

Constructing China

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Clashing Views of
the People's Republic

Mobo Gao

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Introduction

THE RIGHT TO KNOWLEDGE

In June 2016, at a news conference, when a Canadian journalist put a human rights question to Wang Yi, the Chinese foreign minister, who was visiting Canada (Buckley 2017), Mr. Wang lost his cool and was visibly angry. While most would agree that the Chinese authorities should learn how to handle tough questions from the media in general and Western media in particular, what Mr. Wang interpreted as lecturing is a good starting point for discussing the relationship between the production of knowledge and rights. In the West it appears to be taken for granted that a journalist should be asking politicians tough questions, so as to hold them accountable. In his reply, Mr. Wang, however, suggests that the journalist has no right to ask such questions if she does not know China. While Mr. Wang accuses the Canadian journalist of being arrogant, the Western media and social media responses generally take Mr. Wang to be arrogant. Why the difference in response? And why was Mr. Wang so upset?

This has something to do not only with the production of knowledge but also the right to knowledge, which is related to history as the people in China see it. From one perspective, China not only was invaded, semi-colonized, exploited and plundered but also, and because of that experience, does not have the right to knowledge. The Chinese don't have what is called *huanyu quan* (discursive right) on the international stage. What is right and wrong, what is good or bad, what should be valued and what is legitimate are dictated to the Chinese by the West. Ultimately, the West has the right to knowledge and has the power and resources to produce knowledge about China—to construct China.

This sense of frustration and powerlessness is demonstrated by current discussions among some Chinese thinkers who use a set phrase to capture the phenomenon. The Mandarin-speaking Chinese tend to use set phrases that are neat and succinct to refer to a situation or event, like 9/11 is used in the US. For instance, the Chinese would use a set phrase “June the Fourth” (*liu si*) to refer to the Tiananmen events of 1989, or “people mountain people sea” (*ren shan ren hai*) to refer to a packed crowd.

In the past decade or so, there has been a six-syllable phrase floating around the intellectual discussion circle—*ai da, ai e, ai ma* (挨打, 挨饿, 挨骂)—the first two syllables mean “to endure defeats in wars” or “to endure aggression,” the second two mean “to endure hunger” and the last two “to endure being lectured.” These Chinese people understand modern Chinese history as a history of China bearing the consequences of being defeated in wars ever since the first Sino-British Opium War in 1839–42, the so-called history of a “Hundred Years of Humiliation.” The Chinese had endured hunger even since one could remember. To the majority of the Chinese, the China led by Mao, especially since the Korean War in 1950, no longer suffered defeat at the hands of foreign aggression. So *ai da* is gone.

The post-Mao reform is understood to have bidden goodbye to hunger. So *ai e* is gone. With the two enduring and sufferable situations gone, China now endures being lectured, *ai ma*, by the West, for moral inferiority, for its lack of democracy and its abuse of human rights, or indeed for anything they can think of: currency manipulation, taking millions of jobs from the West, stealing Western technology, etc.

In other words, the Chinese government is not legitimate. Hence Wang Yi’s indignation: China has lifted 600 million of people out of poverty; China has managed to become the second largest world economy in a short period of time. “Do you know China?”—Wang asked the journalist whether she had ever been to China. For Wang, if you have not been to China, how do you have the knowledge to talk about China? Wang did not have in mind the individual human right of freedom of speech: of course he knew that a journalist in Canada at a press conference had the right to ask him any question. To Wang it was not an issue of political or civil rights but that of whether you are qualified to talk about something you have no knowledge of. Therefore, his term the “right to speak about” was not about a political right but an epistemological right: the right to knowledge.

The incident demonstrates not only the complex issue of rights but also the complex issue of knowledge: an epistemological right which in many ways is a political right, raising questions over categories of knowledge and how knowledge is produced.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL RIGHT

This epistemological right has two traditions in China: one traditional and one Maoist. The contemporary Maoist tradition was coined by Mao

himself, in the form of “you have no right to speak about something if you have not done any research on it” (*meiyou diaocha yanjiu jiu meiyou fayan quan*). Mao’s own credentials as a leader of the peasant revolution was based partly on one of his earliest influential writings titled *The Hunan Peasant Movement Report*. In fact, some of the Cultural Revolution (CR) violence was inspired by the proclaimed violence during the peasants’ anti-landlord movement described in this report; evidence that knowledge produced in such a revolutionary discourse guides human behaviors several generations later.

