening Chats in Beijing: Probing China’s Predicament (New York: Norton, 1992), p.12 and passim. For an inquiry into late Ming and early Qing literati as dissidents see Frederic Wakeman Jr. “The Price of Autonomy: Intellectuals in Ming and Ch’ing China” in in Daedalus Spring 1972.
kings, calling on them to rule in a just manner, which, he argues, will also be efficacious. The important point is that *Mencius* became canonized as one of the four books (四書) which were fundamental texts in preparing for the exams and were used to teach small children as well. It therefore formed part of the basic curriculum at all educational levels between the 10th and 20th centuries.

The image of the intellectual as one who dissents against a particular regime, often in the name of the people, persisted far beyond the demise of the imperial examination system and well into the twentieth century, for example in the events and student protests of spring 1989. Recent expressions of this view can be found in the political stances of dissident critic and winner of the 2010 Noble Peace Prize Liu Xiaobo and the contemporary novelist Yu Hua, who in a recent collection of essays states “when in this book I write of China’s pain, I am registering my pain too, because China’s pain is mine.”

**The End of the Imperial Order**

However, by the late nineteenth century the relationship between the educated elite and the imperial court had become frayed due to social, political, and intellectual changes. During the previous hundred years China had experienced vast rebellions and civil wars (most notably the Taiping war, 1851-1864), and was challenged by expanding European imperialism and gunboat diplomacy. Members of the educated elite increasingly viewed the bureaucratic structure and its intellectual underpinnings as inadequate for addressing China’s pressing problems. At the same time, alternative routes to social mobility emerged, most prominently the accumulation of wealth.

Together these developments meant that the status of scholarly learning was eroded and the linkage between classical learning, the examination system, and the imperial bureaucracy was weakened. This fraying finally received official institutional recognition when the examination system was abolished in 1905. It is no coincidence that the imperial regime itself crumbled in 1911 and it was replaced by a new “Republic of China.”

The new Republic was born with many high hopes among the educated elites. Hopes, however, soon disintegrated, as political strife emerged and China degenerated -- first into a dictatorship and then into a weak state partitioned among local strongmen (or warlords), and finally into a civil war. This period of social ill, however, proved to be a period of great creativity. Chinese intellectuals, in an attempt to respond to the crises of the times,

---


experimented with various schemes for ordering the state and society along with the new ways of defining their own position in Chinese society.

In a period dubbed in retrospect “the May Fourth Movement” (parts of which were called the “New Culture Movement”), Chinese intellectuals enthusiastically explored foreign cultures and ideas. Intellectuals now translated, read, and discussed ideas in a plethora of fields, from science to music, to health, family, gender relations, sports and physical fitness, theology, and politics. This explosion of intellectual exploration was enabled by a growing readership and a growing publishing industry, primarily in the form of periodicals. These periodicals varied in circulation and in scope from several dozens to around 16,000. Some periodicals sustained publication for several years, while others published a mere handful of issues or even a single issue before collapsing or being shut down.  

Another crucial venue for these discussions and explorations were small cultural-political societies that sprang up in urban centers across China. This intellectual and cultural fermentation climaxed in the summer of 1919 during “The May Fourth Movement” when students, merchants, and other urbanites took to the streets to protest increasing Japanese incursions into China and the ratification of these incursions by the Versailles Conference.

Intellectuals levelled criticism at the policies of the weak, putative national government, and the warlords who dominated most of China. Moreover, they launched fierce attacks on traditional values and institutions—such as filial piety, the traditional family structure, and Neo-Confucian thought—which they saw as responsible for China’s crises. These criticisms were very much informed by the study of foreign ideas, state and society as well as of social order.

Educated elites debated the merits of different views of social order, introduced these views to the right audience where possible, and even tried to implement them. The most noted examples of the study of foreign systems of administration, ideology, and politics would be the interest of Chinese intellectuals in different forms of socialism, liberalism, and nationalism.

