

Left Melancholy: Chen Yingzhen, Wang Anyi, and the Desire for Utopia in the Postrevolutionary Era

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The protagonist of Theo Angelopoulos's 1995 film *Ulysses' Gaze* takes a Homeric journey to the Balkan nations, a land rife with civil war, ethnic hatred, and the ruins of a socialist utopia. In a story that emulates the epic narrative of *The Odyssey*, the traveler mournfully moves through Albania, Bulgaria, and finally into the former Yugoslavia. In the middle of his journey, the kaleidoscopic images of spectral figures, broken dreams, and destruction converge on a barge drifting down a river; it carries a dismembered statue of Lenin, whose huge arm still points firmly toward the sky. Lenin's disembodied head stares out to a distant horizon beyond the diegetic world. The gaze offscreen once belonged to great socialist leaders who inspired grand revolutions and projected heroic futures. As a trope of narration, this "socialist-realist gaze" visualizes progress as a moral-political imperative, a firm reminder that the socialist utopia is visible to those who believe in it.¹ In this scene, however, the gaze is not shared by those people watching from the riverbank as the statue of Lenin glides down the river; instead, the crowds stare at Lenin's broken body in a cryptic silence. There is lingering melancholy but no enthusiasm. Their gazes, devoid of utopian passions, are empty and mournful.

¹ Stephanie Donald (2002: 59–64) defines the "socialist-realist gaze" as a singular spectatorial position that reinforces the Party's version of history through sublime images.

With his visual eloquence, Angelopoulos captures a profound melancholy permeating global left-wing culture after 1989. With the breakdown of communist regimes, left-wing thinking suffered from a disillusionment with a constellation of theories, emotions, and memories oriented toward a socialist utopia. The possibility of unifying theory and praxis was undermined by both the loss of a coherent analysis of class struggle and the disappearance of mass political movements. The socialist moral-political vision of historical progress was shattered by a postmodern distrust of grand narratives and truth, while the analytical dissection of capitalism was invalidated by the emergence of the post-Fordist mode of production. Unable to overcome this theoretical impasse, the left embraced a “culture of defeat” (Anderson 1976; Traverso 2017) with an elegiac acknowledgment that the chance for socialist revolution has “now irrevocably passed” (Jay 1996: xvii).

Yet to declare the “end of history” simplifies the dynamic of an indefinite turn toward the realm of memory, for fin-de-siècle left-wing culture possesses a sentimental gaze toward the bygone socialist era. For many, the lived experience of socialism was saturated with personal memories, ideals, and pursuits. The peculiar experience of its collapse entailed a profoundly painful feeling of loss and self-denial. Here, the Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia is relevant: although both mourning and melancholia arise in response to bereavement and loss, the mourner quickly recognizes the reality and lets go of the lost object. By contrast, melancholia indicates a pathological state; with an excessive devotion to the lost object, the melancholic remains immersed in “self-reproaches and self-reviling,” threatening the ego’s fundamental well-being (Freud 1957: 244). Hence, the psychoanalytical perspective considers left melancholy as a passive disposition synonymous with a pathological reaction to loss.

However, the refusal to sever the link with an unsettling past may signify more than political passivity. For leftist intellectuals in particular,

a melancholy syndrome produced not only the pathos of defeat, but also efforts to excavate the emancipatory promises of socialist ideals. In this perspective, a melancholic Marxism may still imagine utopian political alternatives, even though this power to arouse fantasies, hopes, and expectations has been repeatedly betrayed by the real existing communist regimes that deployed them. In expressing political disillusionment, melancholy nourished at the same time a determinate, and even self-destructive, loyalty to leftist political struggles against disarray and resignation.

To illustrate my point, in this essay I shift the focus from Western Marxism to the Asian context. For the Euro-American left, socialist revolution has always been a distant mirage, an alien but alluring dream, and an imagined utopia constructed vis-à-vis the materialistic and philistine capitalist reality. For the Chinese writers who lived through decades of revolution, however, socialism appears simultaneously imagined and real, emancipatory and oppressive, promising and full of betrayal. Why did these Chinese writers continue to tarry with leftist melancholy at the moment when state socialism was failing worldwide? Is the dystopian turn of their literary narrative animated by an emancipatory purpose? More pertinently, how does the category of melancholy extend and modify our understanding of fin-de-siècle (post)socialism in the Chinese context?

Informed by these questions, I trace the pathos of failure and defeat that have pervaded left-wing literary imaginations in Chinese and Sino-phone literature following the end of the Cultural Revolution. Whereas the dystopian turn of Western Marxism was informed by the collapse of socialist regimes in 1989, the emergence of left melancholy in the post-Mao era was inextricably shaped by the exhaustion of Mao's Cultural Revolution. In the 1960s, the inauguration of Mao's most radical political experiment offered an inspiring political alternative for the left all over the world, with its rhetorical commitment to mass politics, a humane economy, and anticolonial struggles.² Since the late 1970s, however, Mao's utopian vision of revolution was "placed on trial" by Deng's

² For a discussion of the emancipatory potential of Maoist mass politics, see H. Wang 2009; For a study of the intersection of politics and science in Mao's effort to build a more humane agricultural economy, see Schmalzer 2016; and for a study on the global reception of the anticolonial and antiracial dimensions of Maoism, see Cook 2014.

revisionist regime (Cook 2016). In mainland China, humanist literature began to address the anguished memories of collective violence and political persecution conducted in the glorious name of revolution. The younger generation was no longer certain about the positive image of socialist utopia, or even whether it was possible. From the “search-for-roots” movement to modernist literature, from “high culture fever” to postmodern fads, the socialist sublime was repeatedly criticized as a type of “feudal backwardness,” as a bureaucratic form of domination, and as political tyranny (Zhang 1996; J. Wang 1996). The new literary discourse reversed the utopian narrative of communist literature, with youthful activism replaced by sad contemplation, idealist yearnings curbed by traumas, and the enthusiastic support of socialism yielding to a solemn realization of its inevitable collapse. Simultaneously, the total negation of the Maoist experiment not only shook many Sinophone activists’ faith in the revolutionary mandate, but also raised serious questions about the legitimacy of their own antiauthoritarian struggles. Their elegiac tone, signaled by a reluctance to impose a historical verdict on the Maoist political alternative, offers a complex contour into the different interpretations, contested memories, and divergent literary representations of the Chinese revolution.

Exploring this major historical transition, I focus on the literary exchange between the Taiwanese leftist writer Chen Yingzhen (1937–2016) and the Shanghai-based novelist Wang Anyi (b. 1954) to illustrate how left-wing writers came to terms with the ruins of Maoist utopia. Chen was one of those veteran Sinophone Marxists whose socialist faith was thwarted by the exposure of the human costs of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, and whose melancholic reflections on the failure of radical politics were underpinned by a persistent, one might say outdated, belief in the utopian promise of revolution. By contrast, nascent consumer capitalism fundamentally altered Wang Anyi’s perception of China’s socialist past. In her 1990s literary productions, Wang projected a mournful gaze toward

the intertwining of her own family lineage with the revolutionary history of Shanghai. Whereas Chen's utopian socialism was driven by despair over the forgetting of the leftist cause in post-Chiang Kai-shek Taiwan, Wang's literary chronicle explores the complex and continuous interplay between the quotidian and the heroic dimensions of Mao's revolution against the consumerist valorization of Shanghai's bourgeois modernity. Admittedly, Wang and Chen remained deeply divided about the meaning of this revolutionary legacy—its transformative power, its moral and ethical implications, and the price Chinese people have paid to bring it into existence. Yet I seek to demonstrate how Chen's and Wang's narratives converge on an impossible mourning for socialist culture in a radically shifting present.