“You have no right to speak about something if you have not done any research on it” had become one of the Communist Party of China’s (CCP) governance technologies. Following the rationale that knowledge can be gained from experience and from participation and observation, Mao sent his most beloved son, Mao Anying, to work and live in the countryside as soon as the latter returned from the Soviet Union to Yan’an. Mao also sent one of his daughters to rural farms during the CR. The movements of “up to the mountains and down to the countryside” (*shangshan xiaxiang*), and “May the Seventh Cadres Schools” (*wuqi ganxiao*),* were also associated with this epistemological right.

By the same token, upon the serious consequences of the Great Leap Forward (GLF), Mao sent all of his bodyguards to their own hometowns, and some office personnel, to various places to gather information about the real situation at the grassroots level. During the beginning of the CR, Mao and his radicals sent hundreds of army officers all over the country to gather information (Qi Benyu 2016). This contemporary tradition of epistemological right is still held in high esteem as governance technology. Thus, the Chinese government still carry out a lot of experimentation before a policy is implemented. The most celebrated example is the special economic zone of a small fishing village, Shenzhen, where the policy of attracting foreign investment was experimented with before it unfolded all over China. Mr. Wang Yi’s undiplomatic outburst is another example of this epistemological belief.

* On May 7, 1966, a letter to Lin Biao Mao advocates the idea that army soldiers should not just be trained to fight but also need to participate in studies, in political discussions and in material production. During the mid-period of the CR party officials and government bureaucrats were sent to grassroots units, like the factory floor, farms or rural China to participate in production labor. Hence it is called the May Seventh School.

The traditional strand of the tradition of this epistemological right to knowledge is the Confucian foundation of meritocratic legitimacy of ruling and governance. In the *Book of Rites: The Great Learning*, the Master says that to maintain peace under heaven the country has to be governed. To govern the country the family has to be put in order. To have the family in order, one has to cultivate oneself. To cultivate oneself one has to put one's mind in the right place. To have one's mind in the right place one has to be sincere. To be sincere one has to investigate. After this investigation, one will have the knowledge. Once you have the knowledge you will be honest. From honesty to the right mind, from the right mind to personal cultivation and from personal cultivation one is able to have order in the family: then one can govern the country so as to achieve peace under heaven.* According to this line of reasoning, knowledge consists of facts or truth in existence to be found by an honest person who has the sincerity to govern for the peace of the world. Apart from the fact that there is a questionable assumption that a ruler would be honest and sincere, what the Master takes for granted is also the questionable reductionist conceptualization of knowledge—an issue that I will come back to later—very different from the postmodern conceptualization that knowledge does not exist innocently for one to find: it has to be produced.

ANTI-ORIENTALISM IN POST-DENG CHINA

Edward Said's groundbreaking conceptualization of Orientalism (Said 1978) was very much inspired by Foucault's powerful argument for the relationship between power and the production of knowledge. According to this Foucauldian take on imperial discourse by Said, the cultural construct of the knowledge of Orientalism was, by design or necessity, a strategy of constructing a positive image of the Western Self while casting the "East" as its negative alter ego Other. "The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience." Orientalist knowledge has been so persuasive that "Orientals are seen to be perpetrating Orientalism no less than

* The full Chinese version is reproduced here; the English is my own interpreted translation: "古人欲明德于天下者，先治其国；欲治其国者，先齐其家；欲齐其家者，先修其身；欲修其身者，先正其心；欲正其心者，先诚其意；欲诚其意者，先致其知。致知在格物。格物而后知至，知至而后意诚，意诚而后心正，心正而后身修，身修而后家齐，家齐而后国治，国治而后天下平。"

‘non-Orientals’” (Lau 2009). There is a non-Oriental Orientalism in which knowledge producers with Eastern affiliations not only accept the Orientalist knowledge but also comply with perceived expectations of Western readers, as shown in Zhang Yimou’s film *Raise the Lanterns*, in which the so-called Chinese tradition of family life and sexual ploys are reinvented for exoticism. In order to combat this new Orientalism in the twenty-first century, some scholars call for what are re-Orientalist discursive practices and rhetorical strategies as sites of subversion to expose the power of Orientalist discourse among the non-Oriental, so as to provide avenues for questioning the endurance of Orientalist practices today (Lau and Mendes 2011).

