

Utopia and Utopianism in the Contemporary Chinese Context

Texts, Ideas, Spaces

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Anticipatory Utopia and Redemptive Utopia in Postrevolutionary China

Hang Tu

This chapter intervenes in the utopian dimension of Marxist thinking in postrevolutionary China. If Marxism in the twentieth century represented a constellation of theories, emotions, and memories oriented toward a communist utopia, the collapse of real existing socialism in Eastern Europe and China's capitalist turn in the 1980s signified the eclipse of left-wing utopian thinking worldwide. The end of an emancipatory political temporality has broken the hyphen between Marxist thinking and utopianism. For Derrida, the disarticulation of Marxism from emancipatory politics generated a spectral Marx devoid of messianic hope, a hauntology infused with visions of the future that has become obsolete.¹ Derrida further argued 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 its critical insights into the contradictions of capitalism. Nevertheless, the price to pay for such recognition, as Derrida might have been reluctant to elaborate, was to give up the fundamental faith that Marxist utopia represents something positive and possible.

It is my contention that contemporary Chinese Marxism still speaks of a robust utopian desire against the global collapse of Marxist utopia. The genealogy of post-World War II Marxism from the Frankfurt school to the postmodern fad has been characterized by a culture of defeat in the emphatic identification with a “melancholy criticism” that embraced critical theory's fate to engage politics without a realizable political agenda.² In contrast to this, China's dramatic reorientation from Maoist revolutionary utopia into neoliberal juggernaut since the 1980s has generated an ambiguous topology for left-wing thinking: a Marxist-Leninist regime supposedly representing

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1. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006). For a detailed discussion on the eclipse of utopian thinking in Western Marxism, see Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), esp. introduction and chap. 1.
 2. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2006). For a discussion of Adorno's “melancholy science,” see Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 2014). For a general mapping of the left-wing culture and political defeats in the twentieth century, see Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, chap. 1.

the vanquished and the downtrodden and global capitalism claiming to revive bourgeois culture and the fetish of commodities suddenly became strange bedfellows. The Chinese regime forcefully promotes neoliberal ethics of inexhaustible consumption and privatization, on the one hand, but still cleaves to some basic tenets of the left-wing political agenda, on the other.³ This creates a schizophrenic situation for Marxist thinking in China: the Chinese state still has the power to evoke Marxist imaginaries and realizable utopias and has aroused considerable expectations from the Left; yet this neoliberal Leviathan simultaneously frustrated any radical attempts to revitalize Mao's revolutionary practice and paralyzed the anticapitalist critiques of left-wing radicals. In other words, the Chinese state has become both the nemesis and the Prometheus of the Left. I argue that, precisely because of this, contemporary Chinese Marxism retains the ability to conceive of another social order because of the possibility of realizing it.

More specifically, I examine two Marxist thinkers in postrevolutionary China whose ideas illustrate the ambivalent interactions between the (post)socialist regime, left-wing politics, and utopianism. Li Zehou (李澤厚), a veteran Marxist aesthetician loosely affiliated with the humanist Marxism of the 1980s, was dedicated to reformulating Mao's radical revolutionary agenda with a reformist neo-Kantian scheme. Li's revision sought to "unlearn" the Marxist theory of the socialized revolutionary subject by harking back to Kantian self-legislation. Moreover, Li's historical writing construes the May Fourth Enlightenment as an *anticipatory utopia*: Li's historical excavation of the liberal tradition is a future anterior to retrieve as well as anticipate an era of enlightened China. To the contrary, Wang Hui (汪暉), the prominent leader of the Chinese neo-Left, is committed to revitalizing Mao's revolution as a *redemptive utopia* to combat the malaise brought by neoliberalism. Borrowing heavily from a wide range of antimodern thinkers from Lu Xun to Carl Schmitt, Wang's reformulation of Marxist political intervention bespeaks a strong impulse to provoke a sense of rupture through which lost meanings, suppressed desires, and failed battles of socialist utopia will be fulfilled in a redemptive manner.⁴

My attempts to categorize these two thinkers under the single brand "Marxist utopianism" will certainly raise eyebrows. The polarization of the Chinese intelligentsia since the early 1990s has produced so many sentiments, controversies, and politics of public-cum-academic scandal making, with Li's and Wang's names constantly invoked throughout the virulent ideological battles between the Left and the liberal over the contested meaning of Chinese revolution and enlightenment. Li was reduced to (or deified as) an enthusiastic proponent of 1980s liberal Marxism, while Wang was either embraced or rejected as an unrepentant Maoist eulogizing (or reviving) state socialism.⁵ My study is intended to be problem oriented rather than to provide a normative answer.

