



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China by Jing Wang
Gregory B. Lee

The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 57, No. 2. (May, 1998), pp. 509-511.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-9118%28199805%2957%3A2%3C509%3AHCFPAA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L>

The Journal of Asian Studies is currently published by Association for Asian Studies.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/afas.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

jumping-off point for future research. (Thaxton calls his book a “hypothesis-generating case study,” and he is sensitive to its limitations as a general explanation of the Chinese revolution.) Graduate students and dissertation advisers will find endless possibilities in both the text and the many explanatory footnotes. I especially welcomed the affirmation offered here of the findings of Lucien Bianco that rural people in many areas were outraged more by officials than by landlords. In this and many other parts of his argument Thaxton is highly persuasive, building on existing scholarship to deepen our understanding with his own findings.

Some parts of the argument are less convincing. Of these, the most important concerns the part the CCP played in the long-term revolution. While I appreciated the irony of the CCP, some years before “New Democracy,” worming its way into the saltmakers’ confidence by defending their free market rights (and also their religious beliefs and various other aspects of popular culture that Marxists typically denounce), I need to know more than Thaxton provided about how the party took its next steps. He provides much (including some discussion of CCP land policy), but the process of building the massive resistance-war and civil war support needed to put the CCP in power did not receive the same close analysis and thick documentation that the pre-1937 resistance to the salt police is given. In this connection, clarification is needed regarding Thaxton’s “peasantry.” He refers to “semipeasants” and “quasi peasants” as well as just “peasants.” The first two groups seem to overlap with elites, and all play rather different roles at different times, but it is not altogether clear which is doing what, and when. In any case, the CCP had to reach deeply into the “peasantry” to mobilize the hundreds of thousands it eventually drew to its side in winning power. What Thaxton has chiefly shown is how the CCP retained the confidence of those rural people who remembered the party’s support for the free-market salt protests against the Guomindang. But he has not quite as convincingly shown how the CCP moved on to mobilize rural people for full-scale war and revolution. For this—the huge step from protest and even rebellion to revolution—we must still turn chiefly to Wou, Chen, and others.

A major strength of Thaxton’s book is that it opens up, in a fresh and scholarly way, the perspective from the villages. He has successfully moved the balance point between local initiative and CCP direction back toward the former, and he has widened the debate and raised it to a higher level. Now we shall have a new debate about direct and indirect CCP mobilization, and about salt, Guomindang warfare against its own rural people, and other issues Thaxton has put before us. This is all to the good, and we owe Ralph Thaxton thanks.

MICHAEL GASSTER
Rutgers University

High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China. By JING WANG. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. x, 399 pp. \$50.00 (cloth); \$20.00 (paper).

Jing Wang’s book as a whole constitutes a profound and intense analysis of cultural and ideological change in a decade of intellectual ferment probably unparalleled in China since the 1920s and 1930s. The work consists of seven essays dealing with aspects of cultural practices and intellectual debates that took place in the tumultuous 1980s, years of ideological adjustment not only to an altered political

superstructure but also to a rapidly changing economic base. Chapter 1 deals with the debate over socialist alienation; chapter 2 describes the cultural and theoretically lively moment known as *wenhua re* (the culture fever of the book's title); chapter 3 discusses the landmark televisual text *Heshang* or *River Elegy*; chapter 4 tackles the 1980s' aesthetic modernisms, and in particular the generation of writers that included Liu Suola and Xu Xing; chapter 5 examines humanist scholar Liu Zaifu, the root-seeking writers and the 'experimentalists'; experimentalism again is the focus of chapter 6 in which Jing Wang discusses Ge Fei in terms of the 'mirage of postmodernism'; and the concluding chapter is centered on novelist Wang Shuo and the increasing importance of street-bred culture, what Wang, citing critic Zhang Yiwu, calls *shimin wenhua* or plebeian culture. This is such a wide-ranging yet detailed and thoughtful book that it is hard to do it justice in a few hundred words, and only a few segments can be meaningfully discussed here.

Wang shows herself to be a perceptive and expert guide to, and archaeologist of, the subtexts and strategic machinations of contemporary Chinese cultural political discourse and practice. Such qualities enable a historically informed approach that avoids generalization of which she is particularly wary. For instance, in chapter 1 Wang warns that "the quick conclusion drawn by some Western observers about the close resemblance between the [1980s] alienation school and the leftists of the cultural revolution should be re-examined carefully."

