

*China's Twentieth Century: Revolution, Retreat, and the Road to Equality*, by Wang Hui. New York: Verso, 2016. 361 pp. US\$29.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 9781781689066.

It is more than a coincidence, I suppose, that literary criticism and politics make uneasy bedfellows throughout twentieth-century China. Since Lu Xun's time, leftist intellectuals have endowed literature with a decisive, even Promethean role as powerful ways of formulating ideologies, inspiring revolutions, and legitimating radical beliefs. Nevertheless, the irreconcilability between acting and writing, nation and narration, contemplative life and political intervention makes this relationship complex, troubled, and estranged. Under Mao's rule, literary critics were tempted to embroil their scholarship in the proletarian revolution, but more often they found themselves under the constant scrutiny of politicians, who intermittently use literature to legitimize their politics but try to silence unruly critics with persecutions. In the wake of the post-Mao era, intellectuals sought to disarticulate literary criticism from this dangerous liaison with Maoist politics. The search of "autonomous criticism" was itself part of the larger project of rethinking Chinese modernity defined by revolution, socialism, and radical politics. Basked in the heat of the New Enlightenment, Wang Hui's fame as a literary critic began in the 1980s with a humanistic interpretation on Lu Xun. Nevertheless, Wang took a surprising turn since the early 1990s, as he became the leader of a group of neoleftist critics and scholars who were disillusioned about the advent of capitalism in China. Wang published an extravaganza of essays to expound his critique against neoliberalism and the Chinese market reform, challenging the predominant Chinese intellectual consensus on the necessity of embracing global capitalism. The fusion of literary criticism and politics in Wang's undertaking seems to have revitalized the Maoist passion to politicize literature, calling not for the "return of the repressed," but for a critical understanding of the social function of Chinese intellectual in the market era. Wang Hui's revitalization of leftist political intervention bespeaks a strong impulse to provoke a sense of rupture through which lost meanings, suppressed desires, and failed battles of socialism will be fulfilled in an apocalyptic manner.

In this new book, Wang Hui offers a revisionist perspective on the radical politics of twentieth-century China. The central theme is what Wang terms as the "politization twentieth century China" (二十世紀中國的政治化). Wang defines this process from three interrelated perspectives:

political integration (政治整合), cultural politics (文化與政治), and the people's war (人民戰爭). First, China's transformation from empire into nation-state at the beginning of the twentieth century was best by a conundrum: how to integrate multifarious political forces, different ethnic groups, and divergent cultural beliefs into a coherent modern political entity known as "China." Wang argues that the attempt to forge a modern Chinese culture during the May Fourth era generated a strong cultural identity. Moreover, the "People's war"—a succession of revolutions waged by the CCP from the 1920s into the 1950s—is regarded as the intensification of the May Fourth Movement in its effort to empower and consolidate a Chinese nation-state. During this political process, national identity was transformed and redefined by class politics, revolutionary internationalism, and proletarian consciousness. Nevertheless, the reversal of this political process in the post-Mao era generated political problems such as a crisis in political representation, the abandonment of socialist equality, and the immiseration of migrant workers. Wang contends that China's market turn, termed by him as "depoliticized politics" (去政治化的政治), brought up serious legitimation crisis to the Party-state, which might be solved only by a partial revival of socialist legacies.

In Chapter 2, "The Transformation of Culture and Politics," Wang intervenes into the question of enlightenment in the 1910s. The contemporary scholarship on the May Fourth Movement has been largely shaped by liberal scholars such as Li Zehou (李澤厚) and Lin Yu-Sheng (林毓生). Both of them repudiate the radicalism of the May Fourth intellectuals. For Li, the dynamic tension between enlightenment and nationalism during the May Fourth Movement was overthrown by the subsequent political struggles. For Lin, the CCP's radical politics was generated out of the profound antitraditionalism during the May Fourth era. Contrary to this, Wang argues that the radical politics at the time produced a brand-new political culture that was inextricably tied to revolutionary politics. Instead of stressing the discontinuity between the Republican era and the PRC regime, Wang views the Communist Revolution as something that grew *organically* from the May Fourth enlightenment. More specifically, Wang focuses on several major intellectual debates during the 1910s. In the aftermath of the First World War, *Eastern Miscellany* (東方雜誌) published a series of articles on the crisis of nineteenth-century Republicanism and the problem of Western civilization. Wang believes

that this crucial reflection on the limits of Western modernity fundamentally shook Chinese intellectuals' belief in liberal democracy. Drawing on the rise of radicalism by examining intellectual ferments in the *New Youth* magazine (新青年), Wang notices that significant attention was shifted toward revolutionary politics, with the Russian Bolshevik Revolution as a subject of intense enthusiasm. Moreover, Wang believes that this shift from liberalism into leftist discourse paved the way for the rise of Leninist party politics in the 1920s. In other words, the May Fourth Movement culminated in its gradual transformation into proletarian revolutions.