3. For a discussion on the revival of Maoist culture in contemporary China, see Jie Li and Enhua Zhang, eds., *Red Legacies in China: Cultural Afterlives of the Communist Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
4. My conception of redemptive and anticipatory utopia is inspired by Ernst Bloch, who distinguished between the abstract compensatory utopias (unrealizable imaginations) and the concrete realizable utopias (real existing utopian practices such as socialism). The difference lies in that Bloch believes that the imagined utopia offers only compensations for reality, while I argue that it is precisely its unrealizable feature that endows imagined utopia with a redemptive power. See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).
5. See Xu Jilin 許紀霖, *Dangdai zhongguo de qimeng yu fanqimeng* 當代中國的啟蒙與反啟蒙 [Enlightenment and anti-enlightenment in contemporary China] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011); Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

It is time to move beyond the apologetic/polemical model that is eager to “intervene,” “criticize,” and “(re)politicize” the Li-Wang debate. I refuse to offer a critique from an a priori “liberal” or “leftist” position that usually collapses the examination of ideas into political moralizing. By contrast, I hope to analyze their ideas from within their own categories and systems. The study of intellectual history, as Peter Gordon forcefully demonstrates, is the examination of the “ramification of ideas”—the mediatory process through which concepts branch out into the historical world.⁶ From this inner perspective, Li and Wang resemble each other in their bifurcated understanding of Chinese modernity defined by revolution and enlightenment.⁷ Nevertheless, I realize that this methodology runs the risk of depoliticizing—the bracketing of political concerns involuntarily erases the important fact that their visions of utopia are in almost all aspects diametrically opposed. Admittedly, Wang’s admirers have tended to cluster at the left end of political spectrum, while most of Li’s celebrants have claimed a self-righteous liberal position. This does not mean that I will refrain from criticizing their conceptual flaws, deceptive rhetoric, and willful distortion of history according to political needs. Rather, it is the contention of many intellectual historians that one can only better criticize certain idea by reading the idea against itself.⁸ Habermas’s famous slogan to “think with Heidegger against Heidegger” separates the *ideational* aspiration of Heidegger from his *ideological* applications. As I will show through my analysis, a better way to understand the utopian elements in Li and Wang is to acknowledge that their ideational aspirations retain certain validity even though their promises have been co-opted by ideologies.⁹ Furthermore, I will demonstrate that the link between ideas and their possible political realization proves to be both the breeding ground for utopian imaginations and the sword of Damocles that threatens to castrate utopia into pale and sad copies of dominant ideology.

Kantian Self-Legislation, May Fourth, and Li Zehou’s Solution

Li Zehou (李澤厚) was probably the most influential philosopher in the 1980s, comparable to Sartre in France. One might say that he was the instigator of the New Enlightenment. In 1956, Li made his academic debut by offering his distinctive view on beauty in the “Great Debate on Aesthetics” (美學大辯論).¹⁰ Like most Chinese intellectuals of his age, he became dormant during the Cultural Revolution. Under Mao’s great instruction to “re-educate” urban intellectuals, Li was forced to do labor work at a rural May Seventh cadre school. During the 1970s, he began to study Kantian philosophy in an extremely difficult material and intellectual environment. The result was a path-breaking monograph, *Critique of Critical Philosophy: A Study of Kant*, published in 1979.

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6. See Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012): 3–7.
 7. See David Der-wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), especially the coda.
 8. For example, see John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7–8.
 9. For a discussion of the ideational aspiration of ideas against its ideological application, see Peter E. Gordon, “Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas,” in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
 10. Li Zehou 李澤厚, “Mei de keguanxing he shehuixing” 美的客觀性和社會性 [The objectivity and sociality of beauty], *Renmin ribao* 人民日報, January 9, 1957.

Li sought to solve the Kantian paradox of self-legislation by combining Kantian epistemology with the Marxist theory of material practice. Moreover, Li demonstrates a type of historical-philosophical fusion that combines his historical reflection of the Cultural Revolution with his materialist intervention into Kant. Not only was the question of Kantian subjectivity thoroughly historicized, but now merely posing “back to Kant” became inseparable from a particular Chinese intellectual agenda in search of autonomy after the demise of Maoism. Meanwhile, Li published a series of treatises on modern Chinese intellectual history with an explicit enlightenment agenda. The most influential argument was his thesis that the dynamic tension between enlightenment and patriotism during the May Fourth was overthrown by the subsequent political struggles.¹¹ As a result, the Communist Party prioritized the party-state over the enlightenment. Li asks for a recuperation of the May Fourth enlightenment values by entirely circumventing the era of high socialism. My analysis of Li focuses on his historical attempt to restructure Chinese modernity in the narrative of future anterior, with the bifurcated attempt to bracket socialism and excavate the May Fourth enlightenment tradition.

From 1979 to 1987, Li penned a series of historical writings on modern Chinese intellectual thought and the question of Chinese enlightenment. Compiled in three volumes titled *On Early Modern Chinese Thought* (1979) (中國近代思想史論), *On Ancient Chinese Thoughts* (1985) (中國古代思想史論), and *On Modern Chinese Thoughts* (1987) (中國現代思想史論), Li undertook a systematic reflection on major intellectual currents, primarily neo-Confucianism, the May Fourth Enlightenment, and Chinese Marxism in history. These writings are characterized by a historical consciousness to reconstruct the suppressed tradition of enlightenment universalism in Chinese modernity. Li turned his Kantian thesis into a historical narrative, a series of events whose meanings could be interpreted as the gradual unfolding of reason in modern China. Li’s ambiguous stance between individual autonomy and sociality was historicized into a heroic struggle between enlightenment cosmopolitanism and revolutionary nationalism in twentieth-century China.

Li’s bifurcated configuration of enlightenment and revolution resembles Kant and Hegel’s debates on the idea of historical progress. Kant views the gradual unfolding of reason as not just a form of consciousness but also a real historical force that can be institutionalized, actualized, and embodied in historical reality. Despite his pessimistic view on human nature as “unsocial sociability,” Kant believed that the “cunning of nature” will bring out its hidden purpose—the actualization of reason and freedom in history.¹² However, this idea of historical progress is contradictory to Kant’s portrayal of humankind as an ahistorical telos: the very need for historical progress indicates the limitation of human reason, dethroning man from the final end of the universe to an imperfect historical being.

