

Introduction: An Anthropology of Knowledge in Post-Communist Sinology

Chih-yu Shih

This book discusses how socialist and Communist legacies had an impact on the evolution of the intellectual history of China and on Chinese studies in four former Communist party-states—the Czech Republic, Mongolia, Poland, and Russia. After the end of the Cold War, the research agenda in these four countries has not evolved with any apparent shared orientation, nor have these countries been in close cooperation in accordance with a top-down imposed division of labor. It is thus difficult to detect a direct influence of the sinology of the Communist period on current research today. However, this book argues that a much stronger legacy than what is observable superficially exists in each of these research communities. One of these strong influences involves pedagogical and family lineages. Pedagogically, sinological training that stresses language and the classics did not disappear during the interlude of the Communist period. To varying degrees, it also continues to exist today. In addition, many contemporary China scholars in these societies have inherited an interest in China from their families, particularly from their fathers. There has also been a revival of a certain self-understanding embedded in the civilizational imagination, which reconnects the contemporary generation to the older generations.

Even in those societies that on the surface appear to be anti-Communist, for example, the Czech Republic and Poland, a rediscovery of humanist China in the past or a distaste for the rise of Communist China in the twenty-first century can be traced to an aversion to their own Communist pasts after the breakup of the Soviet bloc. This aversion is informed by the pro-Western approach in China studies. Together with the return of the humanities, they merge into a familiar

image of China divided by a repressive regime and a repressed population. The liberal tradition in Czech intellectual history as well as a Catholic anti-Communist component in Poland, which say more about the home societies of these sinologists than they say about China, have been part of this lingering aversion to the Communist party-state structure in China. In other words, the seeming rupture in the research agenda after the fall of communism actually reflects a contradictory and indirect impact of the Communist period that seeks a departure from communism. In this formulation of China, the self-understanding of post-Communist sinologists looms critical in determining their orientations. Nevertheless, such sinologists are more engrossed in an agenda dealing with the Chinese humanities than in an agenda dealing with their social science or policy think-tank counterparts.

Academically, neither the deductive method supported by a universal theoretical framework nor the quantitative method has prevailed in these post-Communist societies. The ability to read and interpret Chinese documents, official or popular, contemporary or classical, continues to occupy the concerns of sinologists in the four societies. These skills primarily rely on the self-confidence among the sinologists to understand Chinese culture and Chinese people. They have acquired this self-confidence from their training in the reading of the classics, which reveal those cultural and political sensibilities that are usually inaccessible from the vantage point of social science pedagogy. Finally, despite the decline in the Sino-Soviet alliance, the past socialist brotherhood between the former Soviet Union and China has left a positive impression in Russia toward their Chinese comrades in certain sectors of the sinological community.

Given the curious discovery of post-Communist sinology, the conclusions in this volume have major implications for the evolution of intellectual history and its analysis. There has been an emerging interest in the genealogy of contemporary ideas as a way to expose the constructed nature of knowledge. Alongside the long tradition of the sociology of knowledge, which is more about the structural forces undergirding the production of knowledge, genealogical research attends to the coincidental, circumstantial, and ruptured characteristics of a seemingly consensual base of knowledge. Nonetheless, they both look to the macro-level conditions for explanations about the establishment of a given piece of knowledge. In contrast, research on

post-Communist sinology emphasizes the importance of individualized agency to practice sinology, rendering sinology not only a statement of identity, but also a strategy to survive politics during tumultuous times. The following discussion elaborates on the broader epistemological implications of these features for the study of intellectual history.

