

Sentimental Republic: Chinese Intellectuals and the Maoist Past. By Hang Tu. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2025. Pp. 315. \$44.95.

Sentimental Republic is a study of the volatile period in Chinese intellectual history following the end of the Cultural Revolution, a period that includes the soul-searching of the “high culture fever” in the 1980s as China’s people were urged to liberate their thinking and move towards the world, and the nationalistic turn taken in the accelerated economic expansion of the 1990s, two eras dramatically separated by the horror of 4 June 1989. Hang Tu proposes to address conflicting intellectual trends not merely through the reading of political ideology on the part of his chosen protagonists, but also by the attribution of emotion to their polemical positions, thereby exploring the interaction of feeling and thinking. In this quest, the author adopts Raymond Williams’s formulation of the structure of feeling, the way that each generation perceives and represents the spirit and culture of its times.

A spectre is seen to haunt the thinkers and influencers selected as case studies, variously liberal, leftist, Christian, Confucian, or neo-conservative: not that of the nascent communism seen by Marx and Engels to alarm the European powers in their 1848 *Manifesto*, but one from the recent past, the spectre of Maoism, its chaotic and violent history and the towering figure of its charismatic and capricious central figure. The reader is confronted by projects that reject, avoid, co-opt, reinterpret, or reinvent the Great Helmsman as they negotiate with his legacy. The Introduction proposes four dominant structures of feeling—anguish, melancholy, quasi-religious passion, and patriotic fervour—as motivating the selected writers and their audiences (p. 14), and the author deploys an army of Western and Chinese philosophers, political scientists, theorists, historians, theologians, observers, and participants as he gallantly, if not always successfully, attempts a dispassionate analysis of his subjects.

Each of the five main chapters focuses on an individual, a pair, or, in the final case, a small group, to exemplify a defining sentiment that informs an ideological position as it develops or transforms. An Epilogue moves into the Xi Jinping era for an overview of the current state of debate (or its absence) among Chinese intellectuals and the prospects for a post-Mao consensus in the age of the China Dream and beyond.

In Chapter 1, “Pleasure and Guilt: Reason and Emotion in the Age of New Enlightenment,” Tu considers the philosopher Li Zehou 李澤厚 and the literary critic Liu Zaifu 劉再復, co-authors of the liberal treatise *A Farewell to Revolution* (*Gaobie geming* 告別革命) published in Hong Kong in 1995. Their work revived the liberal humanist search for enlightenment that had flourished in the 1980s and might have maintained its prominence but for the precipitate fall from grace of the reformist Party General

Secretary Zhao Ziyang in the spring of 1989. Li and Liu championed “enlightened sentiments” (p. 48) over the hatred, fear, shame, and violence they saw as characteristic of the Mao era. But while both men shared a revulsion for Maoist fanaticism, their approach to its legacy differed. Li Zehou, who had studied German philosophy, combined Kant’s ideas on enlightenment with the aesthetics of Confucius, who had enjoyed a return to official favour after condemnation by the May Fourth generation and in late Maoism, notably the Sage’s “culture of pleasure” (p. 60) where rationality ruled over religious transcendence. For Liu Zaifu, active in the tearful national catharsis immediately following the Cultural Revolution, admission of individual guilt and Christian repentance was necessary for the perpetrators of atrocity in the Mao era, such as the intellectuals who had participated or acquiesced in the mutual betrayals of the Anti-Rightist campaign and the Red Guards who had terrorized the cities in the mid-1960s. While Li embraced the “pleasure” of a secular life free from extreme passion, Liu could not escape the need for confession and absolution, a position with uncomfortable parallels to the self-humiliations of the victims of Maoist campaigns of criticism; yet both men saw moral learning and sentimental education as the means towards the liberal-democratic society they envisioned. This was not to materialize, but the ideas expressed by the authors of *A Farewell to Revolution* influenced further debates, if only as targets of attack.