Hegel’s solution is to transcend the limitation of individual reason by incorporating this particularity into absolute knowledge through the dialectical progression of history. Ironically, Hegel’s success in establishing a coherent theory of history results in abolishing human reason altogether, since humanity is now but the medium through

11. Li Zhou 李澤厚, “Qimeng yu jiuwang de shuangchong bianzou” 啟蒙與救亡的雙重變奏 [The variation of enlightenment and national salvation], in *Zhongguo xiandai sixiangshi lun* 中國現代思想史論 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2007).

12. Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41–53.

which absolute knowledge is realized. As a result, Hegel views history as a form of automatism, in which a teleological and natural progression proceeds even without the participation of human consciousness. Contrary to this, Kant views history as growing out of men's desires, intentions, and actions, reshaping the world in accordance with human reason.¹³ This divergence fundamentally shaped their views on the French Revolution. Inspired by the revolution, Kant nevertheless cautioned against treating the French Revolution itself as historical progress. He ambiguously put it that the "universal sympathy" toward the revolution shows a "historical sign" of moral progress.¹⁴ Instead of viewing the revolution as an automatic progression of history, Kant distinguished people's affirmation of the principles of the revolution from the revolution in history, showing the gap between rationality and its empirical realization. Precisely because he fell back into his dualism, Kant could resist the Hegelian impulse of integration.

This Kantian caution is of crucial importance in Li's historical writing. Li argued that Chinese Revolution, in its passionate will to integrate and transcend individual consciousness, was the very evil that buried the gradual development of individual rationality. In his 1986 famous thesis, "The Dual Theme of Enlightenment and National Salvation," Li contended that the May Fourth Chinese enlightenment started by intellectuals' attempts to transform Chinese culture according to the ideas of individual freedom. Intellectuals,¹⁵ students, and reform-minded politicians undertook a broad cultural reformation designed to liberate the Chinese from "self-incurred immaturity" and embrace enlightenment values. Unfortunately, this cultural renaissance coincided with a succession of civil wars, nationalist movements, and political mobilizations, all of which threatened to subject individual consciousness to a greater cause of collective unity. Disillusioned by the impossibility of attaining personal freedom amid virulent political struggles, Chinese intellectuals sought to empower their enlightenment with a stronger historical will and political action.¹⁶ Li takes the case of Chinese Marxism as an example. He argues that Chinese Marxism originated from the spread of anarchism. During the process of political struggle, anarchism was gradually replaced by Marxist-Leninism, because the latter has "a systematic and concrete revolutionary strategy for political action."¹⁷ What is more, the subsequent militant struggles waged in the Communist Revolution further suppressed individual rights for the sake of survival. As a result, the search for individual rights was constantly postponed.¹⁸

Moreover, the rise of an overpowering revolutionary collective finds its vivid allegories in the thinking of Mao Zedong. Li treats the voluntarist impulse of Maoism as a combination of Hegelian logic and neo-Confucianism. Li's philosophical rejection of Hegel is historically connected to his judgment that Mao's thinking has a close affinity

13. This view is held by many neo-Kantian scholars. For example, Yovel argues that Kant's philosophy of history already contains embryos of Hegelian synthesis, but Kant is able to resist the temptation of integration. See Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980). For a defense of Hegel's position, see Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

14. This interpretation was expressed by Prof. Peter E. Gordon in his seminar on European Intellectual History during the fall term of 2016 at Harvard University.

15. Li Zehou 李澤厚, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiangshi lun* 中國現代思想史論 [Treatises on modern Chinese thought] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2007), 1–20.

16. *Ibid.*, 21.

17. *Ibid.*, 27.

18. *Ibid.*, 32.

with the Hegelian logic, whose totalizing attempt was radicalized by Mao's early voluntarism. In his essay "On the Youth Mao Zedong" (青年毛澤東), Li characterizes Mao's thinking as dominated by "motion" (動), "struggle" (斗), "overpowering self" (貴我), and "contemporaneity" (通今).¹⁹ Mao in his youth understood the nature of the universe as defined by incessant motion and so derived an ethics that emphasizes the infinite struggle between the subject and the object, men and nature. For Mao, the only thing that remains unchanged is the subjective battling spirit that is constantly fighting and resisting various kinds of external forces.²⁰ Furthermore, Mao formulates a subjective ethics that rejects any sorts of categorical imperative. Rather, this ethics is motivated by a corporeal impulse, a sensuous pleasure, and a Nietzschean will to superhuman power to overcome the chaos of the changing universe. For Li, Mao's ethics was inspired by different strings of old and new thoughts, ranging from the romantic heroism in traditional Chinese novels like *The Water Margin* to anarchism in the May Fourth Enlightenment.²¹

Li further argues that Mao's early voluntarism fundamentally shaped his reception of Marxism in his mature years. Li contextualizes Mao's study of Marxism to his years in Yan'an (延安), an era when Mao undertook the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party to fight against the Nationalist Party and the Japanese invaders. Mao's early voluntarism helped him understand Marxism rather as a set of military strategies: dialectical materialism is helpful to comprehend the constantly changing situation on the battlefield. Analyzing Mao's most important writings in this period, Li argues that the conjoined force of early voluntarism and military strategies became the horizon on which Mao tried to grasp dialectical materialism.²² For example, Mao's famous theory of contradiction (矛盾論) declares that being is forever in motion, which in turn produces numerous contradictions. Meanwhile, the universality of contradictions is accompanied by the particularity of contradictions: within a specific temporality, a particular set of contradictions comes to dominate motion. Overcoming this particular contradiction does not restore balance but pushes the subject into another circle of infinite struggles in which he confronts the next primary contradiction. Thus, dialectics in Mao does not lead to a Hegelian progression. Rather, it plunges the subject into a succession of antagonistic contradictions without any hope of overcoming them. For Li, this Taoist dialectical logic was derived from the voluntarist's idea on the constancy of change, on the one hand, and the military strategist's belief of permanent struggle against the enemy, on the other hand.