1. Encounters and Choices between Civilizations and Ethnicities

Studying China in the global age involves interactions between two sets of identities—those of the observers and those of China. Each set comprises choices at three levels: civilizational, national, and (sub) ethnic. Take, for instance, Mongolia.¹ Mongolia is representative of a nomadic and prairie civilization, as opposed to a maritime, agricultural, or industrial civilization. It is a sovereign nation in quest of a potential alliance with Japan or the United States in order to balance its two powerful neighbors, namely, China and Russia. Furthermore, Mongolia denotes an ethnic group in the Chinese autonomous region of Inner Mongolia. Needless to say, references to China evoke similar images of civilizations, nations, and (sub)ethnic groups. When a Mongolian scholar engaged in research on China, or, conversely, when a Chinese scholar engages in research on Mongolia, the scholar (subject) should be aware of which identity he or she is coming from. Accordingly, the intellectual choice of identity becomes intrinsic to scholarship on China, the Chinese, or China studies.² Any choice or change in choice designates an institutional identity that has a bearing on the distribution of public as well as private rights and duties. In addition, such a choice affects the balance in social relationships. Thus, scholarship dealing with these choices is by necessity multi-sited, political, and global, and, accordingly, it is inevitably anthropological.

Due to widespread perceptions that China is on the rise, designation of China's identity has become essentially a political matter. This may be a consolidated decision that reinforces a specific identity and relationship with China. Or, alternatively, this may be a transformational decision that ushers in a new and different identity for China. Nevertheless, scholars rarely unilaterally determine the meaning of such decisions or choices, nor are such choices invariable over time. The possibility of the significance of each choice constitutes a discursive site of constant contestation. Such contestation centers on whether China

should be viewed as a threat and if indeed it is a threat, against whom is this threat posed. Moreover, the contestation implies how one should treat agents that willingly or reluctantly carry the identity of China. This is why studying China is a political as well as a personal engagement, especially in light of studies of the Chinese classics as well as the Chinese government's call for a harmonious society during the past decade. This political engagement speaks to both China's identity and the researcher's self-identity and therefore it may be highly controversial and volatile over time.

Civilizational history and individualized intellectual possibilities lie at two extremes of the identity dimension, with endless sites between the two extremes. The political nature of identity implies the impossibility of a stable identity. Identity is always about strategic choice. The fluidity of identity over time and place may be instantaneous and strong under globalization. However, even though fluidity of this sort often generates a wish for a permanent solution, the unavailability of any stable solution frequently leads to frustrations that require and produce mechanisms of projection onto a scapegoat. Traveling to multiple sites, each of which are either suffering or enjoying its own identity matrix, resembles an anthropological moment that provides opportunities to appreciate the politics of possibilities and to broaden one's thinking. The quest for an anthropology of knowledge seeks to open up and share. Traveling physically to different communities, in combination with traveling intellectually to different discursive constructions, at the same time is the practice of self-criticism. Colleagues from all over the world who have generously supported this epistemological exercise with their own self-criticisms have contributed to and have provoked thinking and changes in thinking, such as those that have come together in the reflections on civilizations, nations, and (sub)ethnic groups in this volume.

For contemporary social scientists outside of North America or Western Europe, pretending that an objective China exists may be a departure from imperialist history, its associated civilizing burden, and its unwarranted sense of superiority. A social scientist presumably no longer must be obsessed with the backward identity of China or feel responsible for remedying it. However, the seemingly natural and normal objectivism in European and North American social science is neither natural nor neutral once the nascent Asian intellectual reflections on the politics of knowledge, especially knowledge regarding China

studies as a component of area studies, is put into perspective.³ The civilizational embedding of scientism actually inspires American and Western European elites to take an objective approach, rendering their own civilizational past ostensibly irrelevant. This explains why a return to civilizational consciousness becomes an epistemological prescription for the obsessive-compulsive drive for objectivism that, incidentally, exposes the political nature of social science.

2. Sinology as a Substitute for an Objective China

China's many colonized neighbors can no longer appreciate the discourse of the objectivists. Their otherwise insignificant choices, meaningless to the mainstream research literature, nevertheless, compose a variety of creative possibilities for worlding or re-worlding. Based on their quest for subjectivities from within the sinic world order, what used to define the sinic world order—for example, the tribute system, Daoist philosophy, ethnic kinship, political territorial sovereignty, and so on—no longer holds true or is no longer practical. However, this finding does not mean that these neighbors coordinate in these deconstructive exercises or that deconstruction is incompatible with the nascent sinicization. For the majority of Korean thinkers, for example, a Korean historical trajectory exists outside of the sinic world order, bearing the burden of the tribute system through its various vicissitudes. In turn, for the majority of Mongolian thinkers, a Mongolian historical trajectory exists independently over a vast territory, which the Yuan dynasty turned into a sub-empire, foreshadowing the eventual reunification of the great Mongolian nationality. In contrast, a small group of Vietnamese sinological veterans tightly hold to their sinic identity to support a distinctive national position, whereas deterritorialized Southeast Asian Chinese scholars greatly undermine any attempts at a centered arbitration of Chineseness.⁴