My inquiry builds on a growing scholarly engagement with the "melancholic turn" of contemporary Marxism. Twentieth-century Marxist theoreticians consider melancholy to be a pathology underpinned by hesitation, despair, and self-hatred, with reactionary political consequences: from Walter Benjamin's (1974) indictment of the conservative and backward-looking gaze of the Weimar leftists to Wendy Brown's (2003) criticism of the political paralysis of the New Left in the wake of the Thatcher-Reagan offensive, and from the student radicals' denouncement of bourgeois sentimentalism as political acquiescence and submission in May 1968 to Georg Lukács' (1974: 22) caricature of the Frankfurt School as emanating from the "Grand Hotel Abyss." For them, melancholy infects the leftist cause not because it is inherently reactionary; rather, its excessive pathos immobilizes decisive action and encourages political resignation, thereby collaborating with the reactionary forces it seeks to dispel. Moreover, Marxist scholars contend that the employment of psychoanalytical categories into Marxist analysis inevitably offers a *therapeutic* answer to sociopolitical questions of class and hegemony, reducing political quests to the ultimately liberal-individualistic horizon of ego-psychology.³

Nevertheless, although melancholy does produce psychological distress and political passivity, it also gives insight into the structure of the

³ For a debate on the psychoanalytical approach to Marxism, see Butler/Laclau/Žižek 2011 and Breckman 2015.

real. In other words, the melancholic's refusal to mourn harbors a rebellion that reorients repressed possibilities of the past into an ambiguous future. For instance, Benjamin's antipathy toward melancholy is intermingled with his musings on German *Trauerspiel* (Tragic drama), through which he gradually came to realize the "weak messianic" promise of Marxism (Pensky 1993). Needless to say, Adorno's (1978: 165–168) (in) famous "resignation" unveiled the oppressive mechanism of the "pseudo-activity" that underlies the radicals' obsession with political praxis. Even Žižek's seeming retreat into psychoanalytical categories betrays a wounded attachment to the Marcusean approach that locates political emancipation in the interior structure of the psyche (Marcuse 1974).

With the melancholic turn of Western Marxism in mind, this essay explores the aesthetic, affective, and political dimensions of left melancholy as it has manifested in the literary narratives of Chen Yingzhen and Wang Anyi. I do not try to situate these two writers squarely in the ideological spectrum of the political left. Whereas Chen consistently upheld a leftist position, Wang's postrevolutionary ennui has made it difficult to categorize her as a left-wing writer. Therefore, I use the term "left melancholy" to mediate the tension between Chen's leftist political conviction and Wang's lived experience of socialism. It designates Chen's political identification with the millenarian vision of proletarian revolution, on the one hand, and incorporates Wang's ambivalent memories and complex feelings of growing up under socialism, on the other. By stressing the intersections and contrasts between the utopian ideal and the everyday reality of socialism, I look beyond "leftist" melancholy to understand the complex and fluid articulations of heterogeneous emotions, experiences, and literary manifestations that contributed to the dynamic expressions of "left" melancholy across the Taiwan Strait. Meanwhile, by highlighting their dystopian thinking about the Chinese revolution, I am not treating left melancholy as the mere expressions of despair and defeat. Rather, I am more concerned with illustrating the dualistic nature of the mel-

⁴ Adorno's negative dialectics have shaped scholarly discussions on the double bind of melancholy. The performative contradiction between Adorno's epistemological despair and his search for a radical aesthetics of hope provides a dialectical method for reconceiving the positive connotations of melancholy. For Rose (2014), Adorno's "melancholy science" represents a "sociology of illusion" that reveals the paradoxical outcomes of reason beyond simple resigned pessimism; Marasco (2015) deploys Adorno's dialectical rethinking of aporia to tease out a genealogy of critical theory driven by the "disquietude of despair"; Gordon (2016: 6) uses "paradoxical simultaneity" to characterize Adorno's rejection of and reliance on the "philosophies of bourgeois interiority."

⁵ For the distinction between "restorative nostalgia" and "reflexive nostalgia," see Boym 2002: xviii.

ancholic: the eternal contestations between thinking and acting, politics and aesthetics, and backward gaze and messianic futurity. As I demonstrate later, this "paradoxical simultaneity"—between an aporetic mood and a radical openness to hope⁴—has exerted a profound impact on Chen and Wang as they reckoned with the ethical and political implications of Mao's failed utopian experiment.

The inner dynamics of melancholy show that the haunting presence of the socialist past is more complicated than the answer provided by the extant paradigm of "postcommunist nostalgia," a critical concept that has been widely used to analyze the surge of socialist memories and emotions in postsocialist regimes. My understanding of left-wing literature is in many ways congruent with the paradigm of nostalgia. However, although both melancholia and nostalgia lead to the realm of memory, their underlying emotions are drastically different. "Restorative nostalgia," as Svetlana Boym defines it, fantasizes about a "transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home."⁵ Commenting on the post-Mao reinvention of the socialist past, Geremie Barmé (1999: 321) contends that a "totalitarian nostalgia" mythologizes the Maoist years into a golden era of cultural confidence and political unity. By contrast, melancholy infuses the past with a desolate emptiness that mitigates against any (ab)uses of memory as the source of political legitimacy. Psychologically, it leads to a retreat into bourgeois interiority rather than an active engagement with reality; philosophically, it views history as a series of catastrophes without any impulses for restoration; politically, it might produce permanent inaction but not totalitarian passion. Thus, melancholy and nostalgia are almost diametrically *opposed* to each other. The paradigm of nostalgia obscures the dialectical passion of left melancholy that sustains the possibility of what it simultaneously negates.

To substantiate my argument, I examine the contribution of Chinese and Sinophone writers to the polemical dimension of left melancholy. In post-Mao China and post-Chiang Taiwan, mournful musings on

the failed revolutionary promise became an anchoring point for leftist writers to rearticulate a Marxist commitment no longer bound up with Marxist ontology. I first examine Chen Yingzhen's literary testimonies to the repressed memory of Taiwanese leftism during the Martial Law era (1949–1987), then I read some of Wang Anyi's 1990s literary works as an ambiguous response to Chen's utopian socialism. Each section shows how melancholy implies political choices and, more importantly, how the melancholic narration of politics arouses excessive sentiments, moral claims, and political controversies regarding the value and the cost of revolution.

A Melancholic Intellectual

The melancholic intellectual—characterized by vacillation and estrangement—constitutes a predominant literary prototype in twentieth-century China. The protagonist is usually a jaded youth emerging from a petty-bourgeois background with obscure origins, who receives a modest education in the art of letters, and experiences abject poverty as a result of declining family fortunes. He cultivates his interior world with art, literature, and refined idleness, and his passion for politics—if there is a passion at all—is almost indistinguishable from an aestheticized experience of radical freedom in chaotic times. He is good at contemplative reflection but lacks a decisive commitment to action. His flamboyant call for politics only betrays an obsession with the magic of literary style. When he accidentally “falls” into a revolution, his sentimentalism increases his distance from politics and evokes suspicions in his comrades. Plagued by defeat and disillusionment, he ultimately confesses that his political (mis)adventure remains under the spell of the very ideal of melancholic criticism he seeks to abandon. Thus, for Lu Xun (1881–1936) who supported a stringent “call to arms” (*nahan*), the persistent reluctance to forfeit his meditative stance produced a profound “hesitation” (*panghuang*) that underlined his maladjusted pilgrimage to revolution; Qu Qiubai (1899–1935), who was irresistibly propelled by the storm of Communism toward

militant uprisings, was always haunted by “superfluous words”—mournful confessions that described his political career as a “farce” caused by “historical misunderstandings” (Qu 2009: 5). Mirrors and mediums of their time, these intellectuals and writers produced a string of literary protagonists who share their own dispositions, sentiments, and fates. In their attempt to overcome the ailment of melancholia, they presented the dilemma between acting and thinking through a melancholic narrative that turned out to be more creative, more sophisticated, and more illuminating than their putative political beliefs.

