

Pleasure and Sin

Li Zehou, Liu Zaifu, and the Political-Theological Motif in Post-Mao Cultural Reflections

ABSTRACT This article offers a reconstruction of the intellectual dialogue between Kantian aesthetician Li Zehou 李澤厚 (1930–) and humanist literary critic Liu Zaifu 劉再復 (1941–). By comparing Li's ruminations on “cultures of pleasure” (*legan wenhua* 樂感文化) and Liu's treatises on “literatures of sin” (*zuigan wenxue* 罪感文學), the author shows how religious ethics became a crucial medium for them to reflect on the theologico-political aspects of Chinese revolutionary culture. In particular, Li's cultures of pleasure were grounded in the May Fourth aesthetic discourse that highlighted the inculcation of secular humanity as an alternative to religious transcendence. Meanwhile, Liu underscored the transcendence of literatures of sin to stimulate an inner morality through which to excise all secular political commands from human interiority. Whereas Li prioritized a realistic ethical and psychological noumenon in Confucian aesthetics to refute the romantic and sublime figure of the proletarian subject, Liu's espousal of religious transcendence provided Chinese writers with a spiritual dimension to actualize literature's breakaway from the tutelage of the revolutionary state. Their reflections on this-worldly pleasure and otherworldly sin have merged in exorcising the myth of Mao's revolutionary utopia.

KEYWORDS Li Zehou, Liu Zaifu, religion, transcendence, aesthetics

The unfolding of the 1980s New Enlightenment is often narrated as a rationalization process that strove to replace the sacred aura of Mao's revolution with secular humanism. While humanist writers created “scar literature” to address human abuses and mass violence conducted in the name of a holy revolution,¹ reformist thinkers came to regard the religious aura of Maoism as remnants of feudal traditions and superstitions. But the tension between political religiosity and enlightenment reason can hardly be overcome through a normative program of cultural modernization. Although the ethos of the post-Mao literary and intellectual culture was ostensibly secular in orientation, its literary imaginations and philosophical argumentations remained haunted by religion. Here the question of religiosity obviously went beyond doctrinal disputes of revealed religions. For concerned intellectuals, the category of religion connotes the profound spiritual allure of otherworldly ethics that sustains the sacred and charismatic appeals of various political utopias—be they enlightenment, reform, or revolution. It is

therefore unsurprising that the post-Mao cultural reflection (*wenhua fansi* 文化反思) was consistently imbued with religious imaginaries, from the reenactment of neo-Confucianism to the nativist search for China's mythic ancestral roots, from the obsession with Christian transcendence to the revival of Buddhist and Taoist sentiments. The figurative constructions of an "other world"—be it spiritual, cultural, or religious—filled the spiritual vacuum created by the waning of revolutionary utopianism in the post-Mao era.

In this article I offer a reconstruction of the intellectual dialogue between Kantian aesthetician Li Zehou 李澤厚 (1930–) and humanist literary critic Liu Zaifu 劉再復 (1941–). By comparing Li's ruminations on "cultures of pleasure" (*legan wenhua* 樂感文化) and Liu's treatises on "literatures of sin" (*zuigan wenxue* 罪感文學), I show how religious ethics became a crucial medium for them to reflect on the theologico-political aspects of Chinese revolutionary culture. My discussion starts with Li's publication of *Mei de licheng* 美的歷程 (The Path of Beauty) in 1981. In this influential monograph, Li traced the origins of Chinese aesthetics and its manifold manifestations in various art forms, from cave engravings of the prehistoric period to Confucian rituals and music of the Qin-Han era. He observed that the Confucian "structure of feelings" (*ruxue qinglijiegou* 儒學情理結構) is marked by a profound this-worldly ethic categorically different from the transcendence of Judeo-Christian religion.² Most important, aesthetic education (*meiyu* 美育)—the cultivation of proper feelings, sentiments, and desires—played a fundamental role in formulating a Confucian ideal humanity in the realm of the profane. For Li, the emergence of this secular reason at the very inception of Chinese civilization was of immense historical significance. While the Christian search for salvation is motivated by the image of an utterly transcendent God, the Chinese path of beauty is intertwined with a desire to secure this-worldly pleasure as the sole purpose of life.