Multi-sited reinterpretations of the sinic order challenge the singular text of “China’s rise” as well as that of the “China threat” and point to a different intellectual history and, ultimately, a different view of global international relations. China’s rise has already generated multi-sited understandings both inside and outside of China’s territorial borders. Chongqing, the leading municipal region in Central China that was once (before the purge of its leader) consciously developing a China model in contrast to the Western model parallels, in a manner of

speaking, Guangdong, which deliberately combines liberalization and one-party rule. Both were led by capable leaders who possessed both confidence and a vision and who kept an eye on each other. One need not mention the age-old competition between Shanghai and Beijing, or any other smaller, allegedly “unique” sites, attempting to approach socialist reform in their own ways. Further challenges come from other sites, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where Chinese borders are increasingly obscured not only territorially, but also socially and politically. A transition from one Chinese territorial site to another usually requires a distinctive understanding of what China is. How China is continuously becoming another China is therefore contingent upon how each site, as low as the individual household and as high as the national regime, acts upon its own historical trajectory. Neighboring nations certainly join in this constant process of becoming part of “China’s rise” and, as a result, China also becomes part of its own becoming. Borders and sites multiplying in this complicated manner almost certainly undermine high politics in the imagery produced by the conventional international relations literature. Among possible sites, however, are the long-ignored socialist sites and their pre-socialist trajectories.

Sites are where the identity strategies emerge. The multiple sinic orders arising from the various sites, which appear to belong to an overriding sinic order, reflect different identity strategies that meet through their interactions. These strategies, derived from different historical trajectories, construct their own China through the mechanisms of encounters and choice. Through such encounters, each site is constrained by the physical and discursive contexts from which its strategies emerge; through choice, each site combines and recombines cultural resources to give them meaning. This is how no one site can monopolize the meaning of the sinic order. All sites are able to come up with new or recycled meanings. Ironically, the sinic order survives in name or in imagination, if not in substance, as all strategies interact and continuously adapt.

Sinicization has enhanced the vitality and resonance of the intellectual history of sinology. It has facilitated the spread of American capitalist market practices within the Chinese economy, the nationalist and rights rhetoric within Chinese politics, the idea of the “balance of power” within China’s foreign policy, and the multi-culturalism within

China's global diasporic communities. Conceptual and institutional adaptations of sinicization and the different forms of resistance, re-appropriation, and feedback they engender have rendered sinicization all the more important. The responses, requiring knowledge of both the Euro-American and the Chinese forms of civilization, motivate agents to be cognizant of the positions they occupy between the different civilizations. Sinicization, as well as sinology, often implies not only China as a nation-state, but also the Chinese residing in Indochina and Taiwan who mediate between the Chinese and their own various forms of identity. They act as both producers and consumers of civilization who maneuver among collective, familial, and individual centers of allegiance.⁵

3. Sinologists as Anthropologists of Knowledge

Self-knowledge is the foundation of sinology. Becoming a sinologist involves multi-sited processes that deconstruct the stereotypical notions of China's rise in the twenty-first century. The pre- and post-socialist sinologists in this volume have actively participated in this sort of sinicization. Their strategic choices have been shaped by their specific historical contexts, thus there are wide variations in their adaptations. Because they are positioned at different sites, they do not respond to China's rise in similar ways.