Along similar lines, some Chinese writers argue that some Chinese people themselves reproduce Orientalist knowledge about China. By twisting the term “reverse racism”^{*} for their own purported use, these writers argue that the elation of this kind of knowledge produced by some Chinese—from the celebrated May Fourth Movement activist Dr. Hu Shi to the much-revered Qian Zhongshu, from contemporary popular essay writers such as Yu Shicun and Wang Xiaobo and fiction writer Wang Shuo to propagandist politicians like Ma Licheng—demonstrates reverse racism in the sense that anything Chinese is denigrated and condemned. These Chinese *fenqing* (angry young men) argue that China should fight against this kind of reverse racism which advocates self-hatred, and self-dwarfing (*ziwo aihua*). One prominent writer of this group of post-Deng writers, Wang Xiaodong, calls this kind of reverse racism the slavery of the Western master (*yangnu*). According to him and other *fenqing*, China should express its unhappiness with the current state of affairs (Song et al. 2009), and should be able to say no to the West (Song Qiang et al. 1996).

CHINESE NATIONALISM?

The reaction of the angry young Chinese men against the epistemological rights of the West is typically interpreted as Chinese nationalism. Barack Obama, an eloquent speaker who charmed both the Right and Left in the West, for instance, took this line of discourse and warned in an

* “Reverse racism” as a concept and as a set of political activities arose from the struggle of black people against racism at the hands of white people. Nelson Mandela both condemned “reverse racism” (MacGregor 1995) and was accused of being a reverse racist (Gumoisai 1993 and Dunn 1998).

interview with *The Atlantic* of a China that would “resort to nationalism as an organising principle” (quoted in Eric Li 2017).* The interpretation of this strong Chinese tide against Orientalism as Chinese nationalism in some ways makes sense, as China’s economic take-off paved a path for the Chinese to recover some confidence in their own culture and the dignity of China as a nation. However, this kind of approachable and easiest popular conceptualization of Chinese nationalism leaves us with more problems than answers. For instance, is China a nation state? Which nations of the Chinese state are Chinese nationalist?

In countries like Australia and the US, the indigenous nations are either wiped out or uprooted. The white settlers formed their nation states. Gradually people of other national backgrounds migrated to these states as citizens. These new migrants don’t form their own distinct culture, language and economic national identity even though the first generation of them may cling on to similar ethnic communities. They are all called Australians or Americans. In contrast, the Chinese state has not wiped out or uprooted the indigenous peoples, 56 of them are officially recognized, though some of them could arguably be said to have been pushed aside by migrants of other national groups, mostly by what is called the Han nationality. Most of these people have stayed and lived where they originally belonged and their populations increased dramatically (Sautman 2001, 2006). It is very hard to say therefore what the nation, or nations, of the Chinese state are. What is Chinese nationalism? Is it nationalism of the Chinese state, or nationalism of the Han Chinese, who are the majority? If the latter, who are the Han Chinese?

HEGEMONY OVER THE RIGHT TO KNOWLEDGE AND CONCEPTUAL PARADIGM

Apart from addressing the questions raised above, this book aims to explore some more conceptually challenging issues of the relationship between rights and knowledge. Why do the Chinese (the term Chinese being very ambiguous, an issue that is dealt with later on in the book) either exercise self-denial or self-hatred, like the May Fourth Movement radicals who wanted to disown the Chinese tradition and the post-Mao

* Obama’s famous remarks during his visit to Australia—that if the Chinese were to live like us we would need five or six planets—infuriated some angry young Chinese men, as it implied that only Western people are allowed to live a life of comfort and luxury.

self-claimed liberals who wanted to disown not only the Mao era but also the very idea of revolution? The underlying reason is that they have no right to knowledge. They either reproduce, by translation or reinterpreting, the kind of knowledge that is fed to them from the West, often without proper digestion, or else they could not produce anything.

