
Xu Jilin

What Future for Public Intellectuals?

The specialisation of knowledge, the commercialisation of culture and the emergence of post-modernism characterise China in the 1990s

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What Future for Public Intellectuals?

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- 1 While the question of the public intellectual has been the subject of lively debate in the international intellectual community for over ten years, it has appeared in China only recently. What is a public intellectual? And why does this question generate debate? It is generally considered to be Russell Jacoby, in his book published in 1987, *The Last Intellectuals*, who called attention to the disappearance of the public intellectual. In his view, the intellectuals of the past, who wrote for cultivated readers, often had a public commitment (*gonggongxing*). In the United States, the generation born in the 1920s is considered to be the last generation of public intellectuals. Actually, with the democratisation of university teaching, public intellectuals have been replaced by scientific experts and university professors, whose production is aimed exclusively at specialised readers. With the disappearance of public intellectuals, culture and public life also went into decline¹. In France it is the passing of Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault that are generally considered as marking the end of the public intellectuals².
- 2 Let us first define what the term “public” means in the expression “public intellectuals”. I believe that it carries three levels of meaning. Firstly, it designates a discourse *aimed at* the public. Secondly, it concerns thought carried out *for the public*, whose point of departure is the common good, rather than a personal position or individual interests. Lastly, it characterises *the inclination for* public affairs or major issues in society. These three levels of meaning contained in the notion of public commitment are closely bound to the conception intellectuals have of themselves. Now public commitment, which was initially one of the characteristics of intellectuals, is weakened today because of specialisation and the post-modernist movement. How can this commitment be restored in a specialised, post-modern society?
- 3 The question of the public intellectual is not only a Western problem, but also concerns China. In the 1990s, China experienced, as did Europe and the United States after the 1970s, a specialisation of the system of knowledge and the appearance of the post-modernist cultural movement. In this article I will firstly analyse the emergence of specialised intellectuals (*zhuanye zhishifenzi*) and of media intellectuals (*meiti zhishifenzi*), two phenomena which are characteristic of China in the 1990s. Then, based on several debates devoted to the reconstruction of commitment which have taken place in the Chinese intellectual world, I will advance three ideal types: the traditional intellectual, the organic intellectual, and the specific intellectual. Lastly, drawing my inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu, I will analyse the possibility, in the era of specialisation, of constructing an ideal type of public intellectual, who, from the specific, aims at the universal.

Specialised intellectuals and media intellectuals

- 4 In China, the decade of the 1980s was very lively in terms of culture and public life³. The movement of liberation of thought at the beginning of the 1980s, followed by the “cultural fever” (*wenhua re*) of the mid-1980s (later called “The New Enlightenment” after the May 4th movement 1919), saw the appearance of a group of renowned public intellectuals who reached a wide readership. These intellectuals were writers, scientists, philosophers, researchers in the humanities, and even senior civil servants and ideologues of the system. The subjects they broached all had a public dimension and went beyond their spheres of specialisation, whether political life, the comparison of Chinese and Western cultures, or the scientific Enlightenment. These “public intellectuals” gave lectures in the universities, and published articles in the newspapers and journals, while their books were sold all over the country and easily reached print runs of tens or hundreds of thousands of copies. They had become influential public figures.

Annex

Economic development and transformation of human capital

On October 27th and 28th 2003, the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China (CEFC) and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) jointly organised a conference entitled “Economic development and transformation of human capital”¹, from which we publish two contributions. What competences does China need today? How do individuals, as well as the training system, adapt to the new demands of companies and of the administration? These were some of the questions asked and which the participants attempted to answer by exchanging their points of view on China, on Russia, another society and economy in transition, and on France; an approach based on the conviction that the social sciences can only be comparative.

The focal point of this conference was a consideration of the elites, a highly sensitive subject in a neo-authoritarian or neo-totalitarian communist regime. While certain actions of the new government team inaugurate a new phase in the policy of reform, which is more directed at those excluded from prosperity, does this really mean the beginning of a new practice of policy and of politics, which must necessarily include reflection on—if not a calling into question of—those who are at the top of the social ladder? The sessions were organised around three subjects: the economic, political and intellectual elites.

In his opening speech, Yin Jizuo² recalled the context and the tenor of the changes experienced by the country’s elites. China, in integrating itself into the world system by its policy of reform and opening up, has joined the scientific and technical revolution, bringing about the necessary adaptation of the Chinese working population, that is to say its professionalisation. This is particularly the case of company managers, whose role has evolved in order to respond to the needs of the transition. Shen Ronghua³ showed how the state enterprise managers, until then administrative cadres supervising production, have become real heads of enterprises, chosen according to criteria of professional experience and competences validated by diplomas. It is not only enterprise managers who have to adapt to the new economic environment, but, to a large extent, all employees, of whom specific competences are now demanded. State enterprises are facing the challenge of retraining their employees, whom Li Peilin and Zhang Yi⁴, basing themselves on a series of surveys carried out in the province of Liaoning, showed would benefit from an effective system of professional training. Zhang Jiehai⁵ gave an example of successful retraining and of social mobility: that of migrant workers who have become white collar and thus identify with the urban middle class.