Methodologically, the authors in the book rely on the aforementioned anthropology of knowledge, which stresses the relevance of encounters and choices that mirror and reproduce those responsible for the survival of human groups in the process of knowledge production. Specifically, the volume includes interviews with senior sinologists as well as literature reviews. The authors pay particular attention to the choices of sinologists facing the constraints of their social and professional encounters. Between the pre-socialist traditions and the post-socialist globalism, there were unlimited cultural as well as epistemological sites where one could acquire perspectives through learning, practicing, or simulating particular identity strategies that made sense to the sites at specific points in time. Each site in itself is home to many possible alternative identities, so not only may the choice of an identity at a particular site be unstable over time, but the choice of a site itself may be unstable as well. This reduces the choice of identity to no more

than the act of taking on a particular role, except that it usually requires a conscious, context-specific, and immediate decision.

Globalization obscures the distinction of identity due to its increasingly destabilizing effects on self-other relations. Intellectual paths that are influenced by the transformation, overthrow, lingering-on, disappearance, reproduction, fading, or backfiring of the party-state in the post-socialist states as well as their foreign relations are destined to encounter such dislocations in self-other relations, generating frustration, hope, emptiness, fear, opportunity, and other types of anxiety. Accordingly, sites are as much intellectual and psychological as they are social and physical.

Underpinning this intellectual history project is a conviction that individual professional trajectories necessarily reflect choices, both conscious and subconscious, about epistemological possibilities permitted by the social conditions about which individuals have no immediate choice. The two mechanisms that facilitate intellectual growth are, first, encounters with existing epistemological perspectives beyond one's own volition and, second, choices that strategically select, recombine, and renovate perceived (im)possibilities. The mechanism of encountering constrains the range of intellectual puzzles;⁶ the mechanism of choice reflects the strength of volition.⁷ Whereas encountering is largely socially prepared and yet unavoidably mediated by coincidence, choice is indicated by the existence of alternatives that are either preserved or are created by the differing decisions and narratives of others. Between one's choice and encounters, which are beyond one's own choice, there is the second-ordered mechanism of travel. All of these can be conceived of in terms of physical movement and career paths. Travel always involves choices that facilitate the ensuing encounters, hence, it is a second-ordered mechanism that breeds individual intellectual growth.

A methodological note on travel is useful here. Reflections on one's choice of a site about which one has written different things about China could more easily begin by recalling one's travel experiences—as an immigrant, a student abroad, a conference participant, a visiting scholar, a field researcher, a tourist, or other such experiences, whether mentioned or not on one's curriculum vitae—whereby encounters that necessitate constant decision making are essential. Similar pressures to make different choices also take place when hosting, willingly or not, visiting travelers in various forms—when surrendering to their

governing bloc, enlisting their services, reading their writings, subscribing to their ideology, consuming their products, marrying their members, and so on. Travel intrinsically is a method of China studies and also a methodology of re- or de-Sinicization.

4. The Intellectual History of Sinology as Sinicization

The present book invites reflections on various trajectories of intellectual history specifically pertaining to how China is accessed through knowledge about China in different communities and life biographies. Given the multiple identities in the world, one's own self-understanding is essential to an understanding of China. Decisions made regarding ever-evolving individual biographies challenge the objectivity of knowledge.⁸ Knowledge of China and the practices associated with China complement one another in China as well as elsewhere.⁹ The evolution of China knowledge proceeds along trajectories of intellectual growth, each of which is embedded in its own social practices. This is particularly relevant in the age of globalization and amidst the arguably "age of rising China." As symbols of China fill in one's life practices, the China scholar's approach to the study of China increasingly interferes with his or her own self-understanding.

The study of individualized intellectual history regarding China is therefore at the same time an anthropological study of knowledge. China involves a process of self-becoming among its scholars and their communities, and is thus intrinsically composed of a phenomenon of human evolution. Historical bearings of one's social and cultural backgrounds comprise the epistemological foundation for one's writings on China. They incorporate various biographies that have given rise to unusually rich but often mutually incompatible intellectual resources and inspirations, including, at the very least, the collective memory of all those groups with which one has sequentially identified oneself throughout one's life. In my own past, for example, these historical bearings refer to political and social movements and wars fought in the name of, or targeted at, China and the associated political upheavals that caused social cleavages, political turmoil, ideological confusion, and, at times, anti-foreign, anti-colonial, or anti-Chinese nationalism.