Chapter 2, “The Liberal Imagination: The Politics of Mourning in the ‘Chen Yinke Fever’” considers the posthumous debates over a Western-educated polymath who had flourished in the intellectual pluralism of the Republican period, withdrawn from public life after the founding of the People’s Republic, and suffered condemnation and persecution in the Cultural Revolution before his death in 1969. The “fever” of the chapter’s title was sparked by the Princeton intellectual historian Yu Ying-shi’s 余英時 essay on Chen published in 1983, and the response it elicited. Yu presented Chen Yinke’s 陳寅恪 declining of any public service and his retreat into the Ming-Qing intellectual tradition, including his eulogy of the Ming loyalist and poet Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618–1664), who committed suicide after the collapse of the Ming dynasty, as an allegory for Chen’s resistance to the communist regime, and Chen as the model intellectual who embodies opposition and independence. This portrayal appealed to liberal intellectuals who had been emboldened by the state’s call to liberate thinking as the Reform and Opening-up movement began and subsequently dismayed by its retraction. Mourning for Chen Yinke and others who had suffered in Mao-era campaigns like the “rightist” dissident Lin Zhao 林昭 set off a “memorial mania” (p. 88) and served as a touchstone for sentimental self-representation of liberal intellectuals as brave cultural loyalists and frequent victims of leftist activism. In subsequent years, Chen Yinke was reinterpreted, both by those who lionized him and by others who scorned him as

an aloof elitist detached from the masses and achievements of socialism. For his admirers, Chen's mistreatment initially aroused grief and righteous anger; later interpretations saw him as a pioneer of classical liberalism and even as an unlikely "conservative guru" (p. 104) for his integrity and avoidance of socialist ideology. Tu deals with the pathos of the Chen Yinke revival with empathy in some of the most elegant writing in the book: of Chen's detached moral compassion, he concludes that "In the end, 'humanistic sentiment'—a feeble, lukewarm temperament—became the last means by which liberal scholars could connect themselves to the lost literati tradition" (p. 108).

The focus turns from liberal theorists to two fiction writers in Chapter 3, "Left Melancholy: A Dialogue between Chen Yingzhen and Wang Anyi." The two authors met at the Iowa Writing Program in 1983, Chen a Taiwanese Christian Marxist and Wang the daughter of the prominent literary figure Ru Zhijuan 茹志鵑 and rising star in the post-Cultural Revolution environment of humanism and individuality. Thereafter, Tu contends, they can be seen as being in dialogue on the aftermath of socialist utopianism; though the two authors appear to have diametrically opposed views on the topic, both are characterized as affected by melancholy, consisting of "self-reproaches and self-reviling" (p. 127) tinged, unlike mourning, with some hope for the future. Their writings reveal both to be haunted by the communist revolution, Chen by its failure to deliver on its promises, and Wang by the disasters it unleashed. Tu offers readings of fictional work and memoir by each to explore the different qualities of their melancholy. Chen Yingzhen's 陳映真 turn to the left had been his reaction to the state of terror imposed by Chiang Kai-shek after the Nationalist government's flight to Taiwan: his fiction portrayed Taiwanese revolutionaries as rebellious but defeated and sinking into despair, in the manner of the melancholic intellectuals created by May Fourth writers like Lu Xun 魯迅 and Yu Dafu 郁達夫, themselves reminiscent of the "superfluous men" of nineteenth-century Russian literature. In Chen's story "Mountain Path" (*Shanlu* 山路), the central character, disillusioned at the failure of the communist revolution, commits suicide, her "blind faith in Maoist politics resulting in meaningless sacrifice" (p. 147), and her creator "waiting for the weak promise of redemption in the dystopian world" (p. 165). Wang Anyi's 王安憶 early writing is seen to convey "self-conscious individualism" followed by "pale sentimentalism," before a more serious reflection on the legacy of socialism (pp. 147–48). From her early short fiction, however, the focus on the changing dynamics of class, notably in her native Shanghai, is a constant in her writing, with a preference that contrasts with that of the fiction published during the Mao years. For example, in her 1982 novella "Lapse of Time" 流逝, a work not selected for analysis here, the bourgeois central character, disgraced and impoverished in the Cultural Revolution, is hired as a nanny by a worker couple from the ascendant proletariat who, despite

their scruples about the “somewhat worrisome fact of her bad political background . . . nonetheless felt good about the proper lifestyles of such people, with their attention to sanitation and manners.”¹ Wang Anyi’s later works set in her home city continue to explore issues of the individual and class in a changing China, with melancholy seen in listlessness and lack of higher purpose in a world of cosmic disorder. As authors, Chen Yingzhen and Wang Anyi present an ill-matched pair of melancholics; but for both, Tu suggests, following Derrida, that their “mournful gestures are . . . intermingled with a paradoxical remembrance of a Chinese revolution without a revolutionary mandate” (p. 161).