According to Lu Hanlong⁶, analogous transformations are taking place in the political sphere where the “reds” are making room for the “experts”. Jean-Pierre Cabestan⁷ confirmed this by studying a particular population, the delegates of the National People’s Congress (NPC), the second most important group of leaders in China after the members of the Central Committee of the Party. The members of the NPC have an increasingly high level of education. Their legitimacy has been enhanced not because of the mode of election, but because of their increasing participation in debates which are more and more open to their growing expertise. What is true at a national level is also true, possibly even more so, at a local level. Li Yuomei⁸ underscored this by analysing the leaders of neighbourhood communities and other urban organisations, such as residents’ committees or co-owners’ associations; they are chosen more for their level of education or their professional status than for their links with the Communist Party. While in the eyes of these new social actors, professional competences are more useful and more valuable than membership of the Party, the same holds true for managing cadres who have themselves reduced ideology to a quasi-symbolic secondary importance. As our own work⁹ shows, the latter spend most of their training period in the Party schools or in the institutes of administration learning the stakes of the modern world and of post-Maoist China, as well as training on more specific or technical questions, in order to carry out the new tasks imposed on them by the policy of reform and opening up.

One could not tackle the problem of training for the leading elites without mentioning the French Ecole nationale d’administration (ENA) which inspired the Chinese government in the reform of its schools of administration and with which the latter maintain institutional and pedagogical links—their best students spend time in France. Jean-Pierre Worms¹⁰ sought to underline the distortions that “enarchy” has produced, in particular the de facto monopoly held by ENA graduates on positions of power in the economic and political spheres. Thus, from the training of leading cadres, the interrogation moved towards the problematical connections between the political and the economic, one of the challenges in the transition which are regularly brought up by the media during cases of corruption. Monique de Saint-Martin¹¹ recalled that such connections also exist in Russia, where former Soviet bureaucrats have become entrepreneurs, owners or shareholders in large private enterprises after perestroïka. Nevertheless, according to Marie Mendras¹², the administrative apparatus in Russia has managed to adjust to the new context, and to consolidate its positions in the political and economic spheres as well as the social one: in fact, at all levels of the country, years of upheaval have made the Russian administration stronger, and it is said today to be oblivious to political pressures.

To Zheng Yefu¹³, the remedy for the plague represented by corruption lies in a return to Confucianism and the placing of ethics and moral teaching at the heart of the pedagogical mission. Mao Hongxiang¹⁴ sought to show the glaring inadequacy of the Chinese education system, as a result of lack of investment and

weak political will: urgent reform is called for. Finally professionalisation also affects the intellectuals—understood as the group of those with diplomas—who, according to Lu Xiaowen¹⁵, make up an essential part of the middle classes. Moreover Lu made an essential distinction between the professional intellectuals, the academics and researchers who fulfil a function of experts for the governments, and the critical intellectuals. The latter, recalled Xu Jilin¹⁶, after having been very active in the 1980s, had great difficulty during the decade of the 1990s in finding a role in the public debate of a society which puts more value on expertise with a practical objective. Jean-Philippe Béja¹⁷, comparing China and France, went further, maintaining that the critical intellectuals, or counter-elites, are condemned to remaining in a minority and to seeing their role decline. Lastly Jacques Rupnik¹⁸ showed how in certain Eastern European countries, the victory of the intellectuals (such as Vaclav Havel) also marked the beginning of their fall in the face of the advance of consumer society. As well as the question of the conversion of political capital into economic capital during the transition phase, he emphasised the importance of civil society in the consolidation of the democratic process.

The animated and open debates to which the body of these contributions gave rise were structured around the notions of effectiveness and equity. From the manager's point of view, the objective sought is an optimal functioning of enterprises, administrations and the training apparatus. From the point of view of the citizen, it is access to education, the conditions of promotion and of critical thinking which are questioned.

Emilie Tran

Notes

1 Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*, translated by Hong Jie, Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2002.

2 Cf. Jean-Philippe Béja, “Gonggong zhishifenzi de shehui jue. Faguo de lishi yu xianshi” (The social role of public intellectuals. History and reality in France), *Kaifang shidai*, No. 1, 2004.