One fine example of the curiosity of intellectual elites and of the eclectic and probing nature of their inquiries is a young teacher, journalist, and activist named Yun Daiying. In his journal Yun recorded his readings of Thomas More’s *Utopia* as well as the Chinese novel Dream of the Red Chamber (also known as *The Story of the Stone*). When planning a book series for one of the most important cultural societies of the time (the Young China Association 少年中國學會), the topics that Yun proposed included Kropotkin and his


theories, Russell and his theories, Dewey and his theories, Darwin and his theories, Proudhon and his theories, the materialistic vision of history, democracy, Bolshevism, experimentalism (試驗主義), foundations of morality, the question of labor, the question of women, elementary-level village education, research on middle education, anarchism, Japan, the international movement, and mass psychology.\textsuperscript{13}

The ideological experiments and explorations of educated elites, especially the youth, led to a new wave of organizations. Now like-minded youth gathered to explore similar cultural and political interests. Some of these explorations also resulted in the construction of small communes, though most of which were short-lived.\textsuperscript{14}

In the late teens and early twenties these interests and experiments resulted in a host of small cultural-political societies diffused across China, mainly in large urban centers such as the Mutual Aid Society and Benefit the Masses Book Society in Wuhan; the Marxism Study Society in Beijing; the New Citizen Society in Changsha, of which Mao Zedong was a member; and the Young China Association. These small societies formed an infrastructure out of which new political organizations eventually emerged, including such parties as the Chinese Youth Party (Qingnian dang 青年黨), the Nationalist Party (國民黨), and the Communist Party (共産黨). These parties shaped China in the twentieth century and have remained central to Chinese politics to this day; the Communist Party still rules China whereas the Nationalist Party, although it now operates in a democracy, remains a major factor in Taiwanese politics and currently holds power.

The emergence of Chinese political intellectuals then is closely tied to the appearance of mass political parties, that is, parties claiming to speak in the name of the masses or the people. As such they have based their claim to authority on their representing the best interests of the people or the nation.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Brokers of Legitimacy}

In China’s post-imperial political chaos one acute problem that not only actual contenders for political power such as politicians and warlords but also all those who had an interest in politics or in national affairs have faced was the absence of a clear source of political legitimacy.

\textsuperscript{13} Shaonian zhongguo, vol.1, no. 11, May 1920, p.55.
\textsuperscript{14} For example the “new village movement” that took root in 1919 and 1920 and led to several urban communes, such as the Beijing Work Study Mutual Aid Corps [Beijing gongdu huzhu tuan], the Morning Garden Scoeity [Xi Yuan], or the Wuhan Benefit the Masses Book Society [Liqun shushe]. I elaborate on some of these groups in “A May Fourth Peach Garden” in Twentieth Century China, November 2007; “Yun Daiying and the Rise of Political Intellectuals in Modern China”, Ph.D. dissertation, Berkeley 2007.
\textsuperscript{15} Political parties appeared in China during the 1910s as well. These, however, were mostly small and elitist organizations that were designed to leave power in the hands of their members rather than to recruit lay people and mobilize the masses.
The absence of a clear and agreed-upon source of political legitimacy had also to do with a crisis of identity. Historian Joseph Levenson highlighted the dilemmas of Chinese intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as they struggled to determine their own identities. For the problem, as Levenson pointed out, was not simply a matter of describing oneself but of searching for a morally acceptable basis for one’s identity; in other words, consolidating a foundation for one’s identity that he or she would see as legitimate.

In the small cultural-political societies of the time, educated young men and occasionally women cultivated their moral identities. These identities provided the basis and legitimacy for a critique of politics and society, a critique that was based on these youngsters’ sense of their own moral rectitude. Relying on their image and aspiration to be moral paragons, and on the historical legacy of the role of educated elites under the imperial regime, young intellectuals felt justified in positioning themselves as social critics who adjudicated the legitimacy of ideas, policies, and politicians. At the same time they suggested alternative social and political arrangements. By pointing to alternative possibilities of organizing state and society, they expanded the political discourse and the political imagination of their peers. In so doing they were part of the changing political scene, as organizations and institutions were created to try to embody these ideals. They thus had an essential role in shaping the emergence of political parties.