The ultimate tragedy of Chinese socialism, for Li, is that Mao's skewed Marxism took center stage after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC).²³ Mao's somewhat existentialist logic turned him into a "permanent revolutionist": his ingrained belief in the constancy of contradictions has led to an idiosyncratic emphasis on violent class struggles even after the establishment of the socialist regime. Moreover, if no contradictions are to be found, people must subjectively "create" the contradiction in order to transform the potential "other" into the social totality.²⁴ To demonstrate this, Li examines Mao's constant attempts to cope with the constancy of contradictions

19. Ibid., 127.

20. Ibid., 131.

21. Ibid., 138–41.

22. Ibid., 175–83.

23. Ibid., 191.

24. Ibid., 192–98.

by mobilizing people's subjective will in the era of high socialism. For Mao, nearly all problems in the building of socialism—the collectivization of agriculture, industrial modernization, the promotion of proletarian culture—might be solved through incessant class struggle. Drawing on his military experience, which would attribute contradictions to the existence of enemies, Mao constantly tried to find “the enemy” by imposing a succession of friend-and-foe distinctions upon a wide range of categories: Western imperialists, intellectuals, party capitalist roaders (走資派), and so on. In his famous slogan “criticism-unification-recriticism” (批評—團結—再批評), Mao always attempted to find “the other” within the self, only to absorb the last remnants of “otherness” in the self-sufficient structure of the unconditional, absolute totality of his socialism. Here, Hegelian logic has gone mad: the self's integration into the universal does not lead to a dialectical progression but is constantly driven back into another set of particularities—personal and class identities—which, deemed once again as “enemies,” need to be repudiated, rectified, and transformed in the infinite cycle of contradictions. Ideally, a socialist self is someone who fully merges with the life of the proletarian masses. Mao asks for a cognitive transparency to every individual being, since only he who truly is part of the struggle for socialism is entitled to belong to the socialist collectivity. There is no difference between the self and the collective, since the self as a proletarian would constitute himself as a universal collective subject in history and act in the collective of which he is a part in its totality. However, in reality this greater unity is always to-be-arrived-at but never arrives. As a result, individual consciousness is not only eliminated but is forever caught up in the infinite cycle of struggles.

In the end, Li asks for a creative transformation of the enlightenment tradition. More specifically, he requires a return from Mao's mad Hegelian logic to the Kantian moment of the May Fourth Enlightenment in order to regain individual freedom. He warns the reader that the similarity between the 1980s New Enlightenment and the May Fourth might lead to another round of political radicalism, during which individual rights would again be suppressed by a greater political cause. The way out, Li argues, is to creatively transform both the technological-social structure and the cultural-psychological structure of China. Drawing on his sedimentation theory, Li asks for a gradual reform of both the interiority and the exteriority of Chinese subjectivity through modernization process. In this way, Li's historical excavation of the May Fourth tradition becomes a future anterior to retrieve as well as anticipate a realization of individual rights from the tyranny of collectivity.

With this narrative of future anterior, Li restructured the entire discourse of modern Chinese intellectual history. This interpretive mode fundamentally altered the relationship between the May Fourth Enlightenment and the era of high socialism. The Maoist historiography plotted the history of modern China as a melodrama that portrays the ascendance of the proletarian revolution as overcoming the inherent weakness of the May Fourth Enlightenment. This narrative attempts to enforce a stable, disciplined, and deterministic historical causality that views the building of socialism as irreversible historical progress. Contrary to this, Li rearranges the historical causality between enlightenment and revolution to make this drama intrinsically tragic: China's embrace of socialism was at the sacrifice of dismantling the complex and entangled tradition of enlightenment that was overshadowed by Mao's revolutionary politics.

The Anti-modern, Mao's Revolution, and Wang Hui's Rebellion

In the heat of Li Zehou's enlightenment project, Wang Hui (汪暉) made his debut in the late 1980s with a humanistic interpretation on Lu Xun. In this academic debut, Wang argued that Lu Xun's diatribe against the May Fourth Enlightenment harbored a cautious detachment from Western modernity.²⁵ Given the time of his writing, the seemingly old-fashioned topic looked like a subtle critique of the 1980s New Enlightenment, whose tragic end resonated with Lu Xun's reservations about the limit of total Westernization. The broader implications of Wang Hui's intellectual agenda became clear to the Chinese intelligentsia only in 1997, when Wang published an essay in *Tianya* journal arguing for a more nuanced understanding of Mao's legacy. It emerged as a key text for a group of prominent critics and scholars who became disillusioned with the advent of capitalism in China. Wang Hui was later coined by his detractors as the leader of this nascent "Chinese New Left" in a storm of debates that ensued. In the following decade, Wang Hui undertook a more audacious attempt by publishing an extravaganza of essays to reveal the implicit links between Li's humanist Marxism and the neoliberal depoliticization of Mao's socialist revolution, challenging the predominant Chinese intellectual consensus on the necessity of denouncing Mao's revolutionary practice.