3 Cf. Chen Yan, *L'Eveil de la Chine*, Paris, éditions de l'Aube, 2002, 318 p.

4 On the differentiation of Chinese intellectuals in the 1990s and the theoretical debate between liberalism and the new left, see the author: “Qimeng de mingyun: ershi nian lai de Zhongguo sixiang jie” (The fate of the Enlightenment: the Chinese intelligentsia in the last twenty years), *Ershiyi shiji*, No. 50, Hong Kong, December 1998. “Lun liang zhong ziyou he minzhu: dui ‘ziyou zhuyi’ yu ‘xin zuopai’ lunzhan de fansi” (Commentaries on two forms of freedom and democracy: reflections on the theoretical debate between “liberalism” and the “new left”), *Dongya lunwen*, No. 31, 2001.

5 Chen Pingyuan, “Xueshu shi yanjiu suixiang” (On the current of research on the history of academic life), *Xueren*, Vol. 1, Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1991, p. 3

6 Cf. Chen Sihe, “Zhishifenzi zai xiandai shehui zhuanxing qi de san zhong jiazhi quxiang” (Three orientations of the intellectuals in the period of transformation of modern society), *Shanghai wenhua*, inaugural issue, 1993.

7 On vocation, see Max Weber, in *Politics as a Vocation*, translated by Feng Keli, Beijing sanlian shudian, 1998. Qian Yongxiang has made a close analysis of the sense of vocation in Weber, see his article: “Zai zongyu yu xuwu zhishang” (Above pleasure and nothingness), in the book of the same title, Beijing sanlian shudian, 2002.

8 Chen Pingyuan, “Jin bai nian Zhongguo jingying wenhua de shiluo” (The decline of elite culture in China over the last hundred years), *Ershiyi shiji*, June 1993.

9 Wang Xiaoming *et al.*, “Kuangye shang de feixu: wenxue he renwen jingshen de wei ji” (Ruins in the desert: the crisis in culture and in the humanist spirit), *Shanghai wenxue*, No. 6, 1993.

10 Cai Xiang, Xu Jilin *et al.*, “Daotong, xuetong, yu zhengtong” (Taoist orthodoxy, scholarly orthodoxy and orthodoxy), *Dushu*, No. 5, 1994.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Xu Jilin, “Renwen jingshen de duo yuan yiyi” (The multiplicity of meaning of the humanist spirit), *Wenhui bao*, Shanghai, December 17th 1995.

13 Voir Chen Xiaoming, “Renwen guanhuai: yi zhong zhishi yu xushi” (The humanist concern: a form of knowledge and narration), *Shanghai wenhua*, No. 5, 1994. Zhang Yiwu, “Renwen jingshen: zui hou de shenhua” (The humanist spirit: the last sacred word), *Hebei zuojia bao*, May 6th 1995.

