

Postmodernism and Post-Socialist Society: Cultural Politics in China After the 'New Era'

Enthusiasts for Chinese postmodernism are nowadays put on the defensive by those who dismiss the issue as a Chinese problematic, or resist postmodernism in general.* However, it is often neglected that, at a pedestrian, journalistic level, it has never been too difficult to identify and inventory postmodern(ist) works in arts or theoretical discourse in China today by mechanically using the standards established in Western critical and theoretical discourses. Nor has it been hard to describe radical paradigmatic shifts and profound socio-cultural ruptures in the past two decades, as sweeping changes in post-Mao China are virtually the norm. To avoid the unproductive effort of qualification and justification, I would like to begin by making a simple distinction between 'postmodernism in China' and 'Chinese postmodernism'. The conceptual separation between the two interrelated and sometimes confused categories may highlight the gap between an international cultural and discursive fashion

and the Chinese reality; it can also reveal the theoretical hinge between a nameless reality and the system of naming which connects uneven and often discontinuous historical times and spaces.

By 'postmodernism in China', I mean the global discourse of postmodernism and postmodernity, whose entry into China is via the intellectuals who seek theoretical inspiration from, and discursive synchronization with, the West, and is largely limited to small circles of literary and art criticism. The discourse, in this sense, is a continuation of the modernist trend in the 1980s. Its currency in the 1990s indicates the rapid growth of a consumer-oriented economy and the relentless process of globalization. Its content, however, is strictly foreign and technical, corresponding to the gleaming enclaves of international economic and cultural capital amidst the extremely uneven Chinese reality. Its aesthetic and political excitement comes mainly from its vision—and to an increasingly degree, its daily experience—of China as an integral part of the global market.

Nebulous Productivity

Contrary to this clearly defined category, it is 'Chinese postmodernism'—a far more nebulous yet productive discourse—which is at the centre of this article. 'Chinese postmodernism' pertains to the Chinese everyday life as a producer of a culture of the postmodern. However, 'postmodernism' as a theoretical discourse, in this context, seems vacuous except as a deliberate signifier—or an ad hoc stand-in—for an unsettled, postponed, living, and reconfigured collective experience of revolution, modernity, statehood, and the masses. To this extent, the 'post' in Chinese postmodernism refers not so much to a sense that something is over, but that something is finally ready to begin along with the breaking of all kinds of rigid epistemological paradigms, aesthetic canons, historical periodizations, geographical hierarchies, and institutional reifications. The initial economic success of post-Mao Chinese society, the multicentredness of global capital and production, and the survival of the Chinese socialist state allow ordinary Chinese to feel that one does not have to become a Westerner to enjoy a good life. This, to be sure, has profound implications for a whole range of quotidian, social, cultural, and political choices and aspirations. Like nationalism, postmodernism functions in China today as an empty net of 'universal high culture' which often ends up with bountiful catches from beneath the water. Instead of projecting the Chinese reality onto the timeless now, the notion of Chinese postmodernism, through its irreverent nostalgia and its struggle to break free from the high modernism of the New Era (1979–89), is haunting the Chinese consumer masses with

* The article as it appears here is an abbreviated version of a longer essay under the same title. The full text will appear in *Postmodernism and China*, co-edited by Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, Duke University Press, Durham 2000. The author wishes to thank Arif Dirlik, Fredric Jameson, Harry Harootunian, Peter Osborne, Madeleine Y. Dong, Rebecca Karl, Zhiyuan Cui, and Elizabeth Perry for their comments.

the past which has never been put to rest. Moreover, Chinese postmodernism reveals the conditions of possibility for a lifeworld which has so far escaped analytical description. As the cultural form of the new market and of the consumer masses nurtured by the state, Chinese postmodernism becomes not only an important component of the mainstream ideology of Chinese society in the 1990s, but also a utopian space for reconfigurations of social and class relations, for the imagination of community, nation, and democracy.

