

Revolutionary Waves: The Crowd in Modern China. By Tie Xiao. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017. Pp. xiv + 286. \$49.95/£35.95.

Tie Xiao's study of the crowd in modern Chinese literature is a well-researched and sensitive addition to the field of studies on left-wing literature in the Republican period. It productively explores the crowd not only as an aesthetic symbol but also a theme in Chinese and global intellectual history that is closely connected with concepts like democracy and revolution. Many scholars of Chinese literature will be familiar with Gustave Le Bon's theories of the crowd and their influence on the early Lu Xun and other late-Qing thinkers. Xiao takes this theme further and deeper: looking at the 1920s and 1930s, he effectively highlights some of the ambiguities of the crowd figure within "revolutionary" literature: the appropriation of the crowd as a literary trope thus often results in bringing out undercurrents of moral anxiety or doubts about the political role of crowds, and their possible threat to the status of writers or intellectuals. In this way, he neatly shows how the crowd theme is connected with a residual literary modernism even in literary fictions that claimed the banner of proletarian aesthetics.

Xiao studies how the crowd emerged simultaneously as a literary theme, an object of academic inquiry, and indeed as a participatory public in the late nineteenth century. This approach allows him to show that literary themes and tropes can be productively studied in conjunction with discourses of knowledge, emanating in this case from the fields of psychology and psychopathology (p. 20) as well as politics. Taking its cue from traditional notions of *zhong* 眾 and *min* 民, the term *qun* 羣 appeared in the context of the Hundred Days Reform, referring to the ideal of a structured society or nation. However, it was also sometimes used to refer to the "crowd" until it was displaced by the new coinage *qunzhong* 羣眾 after the May Fourth movement.

In the first chapter, Xiao traces the scientific interest in crowd mentality, psychology, and behaviour back to a global trend that originated in Europe in the 1880s, mentioning Le Bon, Nietzsche, and William James (p. 30). He might also have referred to two crucial earlier literary works: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), later translated by Baudelaire, and Baudelaire's own prose poem inspired by Poe, "Les Foules" (The crowds, 1861), both of which contain many of the themes and ambiguities of later Chinese fiction. Xiao notes that Le Bon's idea of "crowd mentality" was widely used after the May Fourth movement in journals like *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (*La Jeunesse*, or New youth). While Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 warned against the "blind crowd mentality," and Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 and Fu Sinian 傅斯年 lamented its lack of structure and clairvoyance, the KMT leader Hu Hanmin 胡漢民 celebrated the crowd's political willpower and innate morality (pp. 35–38).

An important critical theorist of the crowd was Gao Juefu 高覺敷 (1896–1993), who studied psychology at the University of Hong Kong from 1918 to 1923 and went on to teach and author several influential studies on social psychology, including *Crowd Psychology*.¹ Rather than postulating a distinctive collective consciousness, he tried to explain the crowd phenomenon as a “transformative condition” that modifies individual behaviour in a pathological manner (pp. 44–46). Zhang Jiuru 張九如 (1895–1979), who lectured on the same topic at the Whampoa Military Academy from the late 1920s, although he recognized the political potential of a well-controlled crowd as a “passionate form of public opinion” (p. 51), also warned against its ability to activate pathological desires in individuals. Despite his critical assessment, his interest in the political potential of a crowd under strong leadership was put to use by the KMT in the 1930s.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the philosopher Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之 (1899–1972), who took a more favourable view of the crowd as the expression of irrational and instinctive vitalism. A Peking University graduate interested in anarchism (he wrote for the *Beijing daxue xuesheng zhoukan* 北京大學學生週刊 [Peking University students’ weekly] and took part in the May Fourth movement), Zhu viewed *qing* 情 (emotion) as a more potent and authentic force than rationality, which could form an emotive basis for political identification. While imprisoned for over three months in 1920 he wrote *Geming zhexue* 革命哲學 (Philosophy of revolution), a critique of rationalism and utilitarianism that advocated a revolution of authentic emotion under the catchword “oppose intellect, recover emotion” (*fanzhi fuqing* 反知復情, p. 66). His view of revolution was in the final analysis existential and “cosmic,” echoing Zhang Binglin’s 章炳麟 earlier theory of “Five Negations” (*wuwu* 五無). Consequently, he viewed revolution not as derived from rational reasoning but from impulse and emotion, advocating an “irrational attitude.” For Zhu, the crowd is authentically revolutionary precisely because it is irrational and instinct-driven; self-awareness (*zijue* 自覺) is not the result of enlightenment but an inherent characteristic of the crowd. Tie Xiao effectively situates this strand of thinking within the global “Bergson fever” of the 1920s, and felicitously describes it as a “romanticism of spontaneity” (p. 85), situated both within the “revolution plus love” literary tradition and within a long line of controversies about spontaneity versus organization that run from Lenin via Gramsci to Mao. Xiao also notes the ambiguity of Zhu’s spontaneism, which led him to embrace Chiang Kai-shek’s New Life philosophy in the 1930s, not unlike Zhang Jiuru. The strands of authenticity and irrationalism, which were central to his endorsement of the crowd, are thus neatly exposed in their political ambiguity.