The tragicomedy of melancholy and its overcoming is a recurring drama in the life of Chen Yingzhen. Chen was born into a rural Christian family in north Taiwan in 1937, and his formative years were shaped by the most tumultuous period of mid-twentieth-century China: the 1949 national split and the accidental birth of an island state, followed by the Nationalist imposition of martial law in Taiwan. Chen experienced national cataclysms through a succession of personal traumas: the deaths of his younger brother and his beloved stepfather, and the endless violence, arrests, and executions that pervaded his social circles. The omnipresent terror made an indelible imprint on his personality. But he was also the child of an explosive leftist movement in postwar Taiwan. Under Martial Law, Chen confronted first the violent suppression of communist uprisings in the 1950s “White Terror,” then the escalating social protests of the 1960s, and finally the relaxation policy under Chiang Ching-kuo’s presidency that led to the awakening of native Taiwanese identity. Although Chen remained a devout Marxist, he possessed a melancholic and sometimes pessimistic temperament. Hence, his eschatological vision of revolution was always tinged with a strange, dystopian tone.

Chen established himself in the 1960s as a leftist writer versed in modernist aesthetics.⁶ His early fictional works always portray a pure idealist afflicted by the traumas of war and terror. A strong existentialist theme accompanies his realistic depictions of the bleak political atmosphere of

⁶ For an analysis of the modernist aesthetics in Chen’s early works, see Chang 1993: 148–176.

the “White Terror,” and his protagonists experience a constellation of defeats and losses that gradually destroy their political aspirations and passions. The failure to confront the crude reality in turn produces long-lasting psychological agonies and nourishes a nihilistic vision of history. In “My Kid Brother Kangxiong” (Wode didi Kangxiong, 1959), for instance, Chen illustrates Kangxiong’s vain pursuit of socialist utopia through the confessional tone of his sister. Both Kangxiong and his sister rebelled against bourgeois hypocrisy only to find their powerlessness in the reactionary social hierarchy. Kangxiong turns to fantasize on his imaginary egalitarian kingdoms, whereas his sister conforms to the bourgeois norm by marrying into a rich Christian family. After an illicit affair with his landlady, the brother eventually commits suicide out of shame.

For Chen’s disillusioned protagonists, melancholy offers an imaginary escape from their traumatic embeddedness within the oppressive political regime. Although the melancholic resorts to a contemplative posture to alleviate painful feelings of loss, that self-healing glides into a desperate withdrawal from the public world, gesturing toward a half-willing collaboration with social reality. Melancholy’s double bind is manifested in the sister’s transformation from a leftist sympathizer to a bourgeois hypocrite. The sister possesses a sensorial and morbid attachment to grief and remorse. To her, Kangxiong’s sudden death appears overwhelming and unbearable, and escape thus becomes an inevitable option to maintain the ego’s well-being. The sister’s marriage with an “earnestly polite, straitlaced, upper-crust type” signifies her willingness to trade her rebel conscience for a materialistic living (Chen 2007: 205). Meanwhile, her ruminations on Kangxiong’s political ideals do not animate any decisive actions, only a feeble guilty conscience to “rebuild his [Kangxiong’s] gravesite and make it luxurious” (209). Melancholy valorizes her Faustian bargain and leads to a return to the bourgeois norm.

Yet to conclude that this melancholia is a reactionary mentality simplifies the dynamics of Chen’s literary aesthetic. Above all, his melancholy

writing expresses a dilemma between the desire for narration and the urge for action. Chen employs a sorrowful and compassionate tone to explore the psychological wound inflicted on the individual. However, excessive pathos achieves a sensational effect and threatens to nullify any visions of political progress. This tension underpins Chen's criticism of the complicity of the melancholic intellectual with the repressive political order. Another short piece, "The Village Teacher" (Xiangcun de jiaoshi, 1960), narrates the tragedy of a petty-bourgeois intellectual whose every effort to bring progressive politics to a suffocating rural town is forestalled by his own vacillation and pessimism. Wu Jingxiang, who was conscripted by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Pacific War in Southeast Asia, returns to his hometown in rural Taiwan. The Wertherian youth's eager pursuit of social enlightenment soon comes into conflict with his inability to become an active and pragmatic fighter. After a series of failures, Wu confesses that his passion for politics rests merely on a melodramatic imagination, a feeble and passive gesture that involuntarily "turns knowledge into art, thinking into aesthetics, and socialism into literature."⁷ Wu's repentance suggests that the melancholic intellectual is acutely aware of the necessity to transform his bourgeois sentimentalism into politically engaged forms of writing and thinking. However, he remains immersed in his pathos, unable to overcome his political pessimism. Moreover, Wu's inaction increases his sense of guilt, leading him to denounce his former collaboration with the Japanese imperial war machine. The story ends with Wu's open acknowledgment of his participation in cannibalistic acts during the war, a striking metaphor that highlights his complicity.

Chen's meditations on political quietism constantly hark back to the dilemma of literary realism in the May Fourth era.⁸ Although realist writers such as Mao Dun hailed fiction as the agent of political empowerment, their desire for narration involuntarily leads to an aesthetic withdrawal from the degradation of the social world. Writing became a form of ideological distraction that displaced the call for action with endless

⁷ Chen Yingzhen 1988a: 1: 30. Chinese original: 他的思索變成了一種美學; 他的社會主義變成了文學.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of Chen's relationship to May Fourth leftist tradition, see Chen Sihe 2011.

self-reproaches. Such a pensive tone, as Marston Anderson (1990) and David Der-wei Wang (2004) point out, demonstrates a propensity to defer and deter revolution in the face of a bleak political reality. Lu Xun, for example, reviewing the flourishing of “revolutionary literature” following the 1927 Shanghai massacre, was struck by the peculiar dissonance between rhetorical militancy and political passivity. Against the facile expectations about literature “begetting” revolution, Lu Xun poignantly stated that the creation of a “revolutionary literature” merely serves as aesthetic ornaments in the absence of real revolution. By writing down “kill, kill, kill” and “blood, blood, blood,” armchair activists proffer fantastical notions of resistance on a piece of paper. Leftist literature is merely a form of distraction, a mode of consumption, and a way of procrastinating, all of which dilute a serious commitment to radical politics (Lu 1973). Continuing Lu Xun’s polemics, Chen Yingzhen contends that Wu Jingxiang’s political passion is intermingled with a decadent, aestheticized sensibility that frequently maimed his capacity to transform narration into action; he can “strive for” revolution only in fantasy or daydreams. Eventually, melancholy offers a sentimental account, an imaginary solution, and even a narrative pleasure to come to terms with the impossibility of change.