One is tempted to admit that, in the Chinese context, it is sometimes more interesting to study the resistance to and dismissal of postmodernism than to catalogue its aesthetic achievements; that the more productive discussions of the formal innovations of Chinese postmodernism will sooner or later end up in the realm of the political. For those who oppose even the appearance of the term postmodernism in China, Chinese postmodernism, by borrowing or (re)producing those—Western-originated—simulacra, threatens to obscure the urgent Chinese social, economic, and political imperatives grouped under the label of modernity. Based on their respective notions of the modern, opponents of postmodernism go on to press often contradictory charges, accusing Chinese postmodernism of being subversive (undermining the value system of the socialist state), complacent (legitimizing the state by affirming and celebrating the commercialized everyday culture under the former's ideological control), too Westernized (whoring after the academic fashions of the Western theory), too Chinese (harbouring haughty nativism and nationalism), too leftist (criticizing capitalism and undermining the universal truth of modernity), too rightist (celebrating desire and commodities), and so forth. The strong, often bitter objections to the idea of Chinese postmodernism must be considered a constitutive part of it as a discourse, for its ideological-political contestedness provides a clue as to its place in history.

To give the issue of Chinese postmodernism any historical and theoretical sense, one has to start with the widely held view—or rather, conviction—that, in China at least, the modern is far from over, or, as some still sincerely believe, has not yet begun. To those who entertain the idea of Chinese postmodernism and its complex, far-reaching implications, a meaningful notion of Chinese postmodernism must be in-itself and for-itself a historical reckoning with Chinese modernity as an explicitly unfinished project, whose legitimacy, validity, and universal claims have already, for better or worse, come under fire. The perception, experience, and anxiety that modernity as an organizing principle, as an all-encompassing, meaning-bestowing vision, is losing its grip on Chinese daily life lies at the heart of the Chinese discourse of postmodernism.

Out of Modernism

It is important to note that, in China today, various artistic, literary,

and theoretical styles under the rubric of postmodernism often emerged specifically in reaction against the cultural-intellectual mainstream of the 1980s, the so-called modernist-humanist paradigm of the New Era. While high modernism had become an intellectual and formal institution in the Chinese metropolis before the Tiananmen affair, it has been thoroughly dismantled in the 1990s by the conjoint forces of the market and the ideological apparatus of the state, as well as by a rising populism and nationalism, and, above all, by the thoroughgoing commodification of culture. The emblem of post-Mao Chinese intellectual discourse, namely its jargon à la Heidegger or Walter Benjamin, and its metaphysical vision, is now replaced either by a journalistic genre designed for quick media exposure and consumer gratification, or by a professionalist turn to the normality and standardization of academic production and promotion. Even those who carry on their uncompromisingly modernist or avant-garde style unabated—writers such as Ge Fei come readily in mind—are bound to be read in a different light, that is, in the context of the cultural market, in terms of a particular flavour or brand, of a uniquely marketable quality. This is not to say, however, that the brief moment of Chinese high modernism as a whole has already been subjected to academic canonization and has entirely lost its shock value and quality of subversiveness vis-à-vis the dominant taste and ideology of the reading public and officialdom.¹

If we focus on the deconstruction of the moral, philosophical, and political systems of the Enlightenment and modernity, long seen as the core values and secret weapons of the modern imperial and colonial powers, and contemplate its effect on areas that are on the margins of an unevenly developed world system, then the modernism-postmodernism turn in China offers the possibility for a new discursive and ideological framework through which to continue the search for an alternative to the classical blue-print of modernity, namely, the free market and liberal democracy. To this extent, postmodernism, in the event, may carry a revolutionary message. Thus, the intellectual decolonization process of liberating oneself from the ideology of modernization contains an inherent choice: given the Chinese experience of socialist modernity, the ‘postmodern’ inevitably points to a horizon beyond socialism as we know it. In the meantime, however, the obsessive reunion between pre-revolutionary China—or the so-called ‘repressed modernity’ of the 1930s and earlier—and the post-communist world order has become the norm of the history which the ‘postmodern’ seeks to transcend, often

¹ In a recent article in *Modern Chinese Literature Studies* (*Xiandai wenzue yanjiu congkan*), a backbone publication of the establishment of modern Chinese literary studies, Yu Hua, the star of avant-garde fiction in the 1980s, who spearheaded the ‘subversion’ of the humanist-realist canon, is compared to Lu Xun, the ultimate canonical figure in modern Chinese literature, in terms of their standing and contribution to the development of modern Chinese literature. See Geng Chuanming, ‘Shilun Yu Hua xiaoshuo zhong de hou rendaozhuyi qingxiang ji qi dui Lu Xun qimeng huayu de jiegou’ (On the Post-Humanist Tendency in Yu Hua’s Fiction and Its Deconstruction of the Enlightenment Discourse of Lu Xun), *Xiandai wenzue yanjiu congkan*, vol. 72, no. 3, 1997, pp. 79–93.

by reviving the socialist alternative in the new configuration of traditions, memories, social values and infrastructures which are at variance with capitalism. To this extent, there is an elective affinity, under Chinese circumstances, between (post)socialism and postmodernism, to which we will turn later.

