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# Charles Tilly's Influence on the China Field

June 11, 2008 in [Watching the China Watchers](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)

*Editor's note: This post inaugurates an occasional China Beat feature in which we will look back at the lives and careers of writers whose work has had an impact on Chinese studies. Usually, these figures will be China specialists, but in this case, the influential figure in question, Charles Tilly (pictured below), worked primarily on another part of the world. There is no question, though, that via his activities as a teacher and author he had a profound influence within Chinese studies, as becomes clear from the following comments by Daniel Little, author of [Understanding Peasant China: Case Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science](#) and Chancellor of University of Michigan-Dearborn.*



By Daniel Little

Charles Tilly ("Chuck" to his friends and colleagues) was one of the world's most influential social scientists, and his impact on Chinese studies will be long-lasting. His death on April 29, 2008, was a sad loss for many scholarly communities as well as for his friends and family. (See the SSRC [memorial page](#), which includes a series of remembrances about Tilly. Chuck talks in fascinating detail about the evolution of his thinking in a video [interview](#) I conducted with him in December 2007.) Tilly was a comparative historical sociologist with a primary interest in French contentious politics, and his writings have had deep impact on several generations of scholars. He helped to define much of the theoretical vocabulary that scholars use to frame their theories and hypotheses about social change, contentious politics, and state formation. The central focus of his empirical and historical research was on France, with important and illuminating treatments of revolution, counter-revolution, popular politics, and mobilization from the Revolution to the Paris uprising of 1968.

(Ed Note: If you would like to see more video like that above, there are seven additional parts to this interview, which you can view at YouTube by following [this link](#).)

Chuck was often immersed in the historical specificities of French politics; but his mind always turned to theorizing and conceptualizing the circumstances he studied. And this meant that all of world history was of interest to Chuck. In particular, Chuck paid close attention to the recent literature in Chinese history. Astute references to current research on China can be found throughout many of his later books, including [The Politics of Collective Violence](#). He was always most interested in discovering the "why" of the events that he observed – and how these "why's" might be portable into other historical settings as well. (One of his last books carried the simple title, [Why?](#).) This is what marked him as a comparative historical sociologist, rather than an historian using the tools of the social sciences. He wanted to understand what explained the course of the large processes he studied, and he felt this was most achievable through comparison across cases. Another title of Chuck's puts the point vividly: [Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons](#). Here Chuck signals his theoretical interests: discovering the "how and why" of large social processes, and discovering what we can learn about social processes through careful comparison across settings.

A very important development in Tilly's thought was the turn to causal mechanisms rather than social generalizations as the foundation of explanations of large social outcomes and processes — things like

social contention, civil war, or revolution. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly worked out the details of this view in [Dynamics of Contention](#). They argue that explanations of large social outcomes should be constructed by discovering the specific causal mechanisms present in the cases, rather than hoping to find a few high-level generalizations about “the causes of civil wars” or “general laws of ethnic violence.” And, it turns out, the idea of historical change as a concatenation of a number of social mechanisms is particularly useful in coming to grips with Chinese history.

Chuck’s central historical contributions were to European studies. So what does all this have to do with the China field? Quite a bit, it turns out. Chuck exercised a deep level of influence over a number of important strands of research in Chinese history and historical sociology. His thinking worked its way deeply into the intellectual “DNA” of young researchers in many fields of history and the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s – with the result that his influence can be seen across the range of world histories, including Asian history, Latin American history, and African history.

This occurred through several pathways. First, Chuck’s personal influence on graduate students at Michigan, the New School, and Columbia was enormous. The Center for Research on Social Organization at Michigan was a hotbed of innovative thinking about social research and historical comparison; and the style of thinking that the Center encouraged subsequently migrated to many areas of world history and many other institutions. Second, the fertility and innovativeness of his thinking was a constant source of influence for others, and he certainly stimulated new conceptual approaches to important problems in Chinese history. And finally, Chuck’s writings were prolific, assuring him of a wide sphere of influence. More than fifty books and more articles than one can reasonably count assured that his ideas would have wide currency.



There are several specific areas in Chinese history where Chuck’s intellectual DNA seems particularly evident. Take the emphasis on historical comparison that was so central to Chuck’s work and worldview. A particularly fertile development in China studies in the past two decades is a new approach to large-scale comparison – new ways of thinking about how to compare the large developments of Western Europe and China, with regard both to political institutions and economic development. R. Bin Wong’s [China Transformed](#) sets the table for Eurasian comparisons in a new way. He urges us to compare the large economic and political development processes of Europe and China, without the blinkers of the Eurocentric assumptions that previous generations of economic historians have carried. This is an approach that is highly consonant with Tilly’s appetite for comparison and for fresh thinking about the ways in which we characterize those alternative experiences. Significantly, Bin Wong was an undergraduate student and a Junior Fellow at the University of Michigan, and he was influenced by Chuck at a very early stage. Ken Pomeranz’s [Great Divergence](#) pursues a similar intellectual agenda. Pomeranz too is committed to providing new and more nuanced comparisons between Europe and China, and the breadth and subtlety of his analysis, and his facility in using categories of social theory to frame the narrative, are very reminiscent of Tilly’s thought.