The newly emergent neo-leftists in the 1990s situated China's contemporary social problems in the uncritical embrace of modernity originating from Li's enlightenment. For them, the intrusion of global capitalism was the realization of Li's enlightenment utopia. What needed to be retrieved was precisely the Chinese socialist revolution. Thus, Wang Hui's critical historiography constructs Mao's revolution as a "modernity of anti-modernity," as he argues for the necessity of recuperating China's socialist utopia to combat the rise of neoliberalism. Equipped with postmodernist and poststructuralist scholarship, Wang and his comrades were dedicated to deconstructing enlightenment universalism by investigating discursive operations and East/West power relations whereby certain progressive images of the Western Enlightenment were constructed, circulated, and stabilized in the 1980s New Enlightenment. More specifically, while the liberals deplored the return of the political, the New Left viewed Li Zehou's philosophy as a "depoliticized politics" that was complicit with the ascendance of neoliberal capitalism in the post-Mao era. Furthermore, Wang Hui questioned Li's attempt to circumvent Mao's socialism in his enlightenment project. Contrary to Li's narrative that regards Maoist politics as overthrowing the May Fourth enlightenment tradition, Wang views the Chinese Communist Revolution as something that grew organically from the May Fourth enlightenment. Thus, Wang regards Li's enlightenment project as a "depoliticized politics" that systematically reversed the Maoist utopia defined by class politics, revolutionary internationalism, and proletarian consciousness.

Wang Hui's earlier dissension from Li could be traced back to his 1988 essay, "The Identity of Attitude in the May Fourth Enlightenment." Wang proposes a conceptual framework of "attitude" (態度的同一性) to categorize the unconscious mental habits operating in the thoughts of the May Fourth thinkers.²⁶ "Attitude" connotes an ambiguity that blurs the boundary between reason and emotion. It points to the May

25. Wang Hui, *Fankang juewang* 反抗絕望 [Rebel against despair] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008).

26. Wang Hui 汪暉, "Zhongguo xiandai lishi zhong de wusi qimengyundong" 中國現代歷史中的五四啟蒙運動 [The May Fourth Movement in modern Chinese history], in *Wang Hui zixuanji* 汪暉自選集 (Guangxi: Guangxi shifandaxue chubanshe, 1997).

Fourth thinkers' emotional embrace of the enlightenment without a thorough logical, historical, and cultural conceptualization of Western modernity. It derives more from the Chinese intellectuals' urgent desires to break away from the Chinese tradition than from a systematic study of the West. Ironically, it is precisely this lack of understanding that yoked the May Fourth generation together in the first place, as they were pushed by the same radical desire to embrace something modern regardless of the ramifications. They were thus able to simplify sophisticated, usually contradictory, Western intellectual genealogies into a single attitude of rebellion against the Chinese tradition. As the movement deepened, it splintered from within not only because of the gradual unfolding of the complexities of Western modernity but also because of the incommensurability between Western theory and the Chinese situation. Wang's implicit critique of Li's position lies in his conclusion that the May Fourth was unable to go beyond an attitude of anti-traditionalism without breaking consensus. In other words, Li's utopia proved to be a historical failure.

Since the early 1990s, Wang Hui gradually shifted his theoretical lens toward a radical critique of capitalist modernity. Meanwhile, he strategically excavated the emancipatory aspects of the Cultural Revolution by prioritizing its potential political agency over its historical failures. One of the most provocative aspects of Wang's thinking is his identification of Mao's revolution with a genealogy of antimodern thoughts. For Wang, Mao's dialectic embrace and refusal of modernization represents a long-standing Chinese tradition of radical critique against Western modernity:

This antimodern theory of modernization is a characteristic not just of Mao Zedong thought, however; it is one of the major characteristics of Chinese thought from the late Qing onward. The discourse on China's search for modernity was shaped in the historical context of imperialist expansion and a crisis in capitalism. Thus, those intellectuals and state officials who promoted modernization in China could not help but consider who China's modernization could avoid the multiple problems of Western capitalist modernity. . . . As a result, at the heart of the search for Chinese modernity in Chinese thinking stands a huge paradox.²⁷

This highly reductive antimodern theory is deeply contradictory, as a combination of historicism and presentism, strategic intent and conceptual magic, orthodoxy and hypocrisy, which reveals Wang Hui's tactical improvisation that prioritizes the utopian impulse of this position as a radical criticism of Li's enlightenment. For Wang, both the May Fourth and the 1980s New Enlightenment failed in its uncritical embrace of modernization agenda. At this point, Mao's socialist saga ironically became the major provocation to continue the practice of antimodern theory against Western capitalist modernity.

Furthermore, Wang's philosophical categorization of Mao's theory as antimodern was followed by his historical reconfiguration of Mao's practice as a Schmittian conception of the political. Wang boldly asserts that the central motif of the radical politics of the past century might be termed "the politicization of twentieth century China" (二十世紀中國的政治化).²⁸ For Li, the dynamic interplay between Kantian self-legislation and nation building during the May Fourth was overthrown by Mao's radical politics.

27. Wang Hui, *The End of Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity*, trans. Rebecca Karl (London: Verso, 2011), 14.