Such an affinity stems not so much from theoretical opportunism as from an expanded historical horizon, for the discourse of Chinese postmodernism, if only by its mere existence, must force open the internal periodization and contradictions of Chinese modernity and set different moments against one another in a radically synchronic fashion in the new context. If revolution, socialism, and Maoist democracy is the ultimate negation of the bourgeois project of industrialization and nation-building before 1949, then Deng's New Era is a negation of the Maoist paradigm by means of Weberian rationalization, which leads logically to a market economy under the supervision of the bureaucratic state.² While even the most ardent cultural conservatives in the 1920s are modernists by other standards, cultural conservatism, which seeks to define the Chinese future through revisiting its cultural tradition, is contained by and compatible with the loosely defined discourse of Chinese postmodernism. The cultural, intellectual, and political content of Chinese postmodernism depends, to a significant degree, on which particular form of the modern it seeks to go beyond and/or return to.

Anti-Modernist Modernisms

Thus, the emergence of the term of Chinese postmodernism, like its Japanese counterpart, 'testifies not so much to a transition from one period to another as to the shift or transformation of our discourse as a result of which the supposed indisputability of the historico-geopolitical pairing (premodern and modern) has become increasingly problematic.'³ To this extent, Chinese postmodernism, as reality or as fiction, adds a new twist, nuance, or articulation to the tradition of anti-modernist modernisms, including various forms of cultural traditionalism, nativism, rural communalism, nationalism, and populism, whose histories are as old as the history of modernity itself in China. Whereas the impulse to challenge Western modernity and search for an alternative evolved in Japan in the form of *kindai no chokoku*—or, the 'overcoming of the modern'—during the Pacific War, in China social energy and imagination found their political realization in socialism which, in its Maoist form, offered a solution to the dilemma of non-Western modernities, that is, of how to

² In this case, China is following the developmental model of Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. The socialist discourse of market activity and state regulation has—until the recent stock-market meltdown in East Southeast Asia—often eclipsed the triumphant rhetoric of the East Asian model or 'Confucian capitalism'.

³ Naoki Sakai, 'Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism', in *Postmodernism and Japan*, edited by Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian, Durham, NC 1989, p. 94.

address geographical unevenness in terms of temporal evolution, and how to absorb the universal through the creation of a mass democracy and its vernacular high culture.⁴

If Chinese postmodernism is to be viewed as a specific reaction against the established forms of high modernism, then one needs to bear in mind that modernism as a specific historical-aesthetic style has never been an 'established form' in the history of modern China, but has always been a cultural-intellectual striving and a transient, embattled, and precarious movement, as in Beijing in the mid- and late 1980s, and, equally briefly, in Shanghai in the 1930s.⁵ Moreover, the socio-economic condition of ephemeral high modernism, namely Chinese—bourgeois or socialist—modernity and modernization, is widely considered an ongoing project yet to run its full course in Chinese and world history. The fact that most of the criticism of the discourse of Chinese postmodernism—and its moral and political intensity—stems from an undivided loyalty to the unfinished projects of Chinese modernity and nation-state indicates a temporal axis which fully collapses the discourse of Chinese uniqueness into the (liberal or Marxist) discourse of universal progress, an ideological conviction and discursive practice that dates from the turn of the century.