In contrast to Li Zehou's espousal of Confucian secular rationality, Liu Zaifu offered a different hermeneutic inquiry into the question of religious transcendence. Reflecting on the pervasive apathy and reticence in the emotional trajectories of the post-Mao era, Liu proposed in the late 1980s that the Chinese inability to mourn the atrocious crimes of Maoist revolution might be attributed to the absence of guilt in Chinese secular reason. Liu further ascribed this lack of a guilty conscience to the atomizing effects of Maoist authoritarianism that reduces ethical responsibility to submission. In the years following the Tian'anmen incident and his exile, Liu's humanistic undertone was further complicated by his meditations on a variety of faith traditions from Christian ethics to Zen Buddhism. For the exiled critic, twentieth-century Chinese literature was obsessed with the rejuvenation of a secular nation to the point that its artistic form and ethical dimension were completely constrained by mundane social and political mandates. By comparison, Liu described self-repentance in nineteenth-century

European literature as a path to a form of redemption above and beyond politics and state.³ In this way, Liu underscored the transcendence of religion to stimulate one's inner conscience and moral introspection as a corrective to socialist secular reason.

As I explain later, Li and Liu's disagreement on the question of transcendence often obscures the manifold interactions and affinities that underlined their critique of Mao's revolutionary utopia. Differences aside, Li's and Liu's respective constructions of this-worldly pleasure and otherworldly sin were motivated by a shared intellectual concern: the appeals of Maoist revolution are grounded in, if not utterly parasitic on, quasi-religious rituals, values, and sentiments. Thus, to exorcise the myth of revolutionary utopia demands more than a critique of authoritarian politics. Rather, enlightenment reason needs to expel various theological fantasies that elevate Maoist politics above secular grounds. In conjunction with this, my focus on the intersection of religious ethics and political thinking in Li's and Liu's reasoning has been shaped by the growing scholarship on the revival of political theology in the postsecular world.⁴ The term *political theology* signifies both the occupation of religion by politics as the fundamental form of modern collective identity and the persistent haunting of the secular political order by theological metaphors and analogies.⁵ Weberian rationalization, in the view of its major critic Carl Schmitt, desacralizes the religious aura of politics, reducing the modern state to a hollow machine without moral-political authorities. Facing this "normative deficit of modernity," secular politics is in desperate need of theological values to justify its fundamental existence.⁶ In opposition to Schmitt's authoritarian-decisionist model, critics of political theology focus on the state's instrumental take on religious rituals and values to enforce violence, terror, and totalitarian rule.⁷ Similarly, studies of the religious dimension of the Chinese revolution have emphasized the Chinese Communist Party's strategic and rational deployment of religious symbols for purposes of political persuasion.⁸ For these critics, theological remnants function not so much as the underlying substance of Schmittian politics as symbols and rituals manipulated by a thoroughly rationalized state.

In view of the discrete and highly contested disagreements between the rational-functionalist and the theological understanding of authoritarian politics, my inquiry is intended to be problem oriented. I contest that the sacralization of the Maoist revolution involves a paradoxical process of disenchantment and enchantment: the exposure of all forms of religious illusions in the mode of rationalist criticism, on the one hand, and the inscription of religious symbols and values onto revolutionary politics as sources of transcendence, on the other. In this article, I use the term *Maoist revolution* in generic ways to designate a broad range of feelings, values, and historical experiences irrevocably shaped by Mao's idiosyncratic vision and practice of revolution, a historical sequence

characterized by class violence, utopian ideology, and cult of leadership. In Li's and Liu's perspectives, the mutual imbrication of religious superstition and modern authoritarianism was one of the most problematic features of this revolution's dark legacy. Whereas Li's espousal of Confucian this-worldly aesthetics was no less mingled with his rejection of the otherworldly ethics of the Chinese revolution, Liu's search for an utterly transcendent religious dimension, yet not religious belief, was intended to negate the quasi-transcendental ideals of the Maoist sublime. As their theoretical routes eventually merged into a shared agenda to bid farewell to revolution, the discussion of religious ethics has served as an allegorical mode of critiquing and exorcising the quasi-religious aspects of revolutionary utopia.