28. Wang Hui, in *China's Twentieth Century: Revolution, Retreat and the Road to Equality*, ed. Saul Thomas (London: Verso, 2016), 1–7.

Contrary to this, Wang contends that Mao's Communist Revolution grew *organically* from the May Fourth political culture. For Wang, the politicization of culture in the gradual transformation from enlightenment into revolution was both historically inevitable and politically empowering. Mao's revolutionary practice involved a complex, interrelated process of political integration (政治整合), cultural politics (文化與政治), and the people's war (人民戰爭).²⁹ While Li views Mao's militant Marxism as a Hegelian monstrosity that constantly devours "the other," Wang connects it to the Schmittian understanding of the political as an existential decision distinguishing between friend and foe.³⁰ In this regard, a succession of revolutionary struggles waged by Mao from the 1920s to the 1950s demonstrated an authentic (one might say apocalyptic) attempt to formulate new political subjectivities through a matrix of tactics such as the mass line policy, the united front, and revolutionary cosmopolitanism.

Interestingly for Wang, the climax as well as the eclipse of Mao's radical politics was the Cultural Revolution. Contrary to Li's argument that Mao's class struggle was a cyclical regression of violence, Wang views Mao's class politics as a revolutionary attempt to formulate proletarian subjectivities. For Wang, Mao understood social classes as mobile rather than rigid categories, and his theory pointed out an opportunity to transform class antagonism into class integration. Mao's Cultural Revolution was not meant to annihilate class enemies but was designed to transform enemies into revolutionary subjects.³¹ The Maoist-Schmittian friend and foe distinction was not so much about the annihilation of enemies through violence as about transforming enemies into friends of socialism through class struggle.³² In other words, the temporary categorization of a certain social class as the "enemy" was designed to "help" its members integrate into Mao's proletarian subject. For Wang, the political empowers the proletarian agent and transforms the hierarchy of class into a Kojevian universal homogenous utopia. The utopian impulse of Wang's intervention is revealed as he makes a highly controversial distinction between the theory and the practice of the Cultural Revolution. The hierarchicalization of the revolutionary class and the subsequent violent struggles against class enemies in the history of the Cultural Revolution did not stem from Mao's theory; on the contrary, this tragic outcome was precisely the result of a *deviation* from Mao's radical politics.³³ For Wang, Mao's theory of class struggle opened possibilities to democratize China by empowering political agency and transforming class enemies into democratic citizens; in reality, it was manipulated and turned into a tool of power struggles and justification for social stratification in favor of the new privileged ruling class.³⁴ Wang further argues that the forgetting of the revolutionary potentialities of Mao's class politics paved the way for a "depoliticized politics" in the post-Mao era.

29. *Ibid.*, 5.

30. An example is Wang Hui's attempt to use Schmittian logic to analyze the Korean War. See Wang Hui, "From People's War to the War of International Alliance: The War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea from the Perspective of Twentieth-Century Chinese History," in *China's Twentieth Century*.

31. Wang Hui 汪暉, *Quzhengzhihua de zhengzhi: Duanershihiji de zhongjie yu jiushiniandai* 去政治化的政治：短二十世紀的終結與九十年代 [Depoliticized politics: The end of China's short twentieth-century and the nineties] (Beijing: SDX Press, 2008), 31. Chinese original: "如果革命主體的創造是一個階級轉化，那麼，階級的對抗性就可能通過主體的轉化加以解決。"

32. *Ibid.*, 33. Chinese original: "以區分敵我為中心的政治性階級概念並不必然地預設肉體消滅或強力控制的暴力形式，恰恰相反，鬥爭與轉化是這一政治概念的兩個相互關聯的環節。"

33. *Ibid.*, 30.

34. *Ibid.*, 36.

Neoliberalism canceled any radical democratic possibilities by depoliticizing this long tradition of revolution. The negation of the political entails a political practice that calls for its own restructuring of politics to suit the needs of global capitalism.³⁵ If the split between Mao's theoretical utopia and the skewed practice provided neoliberalism with a chance to assert itself, the depoliticizing process entailed by China's market turn gradually wiped out radical democratic potentialities promised by Mao.

Strangely though, Wang's analytical dissection of neoliberalism is intertwined with a mythical eulogizing of the transfiguring power of revolution. On the one hand, he tries to uncover the historical trajectory that brought out revolution's eclipse in an objective manner; on the other hand, Wang feverishly configures Mao's revolutionary practice as tinted with a mythic power and unrealized potentialities. The idea/reality distinction mentioned above reveals that Wang had no fantasies about historical reality, nor did he wish to return to that idealized past. But neither was he prepared, even though Li chose to, simply to conform to the forgetting of revolutionary potentials initiated by the rise of the capitalist present. There is a passionate, or even apocalyptic, undertaking beneath Wang's redemptive retrieval of revolutionary utopia: to infuse a depoliticized present with a Schmittian political intensity characterized by ruptures, actions, and existential decisions.

In a recently published book *Six Moments of Ah Q's Life: In Memory of Xinhai Revolution* Wang mythologizes the Chinese Revolution as a site of redemptive utopia.³⁶ *The True Story of Ah Q* is Lu Xun's classic novel that portrays the vicious cycle of revolutionary aspirations continually thwarted by the entrenched feudal tradition in rural China. Ah Q, a pathetic subaltern looked down upon by nearly everyone around him, fantasized about becoming a powerful oppressor one day to rule over those people he hated. Lured by the promise of liberation and empowerment, Ah Q enthusiastically embraced the Xinhai Revolution only to find out that the reactionary power structure proves to be more intransigent than he expected. Ah Q's ultimate execution as a "revolutionary rebel" bespeaks Lu Xun's dark consciousness, a staunch refusal of both a present and future that promise the sweet dream of human emancipation.