In the 1980s, attempts to rethink Marxism and to introduce a critical understanding of alienation were of immense importance. Wang narrates the impact of Eastern European critics of official Communism on post-Mao Marxism. The debate was nevertheless limited on one level by the ideological conventions to which critics were still beholden, and on another by the lack of access to even more divergent left critiques of official Communism and bureaucrats, such as those developed in France from the 1940s onwards from Lefebvre, Castoriadis, and Lefort to Debord and Wolman. Of course, any critique based on such theoretical innovation would doubtless have led to even swifter purging of the critics of 'socialist' alienation, Wang Ruoshui and Zhou Yang, whose outflanking in that debate perversely led to the Marxist critique of alienation being constructed an obscenity on a level with pornography in the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983–94.

Wang is at pains to emphasize the oppressed's complicity in their own oppression—"the effects of internalized oppression" (p. 18)—and cites as evidence popular support for the 1983–84 campaign. But just how widespread was that support, and can the coercion based on real material fears, tactics based on the lessons of experience really be constructed as "internalized oppression"? Perhaps, but even vulgar Marxist concepts of ideology could account for such reactions. It would have been different, Wang suggests, had the alienation school addressed the "problematic of emancipatory subjectivity" and stressed not the public sphere but emancipatory capabilities of "the subjective practice of the individual." While agreeing with Vaneigem that what can separate us from a passionate life is our fear of having to create it, can de-alienation be realistically achieved solely by an overthrow of "the faceless oppressor internalized within each individual."

Wang's book is sustained by rigorous almost relentless desire to expose the mistakes, limitations, and irrealism of recent intellectual discourse in China, a discourse she ably analyzes and unpacks: "With a naivete that characterizes both martyrs and victors alike, they revel in the reversibility of the subject positions of Power and Literature in China's existing power structure" (p. 197).

There is an underlying pessimism to this book, as instanced in Jing Wang's analysis of the struggle between the imaginary and material reality, what Wang calls an "indulgence in the mutation of the imaginary." Invoking the history of 1989, she writes: "the real can be upstaged only for a fleeting moment before it returns to annihilate the imaginary with a vengeance" (p. 229). But is it not surely that very imaginary, those triumphs of an instant's duration, that illustrate the possibility, and indeed the practice of de-alienation, of making ourselves more human in the face of capitalism's making itself more totally invasive? Jing Wang has produced a hard book, an honest book, in some ways a bleak book, but one that deserves to be widely read.

GREGORY B. LEE
University of Hong Kong

In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China.
By GORDON WHITE, JUDE HOWELL, and SHANG XIAOYUAN. Oxford:
Clarendon Press, 1996. 241 pp. \$69.00.

As the title of the book under review makes clear, the authors went in search of civil society in China on the premise that the spread of market forces provides a basis for the development of civil society. The authors take a can-do approach to the concept of civil society rather than engage in a long-winded discussion of what it means and its limitations. They decide that they see evidence of civil society when they find intermediate social organizations that demonstrate characteristics of separation and independence in their relationship with the state and voluntariness and self-regulation in their activities.

In their quest for evidence of civil society, the authors examine variations in social organizations by taking into account a number of variables, including time, space, level of urbanization, and industrial sector. They begin with the "caged sector" of official mass organizations that predated the reforms. Both the official trade unions and the women's federation receive chapter-length treatment. While both organizations have become more active than before the reforms, they remain under the spell of the Communist Party. In consequence, workers still regard the official unions primarily as organizational instruments of managerial or Party priorities and not as autonomous agents of workers' interests. Indeed, the authors suggest that, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Crisis of 1989, the official union has entered into a political pact with the Party leadership. Through the pact the unions have gained some influence over the reform policy process, but they have also "found their 'cage' so comfortable that they do not want to leave it" (p. 64).

The Women's Federation is similarly caught between serving the Party/state and representing the interests of women. It helps carry out the unpopular family planning policies even while pressures are mounting for it to articulate and represent the interests of women who have seen their social positions deteriorate with the economic reforms. Thus, even though it has expanded its functions and experimented with new activities, it is being challenged by new women's associations from the grassroots. In short, one looks in vain for evidence of full embodiment of civil society in the official mass organizations and should instead look in the direction of independent labor activists, unofficial workers' organizations, and new women's associations. Yet these operate within very tight political constraints and, in the case of unofficial workers' organizations, are generally subject to harsh suppression.