In Chapter 3, "From People's War to the War of International Alliance (1949–53)," Wang continues to examine the impact of radical politics after the founding of the PRC. His intervention into the scholarship on the Korean War remains highly controversial. Historians questioned his academic rigor, arguing that Wang merely lumped together archival recourses only to be squeezed into his theoretical paradigms. Nevertheless, Wang claims to provide an "internal perspective" in order to "situate political decisions within their historical circumstances" (p. 112). Wang dismisses the current scholarly view on the Korean War, which he believes is dominated by a dehistoricized emphasis on national interest. Wang draws extensively on Carl Schmitt's theory of war, and argues that this "People's war" represents the intensification of China's revolutionary politics in the international arena. Situating his argument on the Schmittian understanding of the political as an existential distinction between friend and enemy, Wang contends that the CCP's decision to enter the Korean War was an expression of authentic political action with the attempt to showcase new political subjectivities. Meanwhile, Wang sees an intertwined relation between domestic policy and international warfare: the "People's war" originated from Mao's revolutionary tactics to forge a new proletarian nation-state, and the Korean War reflected the CCP's resolution to defend this revolutionary sovereignty on the international stage. In this regard, the "People's war" was a heterogeneous political process involving a complex interplay between the mass line policy (群眾路線), the united front (統一戰線), radical cultural politics, and revolutionary cosmopolitanism.

The remaining chapters paint a bleak picture of the retreat of radical politics in the postsocialist era. In "The Crisis of Representation and Post-Party Politics," Wang argues that the CCP dissolved from a

“superpolitical party” with a clear political orientation into a managerial administrative apparatus operating based on a neoliberal logic. This “post-party politics” merely prefers regime stability to revolutionary politics in the age of global capitalism, generating a serious breakdown in political representation. In “Two Kinds of New Poor and Their Future,” Wang analyzes the fate of China’s migrant workers under the neoliberal regime. Wang’s anxiety stems from his concern that the newly emergent working class is no longer able to form a socialist movement in their struggle for recognition. The nineteenth-century communist movement and the twentieth-century state socialism all failed with the inability to construct the workers’ states. As a result, contemporary workers’ movements are structurally fractured and politically disoriented. Reflecting on several theoretical paradigms such as “civil society,” “multitude,” and the “new poor,” Wang reaffirms the value of class struggle in contemporary contentious politics. In other words, Wang calls for a revitalization of the basic principles of China’s high socialism—class politics, the united front, and proletarian consciousness—in order to remobilize dispossessed workers.

There is no doubt that Wang Hui’s intervention, despite of its controversial thesis, represents an increasingly important political position among the contemporary Chinese intelligentsia. This position cannot be defined simply as “neoleft,” but rather represents a long intellectual tradition characterized by an intertwined relationship between literary writing and politics. It is tempting to say that the very existence of such a controversy testifies to the power of Wang’s literary politics that is able to provoke alternative visions of China’s future path. Beneath Wang’s poetic language, theoretical sophistication, and polemical argument, there is always a passionate undertaking: to infuse literary criticism with a political intensity characterized by radical breaks, revolutionary actions, and existential moments of decision. However, while Wang insightfully demonstrates the systematic dispossession of Chinese workers under neoliberal statecraft, his uncritical embrace of state socialism falls into a messianism, calling for a simple solution imposed by the Party-state. Motivated by present anxiety to combat global capitalism, Wang’s historiography harks back to the Mao era in search of “the people,” but ironically finds “the state” instead. On the one hand, Wang’s criticism of the status quo seeks to *delegitimize* global capitalism’s claim to be the only viable realization of human freedom. On the other hand,

however, Wang's historiography prefers to preserve the coherence of long periods rather than retrieve the contingencies, uncertainties, and multiple possibilities of every political event throughout twentieth-century China. In other words, Wang's broad strokes attempt to enforce a stable, inevitable, and deterministic historical causality that *legitimizes* the advent of revolutionary politics as irreversible processes. If the politicization of China was so inevitable, what brought about its unexpected demise? If we abide by Wang Hui's claim on the continuity of China's twentieth century, shouldn't we reach the conclusion that the post-Mao era was not a categorical negation of high socialism but a dialectic progression that was fundamentally shaped by the Maoist past? If Wang Hui adheres to his "internal perspective" that historicizes political decision, shouldn't he carefully follow all unexpected turns, possibilities, and contingencies as radical politics metamorphosed from the May Fourth enlightenment into Mao's revolution? The contradiction within Wang's argument largely results from his bifurcated interpretation that denaturalizes neoliberalism's claim to the present, on the one hand, but renaturalizes revolution's mystification of the past, on the other. Admittedly, Wang's political agenda is to remobilize the fragments of socialism as an alternative to China's uncritical embrace of global capitalism, but this critique is at the sacrifice of understanding the complex and fluid articulations of heterogeneous political currents that unexpectedly, rather than inevitably, gave rise of Mao's revolutionary politics. It remains to be seen whether Wang Hui is able to develop a comprehensive analytic framework that is capable of constructing both a critical inquiry into China's past defined by state socialism and a rigorous criticism of China's present shaped by neoliberalism.

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