In contrast to Lu Xun's pessimism, Wang Hui forcefully captures six moments in Ah Q's experience that faintly reveal the possibility of a positive revolution. Playing with Agamben's thesis on instinct and radical political potentiality,³⁷ Wang Hui argues that there are countless moments when Ah Q's instinctive rebellion could have broken the passivity that imprisoned his agency. Ah Q's failure, poverty, humiliation, and loss of himself all generate a messianic potentiality to transcend his petty being into a higher cause of sublime emancipation, yet this redemptive moment is constantly suppressed by his self-inflicted enslavement. The internalization of a messiah's power into Ah Q resonates with Walter Benjamin's thesis on the "weak Messianic power" of the present: "We have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim";³⁸ present potentialities always anticipate and enact a redemptive future to come.

35. *Ibid.*, 37–47.

36. Wang Hui 汪暉, *Ah Q Shengmingzhong de liugesunjian* 阿Q生命中的六個瞬間 [Six moments of Ah'Q's life: In memory of Xinhai Revolution] (Shanghai: Huadongshifandaxue chubanshe, 2014).

37. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

38. Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 254.

This process is characterized by constant and vicious struggles and failures, just as Ah Q's weak redemptive power cannot be achieved easily. It must wait until a revolutionary chance has come to "blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history."³⁹ But who represents this historical agency that fulfils and redeems Ah Q's weak messianic power? Wang Hui does not elaborate on this messiah, but he provides hints by saying that Ah Q's story is an allegory of the beginning of the Chinese Revolution. It is only the advent of the radical, uncompromising Chinese Revolution that liberated the political potentiality of Ah Q. Chinese Revolution was the site of redemption that successfully animated the flashing messianic moment in Ah Q's life, turning the oppressed present into a Benjaminian "now-time." Here, the contradiction between the analytic and the mythic is transformed into a blind belief in the redemptive power of Chinese revolution. Through the tales of Ah Q, Wang eulogizes the Xinhai Revolution as a quasi-theological "event" that produces political ruptures and biological instincts for a perpetual revolution.

Conclusion: Realistic Utopia?

In this chapter, I examined two forms of utopian Marxism in postrevolutionary China: Li Zehou's humanist Marxism that constructs the May Fourth Enlightenment as an anticipatory utopia and Wang Hui's recuperation of the antimodern aspect of Mao's revolution as a redemptive utopia. My investigation of the ideational aspirations of their thinking resists reducing ideas into ideology. By no means do I attempt to ignore the political function of utopia. It is not simply an accident that almost all of Li Zehou's major philosophical achievements coincided with shifting ideological practices of the party-state. Deng's effort to shift political legitimacy from class struggle into economic development in the 1980s was desperately in need of a revisionist Marxism to justify his disarticulation from Maoism. Li Zehou's repudiation of Mao's revolutionary practice fell upon an authority already prepared to receive it. Similarly, Wang Hui's retrieval of a distinctive Chinese path of (anti)modernity dubiously resonated with the post-Tiananmen Chinese regime's stringent call for a "market socialism with Chinese characteristics." Furthermore, his 2009 essay *China's Rise: Experience and Challenges*, in which Wang Hui contends that a mechanism of self-correction has existed within the party, played a crucial role throughout the sixty years of PRC history.⁴⁰ Mao should be credited with paving the way for the rise of Deng's economic reform. Written for the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the nation, the essay was penned in a type of politico-philosophical fusion that grotesquely wove the critique of neoliberalism into propaganda for the party-state. Wang Hui seemed to invest the party-state with metaphysical foundations—state socialism as a matter of real substance to stand against global capitalism. This dynamic interplay between utopian thinking and real politics reveals a peculiar paradox of Marxism in contemporary China: left-wing politics retains the imaginaries of another social order, yet it simultaneously harbors a Machiavellian desire to actualize its utopia through the present regime. This dangerous liaison might

39. Ibid., 263.

40. Wang Hui 汪暉, "Zizhu yu kaifang de bianzhengfa: Zhongguojueqi de jingyan jiqi mianlin de tiaozhan" 自主開放的辯證法：中國崛起的經驗及其面臨的挑戰 [A dialectic of autonomy and opening up: The experience and challenge of China's rise], in *Wenhua zongheng* 文化縱橫 2 (2012).

have originated much earlier from the neo-Confucian tradition that brings contemplative thinking and social practice together in the “unity of thought and action” (知行合一). It might also derive from the old Marxist preoccupation with the unifying of theory and praxis. It might simply be a schizophrenic response to the bizarre marriage between a Marxist-Leninist regime and global capitalism.