Chen’s attempt to overcome the passivity of bourgeois melancholy culminated in his famous 1975 preface, entitled “On Chen Yingzhen” (Shilun Chen Yingzhen). Echoing a Marxist-Maoist reflection theory, Chen claimed that his earlier romantic and melancholic approach to literature reveals the progressive-reactionary double bind of the “petit urbanite intellectual” (*shizhen xiaozhishifenzi*):

In the modern social hierarchy, a petit urbanite intellectual occupies a middle position. During the time of economic prosperity, it’s easy for these intellectuals to climb upward to gain quite an amount of interest from the upper stratum. However, during times of economic depression, they usually slide down into subaltern status. Thus, when opportunities are abundant, they appear high-spirited and optimistic; and when they fall into a lower rank, they appear frustrated, sorrowful, and hesitant. (2011: 3)

Indeed, Chen's "confession" reads like a political manifesto calling for the replacement of his earlier "Chekhovian melancholy" with a "cold and realistic analysis" under the aegis of Chinese Marxism (8). However, closer scrutiny of the essay reveals a cluster of ambiguities that defies Chen's overt Marxist rhetoric. One detects two intertwined concerns that contradict each other: a desire to articulate a rigid class analysis that implies the effacement of subjective emotions, and an affectionate identification with the downtrodden, those whose tragedies could not be narrated without a sentimental mood. Just as Chen demands a political praxis to do away with "boredom, self-reproach, and profound feelings of powerlessness" (8)—those pessimistic moods that incapacitate ill-fated youths and lonesome revolutionaries—his lukewarm tone betrays a lingering sympathy toward their frustrations, narrow-mindedness, and naïve visions. At one point, Chen criticizes his own literature in a third-person narrative: "none of those small-town intellectuals in Chen's literary world dare to stand up for action" (7). Elsewhere, Chen indulges in a succession of desolated imaginaries: impoverished towns, numb crowds, rotten corpses, wasted hopes, and, on the top of all this, perpetual repetitions of defeat. This obsession with bourgeois decadence conveys a fragile humanistic voice: after all, for those whose lives are engulfed in poverty and vicious oppression, emancipation is illusory, and withdrawal seems to be the only viable path toward salvation.

This unresolved tension between an activist imperative and a meditative mood underlines Chen's self-criticism of his sentimental style. As a result, the essay's "hard" Marxist position is always softened by a melancholic dimension, a contemplative stance that rejects crude class analysis. Chen aspired to transform himself into a Maoist ideologue, but he could never formulate a satisfying literary style that conformed to Maoist dogma. Whereas Mao saw nothing in humanistic sentiments but a desperate holding onto bourgeois self-interest, Chen's insight into the progressive-

reactionary double bind reveals how the bourgeois intellectual's failure to act bears within itself a hidden insight, transforming hopelessness into a contemplative critique of his own limitations. Whereas Mao's fundamentalist belief in revolution prescribes a didactic role for leftist literature to promote socialist ideology, Chen's mournful tone always points beyond ideological fanaticism and carries nuanced feelings, experiences, and passions aroused by leftist utopian visions. This discrepancy, as we shall see, indicates the persistence of melancholy despite Chen's tireless effort to adopt a more militant perspective.

The Vanquished Left

Over the course of the 1960s, Chen devoted himself to fostering social protests and to developing a thriving leftist intellectual discourse.⁹ Although melancholy is always colored by resignation, Chen began to demand a more socially engaged form of writing. An avid reader of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, Chen self-consciously directed himself toward an orthodox Marxism underpinned by a more "scientific" mode of sociological analysis. Unfortunately, history did not grant Chen a chance to act out his growing Maoist passions: in 1968, his political activism came to an abrupt halt when he was arrested by the secret police and sentenced to prison. Almost a decade later, he was released following the "special amnesty" after Chiang Kai-shek's death in 1975, only to find that the Taiwanese cultural arena had been fundamentally reshaped by the exponential growth of the market economy. Chen, whose incarceration hardened his faith in the traumatic, bloody, but eventually triumphant path leading to the realization of socialism in Taiwan, found it difficult to adjust to the temporal dislocation caused by the waning of the leftist movement under market capitalism.

By the late 1970s, the rhetoric of liberal-versus-leftist battles was marginalized by the growing tensions between "mainlanders" and "native Taiwanese." The awakening of an islander identity produced heated

⁹ For an analysis of Chen's political activities in the sixties, see Zheng 2014: 455-476.

exchanges on the cultural politics of nativist literature, on the erosion of Sinocentric orthodoxy, and on the waning halo of high literary culture (Chang 2004). The advent of the postmodern in the 1980s further valorized the expansion of the consumerist literary market and the quest for a new Taiwanese national identity. These new conditions—commodification, political relaxation, and the search for Taiwanese culture—posed serious challenges not only to Chen’s literary stylistics in particular, but also to his “outdated” belief in the Sinocentric socialist revolution in general. Like the dislocated Rip van Winkle, Chen-like dissidents became “exiles in their own land” (Braester 2007: 216).

Simultaneously, the identity crisis of the Taiwanese left coincided with China’s “revisionist” turn in the late 1970s, a dramatic reorientation that proclaimed the bankruptcy of the Maoist alternative to Western capitalist modernity. Deng Xiaoping’s determined turn away from the socialist experiment aroused poignant feelings among the Sinophone left, from confusion and anger to disillusionment and resignation. Rumors about and testimonies of the great atrocities conducted by the Red Guards found their way to the Taiwanese public, producing an outburst of shock and disbelief among leftist activists. Although the exiled leftists continued to express moral indignation and to advocate resistance, the ugly face of the revolution was unbearable for those adhering to the emancipatory promise of radical politics. These veterans of socialism were rapidly shedding not only their mainland identity but also the ideals, theories, and utopian visions that defined the left.

As a result, Chen’s 1980s literary creations illustrate the predicament of the vanquished left in the post-Chiang period. The Marxist vision of political struggle implied an empathetic identification with the oppressed, but this moral indignation was inextricably intertwined with a solemn awareness that Marxists themselves were now disappearing from the post-Chiang Taiwanese scene. In this regard, Chen’s deep empathy with the muted voices of political victims of the Chiang era was inter-

mingled with his own tragic sense of belonging to a vanishing generation whose political identities, ideas, and passions were being eclipsed by the irreversible process of historical change. Here, Chen's elegiac undertone might not be understood as an acknowledgment of defeat; in fact, the dialectic vision of Marxism persistently portrays setbacks to socialist struggles as the midwife of historical progress. Instead of destroying its political ideals, historical defeats create an epistemological potential for the proletarian class to rethink its strategies and tactics with critical insight. By contrast, the victor preaches "an apologetic vision of the past based on a providential scheme," whose "self-satisfied historical reconstruction" eventually destroys its political wisdom (Traverso 2017: 25). This dialectical imagination exerts a messianic belief that a socialist utopia can begin anew on the ruins of time, in defiance of all earlier setbacks. Thus, the defeated left is always animated by both a pessimistic identification with the vanquished and an optimistic claim to the poetry of the future.

Chen certainly borrowed this dialectics to overcome the pervasive defeatism among his comrades. Without openly denouncing Mao's Cultural Revolution, Chen formulated a strategic diagnostic, contending that the "corrupted and fallen" nature of the Chinese revolution did not nullify the dignity and the honor of those leftist writers who confronted violence and persecution with protest and resistance. From this perspective, defeats invariably nourish hope, for progressive visions are attainable only by confronting one's own failure.¹⁰ But simply subscribing to the emancipatory potential of leftism raised a poignant problem: whereas resignation ultimately valorizes an apologetic vision of history authorized by the victor, outright resistance is undermined by a reluctance to address the human costs of revolution. In what sense, then, could Chen retrieve the utopian promise of the revolution in the face of the miseries, losses, and privations produced by actual socialism in practice?

In this regard, Chen's novella "Mountain Path" (Shan lu, 1983) exemplifies an effort to come to terms with the thorny question of idealism

¹⁰ Chen's reflections on the failures of the Cultural Revolution have been a subject of intense debate. His recalcitrant insistence on seeking political inspiration from the PRC regime has made him notorious even among the leftist camp. Accusations against Chen's Sinocentric socialism mounted, as he continued to support the Chinese regime after the June Fourth crackdown. Nevertheless, scholars such as He Zhaotian (2011) argue that Chen identifies more with the ideational significance of Chinese socialism in terms of its potential to generate radical democracy.

and its betrayal. The story starts with Cai Qianhui, a middle-aged woman who endured hardships for thirty years to bring the Li family from utter poverty to a comfortable bourgeois life, when she suddenly collapses from a mysterious disease. The family immediately assembles first-class doctors and medical supplies to treat her, only to be told that Cai has simply lost the desire to live. Later, it turns out that Cai's enigmatic disease was triggered by the recent release of her friend Huang Zhenbo, a socialist imprisoned by the KMT regime for more than thirty years; this awakens her to the painful memories of losing her fiancé, Li Guokun, who was arrested along with Huang for a similar reason but was executed in 1950. However, the subsequent discovery of Cai's posthumous letter to Huang Zhenbo completely alters the narrative. In the letter, Cai confesses that she was originally betrothed to Zhenbo, and knew Guokun only as Zhenbo's close comrade. Moreover, the traitor who sold the two out to the KMT police was none other than Cai's brother. Out of her guilty conscience and to atone for her brother's betrayal, Cai claimed to be Guokun's fiancée after his execution so as to help Guokun's family make their way out of destitution.