China scholarship in Taiwan, for example, involves choices by scholars with respect to encountered and constantly reinterpreted imaginations of how Chinese names, identities, and images have occurred.

Due to its colonial history, the Civil and Cold War legacies, and internal cleavages, political turmoil, ideological confusion, and, at times, anti-foreign, anti-colonial, or anti-Chinese nationalism. China scholarship in Taiwan consists of strategic shifts among the Japanese, American, and Chinese approaches to the subject as well as their combinations and recombinations. The mechanisms of choice, including the travel that can orient, reorient, or disorient existing views of China, produce conjunctive scholarship. The rich repertoire of views on China, together with the politics of identity, challenge the objective stance of the social sciences to the extent that no view of China can be exempt from political implications and politicized social scrutiny.¹⁰ Concerns about exigent propriety in a social setting are internal to knowledge production. Therefore, understanding the process by which all the historically derived approaches inform China scholarship in Taiwan through the mechanism of encountering reveals both the uncertain nature of knowledge in general and the uncertain worldwide meanings associated with China in particular.

The academics in this volume illustrate a variety of geographical, linguistic, and temporal possibilities in their lives. They were born in different national communities, they lived and worked in different countries, and their occasional reliance on languages other than their professional languages all suggest that sinicization does not have to proceed in either Chinese or English. Rather, the use of third languages can be a statement about one's being, where one is from, and where one is heading. In brief, sinicization reveals in one individual the existence of multiple cultural-geographical selves. Later in their careers, many of these academics experienced a growing concern about their home countries, often reflected in a shift, occurring consciously and rationally, in their academic and political agendas and in the frequency of their visits. This fact is a healthy antidote to the common preconception that structures are all-determining. As revealed by these individual lives, nothing can be farther from the truth.

Even far-reaching views that seek to associate China with very specific images, such as "China's rise," "all under heaven," or "Chinese characteristics," represent choices, not inevitabilities; the lives and works of these academics contradict any such notions. If one insists on the nation-state as the only viable civilizational actor in world politics, Huntingtonian clashes of civilizations may have some plausibility.

Academics living and working in transnational careers, however, have been free to choose practices unrelated, or even resistant, to the constraints and opportunities imposed or provided by nation-states. The promotion or denial of Chinese distinctiveness always involves choices. Thus, no view of China can be politically neutral. Sinicization is unavoidably shaped and impacted by conceptions of identity and political practice.

This does not mean that actors have full control over their scholarly work on China or over their self-identifications that implicitly or explicitly inform their perspectives. No academic can control either the larger forces that prompt their civilizational encounters or the liminal positions they hold. Their choice of language, for example, does not go unnoticed by one community or the other. Home and host countries pose structural constraints simply because they differ from one another. Any narrative strategy about China cannot help but activate these differences. Yet meaningful choices persist, including both the choice of sides and the avoidance of the choice of sides. Structural determinacy thus fails to remove the capacity for strategic indeterminacy. Adaptation, and even self-revocation, is the norm of biography.

5. Framework of the Book

This book introduces reflections based upon personal encounters in Russia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Mongolia. These various sites have been home to long traditions of sinology and Oriental studies. Before the socialist period, their philological traditions were based largely on the legacy of French sinology. Thereafter, they all experienced an interlude during Communist Party rule and accordingly, to some extent, these sites became politically and ideologically connected to one another. Starting from the 1990s and continuing for the past two decades we have witnessed a transformation—a fading, overthrow, or lingering on—of the Communist rein over scholarship on ancient as well as modern China studies. To what extent this will involve a reconnection with or a revival of past scholarship and to what extent the party-state's legacy has or will be sustained, backfire, re-emerge, or disappear are among the questions discussed in the volume.

In the first part of the book—"Doing Sinology in Post-Communist States"—Olga Lomová and Anna Zádřapová discuss those factors that