Meanwhile, it is an irony that Li and Wang’s almost diametrically opposed utopias are shaped by the same bifurcated interpretation of Chinese modernity emblemized by revolution and enlightenment. This inevitably made an impact on their political followers. For the neo-Left, the liberal’s insistence on the coherence of China’s twentieth century defined by the continuous effort to realize Li Zehou’s enlightenment is problematic: it relies on a bifurcated interpretation that denaturalizes Mao’s claim of the legitimacy of Chinese socialism, on the one hand, but renaturalizes enlightenment intellectuals’ uncritical embrace of global capitalism, on the other. For the liberal, the neo-Left’s remobilization of socialist legacies to overcome global capitalism comes at the sacrifice of understanding the entangled relation between enlightenment and Chinese modernity in history. Most ironically, both selective regroupings of the past are motivated by a redemptive desire to realize the aspirational significance of the unredeemed ideas from the past. However, both approaches end up enforcing a stable, inevitable, and deterministic historical causality that legitimizes the advent of global capitalism / revolutionary politics as irreversible processes. In the end, the act of disrupting the continuum of one historical narrative turns to preserve the stability of another historical narrative that is equally suppressive.

Because of this, the possible materialization of both Li’s and Wang’s utopias looks ominous at best. The naïve fantasy of Li’s followers in the 1980s who were so convinced that their enlightenment would emerge victorious by completely abandoning revolutionary politics resembled the bombastic self-assertion of the liberal intelligentsia of the May Fourth generation, yet both led to disastrous ends. Meanwhile, the neo-Left seems to have forgotten the extent to which Wang’s redemptive utopia is indebted to Carl Schmitt, whose own political practice, instead of reforming political pathologies of Weimar liberalism, led to the Nazi regime, which was even worse. As Schmitt’s fascination with Hobbes reveals, the other side of Schmittian existentialism is the politics of *fear*.⁴¹ Similarly, the dark side of the empowering agency of Mao’s politicization is precisely to *frighten* people to conform to his revolutionary utopia. Neo-leftists spoke so much about the sense of human dignity endowed by Mao’s revolution (尊嚴的政治) and the loss of such dignity under neoliberalism. Never, ever, did they explain how and why Mao’s attempt to dignify proletarian subjects was intertwined with a politics of terror in practice *and* in theory. Furthermore, as McCormick points out, one of the central flaws of Schmitt’s theory is his willingness to make hostile friends simply because of the existential need to annihilate enemies.⁴² Compared to this, it did matter to the neo-Left that neoliberalism, as the greater enemy, did *not* win. The party-state that would also be adversaries in the absence of the greater enemy, could necessarily become a “friend” in the state of emergencies. It remains unclear, though, whether this friend will suppress the enemy in a manner much more ruthlessly than the neo-Left could have ever hoped.

41. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism*, 249–92.

42. *Ibid.*, 280.

At the beginning of this chapter, I compared utopian Marxism in China with the dystopian feeling that paralyzed left-wing politics in the West. Western Marxism woke up in 1989 and discovered that Marx's great promise of a futuristic revolutionary utopia was no longer valid. A widespread left-wing melancholy permeated Marxist thinking in the West, pondering the history of socialism as but a succession of catastrophes with the loss of a messianic hope of liberation. I suggest that this melancholia might result not only from the exhaustion of left-wing political movements but also from their inability to conceive of another socioeconomic order. Ironically, the eclipse of leftist politics generated an unprecedented radicalization of critical theory in academia. Despite of its radical textualism, radical theory has been unable to provide a realistic utopia as a viable alternative. One is tempted to argue that institutionalized critical theory tends to proffer an imaginary escape from left-wing intellectuals' traumatic embeddedness within the neoliberal present. This trauma in turn produced a feverish desire to identify any social conflict as the revival of leftist mass movements. Recently, the melancholy-turned-romance found its echo in the chorus of protests exploding from the Occupy Wall Street movement. Yet the leftists were quickly disappointed by the fact that, along the spectrum of heterogeneous intellectual traditions that shaped the movement, the Marxian call for resistance and revolution could not even be accounted as a marginal reference.⁴³ That the radical intellectuals' constant evocation of "agency," "outside," and "subversion" leads only to a phantasmagoric resistance related to, if not exhausted by, its inability to arouse any utopian aspirations.

In light of this, Chinese Marxist interventions exemplified by Li and Wang have revitalized utopian aspirations and political alternatives that were crucial to the left-wing politics of the twentieth century. Regardless of their disparate theoretical premises, Li and Wang demonstrated that, against Derrida's elegiac teaching, Marxism may still cleave to utopian imaginations to provoke political alternatives, even though this power to arouse fantasies, hopes, and expectations was repeatedly betrayed by those who deployed them. Meanwhile, the liaison between utopia and real politics indicates that utopian imaginations prove to be too dangerous to contain: the power and the curse of Chinese Marxism lies in the constant collapse of ideas into ideology, utopia into reality, resistance into conformity. The predicament of Marxism in China and the West present the fundamental dilemma of left-wing intellectual thinking, with the fear of co-optation and integration on the one side and the anxiety of losing political anchoring point on the other. At the very heart of Marxism was a paradoxical distancing from the existing power politics to which it remains inextricably bound. It is the subject of intense debates whether Adorno's "melancholy science" would be the only path for the Left to take in the absence of a Marxist utopia. Nevertheless, it is my contention that if Marxism wishes to retain its critical power as a legitimate method of intellectual inquiry and genuine political commitment, it should *never* become the opposite of Adorno's melancholy—that is, Nietzsche's gay science—in the future to come.

43. For an excellent analysis of the "inward turn" of the occupy Wall Street movement, see Eva Cherniavsky, *Neocitizenship: Political Culture after Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), chap. 6. For a genealogical investigation of the links between this movement and Post-Marxism, see Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), esp. introduction.

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