In Cai Qianhui's self-willed death, one finds a dialectic between hopeless withdrawal and its apparent opposite, the most extreme expression of faith through self-purgation. As she painstakingly asks in the letter, "If the revolution fails on the mainland, does that mean [Guokun's] death and [Zhenbo's] long-term imprisonment have turned into meaningless punishments more cruel than death or life in prison?" (Chen 1988b: 20). For Cai, the Maoist ideal of revolution transcends the exigencies of political strategy to sustain her existence. A failure of faith not only threatens to nullify all past struggles but also devastates Qianhui's psychological well-being. Despite its seemingly defeatist appearance, the melancholic reaction to loss brings into view extraordinary expressions of ideological devotion: the profound pains inflicted on the ego by loss sustain her revolutionary passions. The disintegration of her ego is therefore a necessary

condition for the preservation of her political integrity.

Qianhui's unwillingness to detach herself from loss inevitably leads to self-reproach, culminating in a delusional expectation of punishment. In her confession, her physical well-being carries moral guilt, because she is able to move on and even thrives after her comrades' tragic death and imprisonment. Furthermore, the fact that she receives the finest medical care, that she brings the Huang family into the upper-middle class, that the family now enjoys a consumeristic life in a capitalist heaven—all these expose her implicit conformity to bourgeois comforts. Qianhui realizes that the deeper tragedy lies in the ironic outcome of her devotion: she came to the Huang family with a determination to "eat bitterness," a Communist ethic that regards self-abnegation as a necessary route to proletarian consciousness; but her sacrifice has served as a "Protestant ethic" that rationalizes the accumulation of wealth, eventually transforming her and her family into "tamed animals" of capitalism (Chen 1988b: 20). Frustrated by this most unlikely result of her saintly devotion, Qianhui can ease her sense of guilt only through self-annihilation. As David Der-wei Wang (2004: 138–142) comments, her self-willed hunger is motivated by an "anorexic logic," a physical ordeal that attempts to reclaim the moral rectitude of Communism in recognition of her sinful complicity. Qianhui's pathological reaction to loss ultimately contributes to her death, but only through death can she retrieve the meaning of revolution in the wake of its fall.

"Mountain Paths" points to how melancholia can be transformed into a poetic of resistance. But such feverish ideological fanaticism certainly raises eyebrows. After all, Qianhui's persistence remains tethered to a deep faith in the emancipatory promise of Mao's utopian project even after its collapse. But does not this utopianism rely on a romanticization of Maoist politics that fails to interrogate revolution's human costs? Wu Jingxiang, Chen's early fictional character, takes pains to admit how his naïve idealism rests on flimsy aesthetic imaginary rather than serious

political analysis. How would Qianhui's idealism be different? Could we even say that Qianhui's self-destructive loyalty merely expresses a blind faith in Maoist politics, resulting in meaningless sacrifice? This is precisely the rejoinder proposed by Wang Anyi, the subject of the second part of this essay.

Utopian Verses

In 1983, Wang Anyi met Chen Yingzhen for the first time in the American Midwest. The daughter of the renowned Shanghai-based writer Ru Zhijuan (1925–1998), Wang had just published several short stories that won her national recognition in China. The biographical stories describe a young girl's emotionally charged experiences of coming-of-age: political frustrations, youthful yearnings, and the fashioning of a private self against the backdrop of socialist revolution. As the first generation born after the founding of New China, Wang and her peers feverishly embraced Mao's Cultural Revolution, only to be disillusioned by the rampant violence and factional warfare that spread across major cities from 1966 to 1968. Following Mao's instruction to "rusticate educated youth," Wang then volunteered to be "sent down" to a rural commune in northern Anhui, but was disappointed by the poverty and hardship of peasant life. Soon, she left to join a local art performance troupe in Jiangsu, and eventually returned to Shanghai in 1978, where she began her writing career and participated in the post-Mao cultural renaissance.

Wang and Chen were both invited to participate in the 1983 International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. Chen had long aspired to converse with writers from his socialist "homeland." Against his expectations, Wang, who had lived through the tumultuous years of revolution, could not hide her indifference toward Maoist rhetoric. Despite their mutual affection, the brief sojourn soon brought Wang into a series of confrontations with Chen.¹¹ Whereas Wang enjoyed walking "beneath shelves full of commodities" in the supermarket, brimming with unapolo-

¹¹ For an excellent historical reconstruction of this encounter, see P. Chen 2017: 52–61.

getic admiration for the enticing glamour of materialism, Chen, for his part, considered Wang's passion for American capitalism a sort of naïve Oedipal rebellion against her mother's socialist asceticism (A. Wang 2009: 22). By contrast, Chen's open endorsement of socialist values struck Wang as hypocritical in the sense that he "enjoyed the benefits of the very individualism that he was now criticizing" (27). Bemused by the all-too-familiar cliché of sacrifices in Chen's novella "Mountain Path," Wang sarcastically pointed out that Cai Qianhui's blind faith in socialist utopianism merely "contributed to history's having gone awry" (27). Meanwhile, what Chen had called "the false appearance" of individualism provided restless energy for Wang's cohort.

The conflict mirrors the drastically different historical experiences that divided Wang's and Chen's assessments of the Maoist utopia, but the divergence might not reflect the dichotomy of bourgeois sentiment versus socialist fantasy. Wang soon discovered that Chen's passion for socialism was not impressionistic; rather, it was motivated by a deep-seated religious piety, a messianic vision of human emancipation. In a biographical reflection on her American journey entitled "Utopian Verses" (1993), Wang contemplates with sadness and admiration the Christian eschatology that deeply shaped Chen's utopian socialism. Listening about Mao's revolution through short-wave radio, Chen connected the "grandiose scenes of the heroic mass revolution on the land across the straits" to the construction of the "Tower of Babel," whose sky-piercing apex symbolizes a genuine desire for transcendence (A. Wang 2009: 14). Such an imaginary serves less as political dogma than as messianic religious faith. This conviction generates a "divine emotion" (16) for Chen to pursue his Promethean dreams in the realm of the secular and the profane. Hence, Wang became deeply attracted to Chen's perseverance, whose foreseeable tragic end provoked in her a mixed sense of "extreme sadness and solemnity" (41).

At the same time, Chen's theologically informed socialism engen-

dered a peculiar form of melancholia for Wang. On the one hand, Chen's selfless devotion made Wang realize that her own literary passion was driven by a pragmatic purpose to gain fame and status, demanding "excessive retribution in this life" (A. Wang 2009: 22). Her obsession with her personal experience narrowed her literary vision to her own sentiments without deeper reflections on collective history. In Wang's judgment, the post-Mao generation had failed to envision a robust and enchanting alternative to Chen's messianic faith. On the other hand, to transcend the individualist horizon demands messianic aspirations, but Wang could not articulate a new vision of history from the ruins of the socialist utopia. In Žižek's (2000: 662) radical twist on the Freudian paradigm, melancholy occurs when "we get the desired object, but are disappointed in it." Similarly, Wang's incurable sense of "lack" stands for a disappointment with the lived experience of socialism. Having lost her desire for revolution, Wang suffered from a spiritual lethargy, indeed a postsocialist ennui, that paralyzed her capacity to imagine any forms of human emancipation. Because neither socialist faith nor sentimental individualism could furnish a clear path for Wang, Chen's defiant gesture provided a spiritual resource for her to come to terms with her accentuated sense of "lack" in the postsocialist reality.