Criticisms of the current order along with proposals for alternative orders were made in speech and writing. As print media circulation grew, its producers gained influence. Writers, editors, and publishers—the producers of media—therefore rose in importance. May Fourth left a legacy of significant ties between politics and the press and therefore between politics and the producers of media. By the mid-1920s the print media had established itself as a tool for political mobilization.

Ideological parties, the press, and its producers therefore all grew together. The process by which they grew also meant a transformation of political culture. Producers of the new media introduced and developed new cultural and political concepts, thereby assuming a role as mediators of legitimacy. In the course of the May Fourth movement and the new culture movement, intellectuals changed from advisers (who due to the civil-service examinations had been reliant on the state) into brokers of legitimacy, mediating between the contenders for power—the political parties and the state—and the masses, whose will or support was invoked as the basis for legitimacy.


17 Reed, “Advancing the (Gutenberg) Revolution” in Christopher Reed and Cynthia Brokaw eds., *From Woodblocks to the Internet: Chinese Publishing and Print Culture in Transition, circa 1800 to 2008* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 275.
Political power increasingly drew its legitimacy from the putative support of the people, and therefore sought to mobilize large numbers of people in its support. The 1920s saw larger numbers of people than ever commenting on political affairs, taking part in demonstrations and strikes, and increasingly joining political parties.

Conclusion

The more politics involved mass political parties, the more intellectuals constituted an indelible part of political culture. Intellectuals positioned themselves as what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called “legislators” of social and political norms who make authoritative statements which arbitrate in controversies of opinions and which select those opinions which, having been selected, become correct and binding. The authority to arbitrate is in this case legitimized by superior (objective) knowledge to which intellectuals have a better access than the non-intellectual part of society.\(^1\)

As legislators of social and political norms, intellectuals now became brokers of political legitimacy. A new political culture was thus constructed in a way which provided for the interests of its different constituents. Those who aspired to power required intellectuals to articulate ideas and convey them to the wider public as well as to recruit supporters. The political public benefitted from intermediaries who could serve as conduits to the leadership while providing insight into the leadership’s aims. In return, intellectuals themselves gained power from their position as mediators.

The new role of intellectuals was also reflected in the changing ways in which they referred to themselves as a distinct social group with its own characteristics and interests.\(^2\) Since the early twentieth century, intellectuals were viewed as constituting a zhishijieji 知識階級—“intellectual class” (though not in a Marxian sense), a term based on ancient concepts of occupations. In the 1920s, under the influence of Marxist theory, intellectuals began to refer to themselves as zhishifenzi 知識分子—which literally means “knowledgeable elements,” a term that the Communist Party adopted and later became a category of formal classification.\(^3\)

\(^1\) Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 4-5. This view is reminiscent of Edward Shils’ view of intellectuals. According to Shils, intellectuals function as mediators with access to the symbols and values of a society. Shils, “The Intellectuals and the Powers.”

\(^2\) For example, May Fourth activist Yun Daiying implicitly and explicitly discussed intelligentsia as distinct from masses in e.g.: Yun Daiying *riji*, 328–329, 332; Yun Daiying, “Geming de jiazhi”, *Yun Daiying wenji*, (Beijing: Renmin chuban she, 1984) vol.1, pp.224-227.

It should be noted that this change in the position of intellectuals occurred in tandem with the emergence and growth of many new professions and occupations in China—such as lawyers, journalists, then academics and scientists—and the change in its labor structure with the expansion of urban labor (or proletariat) that provided a basis for socialist labor organizing.\textsuperscript{21}

The emergence of these new social identities, together with the emergence of politically involved intellectuals resulted in a new political culture, conceived by its components as composed of a political leadership, an intellectual class, and a mass citizenry which was to be mobilized, shaped, and recruited. Intellectuals now became the linchpin that connected people and politics to each other. This role determined the way in which they were subsequently treated by China’s governments, both Nationalist and Communist.