The response to this state of affairs from the Chinese state machine has been different and changing. In the era of Deng, the state response from the lack of Chinese knowledge of China was to shelve political discussion so as to develop the economy, a strategy diagnosed by the prominent scholar Wang Hui as “depoliticized politics” (Wang Hui 2003). This strategy is neatly expressed in Deng’s two dictums of “no debates” and “development [of the economy] is main principle.” When Jiang Zemin came to hold power, the so-called “three representatives” were propagated as theoretically innovative, which basically was an attempt to answer the question of what the CCP was for in China at that time. The answer was: the CCP represented (1) advanced productive forces, (2) advanced culture and (3) the fundamental interest of the broad masses of people. This dictum therefore justified the enrolment into the CCP of well-known elites engaged in either material or cultural production, such as capitalist entrepreneurs and popular media stars. During the leadership of Hu Jintao, the idea of “harmonious development” was advocated so as to shift emphasis from development at all costs—as the grave consequences of such a policy were too obvious—to attention to environmental issues and societal cohesion that had been cracked by disparity. Finally, with Xi Jinping in power, there is a drive toward a balanced knowledge of China among the three traditions: the Chinese traditional tradition, the Maoist revolutionary tradition and the tradition of learning from the West (Gan Yang 2007). To achieve such a balance Xi wants to de-emphasize the West slightly and to recover some value from both the Chinese tradition and the Mao era. In his attempt at such a balancing act, Xi is seen to be the most repressive leader since the 1989 Tiananmen events (Ringen 2016b) and is predicted to fail in his attempt (Shambaugh 2015).

It is far from clear whether Xi can succeed in building up his narrative of China in what he calls “China’s Dream,” since he has just finished his first term as the number one leader in China. What is clear is that there is not yet knowledge of China that is accepted by both the Chinese and the West. The ideas of “the Beijing Consensus” (Cooper 2004) and the “China Model” (Dirlik 2016) floated around for a while as tanta-

lizing conceptualizations of Chinese knowledge, but they did not stay long enough to sustain intellectual attention. This attempted knowledge of China is not taken seriously, because the West fundamentally has hegemony over the right to knowledge. This kind of hegemony does not have much to do with restriction of freedom or even overt power of imposition. I am practicing my freedom now by questioning Western hegemony. This is precisely the power of Western hegemony as it does not have to impose overt restrictions. The Chinese impose restrictions on academic freedom precisely because they don't have the hegemonic right to knowledge. Their restriction and repression on freedom further delegitimizes their discursive qualifications. This is a vicious circle for the Chinese while it is a virtuous circle for Western hegemony. Therefore it is in the national interest of Western scholars to promote this virtuous circle for the West and vicious circle for China. The powerful and stronger produce knowledge which in turn serves the interests of the powerful and the stronger while weakening the weak.

The book argues that because Western hegemony on epistemological rights was formulated during the long process of imperialism and colonialism that was global and transnational, the national interests of Western nations and transnational interests very often overlap.

By pointing out the connection between knowledge production/knowledge consumption and national interest I am not arguing that all of the seekers of knowledge and producers of knowledge, either consciously or even unconsciously, produce knowledge exclusively for their own national interests. The fact that there are what Wang Xiaodong calls "reverse racists" and Orientals in China who practice Orientalism suggests that there are those who pursue knowledge from what they think is right versus wrong and good versus bad. This is why Chinese Orientals justify their position by arguing that it is in China's national interest to adopt Western knowledge.

In other words, there are academics, scholars, think tank specialists and journalists who pursue their individual interests and knowledge based on their belief in some particular conceptualization of the world they live in, such as the conceptualization of democracy and human rights. The hard science scientific community and the social science and humanities community work very much within conceptual and intellectual paradigms (Kuhn 1962) in any particular time and space. The paradigm within which most work since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, or the "end of history," which is used to lecture the Chinese, is that of

human rights and democracy. This intellectual paradigm serves the geopolitical interest of the West, irrespective of whether any particular individual producer or consumer of the knowledge of truth realizes it.

There are some who try to break the straitjacket of this intellectual paradigm. The recent effort to give the Chinese some legitimacy to access a right to knowledge is very articulate (Bell 2015) but again, predictably, met with strong critiques (Nathan 2015 and Fish 2015). Although scholars like Ryan Mitchell have presented a nuanced understanding of what Bell is trying to say, such as what is democracy and whether democracy has merits depending on contexts and on how ideals are transformed in actual situations (Mitchell 2015), the argument that China is not a democracy is enough to put any “panda hugger” on the defensive. Only democracy can render a government legitimate, and only democracy can balance power and hold those in power accountable. Such a paradigm of what I call the democracy thesis is so hegemonic that any attempt to dismount its right to knowledge is almost impossible.

