Revolutionary Waves: The Crowd in Modern China
Tie Xiao
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The crowd—be it a politicized cohesive body of the people as a revolutionary force of historical advance, a mindless swarm that is unable to perform political reasoning, or a formidable mob as the impediment to a healthy social movement—has figured prominently as a new historical subject in modern China. Tie Xiao’s work approaches the crowd (qunzhong 群眾) as “a highly charged object of psychological investigation, aesthetic depiction, and political investment” (4) and highlights its “cultural salience and forms of intelligibility” (6) within modern China’s revolutionary transformations. His study aptly captures the ambiguities, instabilities, and profound anxieties and disorientation that characterized the relationship between the individual and the political crowd in the first half of twentieth-century Chinese history. The Chinese intellectuals had “simultaneous detachment and identification” (2) toward the crowd, and more often than not, they longed to build connections with and merge themselves with the collective but at the same time keep their own reflective and critical thinking.

Xiao’s main objective is to “call attention to how writers, philosophers, psychologists, and political theorists searched for and often invented vocabularies, explanations, and modes of representation that might render the crowd intelligible and practicable” (5). The figure of the crowd became a discursive field to stage the competing authority of various historical actors, as well as the very site to locate selfhood, nation, and modernity. Xiao demonstrates that modern Chinese crowd discourse has actively participated in the making of modern Chinese history and has played a key role in shaping human subjectivities and behaviors and in providing new concepts and vocabularies to describe different forms of political and collective life experiences. Xiao shows that the figure of the crowd was by no means dispassionate, abstract, or impartial but has been endowed with aesthetic meanings and contained “strong emotional investment of their authors” (2). This book highlights the inseparable linkage between these three domains—knowledge (e.g., the new social-scientific knowledge), aesthetics (e.g., new rep-
resentational techniques and emotional investment), and politics (e.g., the rise of mass politics and participatory publics)—that worked together in shaping the modern Chinese crowd discourse. One of the well-known storylines that dominates modern Chinese studies is that the rise of the individual during the May Fourth period was replaced by the individual’s immersion into the collective in the post–May Fourth period, a process of transformation in which the new collective was forged based on the erasure or negation of individuality. By contrast, Xiao insightfully calls attention to the dialectical relationship between depersonalization and individuation and regards the merging of individuals into the collective as “the mutually constitutive relationship between self-realization and self-disavowal” (16).

This book aims at “excavating and categorizing the early twentieth-century crowd discourse” (5) and follows a chronological line of narrating the emergence of the crowd as an intellectual discourse among Chinese intelligentsia (chaps. 1 and 2), and the fictional representations of the crowd by modern Chinese writers, most of whom are left-wing writers (chaps. 3–5). Chapter 1 points out that the establishment of psychology as a discipline coincided with the emergence of the crowd discourse in the early decade of Republican China. Psychology provided ways of thinking, vocabularies, and concepts to make the figure of the crowd visible and intelligible. The inner life/mentality as “crowd mentality” (qunzhong xinli 群衆心理) was discovered beneath the physical massing, which led to a revolutionized conception that “the crowd was understood to have inner desires that could be mobilized or appropriated, raw energy that could be released or repressed, and primitive instincts worthy of praise or fear” (10). This chapter situates the discourse of “crowd psychology” within the global circulation of crowd theories, particularly Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd*. Le Bon’s denigration of the crowd mentality with which individuals exhibit irrationality had a huge impact upon the Chinese intelligentsia. This chapter stresses the circulation of the image of the crowd that has no capability of political reasoning, as seen in the examples of Lu Xun’s 魯迅 (1881–1936) writing on the “muddled crowd” and Gao Juefu’s 高覺敷 (1896–1993) and Zhang Jiuru’s 張九如 (1895–1979) work about the disqualification of the crowd as an agent of social change. Chapter 2 turns to the Chinese philosopher Zhu Qianzhi’s 朱謙之 (1899–1972) antirationalist, romantic view of the crowd. Zhu celebrates irrationality and intuition (such as passionate rebellion and the impulsive overflow of emotion) as the condition for the major drive of revolution. Chapter 3 deals with the recurrent theme of the individual merging with the political crowd in the literary works of the Chinese leftist writers of the late 1920s and early 1930s, a period characterized by its widespread belief in the masses as the agent of revolutionary change. Xiao demonstrates the ambivalent attitude of the intellectuals: their desire for merging with the crowd coexists with their anxiety about losing the self, and the disavowal of the self coexists with the
presence of the self as the witness of the formation of the collective. Chapter 4 describes the fusion into the collective as self-fulfillment and enjoyment through examining the left-wing writer Hu Yeping’s (1903–31) story “Guangming zai women de qianmian” 光明在我們的前面 (The Light Is Ahead of Us). Such an experience is also a process in which the self has been actively produced and transformed by the individual himself. Chapter 5 discusses how the “audible and distinct voice” of the crowd (156) was discovered, imagined, and produced in the works of left-wing Chinese writers and how the voice in its spoken forms was turned into written forms through the mediation of representational techniques. It traces the process from Chinese intellectuals’ self-identification as a transparent channel or mechanical recorder of the voice of the masses to their recording of the auditory explosion of the masses when the crowd was mobilized and internalized to speak a set of language instituted and orchestrated by the party. A very insightful observation in this chapter is that the voice was treated both “as a technology of sound reproduction and as a trope for artistic production” (161), so the fetishization of voice was connected with the age of emerging optical and acoustic media technologies.

Through situating the emergence of the modern Chinese crowd discourse within the global circulation of ideas, Tie Xiao’s book enables us to think how the case of modern China contributes to a renewed understanding of the universal figure of the crowd and mass politics. Xiao’s work exemplifies a truly interdisciplinary approach that brings literary and aesthetic studies to fruitful conversations with intellectual history, social and political science, and the history of technologies. He insightfully describes how the figure of the crowd was made visible and intelligible in the intersection of newly circulated psychological knowledge, new ways of aesthetic representations, and political agendas. Xiao’s highly interdisciplinary approach is not only applicable to the figure of the crowd in modern Chinese history but also enlightening for readers to think about the significance of knowledge production to provide vocabularies and concepts to make images, feelings, and experiences “describable and diagnosable in specific contexts” (20). This book also contributes a sophisticated, nuanced analysis of mass politics and participatory publics in modern China’s fictional and intellectual discourses. Revolutionary Wave: The Crowd in Modern China helps us understand more deeply the revolutionary transformations of the collective in China in the first half of the twentieth century and the continuing relevance of the crowd to the contemporary “crowded” China.

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