“Cultures of Pleasure”: From Shamanism to Ritualism

In current scholarship, Li Zehou enjoys a reputation as an eclectic philosopher committed to revising the Marxist vision of history through a Kantian view of autonomy.⁹ Aside from his role as a major proponent of enlightened reason, Li has nonetheless ventured into the domain of religion since the early 1980s, discussing the aesthetic, ethical, and psychological connotations of Chinese as well as Western faith traditions. Of particular importance have been his elaborations on the secular orientations of Confucian “pragmatic rationality” (*shiyong lixing* 實用理性).¹⁰ In Li's view, the Confucian preoccupation with the politics and ethics of this world gave birth to a distinctive emphasis on the cultivation of human nature through sensuous, material, and affective means. In the absence of a transcendental deity, aesthetic cultivation plays the role of a “nonreligious religion” in terms of its capacity to educate and edify humanity through aesthetic pleasure without recourse to any divine guidance.¹¹ Needless to say, Li's musings have been decidedly influenced by the intertwined relationship between aesthetics and religion in the May Fourth discourse. From Cai Yuanpei's 蔡元培 (1868–1940) polemics on “replacing religion with aesthetics” (*meiyu dai zongjiao* 美育代宗教) to Zong Baihua's 宗白華 (1897–1968) poetic visions of a “spiritual vista” (*lingjing* 靈境), aesthetic education came to be regarded as an alternative form of religious cultivation that stimulates and empowers the Chinese mind by invoking imaginaries of the beautiful, the sublime, and the transcendent.¹² In the face of Christian adversity, these thinkers attempted to construct an “aesthetic ontology” (*meixue bentilun* 美學本體論) as a quasi-transcendental structure beyond concrete and historical religious doctrines.¹³ The question remains, however, of whether aesthetic transcendence could furnish a site for the reconciliation between spiritual cultivation and the rationalist ideal of enlightenment.

The rejection of religion in the May Fourth discourse compelled Li Zehou to search for a rationalized form of aesthetic cultivation in the Chinese cultural heritage. Li wished to explain how a secular form of reason was deeply rooted

in the Confucian tradition of ritual and music (*liyue chuantong* 禮樂傳統). The Confucian orientation of ritual (*li* 禮) encompasses a wide range of symbolic and cultural connotations, ranging from personal etiquette and social ceremonies to cultural orthodoxies and cosmological orders.¹⁴ Most important, ritual enacts a diverse set of values and norms that sacralize Confucian ideals of morality and political order. For Li, the sacrality of Confucian ritual was derived from the mystical power of rituals in prehistoric shamanism. Shamans and magicians of ancient times invented a sophisticated set of ceremonies and rituals to communicate with the divine.¹⁵ At the core of this religious passion, Li argued, was a primordial fear that resulted from the precariousness of human life under a capricious nature. Submitting oneself to an omnipotent god might alleviate the fear of sudden and violent death at the hands of nature. Meanwhile, Li observed that, unlike the biblical vision of an utterly transcendent God, the Chinese imaginary of the divine is above this world yet tethered to it through multiple profane forms. Thus “heaven’s mandate” (*tianming* 天命) does not manifest through a miraculous incarnation. Rather, “heaven’s way” (*tiandao* 天道) is always already an immanent force that guides secular political purposes and the moral order. In this picture, the divine is a rhizomic combination of various spirits, ghosts, ancestors, and supernatural forces.