THE POVERTY OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL RIGHT TO KNOWLEDGE

The epistemological root to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s diplomatic outburst that those who do not know about China have no right to talk about it has too many romantic but naïve assumptions: that knowledge can be gained by study, that knowledge gained from study is the truth of nature and that there is a two-way relationship between knowledge and goodwill—if you have goodwill you can reach knowledge and knowledge will lead you to goodwill. That is why some Chinese believe that by assisting people outside China to study the Chinese language and culture through, say, the Confucius Institute, the people of the world will know the truth about China, and will be friendly or less hostile to it. This naïve or reductionist epistemology does not embrace the complexity of knowledge and its context: that knowledge is constructed and that there are no independent facts or theory. Even the truth of physics is found by postulates and then has to be proved or falsified by practice. Those like Wang Yi who believe the reductionist epistemology have yet to understand that social phenomena can be evaluated from different perspectives and therefore different knowledge can be produced for the same phenomenon. Perspectives on China and the Chinese always involve politics, and perspectives on international affairs

always involves geopolitics. We need to come round to the conceptual understanding that anyone can have different knowledge about China, that China is never completely knowable, that whether one is friendly with China has less to do with knowledge and more to do with attitude; whether one has a friendly attitude toward China is political.

The rise of China, a phenomenon that is arguably the single most significant event of our time, causes a lot of anxiety all over the world. One expression of this anxiety is the increasing media and scholarly coverage of China's internal and international policies and actions. There is also profound anxiety from grassroots communities in the West. They are anxious to know what life will be like if the Chinese come to dominate the world. Knowledge of China is thus in huge demand. There is therefore a need to inquire about how knowledge of China comes about. Who formulates knowledge of China and on what basis? This book addresses the issue of what we know about China and what kind of knowledge of China is produced for what consumption.

The book aims to show that the production of knowledge of China is a construction which is the result of a combination of national and transnational interest, as well as the result of a conceptual paradigm. National interest may underline much of the research into and about China. And many of the individual scholars and researchers may not be able to produce knowledge about China outside the national interest box. Transnational interest includes class interest, ideological orientation and religious and political values and beliefs.

The overall aim of this book is to show that knowledge of China should not be taken as given. Instead, it should be examined within the context of production and consumption. This is more or less a common-sense wisdom accepted in most other fields of humanities and social sciences, but not in the field of Sinology, especially contemporary Chinese studies. The reason for this state of the field is that the production and consumption of knowledge of contemporary China is far too political both inside and outside China.

The book will demonstrate that there are no theory- or framework-independent facts to be discovered about China. There are statistics, but statistics can be structured for specific consumption, and even solid empirical statistics need to be interpreted so as to be considered as knowledge. For instance, statistics show that during both the GLF and the CR, two periods generally accepted both inside and outside China as disastrous, there was a mushroom of local industrial and

entrepreneurial initiatives. Those who are theoretically oriented toward anti-communism and who consider the Chinese Communist regime under Mao Zedong as evil would use these statistics to argue that those local initiatives were grassroots resistance against the oppressive regime, defying China's Stalinist planned economy. However, those who are sympathetic with China's efforts toward building socialism will use these statistics to argue for the opposite: it was during these two periods that Mao and the Chinese government launched policies to encourage local initiative so as to break down the straitjacket of the Soviet model of a planned economy.

It is not just a matter of using the same dataset to produce different kinds of knowledge for specific consumption. This book will also show that different producers of knowledge select different datasets while ignoring other data about the same event or same personality. Thus the post-Mao authorities allow the publication of data that show the bad aspects of the CR but not the positive side, and allow the publications that show Deng Xiaoping in a good light but not publications that show him in a bad light. Written by a high-profile American academic, Vogel's (2011) biography of Deng Xiaoping, published in English outside China, translated in Chinese subsequently, has only 30 or so pages covering Deng Xiaoping's life up to 1979. In his selected biographies of key people of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the book, Mao is not even included. Vogel intends to produce the knowledge that the transformation of China did not take place until Deng became the paramount leader after the Third Plenum of Eleventh CCP Congress in 1978.

Furthermore, this book will demonstrate that some "facts" or data about China are conjectures to prove a point of certain knowledge for consumption by a Western audience. For instance, even though there is some kind of consensus that there was a famine following the radical policies of the GLF, the death toll of this disputed famine is anybody's guess, ranging from several million to 55 million. What is interesting is that those who are anti-Communist want to stretch the number as high as possible while those who are sympathetic to the Chinese Revolution would like to see the numbers as low as possible. What is also interesting is that the higher the numbers one proposes the more attention one gets in the West, as the reception of an English academic Frank Dikötter and the Chinese ex-journalist Yang Jisheng shows, in contrast to the work of Yang Songlin and Sun Jingxian.