This kind of comparative work across Eurasia is also at the heart of the work of historical demographers such as James Lee, Cameron Campbell, and Tommy Bengtsson. In [Life under Pressure](#) and later volumes the collaborative team of researchers involved in the Eurasian Population and Family History Project take the challenge of comparison very seriously, and attempt to identify patterns of fertility, mortality, and health across dozens of micro-communities across the expanse of

Eurasia. This is a kind of historical research that incorporates several features that Tilly's work highlights: careful quantitative analysis, attention to local details, comparison across different historical settings, and a rigorous effort to bring data and theory into one narrative. Significantly, James Lee too was a Junior Fellow at the University of Michigan and was affiliated with the Center during 1980 and 1981.

Or take the infusion of good social analysis and theory into detailed historical research in the hands of scholars such as Peter Perdue in [China Marches West](#). Peter was among the graduate students in Chinese history in the 1970s who were most directly influenced by the idea that good historical research needs to be informed by good social science thinking – and Chuck Tilly was one of those thinkers who wielded great influence on this generation. Peter took a year's leave from his Harvard Ph.D. program to study with Tilly at Michigan, and the influence is apparent. For example, Peter takes up Tilly's theories about state formation in his own effort to place a theoretical framework around the fluid dynamics of Russia, Qing China, and the inner Asian polities in *China Marches West*. "Tilly's model, then, although it does not focus on China or on frontiers, helps to orient our discussion toward the interplay of military and commercial forces during the time of Qing expansion. Military considerations were primary, but not exclusive, in defining the empire's identity" (530). Peter's emphasis on the contingency of the developments that he describes in Central Asia is very important, and is also very suggestive of Chuck's way of looking at historical change. Tilly's work served to provide new questions for Chinese historians and new conceptual frameworks within which to attempt to explain the large processes of change that they were analyzing. State-formation, taxation, military provisioning, and popular politics were themes and theories that Tilly's work helped to frame within recent work in Chinese history.

And, of course, there is the vital area of peasant politics. Chuck helped to highlight the central role that contention and popular politics plays in world history, from the local to the national to the global. And he was consistently fascinated by the particular processes and repertoires through which discontent turned into coordinated collective action. These topics are centrally important in Chinese history – whether we are thinking of peasant rebellions in the Qing or of environment protests in China today. Elizabeth Perry was herself a participant in the contentious politics project involving Tilly, McAdam, Tarrow, Goldstone, Aminzade, Sewell, and others, and her sustained work on collective action and peasant politics both contributed to and drew upon many insights in this fertile collaboration. One fruit of this collaboration is the edited volume, [Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics](#), edited by Ronald Aminzade, Jack Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth J. Perry, William H. Sewell, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly; the preface describes the origins and course of the collaborative project. Also relevant is her essay, "Collective Violence in China, 1880-1980: The State and Local Society," *Theory and Society* 13:3 (May 1984).



Kevin O'Brien's brilliant formulations (often with Li Liangjiang) of new ways of thinking about "rightful resistance" in China today owe much to Tilly (and to James Scott, another fertile thinker in the social science arsenal). O'Brien and Li's analysis in [Rightful Resistance in Rural China](#) also makes extensive use of the most recent turn in Tilly's thinking about contention, his emphasis on the social mechanisms of contention. Other historians and sociologists who have focused on popular politics in China similarly show the influence of Tilly, either directly or indirectly.

When Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom consider the “political theater” of 1989 (“Acting Out Democracy” in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*), they think of Tilly’s concept of repertoires of contention (36). And later in the essay their effort to place the “theater” of 1989 in a comparative perspective and in the context of the institutions of civil society within which the contention took place is very consistent with Tilly’s framework and style of approach.

C. K. Lee is another genuinely gifted sociologist with a central interest in protest and mobilization (*Against the Law: Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt*). She doesn’t refer frequently to Tilly, but the way that she lays out the problem seems to me to reflect many of the mental frameworks for analyzing contention that Chuck advanced throughout his career. What this seems to show is that the conceptual frameworks for how to think about contentious politics that Tilly constructed throughout his career have percolated through the China field, and that younger scholars are now pushing those ideas further in directions Chuck could not have anticipated but would have appreciated greatly.

I am sure that this thumbnail accounting leaves out important ways in which Tilly has influenced the China field. In fact, if Chuck himself had taken on this question – how did one thinker’s ideas spread their influence over several other fields of research? – I am sure he would have come up with a smart way of tracking and observing the influence. And of course the forms of influence that I have highlighted here do not detract at all from the originality and innovativeness of these scholars. But I think the central point is clear: Chuck Tilly established new ways of looking at the landscape of large social change; he posed a new set of questions about power, coercion, and contention in the give and take of human history-making; and he laid out an extensive vision of historical process that has been deeply influential on historians in every field. Chinese history faces a huge range of challenges, and innovative thinking about how to understand social change and social persistence is crucial. Chuck Tilly’s fertile sociological imagination has added much to this field, and has much still to offer.