Li’s characterization may seem to align Chinese shamanism with pantheism, but unlike the chaotic picture envisioned by pantheists, Li emphasized the importance of ritual that rationalizes and solidifies humanity’s negotiations with heaven. Li observed that Chinese shamans and magicians mastered a sophisticated knowledge not only to ritualize human-divine interactions but also to come up with logical explanations about the causal relations between heaven’s mandate and world-historical events. For instance, Li noted that divination (*zhanbu* 占卜) developed mathematical algorithms to interpret the divine will through logic.¹⁶ For Li, this impulse to systematize and objectify divine guidance initiated an incremental progression toward secular reason. Terming this process the *rationalization of ritual*,¹⁷ Li contended that the primordial fear that motivated religious worship gradually gave way to the cultivation of virtuous actions (*dexing* 德行). Hence, the reorientation of ritual from shamanism to human virtue marked a self-conscious breakaway from the tutelage of religion. As a result, human virtue succeeded divine will to offer better ways of thinking about the ruling principle of sociopolitical affairs. The willingness to subordinate oneself to a mythic god was replaced by a self-affirmation of human agency.¹⁸

Finally, this rationalization process culminated in the birth of Confucian ritualism during the Warring States period. In Confucian teaching, the secular aspects of ritual—its educative and social functions—have completely overtaken its original mythical-religious dimensions. Confucian ritual, once released from the mystifying theories of a revealed divine nexus, announced the cultivation of

humanity as the highest purpose of a this-worldly ethic. In contrast to the Weberian view of the formal and stagnant features of Confucian ritual, Li described ritual action as “virtue’s externalization into ritual and its internalization into benevolence” (*de waihua weili, neihua weiren* 德外化為禮，內化為仁).¹⁹ In other words, Confucian ritualism idealized a natural process of transforming exterior norms and commands into internal emotions and wills. For instance, *ritual learning* (*xili* 習禮) refers to training in aesthetic appreciation of “proper actions, expressions, languages, clothing, and other sensibilities” so as to harmonize inner feelings with external norms.²⁰ While shamanistic ritual was undergirded by overwhelming feelings of reverence for and fear of the divine, Confucian ritual prioritized aesthetic inculcation of human affection as the foundation of human rationality. As transcendence lost its appeal in the new secular ideal of humanity, pragmatic mastery of ethical-kinship relations and political order replaced religious mysticism as the primary concern of Confucian ritualism.

Eventually, the exclusion of religious sentiments, values, and rituals produced a culture of pleasure that embraced affection (*qing* 情) as the original substance of Chinese humanity. The term *affection* is deployed by Li to describe dynamic affective and cognitive constellations that involve sensuous desire, aesthetic judgment, and emotional labor.²¹ Notwithstanding the absence of transcendence, the Confucian ontology of affection (*qingbenti* 情本體) serves as a nurturing ground that constantly brings human disposition into interaction with nature, ritual, and political norms.²² The serenity and happiness derived from everyday interactions with the mundane exorcise the theological imaginary and religious fever. As Li puts it, a Confucian affective mind does not “rely upon the salvation of humanity by God” but “strives to rectify and nurture manifold feelings through aesthetic inculcations.”²³ In this process, the question of ultimacy rests solely on “an anthropologized and historicized subject that carries authentic and genuine feelings.”²⁴ As a result, affection toward this world (*cishi zhiqing* 此世之情) contains the ultimate manifestation of Confucian ritualism and is almost diametrically opposed to the transcendence of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

At issue, then, is Li’s attempt to illuminate a form of nonreligious reason at the origins of Chinese civilization. One might ask why Li ventured into the question of religious ethics at the height of China’s new round of modernizations. Of course, looming over the New Enlightenment discourse was a critique of revolution as the apotheosis of political religiosity. At this critical juncture, Li’s search for rationality, this-worldly ethics, and mundane pleasure formulated a peculiar parallel with, if not direct commentary on, the enlightenment critique of the religious sentiments and redemptive promises of revolutionary utopianism. Significantly, this mode of criticism echoes Ernst Cassirer’s reflections on the cultural roots of Nazism in premodern mythologies. In *The Myth of the State* (1945), the exiled philosopher traced the racial and political myth of totalitarian ideology to

the Greek tradition. In Cassirer's view, while myth and religion are filled with the most violent emotions and irrational impulses, reason provides rational ways of conceiving, expressing, and eventually overcoming this primitive vision. Thus, the history of political theory in the West is underlined by a succession of struggles between mythos and logos, leading to the triumph of reason over religion in the Enlightenment. By contrast, the upsurge of political myth in Nazism represented an atavistic regression to the mythical world of savages and neurotics.²⁵ Just as Cassirer was impelled to retrieve the logos of Greek thought to reassert reason against an irrational Nazism, Li's efforts to tease out a secular reason at the root of Confucian thought might be read as an allusive attempt to expel the sublime myth of socialist utopia. In this regard, Li's culture of pleasure serves not as a simple assertion of a this-worldly ethics but as a talisman against the irrationalities, primitive emotions, and violent social impulses provoked by the apocalyptic vision of the Maoist revolution.

