Anticipating Community, Producing Dissent: The Politics of Recent Chinese Intellectual Praxis*

Gloria Davies

Abstract

This paper explores the ongoing debate between the “liberals” and the “New Left” in relation to the rhetorical and discursive strategies adopted by various authors on both sides of this “ideological” division. In articulating the need for greater democracy and social justice in present-day Mainland Chinese society, these authors deploy tropes and concepts drawn from a wide range of Chinese and EuroAmerican sources. Their common anticipation of community — the word that is now most frequently used in Anglophone scholarship to signify the common good — has produced dissent and debate, primarily because of the different ways in which these authors have formulated their vision of the common

Gloria Davies is based in the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University, where she is also involved in the work of the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. She has published many articles in the field of modern Chinese literary and cultural studies, and on cross-cultural issues in literary, postcolonial and critical theory. Her recent work includes Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2001.

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This paper also examines the foundational concepts and values that underpin “liberal” and “New Left” conceptualizations of the common good, and situates their differently formulated concerns in the context of both globalization and a transformed Chinese party-state, whose current ideology shares much in common with the economic rationalistic doctrine of neo-liberalism.

Over the last two decades, coinciding with the rise of globalization, the idea of community has become a significant topic of critical reflection within different intellectual traditions and the languages of these traditions. It has been discussed, analysed and theorized in different and often incommensurable ways, depending on the specific discourse and language in which this idea appears. This makes the idea of community itself less the promise of a greater unity to come than the site of seemingly endless contestation. Yet it is the very promise or anticipation of unity and harmony as community that provides as it were the necessary ingredient for conflicts to arise.

In this article, I use the word “community” in the broad contemporary sense of both an ideality and an undertaking. This word has appeared with increasing frequency in the theoretical literature of the Western humanities and social sciences and is, in simplest terms, an ideality-in-progress for which no universal telos can be projected. Among the more influential commentators on how community can be reconceptualized in pluralistic ways are Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Charles Taylor, John Rawls, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. The prominence of these six authors has, in many ways, ensured the rich textual after-lives of their writings on community, in the form of reworkings, elaborations and critiques of their formulations within the disciplinary and inter-disciplinary frameworks of professional knowledge production.¹ This form of textual industry exceeds linguistic borders, and there is no clearer example than the frequent summation and citation of statements issued under the names of these and other prominent EuroAmerican authors within contemporary Chinese critical discourse.

Yet, the kind of critical inquiry that is being undertaken in the Chinese language differs significantly from the EuroAmerican formulations upon which it draws, variously and in eclectic fashion. EuroAmerican engagement with issues of cultural differences and minority interests across a broad spectrum, as well as with ethnic and religious conflicts within the context of a post-industrial United States and Europe bears little