A single protagonist is considered in Chapter 4, “A Passion for God: Liu Xiaofeng and the Conservative Revolt against Modernity.” Here Tu explores his subject’s “passion for ultimate values” (p. 168) and the remarkable series of reinventions which took him from urban youth idealism through German romanticism and “cultural Christianity” (belief without affiliation), before embracing the political theology of the US-based Leo Strauss and the anti-liberal positions of the Nazi political theorist and lifelong advocate of dictatorship Carl Schmitt, and ending (for now) with the assertion of a “Confucian religion” with “Mao as a ‘sage-king” (p. 168). Tu views Liu Xiaofeng’s 劉小楓 thinking as “a combination of metaphysical rumination and opportunistic intent, philosophical insight and political dogmatism, sincerity and hypocrisy” (p. 174). Liu’s progress also charts the course for those intellectuals who set out to serve the nation as proponents of enlightenment in the immediate post-Cultural Revolution years and subsequently transformed themselves into agents of authoritarianism. While still in China, Liu had combined the transcendence of Christianity with the religious practice of Confucianism, drawing from biblical reading to support his belief that the atrocities of the Mao era required repentance and divine salvation. After his return from doctoral studies of theology in Basel, he sought ways to make religious passion applicable to China in the 1990s and found them in Strauss and Schmitt. His reading of the Confucian *Spring and Autumn Annals* and the late Qing reformer Kang Youwei’s 康有為 ideal of Confucian theocracy opened the way for belief in faith-based absolute rule. Liu and his adherents’ contempt for both May Fourth humanism and American liberalism led to the creation of an image of Mao, his excesses notwithstanding, as an earthly god. With his endorsement of Xi Jinping’s suppression of the liberal ideal of constitutional governance, Liu indicated that his youthful religious transcendence had transmuted into a passionate belief in dictatorship. Tu leaves little doubt as to his disdain for Liu’s “shabby logic” (p. 206) in raising Mao to the level of divinity in the service of absolutism, or his use of “antiquarian nostalgia to beautify a highly aggressive doctrine of political hegemony” (p. 207).

¹ Wang Anyi, *Lapse of Time*, tr. Howard Goldblatt (San Francisco: China Books, 1988), p. 160.

With Chapter 5, “*China Can Say No: Popular Nationalism and the Spirit of Ressentiment*,” the author moves further into what is for him distasteful territory. The 1996 best-selling nationalistic rant played upon the ennui of the generation coming to maturity and inflamed the narrative of a resurgent China as the victim of foreign aggression, with the US as the principal offender. While acknowledging its effectiveness in fuelling xenophobia, Hang Tu abhors the crudely manipulative writing of *Say No*’s “sorcerers of nationalism” (p. 217) and refers several times to the publishing phenomenon as a “farce” (pp. 216, 227, 239, 249). Unlike the writers studied in the previous chapters, the *Say No* authors were not part of the elite; rather, they were grassroots intellectuals assembled on the initiative of the publisher Zhang Xiaobo 張小波, who saw a market opportunity in anger at the nation’s perceived victimization. The individual contributions are detailed at length and analysed with reference to Friedrich Nietzsche’s use of “*ressentiment*” in his study of this “venomous passion” (p. 217), which combines frustrated envy and hatred; Nietzsche likens this to the mentality of a slave who comforts himself by maintaining that his own morality is virtuous while that of his master is evil. Contributing factors to the US taking the position of principal enemy included American support for Taiwan, opposition to China’s bid for the 2000 Olympics, China’s delayed entry into the World Trade Organization, the encirclement of a rising China, and Samuel Huntington’s 1993 article on the “Clash of Civilizations.” Americans were seen to be arrogant and effete, and the “spineless Americanophiles” (p. 237) embedded in China’s elite no less contemptible. While the inflammatory rhetoric of victimization and resentment of *Say No* (and the other books that cashed in on its success) is recognizable as a common tactic of right-wing populism, Tu astutely points to a Chinese antecedent in Lu Xun’s downtrodden lumpen proletarian Ah Q, whose humiliations are ingeniously rationalized as “spiritual victories.”