"Sin and Literature": From Humanism to Original Sin

While Li Zehou's ruminations on religious ethics derived from his reassessment of Confucian ritualism, Liu Zaifu was first known for his leading role in humanist literary criticism in the 1980s. Published in 1986, Liu's highly acclaimed book *Xingge zuhe lun* 性格組合論 (On the Composition of Human Character) set out to restore the profundity and complexity of the literary configuration of human character against crude socialist paradigms. Challenging the binary opposition of good versus evil in revolutionary literature, Liu emphasized the emancipatory potential of literature in capturing the dynamics of human actions, psychologies, and emotions in a global literary universe. The set of terminologies and paradigms introduced by Liu, from inner universe (*neiyuzhou* 內宇宙) to subjectivity of literature (*wenxue de zhutixing* 文學的主體性), inspired a generation of post-Mao writers to search for the artistic and aesthetic functions of a new literature as against the socialist literary orthodoxy.

Although Liu's literary theory was embedded in nineteenth-century European humanism, it should not be understood as a naive assertion of the writer's creative freedom. Rather, Liu touched on a basic philosophical problem of Marxism: that Marx wished to erase the person from the loftier purposes of metahistory. As Warren Breckman suggests, the term *personality* in early nineteenth-century Germany did not refer to the "psychological makeup of the individual temperament or character."²⁶ Rather, discussions of personality at the time revolved around intense struggles between advocates of the person and proponents of the subject. Kant had conceived the subject as a metapersonal, autonomous, and universal unity; Hegel then radicalized the Kantian idea of subjectivity by overcoming the particular identity and character of the subject through a series of depersonalizations. Meanwhile, Christian personalists argued that the idea of the subject

threatens to homogenize the particular characters and dispositions of individual personalities. In their view, the empirical particularity of the single person was predicated upon the archetypal divine person, a theological linkage characterized by a symbiosis between the infinite God and its incarnation in finite humanity.²⁷ The profundity of individual personality could thus never be reduced to the singular subject championed by Enlightenment thinkers.

Marx, however, repudiated Christian personalism as a theological mystification of the bourgeois individual. In his famous rebuttal “On the Jewish Question,” Marx dismissed Christian personhood as egoistic individuals in civil society, which was to be overcome through a socialized ontology known as “species-being.” Ironically enough, in this quest to expunge the theological remnants of the self, Marx summoned an even more totalizing vision of humanity: a unitary proletarian subject that completely wiped out personhood once and for all. Moreover, Marx’s radical vision of humanity has fundamentally shaped twentieth-century Chinese leftist literary theory. As the individual (*geren* 個人) was always associated with vacillation, narrow-mindedness, and selfishness, collective subjects from the nation to the party were elevated into the sublime figures of history. Hence, Liu Zaifu’s attempt to return to a particularistic personhood could be understood as a radical reversal of the Marxian notion of the universal subject. In other words, the vigorous insistence on the polyvalent composition of characters sought to replace the homogenized revolutionary subject with the personality as the unique locus of reason and will. For instance, Liu coined the term *inner universe* (*neiyuzhou* 内宇宙) to compare the dynamics of human characters to the movements of the cosmos. The literary configuration of character thus refers to the art of capturing the incessant metamorphosis of various senses, desires, and streams of (un)consciousness that constantly shapes individual personality. In this sense, the task of literature transcends the morbid modalities of socialist reflection theory to assert the primacy of personhood over and against revolutionary collectivity.

