

Call for Papers: Political Lives in Socialist China

June 10-12, 2024 | Paris



The conference “Political Lives in Socialist China” will be held in Paris, 10-12 June 2024, with generous support from the France-Berkeley Fund, and in collaboration with the Centre d'études sur la Chine moderne et contemporaine at EHESS, Li Ka-shing Foundation Program in Modern Chinese History, and the Center for Chinese Studies at UC Berkeley.

Introduction

Only two years after the publication on his 1966 study *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, Franz Schurmann felt the need to qualify his state-centered approach: “[t]he forces of Chinese society are equally important as those coming from the structure of state power... due weight must now be given to the resurgence of the forces of Chinese society.” The context for this revelation was of course the Cultural Revolution, which ushered in a first wave of scholarship that centered on social life in the People’s

Republic of China rather than institutions, elites, and policies. A second wave of interest began with the opening of local archives, which allowed historians to explore new facets of society, including but not limited to material culture, experiences and emotions, official and unofficial culture, work and leisure, and the day-to-day operations of law and bureaucracy at the grassroots. Nobody can claim that scholars today do not give due weight to society.

For Schurmann's generation, to study Mao's China was to study a revolution comparable to the epochal events that transformed France and Russia. In recent years, however, scholars have found the revolutionary paradigm less helpful in making sense of a complex society characterized by surprising continuities and significant variations from city to city, village to village, not to mention across the urban-rural divide. We recognize the need to move away from old questions of politics and ideology. We celebrate the nuanced and sophisticated understanding of Chinese society that has come about through this shift in focus. But we propose that the time has come to bring the revolution back in, so as to give due weight to the political dimension of life in socialist China.

Topics

We invite submissions on a wide array of subjects that align with our conference theme. Topics of interest include but are not limited to:

1. *Revolution at work.* As a participatory enterprise, the Chinese revolution was not merely a story to be consumed but found expression in a series of practices: meetings, reading groups, purges, struggle sessions, diary writing, self-examination, petitioning, denunciation, big character posters, education, painting, singing, the list could go on. Always present in the work of revolution: a tension between the tendency toward an institutionalization of politics and the mobilization against real or imagined attempts at containing the revolution.
2. *Scripts of revolutionary life.* How did people live with the revolutionary movement? The politicization of daily life fostered forms of conduct that ranged from activism to resistance, with most people situated somewhere in between the two extremes. Which were the strategies of participation and non-participation?

3. *Political construction of authority.* Whether in the cult of personality, the creation of revolutionary tradition, on the factory floor or in the villages, the construction of authority in time and space was bottom-up as well as top-down. How did society organize itself for the revolution and what happened to aspirations and meanings in this process?
4. *Revolution as analytic category.* The challenge to “take Maoism seriously” invites comparative perspectives and conversations between scholarly traditions. The French critique of study of total revolution as the deinstitutionalization of politics, championed by Claude Lefort and François Furet, provides one possible starting point. The New Revolutionary History developed by Chinese researchers in recent years offers resources to establish the history of the revolution on a new footing.

Submission Guidelines

Interested participants are encouraged to submit their abstracts, approximately 300 words in length, to organizers Puck Engman (UC Berkeley) and Isabelle Thireau (EHESS) at political.lives.2024@gmail.com by **November 15, 2023**. We welcome submissions from researchers at all stages of their careers.

Conference Details

The conference will be held in Paris and presentations will be in person. The organizers will cover the cost of travel as well as lodging and meals during the conference.

Key Dates

Submission of abstracts: November 15, 2023

Conference dates: June 10-12, 2024