A Chronicle of Revolutionary Shanghai

Returning from the Iowa trip, Wang went on to an illustrious career with a ceaseless stream of writings. An often-overlooked fact is that the encounter with Chen left an indelible mark on her subsequent literary path. Chen's utopian socialism transformed her pale sentimentalism into more serious reflections on the collective experience of her generation. As Wang bluntly puts it, she "would have already become a materialist" had she not encountered Chen (A. Wang 2009: 83). In the cultural milieu of 1990s China, materialism became entangled with a cultural nostalgia for the golden years of the Chinese bourgeoisie in the Republican era. This

imaginary identification with the values and fashions of prerevolutionary normalcy found its vivid allegory in the literary and cultural landscape of Shanghai. The fascination with the sensuous and the quotidian, the excavation of a “Shanghai-style” literature that champions modernist aesthetics, and the resurgence of free-market ideology, intermingled with a cosmopolitan desire, all worked to fetishize prerevolutionary Shanghai as the epitome of a cultural fashion and ideology long repressed by Mao’s successive political campaigns. Literary critics hailed Wang as “the legitimate heir of Shanghai literary style,” and her 1990s literary creations are said to embrace this trendy nostalgia by projecting a sentimental gaze toward the bourgeois life of old Shanghai.¹² Despite Wang’s own reservations, popular media further constructed a willful genealogy that links her aesthetics to the self-pitying tone of Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), whose writings epitomize the phantasmagoric facades of wartime Shanghai.

However, Wang distanced herself from the consumerist embrace of bourgeois modernity in the 1990s.¹³ As Xudong Zhang (2008: 211) observes, Wang’s literary narrations of Shanghai middle-class ethics are intertwined with mourning “the loss of the immediate past.” As the flow of bourgeois symbols and fashions effaced and replaced socialist norms and experiences, memories of the failed revolution persisted in Wang’s political unconscious. As a result, Wang could never get rid of her deep sense of irony toward the revanchist undertone of the Shanghai bourgeoisie, whose hubristic declaration to end history once and for all echoed the equally triumphant rhetoric of Mao’s proletarian fighters barely forty years ago. In *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, Wang ruthlessly mocks a postrevolutionary dandy named “Old Class” (Lao Kela), whose poor imitation of bourgeois delicacy betrays his modest proletarian origin. Likewise, “A Tale of Cultural Revolution” (Wenge yishi) features a caricatured cross-class marriage between the daughter of a former capitalist family and a working-class young man in 1960s Shanghai. The need for survival

¹² Critics focus on Wang’s (2008) most celebrated novel, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (Chang hen ge), which eulogizes Shanghai as a cultural icon and heaven for the petty bourgeoisie who resisted and survived Mao’s successive campaigns in the socialist era. See, for instance, D. Wang 1996: 37–43.

¹³ Chen Sihe (1998: 51–61) argues, for example, that Wang’s literary endeavors in the early 1990s aimed at constructing a “spiritual heaven” against an impending consumerism.

overcomes the Maoist call for class struggle.

In these writings, the persistent quotidian affairs of class, envy, and stoic survival do not just defy the Marxist script of class struggle but also turn socialist heroic drama into a Benjaminian *Trauerspiel*. In Walter Benjamin's (2009) perspective, whereas Greek tragedy hails the agency of the hero by revealing the cosmic and divine significance of his tragic fate, the king of the *Trauerspiel* is traumatized by the lack of higher metaphysical purposes in a world of cosmic disorder. The sovereign feels melancholic because his hold on power only contributes to the reproduction of rampant violence. He eventually responds to this baroque drama with a mad, self-destructive lamentation and indecision, culminating in his suicide. Likewise, Wang's mournful subjects are repeatedly thrown into confusion because of the absence of a higher moral order. The proletariat and the bourgeoisie resemble each other in their obsession with the frivolous and intricate façade of urban modernity, in their ruthless and desperate struggles to survive, and in their aversion to the grand narrative of revolution and enlightenment. The immutable character of egoistical humanity evokes a cyclical regression of victory into defeat, revolution into farce, and hope into disillusionment.

In this sense, Wang's novel *Documentation and Fabrication* (Jishi yu xugou, 1993) represents an ambitious attempt to re-create the drama of Shanghai's 1949 "liberation" with a playful melancholy. Alternating between autobiography and fiction, Wang's voice transgresses conventional genres to connect her autobiographical narrative with two forms of collective history. The first narrative traces Wang's maternal lineage to the Ru family, a Mongolian nomadic tribe in ancient times, whereas the second one recounts how she spent her adolescence in socialist-era Shanghai, with her ideas and beliefs shaped not only by revolutionary mandate but also by the specters of old bourgeois values. The reader can sense Wang's constant searching for a real or imaginary identity by juxtaposing family episodes with socialist history. As Ban Wang (2014: 135) suggests,

the fabrication of an ancestral origin is “a melancholy attempt to mourn the decline of history by reawakening myth,” a gesture practiced by the “search-for-roots” literary movement in the 1980s. But the mythic dimension of Wang Anyi’s “root-searching” tale is complicated by the other “documentary” mode that records her formative experiences in revolutionary Shanghai. The juxtaposition of the two narratives indicates that mythology and history are not opposed to each other. Natural history and human history are intertwined on an eternal stage on which catastrophes repeatedly unfold.¹⁴

The modern part of the novella features Wang’s traumatic experience as an “outsider” in socialist Shanghai. Growing up in a family of Communist cadres, Wang constantly feels rejected by her peers, most of whom come from former capitalist families. The elite status of revolutionary cadres is seriously compromised by their uncultivated tastes and rural habits. Wang is embarrassed because, unlike most of her classmates who were born into the upper echelon of the city, her parents entered Shanghai only in 1949 singing and dancing the “rice-sprout song,” a north-west folk art known for its gaudy costumes, raspy music, and exaggerated bodily movements. Whereas her playmate appreciates Western musicals, Wang’s taste tends toward images of army uniforms and troop parades. Ironically, although the Communist victors in the civil war take over the city, defeat adds to the symbolic capital of the Shanghai bourgeoisie, who embody a bygone cultural sophistication and aesthetic taste unseen in the Communists’ rusticated lifestyle.

Moreover, the Shanghai bourgeoisie, their political status amputated, continued to flout the new regime’s egalitarian ideology. Their symbolic power was magnified by the open demonstration of their ritualistic mannerisms. Wang describes how her playmate’s mother remained deeply wrapped up in a middle-class aristocratic life-world after “liberation”:

Her mother was that kind of Miss Shanghai who grew up drink-

¹⁴ Xudong Zhang (2008: 196–204) uses “natural history” to analyze the image of Shanghai alleyways in Wang Anyi’s novels. “Longtang” is regarded as the material and spatial embodiment of a natural history that subverts and defies the impinging of profane human history. Whereas Zhang finds in *longtang* the messianic rhythm of nature, I read Wang’s mythic imagination as an immersion in a fallen nature without hope of redemption. See Zhang.

ing American milk, went to a salon to style her hair either in Hepburn's or in Taylor's fashion. On Sunday, she went out in a fancy dress with her daughter. This family is especially noticeable on the streets of Shanghai, where people stare at them with a sense of envy. Proud of themselves, they swagger as if they are masters of this city. (A. Wang 1996: 216)

For Wang, the haughtiness of the girl's family is mingled with an elegant spirit, a cultivated lifestyle, and an outpouring of bourgeois refinement, all of which overshadow the moral rectitude and the perfunctory courtesy of communist ethics. After all, human nature is vulgar, and it needs embellishments to satisfy its vanity, to showcase its charm, and to accommodate its ambition to rule. Superficial as it is, the bourgeois obsession with style rests on a pragmatic foundation to naturalize its cultural hegemony; the public display of exquisite style legitimates bourgeois social privilege. At this point, a nearly comic inversion of the victor and the vanquished confuses Wang. The Communists, who exercise *de facto* power over Shanghai, have to emulate the dominant bourgeois aesthetics to acquire a place in the city; the bourgeoisie, who supposedly need to be rectified, continue to exhibit their flamboyant style as an object of appreciation and envy. At this point, Wang's melancholy arises from this paradox: did the Communists take over the city, or did the bourgeoisie retake the city by co-opting Communist ethics?