Liu’s rediscovery of the empirical self opened up new possibilities for the humanist literature of the 1980s. Nevertheless, if personality rests on nothing but its own fantasy of the infinite value of human dignity, it remains inadequate unless the limits and boundaries of human reason are drawn. For many critics, Liu’s bloated personality bore the marks of a Maoist romanticism that promoted subjective initiative regardless of social-historical constraints. Once aware of this lacuna, Liu turned to various religious systems of ethics in search of a grounding beyond humanism. During the latter half of the 1980s, Liu’s thinking came to be shaped by the question of repentance raised by Ba Jin 巴金 (1904–2005), who contended that 1980s humanism simply bypassed the thorny issue of complicity and responsibility in the collective crimes of the Mao era.²⁸ Ba Jin’s notions of conscience and truthful utterance compelled Liu to reflect on how Chinese

intellectuals themselves bear moral responsibility for their “shameful participation” in the Cultural Revolution, a sin that is above and beyond politics.

Here Liu’s effort to posit an existential guilt shares an elective affinity with the Christian notion of original sin. In the Old Testament, man, who is modeled after the divine personality of God, carries original sin as the result of disobeying God and thus being expelled from the Garden of Eden. Yet this belief in the weak linkage between the human person and God has endowed the individual’s inner realm with an otherworldly potential. The idea of inner conviction conceives man’s inner self as the unique path to salvation, a realm outside the jurisdiction of the secular state. For many intellectuals in the 1980s, only Christian transcendence pointed to an ultimate ground for human dignity beyond flimsy humanistic discourse.²⁹ As Liu went into exile in the United States after 1989, he gradually came to develop a systematic reflection on the relationship between sin and literature that acted as a revision to his earlier humanism. Nevertheless, different from the Christian act of faith, Liu Zaifu’s staging of sin was a self-critical process of reconceptualizing moral responsibility as an inborn aspect of humanity.

Liu best elaborated this view in *Zui yu wenxue* 罪與文學 (Sin and Literature), a book coauthored with Lin Gang and published in Hong Kong in 2002. Here, Liu and Lin differentiated between finite political and infinite moral dimensions of responsibility. They defined the category of morality as the precondition for spiritual salvation. No matter how the individual is coerced or constrained by the political state, one’s actions will ultimately be judged by one’s inner conscience (*liangzhi* 良知). In this regard, repentance—an acute awareness of the existential dimension of one’s guilt—formulates a quasi-theological path toward spiritual salvation. Most important, the Christian notion of sin facilitates this moral awakening and liberates the interior realm of the individual from politics. Nonetheless, Liu attempted to diminish the religious aspects of sin by defining sin as a cognitive hypothesis, a secular reason that imposes a categorical imperative on the individual for purposes of repentance. As Jianmei Liu argues, sin in Liu’s sense refers to “a sin without sin” (*wuzui zhizui* 無罪之罪) committed by a person who lives in an active or passive “structure of complicity” (*gongfan jiegou* 共犯結構),³⁰ an implicit yet contagious situation that could be resolved only through self-repentance. In a word, Liu’s repentance is always oriented toward the mundane world yet must find a transcendental horizon to assert itself above and beyond the secular realm.

Eventually, the notion of sin, articulated in terms of a nonreligious reason, enriched Liu Zaifu’s notion of personality with a quasi-theological grounding that nourishes human dignity. From this perspective, Liu proceeded to question the absence of such moral awareness in Chinese literary modernity. In Liu’s judgment, Chinese writers are so obsessed with the project of nation building as to

ignore the question of how literature could engage in soul-searching interrogation of the internal self. Focusing on the literary dimensions of the soul, Liu offered a comprehensive overview of the repentance in Chinese and Western literature, from Lu Xun's 鲁迅 (1881–1936) struggles for “religious conversions” (*huixin* 回心) to Dostoyevsky's disturbing views on conscience. Hence, Liu's proposal for moral introspection has provided a distinctive view on the lack of religious reason in Chinese literary history.