- 14 Zhang Yiwu, “Xiandaixing de zhongjie: yige wufa huibi de keti” (The end of modernity: a subject one cannot go back over), *Zhanglie yu guanli*, Peking, No. 4, 1994. Chen Xiaoming, “Houxiandai: wenhua de kuozhang yu cuowei” (Postmodernism: the expansion and false position of culture), *Shanghai wenxue*, No. 3, 1994. Zhang Fa, Zhang Yiwu, Wang Yichuan, “Cong ‘xiandaixing’ dao ‘zhonghuaxing’” (From “modernity” to “sinity”), *Wenyi zhengming*, Changchun, No. 2, 1994.
- 15 Zhang Fa *et al.*, “Cong ‘xiandaixing’ dao ‘zhonghuaxing’”, *ibid.*
- 16 Cf. the author’s: “Qimeng de mingyun”, *op. cit.*
- 17 Cf. Zhang Rulun, Wang Xiaoming, “Renwen jingshen: shifou keneng he ruhe keneng” (Is the humanist spirit possible and if so, how?), *Dushu*, Peking, No. 3, 1994.
- 18 Cf. Zhang Chengzhi, *Wuyuan de sixiang* (Thoughts without help), Peking, Huayi chubanshe, 1995. Zhang Wei, *Youfen de guitu* (The indignant way back), Peking, Huayi chubanshe, 1995.
- 19 Cf. Wang Hui, *Sihuo chongwen*, Peking, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000, preface, pp. 343-345, pp. 430-432.
- 20 Cf. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, translated by Cao Leiyu, Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, pp. 1-4.
- 21 Cf. Michel Foucault, *L’Œil du pouvoir*, translated by Yan Feng, Shanghai, Renmin chubanshe, p. 48, p. 72, and p. 147.
- 22 When I call the critical intellectuals, embodied by Wang Hui, specific intellectuals of the Foucauldian type, it is only on the basis of the similarities between their critiques, which seek to reveal unequal power relations. I thus overlook a fundamental difference between them: the specific intellectuals revealed by Foucault reject any global social objective, while the Chinese critical intellectuals make political freedom, social justice and egalitarian power their objectives, and the foundations of their critique. Cf. Wang Hui, *Sihuo chongwen*, *op. cit.*, preface, p. 8.
- 23 Jean-François Lyotard, “Tombeau de l’intellectuel”, in *Houxiandaixing yu gongzhong youxi* (Post-modernity and public play), translated by Tan Yinzhou, Shanghai renmin chubanshe, pp. 116-117
- 24 Cf. Jean-François Sirinelli, *Intellectuels et Passion française*, translated by Liu Yunhong, Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2001, p. 8; Pierre Bourdieu, “Le corporatisme de l’universel: le rôle des intellectuels dans le monde moderne”, translated by Zhao Xiaoli, in *Xueshu sixiang pinglun*, No. 5, Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 1999, p. 174.
- 25 Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*, in *Kaer Manhaimu jingcui*, translated by Xu Bin, Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2002, p. 183.
- 26 Pierre Bourdieu, *Libre-échange*, translated by Gui Yufang, Beijing sanlian shudian, 1996, p. 51.
- 27 In particular by Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, translated by Che Jinshan, Beijing sanlian shudian, 1997.
- 28 Wang Xiaobo, *Wo de jingshen jiayuan* (The Native Country of My Spirit), Beijing wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1997, preface, p. 1
- 29 Cf. in particular Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, translated by Xu Xin, Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe, 2002.
- 30 Wang Xiaobo, *op. cit.*, preface, p. 3.
- 31 Cf. Chen Xuanliang, “Sate: you’an yu tongming zhijian” (Sartre: light and shadow), in *Shiren zhexuejia*, Zhong Guopin (ed.), Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1987, pp. 399-402.
- 32 Pierre Bourdieu, “Le corporatisme de l’universel”, *op. cit.*
- 33 Jean-François Lyotard, “Tombeau de l’intellectuel”, *op. cit.*
- 34 Cf. Michel Foucault, “Intellectuels et pouvoir”, dialogue avec Gilles Deleuze, in *Fuke ji* (A Foucault Anthology), Du Xiaozhen (ed.), Shanghai yuandong chubanshe, 1998.
- 35 Cf. Carl Boggs, *Intellectuals and the Crisis of Modernity*, translated by Li Jun and Cai Hairong, Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2002, pp. 208-217.
- 36 Michel Foucault, “Zhaxue de shengming” (The life of philosophy), in *L’Œil du pouvoir*, translated by Yan Feng, Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1997, p. 102.
- 37 Cf. Michel Foucault, “Quanli yu xing” (Power and Sexuality), in *L’Œil du pouvoir*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
- 38 Cf. Michel Foucault, “Quanli de chanshi” (Commentaries on power), in *L’Œil du pouvoir*, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-34.

39 Jürgen Habermas, *Xiandaixing de zhexue huayu* (The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity), Wang Minan, Chen Yongyuan and Ma Hailiang (eds.), Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2000, p. 366.

40 Pierre Bourdieu never directly mentioned an ideal type of intellectual who from the specific moves towards the universal. What he put forward was only the scientific intellectual of whom the ideal type was the sociologist. However, on the question of the public intellectual, which is our subject here, Bourdieu's theory offers in reality an ideal type of public intellectual which makes it possible to transcend the two conflicting models of the specific and the universal.

41 Pierre Bourdieu, "Le corporatisme de l'universel", *op. cit.*

42 Pierre Bourdieu, *Libre-échange*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

43 Pierre Bourdieu, "Le corporatisme de l'universel", *op. cit.*

Numerical endnotes

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2 President of the SASS.

3 Shanghai Institute of Human Resources.

4 Institute of Sociology, China Academy of Social Sciences, Peking, for the former, and Institute of Demography and Labour Economy, China Academy of Social Sciences, Peking, for the latter.

5 Institute of Sociology, SASS.

6 Director of the Institute of Sociology, SASS.

7 Institute of Comparative Law, University Paris-I.

8 Shanghai University.

9 Emilie Tran, "From Senior Official to Top Civil Servant. An Enquiry into the Shanghai Party School", *China Perspectives*, No. 46, March-April 2003, pp. 27-40.

10 From the "France Initiative Network", Paris.

11 Centre for the Study of Social Movements, School of Higher Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris.

12 Centre of International Studies (CERI), Paris.

13 Sociology Department, People's University of China, Peking.

14 Shanghai Institute of Educational Sciences.

15 Institute of Sociology, SASS.

16 Department of History, East China Normal University, Shanghai.

17 Centre of International Studies (CERI), Paris.

18 Centre of International Studies (CERI), Paris.

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