

Book Reviews

Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals

SEBASTIAN VEG

New York: Columbia University Press, 2019

ix + 352 pp. \$65.00; £50.00

ISBN 978-0-231-19140-1 doi:10.1017/S0305741019001437

Sebastian Veg's *Minjian* represents a new stage in international research on China's intellectuals. While Veg sets out to document the rise of *minjian* (literally "among the people") intellectuals since the early 1990s, he does nothing less than challenge the reader to reconsider who are and how we understand "intellectuals" in China. In this book, he connects the scholarly literature on "China's intellectuals" with the literature on China's social activists, lawyers and NGOs. He does this both conceptually (through a thorough and fair-minded literature review) and empirically (through the several examples of "cross-over" intellectuals who bridge the gap between elite or universal intellectuals and "specific intellectuals" living among working people, representing petitioners from the villages, or fighting for environmental or work condition improvements – for example, Yu Jianrong, Guo Yuhua, Qian Liqun and Ai Xiaoming among many others. Veg sets out to document and make sense of the *networks* of grassroots intellectuals who are independent of the state and direct commercial service, who eschew "grand narratives" and address concrete social problems with and not for ordinary people, or "vulnerable groups" (*ruoshi qunti*), and thus operate like Foucault's "specific intellectuals." They are active in an emerging range of activities and arenas, from documentary film, to unofficial history writing, to internet blogs, to NGOs, to work as rights lawyers representing ordinary people in trouble. Veg calls these intellectuals "grassroots intellectuals" (drawing from their own term, *minjian zhishifenzi*). Their lives open a door to the vibrant, active and effective intellectual life pulsing through grassroots China.

The introduction and chapter one put "grassroots intellectuals" on a sound scholarly and methodological basis. Veg gives the most comprehensive, thoughtful and fair-minded review of the current literatures on intellectuals, China's intellectuals and social activism I have seen. And he also rigorously engages with theoretical models of intellectual life, from Bourdieu and Bauman to subaltern theories. Veg is at pains to point out the need to look at *non-elite* intellectuals: intellectuals who choose not to take elite positions in the state, academia, or in the cultural hierarchy (as pundits or theorists). Of course, the issue of elitism bedevils Veg's story, as it bedevils China's educated population. To his credit, and especially in chapter six, Veg confronts the challenges, personal contradictions and anxieties of notable intellectuals who wrestle with these problems, especially the well-known blogger Han Han, but also Chang Ping, Hu Shuli, Ai Xiaoming and others. Nonetheless, Veg has made a strong case for the significance of "grassroots intellectuals" (both as a felicitous English translation of *minjian zhishifenzi* and as a concept that we cannot avoid if we wish to understand China's educated population, from propagandists to establishment intellectuals to dissidents).

The core chapters do the hard work to make his case – presenting individual examples with copious documentation and vivid quotations, and assessing their fit, or not, with his model. Happily, Veg is less interested in a formal analysis of his "model" than in using it and his details to help deepen our understanding not of theory but

of China. This is mostly a work of history or political ethnography, with a firm and articulated line of analysis. Chapter two profiles Wang Xiaobo (1952–1997), who more or less stands as the theorist for grassroots intellectuals. Wang’s work is carefully presented in the changing contexts of his life and, as well, explains grassroots intellectuals’ focus on vulnerable groups who are not represented in Party propaganda but who make up much of China’s population. Chapter three documents the emergence of “alternate memories” of the Mao period, especially of the anti-Rightist campaign that began in 1957. Here we see “cross-over” intellectuals who are both of the establishment and engaged in the grassroots – such as Qian Liqun at Peking University. Veg maps unofficial historians as *minjian* intellectuals through three stages: commemoration of the Anti-Rightist campaign, documentation of the Great Leap famine, and debating the Cultural Revolution.

Chapter four likewise gives a detailed and spirited exposition of documentary filmmakers. Digital video has empowered a generation of independent filming that has embraced the grassroots intellectual identity and approach of working with and not on local people. Chapter five presents rights lawyers, independent think tanks and those, like Yu Jianrong, who work with petitioners. Chapter six looks at independent journalists, bloggers and the troubled emergence (or tentative emergence) of a new public culture. This chapter also usefully introduces two troubling caveats. First, grassroots intellectuals are internally challenged by residual elitism. Second, the networks and public activities of grassroots intellectuals have suffered increasing repression since 2013, to the point that by 2016 many independent outlets (like the web portal, Consensus Net) and activities (such as representing petitioners or organizing independent film festivals, bookshop discussions or popular blogs) have been shut down under Xi Jinping’s version of the “Chinese Dream.” They may be constrained today, but China’s grassroots intellectuals are living proof of the changes wrought by 40 years of globalization. Not even Xi Jinping can change that.

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Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949

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Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019

xvii + 376 pp. £27.00

ISBN 978-0-691-15213-4 doi:10.1017/S0305741019001449

During the televised parade marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, expert and amateur viewers alike were struck by the images of massive columns of goose-stepping soldiers and the fearsome military hardware of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Yet despite the intense attention directed towards the PLA and its role in China’s rise, the academic literature lacks a comprehensive book-length treatment of the origins, content and changes in Chinese military strategy over those seven decades. Taylor Fravel’s new book, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949*, deftly tackles this shortfall head-on, marshalling authoritative primary sources, insights from military culture and organization theory, and a keen understanding of China’s domestic and external challenges since the country’s founding to categorize and explain the major and minor shifts in Chinese military strategy thinking. Methodologically, the author is