The Convergence of Pleasure and Sin: A Farewell to Revolution

In 1995, Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu published a book titled *Gaobie geming* 告別革命 (A Farewell to Revolution). In the midst of great uncertainties and anxieties, new currents of thought produced heated exchanges on the failure of the 1980s enlightenment project, on the waning halo of the humanist spirit, and on the resurgence of Chinese authoritarianism. A thread running through these debates was the problem of radicalism (*jijin zhuyi* 激進主義) at the core of China's twentieth-century revolution. Engaging this ongoing trend, Li and Liu defined modern Chinese revolution as “a variety of radical and violent actions and mass movements that attempt to overthrow extant order and authority.”³¹ The two iconic figures then called for an explicit rejection of revolutionary passion, culture, and political practice, which they believe have repeatedly interrupted China's incremental reforms and modernizations. While the book enjoyed great popularity after its immediate release, its zeitgeist status also reduced Li and Liu's most memorable thinking to aphorisms and clichés. As neoleftist intellectuals soon moved to remobilize the socialist legacy as an alternative to neoliberal capitalism, Li and Liu's mild reformist stance was identified as a problem for rather than a solution to China's transformation. For a new generation of scholars playing with post-modern and postcolonial paradigms, this ideological farewell announced not the end of revolution per se but, rather, the lacuna of the 1980s enlightenment project that prevented Chinese intellectuals from seeing the manifold potential of revolutionary politics.³²

This article moves beyond the paradigms of enlightenment versus revolution that undergirded the neoleftist/liberal confrontations to reconsider the political-theological motif of Li's and Liu's thinking. Li Zehou's cultures of pleasure were grounded in the May Fourth aesthetic discourse that highlighted the inculcation of secular humanity as an alternative to religious transcendence. Li stressed aesthetic cultivation of human sense and sensibilities, in opposition to the expressions of fervent emotions and apocalyptic visions that were characteristic of the revolutionary utopianism of the Mao era. Li's excavation of the secular roots of Confucian civilization served as an implicit criticism of the theological imaginary at the core of Maoist revolution. Meanwhile, Liu underscored the transcendence of literatures of sin to stimulate an inner morality through which to excise all sec-

ular political commands from human interiority. Whereas Li prioritized a realistic ethical and psychological noumenon in Confucian aesthetics to refute the romantic and sublime figure of the proletarian subject, Liu's espousal of religious transcendence provided Chinese writers with a spiritual dimension to actualize literature's breakaway from the tutelage of the revolutionary state. Finally, their reflections on this-worldly pleasure and otherworldly sin have merged in exercising the myth of revolutionary utopia. Maoist revolution bespeaks a utopian impulse to provoke a violent rupture through which human emancipation will be actualized in an apocalyptic manner. By contrast, Li and Liu's "farewell to revolution," an attitude stemming from their antagonism toward religious reason, sought to dispel the powerful attractions of utopianism and anticipate new ethical grounds for postsocialist Chinese society. While Li recommended that contemporary Chinese practice affective sensibilities and profane reason in a world without a messiah and redemption, Liu underscored the transcendence of nonreligious repentance to stimulate one's sense of moral guilt and interrogate the myth of revolutionary history.

To conclude, my reconstruction of the esoteric dialogue between Li Zehou's this-worldly pleasure and Liu Zaifu's otherworldly sin attempts to reveal the political implications of their religious thinking. While perspectives on post-Mao cultural reflection have undergone major transformations, from paradigms of modernization and enlightenment to critical interventions into depoliticized politics and postsocialism, these scholarships have tended to analyze Chinese revolution and its discontents through rationalist and secular lenses. Instead, I seek to demonstrate that religious ethics carried a special urgency in the post-Mao cultural conversation about revolutionary violence, utopianism, and the fate of Chinese enlightenment. In this sense, Li's and Liu's critiques of religious transcendence were intertwined with their deconstruction of revolutionary utopianism. If Carl Schmitt appealed to the theological imaginary to compensate for the moral lacunae of the modern state, Li and Liu aimed to expose the secular state's strategic manipulation of religious symbols and values at the core of Maoist political religiosity. Here the ambiguities of the political-theological motif remind us that secular politics and religious beliefs are not always at odds with each other. Rather, the complex and fluid articulations between theological yearnings and secular politics reveal eternal contestations between the sacred and the profane in the post-Mao era.