¹ Gao Juefu, *Qunzhong xinlixue* 羣眾心理學 (Crowd psychology) (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1934).

Chapters 3 to 5 deal with literary constructions and explorations of the crowd figure. In Chapter 3, Xiao notes that the notion *dazhong* 大眾, originally a Buddhist term, became the preferred term in left-wing circles to refer to the “masses” in the 1920s, as literary revolution gave way to “revolutionary literature.” The crowd (*qunzhong*) now became a preferred trope for left-wing writers’ “high-strung advocacy of an anti-individualist literature” (p. 100). Examining three literary responses to the May Thirtieth movement, Xiao argues that Ye Shaojun’s 葉紹鈞 novel *Ni Huanzhi* 倪煥之 (1928) epitomizes the simultaneous “awe and fear,” the wish to both belong and observe from outside, felt by the intellectual contemplating the mobilization of the crowd. Tie Xiao pinpoints one of the final chapters (the crowd manipulated by Tiger Jiang), expunged by Ye from his own novel after 1949, as a prescient exposure of the authoritarian danger underlying blind identification with the masses. Mao Dun’s *Rainbow* (*Hong* 虹, 1929) illustrates the physical violence exerted by a crowd against a female body that is swept along with it. In Mu Shiying’s 穆時英 “Pierrot” (1934), the crowd becomes a passionate fantasy that stands for the writer’s inability to break out of solitude.

Chapter 4 focuses on Hu Yepin’s 胡也頻 (1903–1931) novella “The Light Is Ahead of Us” (*Guangming zai women de qianmian* 光明在我們的前面, 1930), a work of “revolutionary literature” that nonetheless bears the traces of Hu’s modernist fascination with female bodies and corpses shown in his earlier expressionist work “Cadaver” (*Jianghai* 殭骸, 1927). The protagonist’s political fantasies converge with erotic desires at the moment when he wants to dissolve into the crowd of May Thirtieth demonstrators, thus, wittingly or not (as Tie Xiao notes), affirming the centrality of individual desire to collective politics. Revolutionary ideology may legitimate the protagonist’s desires but it does not erase them.

Chapter 5 looks at the question of political ventriloquism—when intellectuals speak for the crowd. Ai Qing’s 艾青 (1910–1996) poem “The Crowd” (*Qunzhong* 羣眾, 1940), inspired by Émile Verhaeren’s “La Foule” (1899), contains an unusual metaphor: in describing a desire to become one with the masses, the poet writes: “I have to merely open my mouth to find myself gasping, / As if a million people are breathing through this small hole.” This desperate “gasping” reveals a fundamental tension between the poet’s ambition to speak for the masses and the fear of extinction of his poetic voice, a fear echoed in Ai Qing’s experience in Yan’an, where he fell victim to Mao’s first purge before recanting and embracing the party. Even in Ding Ling’s 丁玲 (1904–1986) *Taiyang zhao zai Sanggan he shang* 太陽照在桑乾河上 (The sun shines over the Sanggan River, 1948), a sympathetic account of how the peasants “turn over” (*fanshen* 翻身) during the land reform, Ding Ling portrays the crowd as caught in the throes of violent primitive instinct that needs to be curbed by the party cadre.

The epilogue takes the reader from the state codification of “mass demonstrations” (*qunzhong youxing* 羣眾遊行) as official events from which all spontaneous passion has been banned after 1949, as well as the disappearance of social psychology as a discipline, to the post-Mao replacement of collective passions with individual economic passion. When discussing the PRC period, Xiao might have mentioned the use of *qunzhong* as a ubiquitous social label (*dangyuan* 黨員 [party member] vs. *qunzhong*), which further attests the somewhat negative connotation retained by the “crowd” in official communist discourse. While the argument about the crowd as an ambiguous political force is made in a subtle way throughout the book, the last few pages indulge in a somewhat simplified nostalgia for the crowd as a “collective” remedy to depoliticization, neoliberalism and other contemporary buzzwords. This is rather regrettable as it seems to reduce the complexity of the crowd-figure, which throughout the century (and throughout Xiao’s study) has appeared as a deeply ambiguous political notion. It is something of a paradox that, having deconstructed the notion of Leninist organization by re-examining the revolutionary aspirations of writers and intellectuals, the author should end up romanticizing the spontaneity that so many of the same intellectuals had symmetrical misgivings about. The last few pages also concentrate a somewhat irritating feature of the book: a tendency to pepper its argument with a barrage of allusions and quotations from contemporary philosophers, often only vaguely contextualized and loosely connected to the main argument.

Xiao is most persuasive when he teases out the modernist ambiguities and moral dilemmas that continue to inform even the most ideological examples of revolutionary literature. His approach, combining studies of intellectuals as producers of social knowledge and writers as creators of social imaginaries, is an example of the new approach to intellectual history at its best, incorporating social and cultural history, as well as drawing on the history of academic disciplines (in this case psychology). Showing how ideas like the crowd, even when they appear in works of imagination, are the result of a process of social formation, opens up new readings of literary works. For these reasons, this book should be of interest to literary scholars and historians of intellectuals, as well as all those interested in the history of revolutionary ideas in twentieth-century China, serving as an excellent companion to more classical approaches in political and social history.

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