Wang's anxiety to anchor herself in the city's bourgeois past is soon to be swept away by the coming of the Cultural Revolution. The Red Guards' claim to reaffirm the cultural leadership of the proletarians not only ignites Wang's political ambition but also satisfies her desire to finally join the ruling class. Yet Mao's redemptive call to "strike down all capitalist roaders" eventually fails to provide her with a sense of sublime feelings. Aside from grandiose ideological slogans and fervent political passions, the Cultural Revolution begins in her neighborhood as an explosion of voyeuristic desire. Red Guards raid the homes of great families and search

for souvenirs, treasures, and property in the name of purging “reactionary elements,” which also satisfies their scopophilic pleasure; Wang witnesses one such house raid. Red Guards storm a wealthy capitalist’s home and then open it up for public exhibition, with the intention of exposing all the damp and moldy secrets of the bourgeois way of life so as to “educate the masses.” Yet, the spectators are drawn to the quaint and treasured objects on display, including a ceramic of the Ming-Qing era, the silk underwear of the lady of the house, and a silver dinner set. In the sublime name of revolution, Red Guards create a theatrical show to satisfy the erotic gaze of the masses. Moreover, after finding out that the capitalist had two mistresses living elsewhere, the Red Guards force them to live with his wife under the same roof. The endless fighting among his many women offers malicious pleasure to the gathering crowd.

Unfortunately, the Red Guards, who take pride in their self-appointed heroism, are soon traumatized by the purging of their fathers, when Mao suddenly turns against the so-called “capitalist-roaders” within the Party. The sudden downfall of these Red Guards resonates with Benjamin’s (2009) depiction of the tyrant who tends to lose power at a moment of emergency. In contrast to Greek heroes, whose decisive actions restore the divine order, the tyrant, who “displays nearly comic indecision” in the absence of a theological postulate, contributes to the continuum of catastrophic violence. Similarly, these frustrated Red Guards desperately try to cleave to their “tyrannical” power as masters of the city in the face of their declining political privilege. They seek to strike up a revolution again, this time by patrolling the streets wearing shining military uniforms and promoting Mandarin to disgruntled Shanghai citizens. Dialect and dress, once the great weapons of the bourgeoisie, become embellishments for the Red Guards’ soulless revolution. As for their bourgeois antagonists, sophisticated codes of dress and language standards serve as social distinctions that separate these red heirs from the masses. Ironically, this outward turn of the revolution reduces communist ideology to

ornaments and fashion. As Wang confesses, she exuberantly embraces the new dress code not because of her belief in revolution, but out of a cynical desire to “follow the trendy fashion of the city.” Wang and her comrades’ obsession with fashion signify a revolution that is exhausted, marooned, and devoid of higher moral meaning.

In the end, Wang finds herself an outsider to both bourgeois Shanghai and socialist revolution. Whereas her effort to emulate bourgeois aesthetics is hampered by her mother’s ideological Puritanism, her hope for a redemptive revolution is shattered by its degeneration into a bourgeois obsession with style and fame. When the documentary narrative reaches its end, it is accompanied by the completion of the other narrative—the Ru family’s emergence into modern times through the coming-of-age of Zhijuan. Intertwining these two plots produces a circular structure: the primordial experience of exile and exclusion that characterizes Wang’s maternal family does not end with Zhijuan’s entry into Shanghai; rather, the sense of spiritual rootlessness returns and pervades the political and emotional torrents she is about to encounter in socialist Shanghai. Family saga and revolutionary chronicle together produce a perpetual repetition of exile and exclusion. This cyclical reproduction of barbarism is the ultimate cause of Wang’s melancholy.

Conclusion: Toward a Melancholic Leftism

I have marked out the contours of left melancholia through the literary journeys of Chen Yingzhen and Wang Anyi. Throughout his life, Chen constantly wrestled with the melancholic bent of Taiwanese leftism: his remembrances of historical traumas, his critique of bourgeois passivity, and his call for decisive actions were all tinged with an incurable sadness, transforming his dogmatic Marxism into an empathetic identification with the vanquished and the downtrodden. By contrast, Wang’s melancholy was not driven by an outburst of thwarted revolutionary passions. Full of sorrowful imagery and an ironic tone, her autobiographi-

cal works reveal conscious and continuous negotiations with the waning experiences of socialism, a ghostly memory repressed by the resurgence of bourgeois cultural fashions in the postrevolutionary era. Disagreement over the value and the meaning of the Maoist revolution remains in the intellectual exchange between Chen and Wang. Chen's belief in the redemptive mission of the PRC regime looks outlandish and antiquarian to Wang's generation, whose experience was shaped by the catastrophic outcomes of state socialism. For Chen, Wang's attempt to blend the sublime with the comic, to find the egoistic desires beneath the revolution's noble claims turns serious politics into an object of amusement. Yet they are still deeply attracted to each other's personalities, thoughts, and literary styles. Chen's religious devotion to a lost cause helps Wang overcome postrevolutionary ennui. Meanwhile, Wang's concern for the fate of the nation beyond the personal dimension arouses Chen's expectations and hopes in his lonely battle against the neoliberal valorization of individual desire. These rifts and affinities that both created tensions and nourished friendship are testimony to the political interpretations and contested literary representations of Mao's revolution across the Chinese and Sino-phone world.

The paradoxical outcomes of melancholy underpin the multiple layers of Chen's and Wang's literary narrations of politics. I read their melancholy not as a pathology, but in connection with the pathos and the passions of thinking and writing in the absence of revolutionary hope. I concede that the forms and tonalities of melancholic literature might signify despair and encourage political quietism, but just as Benjamin "exploited his own melancholia in order to overcome it" (Pensky 1993: 19), so the two Chinese writers share a dialectical passion for retrieving revolution's unrealized promises at the moment of its fall. For Wang and Chen, melancholy was always implicated in a sustained reflection on the ambiguous relationship between thinking and acting, politics and aesthetics, and backward gaze and messianic futurity. Their Sisyphean efforts to

overcome these tensions help to bring out the emancipatory potential of melancholy at its most intense. For Chen, the elegiac tone of the “petit-urbanite intellectual” frustrates his utopian passions with the pathos of defeat; at the same time, it empowers him with insight into the structural causes of social misery. Wang’s playful melancholy, by contrast, questions the Maoist narrative of progress by unveiling the political trauma and drama caused by the incongruities between the revolution’s heroic calls and its nearly comic realizations. Their writings are thus best read not as attempts to reconcile the duality of left melancholy but as critical projects to seize hold of the melancholic in a “paradoxical simultaneity,” caught between an aporetic mood and a radical openness to hope.