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Notes

- 1 An example of this impassioned critique of the sacred aura of revolution is Liu Xiaobo's 劉曉波 (1955–2017) cultural iconoclasm. See Xiaobo Liu, “That Holy Word, ‘Revolution,’” 315–18.
- 2 Li, *Mei de licheng*, 51–68.
- 3 Liu and Lin, *Zui yu wenxue*.
- 4 For a definition of the *postsecular*, see Habermas, “What Is Meant by ‘Post-secular’ Society?”
- 5 See Santer, *Royal Remains*, xii; and Kahn, *Future of Illusion*, 1–22.
- 6 Schmitt, *Political Theology*; for elaborations on the question of modernity's “normative deficit,” see Gordon, “Critical Theory between the Sacred and the Profane,” 469.
- 7 This view has significantly shaped scholarly observations on the elective affinity between authoritarianism and theological worldviews, from Hannah Arendt's study of totalitarianism to Emilio Gentile's thesis on the sacralization of politics, and from Eric Voegelin's excavation of the “Gnostic revolt” that anticipated modern totalism to Karl Löwith's discussion of the eschatological vision of communism. These political-theological analyses need to be treated with considerable caution when applying them to the context of Chinese revolution. Aside from the question of different faith traditions in East and West, the genealogical investigation into theological origins of modernity usually regards the elective affinity between premodern theology and modern polity as one of unidirectional causality. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*; Gentile, *Politics as Religion*; Voegelin, *Modernity without Restraint*; and Löwith, *Meaning in History*. For a useful distinction between historical causality and elective affinity in the interpretations of modernity's theological roots, see Gordon, “Weimar Theology,” 152–55.
- 8 For instance, Elizabeth J. Perry uses “cultural positioning” to describe the party's “strategic deployment of a range of symbolic resources (religion, ritual, rhetoric, dress, drama, art, and so on) for purposes of political persuasion.” Perry, *Anyuan*, 5. Scholars are also drawn to the rationalist logic behind the religious façade of the cult of Mao; see Leese, *Mao Cult*; and S. Wang, *Failure of Charisma*.
- 9 See, e.g., K. Liu, *Aesthetics and Marxism*, chap. 5; and Chong, “Combining Marx with Kant.”
- 10 Li, *Shiyong lixing yu leganwenhua*, 1–53.
- 11 Li, *Huaxia meixue*, 4–81.
- 12 Cai, “Meiyu dai zongjiao shuo,” 68; Zong, *Meixue sanbu*, 58–69.
- 13 Chen, *Ershi shiji Zhongguo meixue bentilun wenti*; Liu Xiaofeng, *Xiandaixing shehui xulun*, 317.

- 14 See Sigurðsson, *Confucian Propriety and Ritual Learning*, 10–17.
- 15 Li, *Lishi bentilun*, 156–88.
- 16 Ibid., 166–71.
- 17 Li uses the term *rationalization* (*lixinghua* 理性化) in a distinctively Kantian rather than Weberian manner. While Weber deploys the term to describe the disenchantment of the world through instrumental reason, Li is much more affirmative about the cognitive and historical achievement of reason as the assertion of human autonomy. See Weber, “Science and Vocation.”
- 18 Li, *Lishi bentilun*, 172–74.
- 19 Ibid., 174.
- 20 Li, *Huaxia meixue*, 18.
- 21 For scholars’ views on Li’s conception of affection, see D. Wang, *Lyrical in Epic Time*, 357–59; and Jia, “Li Zehou’s Doctrine of Emotion.”
- 22 Li, *Shiyong lixing yu leganwenhua*, 55–115.
- 23 Li, *Huaxia meixue*, 216.
- 24 Ibid., 62.
- 25 Cassirer, *Myth of the State*.
- 26 Breckman, *Origins of Radical Social Theory*, 11.
- 27 Ibid., 13.
- 28 Ba Jin, *Suixiang lu*.
- 29 A case in point is Liu Xiaofeng’s theological critique of humanism; see Liu Xiaofeng, *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao*.
- 30 J. Liu, “Liu Zaifu’s Three Voyages of Life,” 190.
- 31 Li and Liu, *Gaobie geming*, 60.
- 32 See, e.g., H. Wang, “Depoliticized Politics.”

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