

Yinghong Cheng, *Creating the “New Man” From the Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities*, University of Hawai’I Press, 2009. 268 pp.

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This book was scheduled to appear in 2007, but was only published last year. Its author is currently Associate Professor at the Department of History, Political Science and Philosophy of Delaware State University. His interest in political history, especially in that of China under Chairman Mao, has led him to very interesting comparisons between the political systems of the People’s Republic of China and that of other socialist states. Cheng Yinghong appears to be particularly drawn by the Cuban revolution and its charismatic leaders, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. He has previously written about the, “rapprochement and rapid advances of Sino-Cuban relations since the early 1990s”.<sup>1</sup> In this book he develops another of his favourite themes, which is described in several of his previous writings, as well as in the title of the present book, as the “new man”, apparently a brave new human person that is basically a creation of the state.

Although it is explained in the Introduction that one of communism’s more ambitious goals was the creation of a new “person” [quotation marks mine], a more satisfactory term that includes women as well as men, the author explains in a note that he has adopted the term, “... ‘new man’ rather than ‘new people’ because the former is a historical term”. Moreover, when writing in English, from the 1920s to the 1960s English and foreign authors preferred to used the term this way.<sup>2</sup> For readers of the book this explanation provides an instant insight into the implicit machismo that coloured the main ideologies that the author painstakingly examines in the following four chapters.

*Creating the “New Man”* is Chen Yinghong’s attempt to bring the phenomenon of world communism to the attention of contemporary historians, which as he points out, has fallen out of favour. Perhaps the most surprising reason he gives for what to many of us will seem rather peculiar is lack of interest among world historians today for world communism. He tries to inject some vigour into the subject by focusing on what he describes as, “a more humanistic dimension: the interaction between revolutionary change and human nature”. In general terms this means that the author has cast a long intellectual look at how world communism has attempted to mould better citizens by creating a “new man” through various means. To get a deeper insight into the subject the author reexamines the concept of the new man as it emerged and developed during various historical periods and in selected communist states, mainly the Soviet Union, China and Cuba. The most original idea that Cheng Yinghong develops in this publication is an effort to discriminate between each of these communist states and their vision of the new man, a vision inherited from Enlightenment Europe but always conditioned by local history and indigenous culture.

The book’s format consists of a main section formed by chapters two and three, providing the meatiest part of the text, which is inserted in the glittering historical frame of two shorter sections formed by chapters one and four. There is also a short Introduction and Conclusion at the beginning and end. The first chapter partly discusses

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<sup>1</sup> Yinghong Cheng, “Fidel Castro and ‘China’s Lesson for Cuba’: A Chinese Perspective”, *The China Quarterly*, March 2007, No. 189, University of London, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Creating the “New Man”*, p. 225, endnote 1.

both the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and the Soviet concept of the new man that emerged from the former. In this initial chapter the reader is introduced to innovative Enlightenment ideas on how a new person could be molded for the social good and on the malleability of human nature through education and other material means. The more significant of these ideas were conceived by great Enlightenment minds, such as the British philosophers David Hume and John Locke, as well as the Swiss, Claude Adrien Helvétius and the Frenchman, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Helvétius would be particularly influential for the theories that Karl Marks evolved later in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately discussion of these thinkers and their world-shattering ideas is squeezed into a mere three page, something that critics will no doubt consider insufficient. The following pages of the first chapter mainly deal with the French Revolution as it led to Marx and the Soviet new man in Russia.

The two chapters that follow are evidently closer to the author's heart because they expand on research he has explored before. For understandable reasons (the author being Chinese), the second chapter, entitled "'Be Mao's Good Soldiers', Creating the New Man in China", is more substantial and discusses the development of a specific type of new communist man under the leadership of the Chinese Revolution. The third chapter having as main title "Let Them All Become Che", consisting of some sixty pages, is only slightly shorter than the second and looks at the evolution of the new man as the Cuban revolution of Fidel Castro understood it.

Throughout the text one is vaguely aware of disturbing Nietzschean undertones. The concept of the new man as a creation of the state is one that has been exploited by all kinds of ideologies in both positive and negative ways. Unfortunately, some of the ideologies that arose during the more violent revolutionary uprisings of the nineteenth century, as well as those that flared out during the first half of the last century and following decades, have accorded the concept of the "new man" a notoriety which had not always tainted it. Indeed, Cheng Yinghong concludes his thought-provoking and in certain respects brilliant discourse in a philosophical note, with a phrase taken from Immanuel Kant declaring, "out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made".