Wang’s and Chen’s melancholic musings on revolution occurred at a time when the global leftist movement confronted the collapse of socialist regimes with fear, confusion, and resignation. The crisis of the left was further accompanied by a global intellectual transition from revolutionary Jacobinism to democratic reformism.¹⁵ As a result, the polycentric shift toward neoliberalism now projected the past romance with Marxism as an “irresponsible attachment to Communism,” “the opium of the intellectuals,” and “infantile liberalism,” and celebrated the collapse of socialism as “the passing of an illusion” and “the end of history.”¹⁶ Admittedly, these “strategies of containment” provide an ideological deciphering of socialism from the reductive and singular standpoint of the victor. The demonization of left-wing politics is bound up with a narcissistic self-congratulation that skirts the complex relations of capitalist domination. Nevertheless, this intellectual offensive has raised a number of critical issues in regard to both Marxism in particular and the legitimacy of radical politics in general: how did a conglomerate of an authoritarian party, a new privileged class, and political persecution rise at the very heart of the utopian aspirations for new forms of humanity? How has Marxism provided justifications—both theoretically and practically—for political tyrannies during the twentieth century?

¹⁵ Since the early 1980s, the dissidents of Eastern Europe propagated the social and political ideal of civil society against the oppressive regimes of bureaucratic socialism. In post-May 1968 France, ethics became the predominant norm for grappling with problems of democracy. The New Philosophers rejected the antinomian revolution of May 1968 and embraced a moralistic eulogizing of human rights and reformist politics. In the Anglo-American world, the market-oriented reform of Thatcher and Reagan made massive privatization the hero in the noble cause of political liberty. See Havel 2015 and Bourg 2017.

¹⁶ The quoted phrases come, in succession, from Judt 1998, Aron 2001, Wolin 2017, Furet 2000, and Fukuyama 2006. These assessments were offered by intellectuals and writers with very different interpretations of revolution’s “end,” from Fukuyama’s ideological declaration of the complete triumph of liberal democracy over the socialist experiment, to Aron, Judt, and Furet’s criticism of the moral lacuna of French Marxism. Despite their differences, these thinkers were determined to bid farewell to radical Marxism in favor of conservative, realistic, or neoliberal alternatives.

To address these questions, it's important to understand that melancholy has become a crucial rallying point in end-of-the-century Marxist discourse. "Post-Marxism," as Warren Breckman (2015: 192) defines it, represents a melancholic response to "the specific loss of Marxism as a privileged object, intellectual investment, and emotional cathexis." To rescue radical politics from its misadventures in Stalinist socialism, post-Marxist thinkers responded to the loss of the socialist project with a conception of radical democracy no longer tethered to hegemonic politics. In this regard, Jacques Derrida's intervention is a timely illustration of a melancholic grasp of the Marxian spirit. For Derrida, the disarticulation between Marxism and emancipatory politics generated a spectral Marx devoid of messianic hope, a hauntology infused with visions of the future that have become obsolete. Derrida further argues that this irreversible collapse of the political alternative envisioned by the left might not be regarded as the end of Marxist criticism. Rather, it was only when Marxism was displaced from its teleological commitment to political dogma—only when it became spectral—that the cultural left could regain insight into the contradictions of capitalism. Derrida's embrace of the spectrality of Marxism endows him with "a weak hold" on certain spirits of Marxism, simultaneously affirming the Marxian pursuit of justice *and* negating Marxist ontology.¹⁷ In other words, a melancholic hold on revolution's emancipatory promise must always be an *empty* promise that forever defers and contests the authoritarian impulse of messianism.¹⁸

The stories of Chen and Wang provide a striking parallel to the melancholic turn of global Marxism. Confronting the collapse of Maoist utopia, the vanquished Taiwanese leftists have abstained from any messianic impulses that anticipate revolution's actualization in the present. Devoid of any specific names, parties, and concrete political agendas, Chen's "faith" in Chinese socialism involves an endless waiting for a revolution that has never occurred and will perhaps never come. Likewise, Wang Anyi's effort to reclaim her memories of socialism is not an attempt to resurrect the

¹⁷ See Derrida 1994. For rejoinders to Derrida's spectral Marxism, see Sprinker 1999 and Breckman 2015: 192.

¹⁸ For an excellent analysis of the anti-authoritarian ethos of Derrida's philosophy, see Gordon 2015.

Maoist sublime; rather, it inscribes the revolutionary past into the emotional and psychic formation of her personal identity, a structure of feeling shaped by, but not necessarily tethered to, Mao's socialist project. The blurry nature of the melancholic loss invokes an amorphous hauntology of a revolutionary past, thereby transforming loss into a traumatic kernel, an unknowable "lack" without which a postrevolutionary identity cannot endure. Ultimately, melancholy provides ample aesthetic means to linger over the Maoist utopia while maintaining a critical awareness of its irrevocable wrongdoings. Echoing Derrida's (1994) call for a "New International . . . without status, without title, and without name" (85), Chen's and Wang's mournful gestures are no less intermingled with a paradoxical remembrance of a Chinese revolution *without* a revolutionary mandate.

Together, the unlikely resonance between post-Marxism and Chinese left-wing writings in the postrevolutionary era sheds light on the emancipatory potential of left melancholy. It illustrates how melancholy revitalizes the left with a deliberately weak hold on the Marxian pursuit of justice. Haunted by the dangerous memory of oppression, post-1989 leftism could never dissociate itself from the dark inheritance of revolutionary violence. A spectral lingering on Marxism thus avoids dangerous liaisons between radical democracy and authoritarianism. Melancholic Marxism serves not as a messianic doctrine with a concrete and realizable historical telos. Through endless deferral and waiting, melancholy transforms a certain spirit of Marxism into a weak promise of "messianicity without messianism" (Derrida 1994: 211). Because a Derridian messianicity "precedes and exceeds all specific religious beliefs as such," the indefiniteness of the melancholic's loss appears as an ascesis that refrains from returning to a historical "messianic" vision of revolution, on the one hand, and a radical openness to what is yet to come, on the other.¹⁹ Instead of causing political paralysis, melancholy ultimately liberates the left from its putative and normative commitment to the totalizing agenda of socialist modernity.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of Derrida's distinction between "messianism" and "messianicity," see Kearney 2015: 203.

Despite these similarities, the Sinophone articulations of left melancholy offer different cultural and historical contours into the origins, processes, and memories of socialist revolution. Whereas the pathos of the Euro-American left was prompted by the eclipse of communist hope, Chen's and Wang's melancholic reflections on the convoluted developments of socialist movements across the Taiwan Strait went beyond the question of thwarted political ideals. For Chen, the collapse of state socialism did not signify the exhaustion of the emancipatory potential of socialism, so his messianic faith in revolution was never lost even after the end of Mao's Cultural Revolution. Wang, by contrast, was perhaps never obsessed with the political vision of proletarian revolution in the first place, and her melancholy was indivisibly linked with the crash of the everyday life of socialism. The dynamic interactions between the socialist ideal and the lived experience of socialism show that leftist melancholy must not be simply read as the political manifesto of the defeated leftists. Rather, it illuminates the profound passions and pathos of Chinese and Sinophone writers caught between a failing Maoist utopia and an amnesic postrevolutionary present.

Glossary

Chen Yingzhen	陳映真
Cai Qianhui	蔡千惠
Huang Zhenbo	黃貞伯
“Xiang cun de jiaoshi”	鄉村的教師
Lao Kela	老克拉
Li Guokun	李國坤
Lu Xun	魯迅
Ru Zhijuan	茹志娟
“Shanlu”	山路
nahan	吶喊
panghuang	彷徨
shizhen xiaozhishifenzi	市鎮小知識分子
Wang Anyi	王安憶
“Wenge yishi”	文革軼事
“Wode didi Kangxiong”	我的弟弟康雄
Wu Jingxiang	吳錦翔
Zhang Ailing	張愛玲

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