Sentimental Republic is an erudite, meticulously researched and copiously annotated study of ways in which feeling and sentiment informed ideological debate and fuelled political disagreements after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Chinese texts of quoted passages from works discussed are usefully included. The author takes it as a given that the Mao era was a catastrophe and, I infer, favours liberal humanism and intellectual consistency in his subjects. While these positions may not be agreeable to all, the cases are presented at length and argued persuasively. The use of the terminologies of numerous disciplines places considerable demands on the reader, but a careful study (combined for this reader with online searches including “hauntology” [p. 160], “messianicity without messianism” [p. 161], and “Christological” [p. 171]) rewards the effort. The frequent appearance of the adjective “muscular” is somewhat baffling, however: it appears to encompass a range of sentiments, variously decisive, forceful,

passionate, overbearing, and imperious, and my attempts to find in it a covert reference to the imperialist Victorian discipline of muscular Christianity were unsuccessful. To give a few examples: We read of Liu Xiaofeng's proposal "to refurbish a 'Confucian Mao' . . . as a mythic-muscular form of political leadership" (p. 178), the party-state's "muscular intervention into the cultural sphere" and Kang Youwei's "muscular vision of Confucian theocracy" (both p. 197), as well as Liu Xiaofeng's "muscular yearning for the sovereign perpetuity of the [communist] party" (p. 208). The phrasing is arresting, but the precise meaning is unclear.

In the "Epilogue: Searching for the Chinese Dream," the author moves forward to the age of Xi Jinping and his early China Dream mission statement, through years in which anything straying from the official line was not to be tolerated: "Dissent was not loyal opposition. It was high treason" (p. 253). More recently, works by Fang Fang 方方, her pandemic memoir *Wuhan Diary* (*Wuhan riji* 武漢日記) and land reform novel *Soft Burial* (*Ruanmai* 軟埋), were trolled as traitorous after their publication in the West; authors are required only to "tell the good China story" (p. 268). Now the image of China overseas, personified as it emerges in the 2017 blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2* (戰狼2), is a fusion of the noble warrior and enlightened capitalist.

The story told in *Sentimental Republic* ends with Hang Tu depicting a "post-Mao generation caught between a failing socialist utopia and a rising neoliberal juggernaut" (p. 276). The epilogue's title offers no defining emotion to match those of the chapters. I suggest that "disenchantment" would fill this lacuna, capturing the feelings of Chinese intellectuals struggling with a variety of political theorizings which seem progressively less likely to provide inspiration and unity of purpose; it might also reflect the mood of the author as he wrote these final words. My term comes from Max Weber via the novelist Zhang Kangkang 張抗抗, who chose it as the title of her recently completed monumental trilogy, which chronicles the intellectual ferment of the 1980s. Zhang explains it as follows:

The term "disenchantment" is derived from what Max Weber called "the disenchantment of the world" . . . In Chinese it can refer to the dissipation of the mystery, sanctity, and charm of science and knowledge. It can also be translated as "exorcism," "demystifying," "to break a charm," or "break a curse," and refer to the dissolution of an integrated religious interpretation of the world that occurred during the transition from theocracy to a secularism in Western societies. By extension, it can also refer to a subject's culture-based doubts or characterization of the sublime, the paradigmatic, the scholarly and refined, the grand narrative and meta-discourse. (personal correspondence with the trilogy's translator)

Zhang Kangkang's *Disenchantment* (*Qumei* 祛魅) has yet to be published in its original Chinese version. An English translation in three volumes by Stacy Mosher, published in 2025 by Bouden House, might be read in conjunction with the book under review.

DOI: 10.29708/JCS.CUHK.202601_(82).0009

RICHARD KING
University of Victoria, Canada, emeritus