The inherent paradox of Chinese postmodernism lies in the fact that, by declaring the end of an era, it creates a sense of liberation from the past, hence of a limitless, indefinite future; yet, by placing itself after something it intends to transcend, postmodernism—its novelty, innovativeness, and aesthetic appeal—can only be experienced and measured against the established, dominant norms and institutions. To this extent, postmodernism inherits all the internal and historical ambiguities of modernism, and thus becomes a new trope for the changing socio-political space of post-Mao China. In a general sense, postmodernism, like modernism, is an endless and sometimes self-defeating struggle to become and remain the ever new. Like modernism, it lends its form to even its most determined opponents: there are postmodern anti-postmodernists, in the same way that there have been modernists of anti-modernism and revolutionaries of counter-revolution. Like modernism, postmodernism entails and is entailed by different socio-economic and political orientations and positions. Like modernism, postmodernism encompasses radically different social ideals and political ideologies. Unlike modernism, however, postmodernism does not see everything as cosmologically, heroically new; rather, its concept of newness or creation is hinged on a

⁴ For an incisive analysis of the Japanese discourse of 'the overcoming of the modern', see Harry Harootunian, 'Visible Discourses/Invisible Ideologies', in *Postmodernism and Japan*, pp. 63–92. I am also grateful to Harootunian for letting me read his forthcoming book, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture and Community in Interwar Japan*, Princeton 1999.

⁵ For a critical examination of the Beijing-centred Chinese modernism in the 1980s, see Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, Durham, NC 1997. For a historical study of the Shanghai-based modernism and middle-class urban culture of the 1930s and early 1940s, see Leo Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*, Cambridge, MA 1999.

sophisticated, almost cynical, sense that all the good and evil, in their most extreme forms, have been tried, somewhere, somehow, and sometime before, and what is left for contemporary men and women is nothing more than shrewd and occasionally breathtaking eclecticism, synthesis, reproduction, and representation in the most literal sense. In this respect, there is nothing more indicative of the aesthetics of the postmodern than fashion or its concept of what is fashionable, which is fundamentally cyclical. This sense of relaxation, if not freedom, from the pressure of linear temporality (progress) and singular spatiality (Europe) can create new breaks, ruptures and fluctuations as it shakes the very foundations of our notions of history, selfhood, meaning, and just about everything else.

Political Stakes

The intellectuals' frustration with postmodernism reflects their powerlessness as a social group in the face of intensified globalization, on the one hand, and the increasing cultural and political self-assertion of the consumer masses on the other. Once again, in the manner of the previous generations of the Chinese Enlightenment, they pledged their loyalty to the modern and, by doing so, denounced the postmodern as a harmful deviation or, at best, a premature, thus useless, gift from their first-world contemporaries. But it is precisely in its resistance to the postmodern that the Chinese modern reveals itself not as a totality, but as a differentiated, fragmented, and contradictory experience. Its prolonged discursive and ideological uniformity is not a historical given, but a historical contingency made possible by the persistence of the truly 'premodern' elements in Chinese society—poverty, ignorance, superstition, chaos, repression, and the backlash of the ultra-conservatives who opposed not only the revolutions of 1919–49, but the Republican Revolution of 1911 as well—and, more recently, by the continued and renewed rivalry between socialism and capitalism, that is, between the two competing ideological claims on modernity in China in the post-cold-war years.

One of the curious things about Chinese postmodernism is the phenomenon of it being labelled as a 'neo-conservatism' (*xin baoshou zhuyi*) by its genuinely conservative critics. Initially coined by the London-based Chinese literary scholar Zhao Yiheng, 'neo-conservatism' as an attribute of Chinese postmodernism shows almost comically how stretched and misleading those Western-originated, Western-defined categories can be when enlisted in Chinese political and cultural-political battles. While deploring postmodernism's fervour for replacing aesthetics and 'ultimate truth' (*zhongji zhenli*) with politics, the New Right is unable to come up with any cultural vision, let alone theory, mainly because its own political position readily turns the cultural and the jargon of subjectivity into a tantalizing trope of private ownership—or the lack of it under communism.⁶ What Zhao meant by 'neo-conservatism' here is

nothing more than an alleged apology for the status quo or, more precisely, the reluctance and hesitation to scrap the existing system and its cultural legacies, by Chinese intellectuals who equipped themselves with Western theoretical discourses of ‘post-ology’—poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, and so on. Here, the backward tendency necessary to earn the definition of ‘conservatism’ is found by Zhao in two things: first, postmodern intellectuals have abandoned the élitist position independent and critical of state power, thus allowing themselves to celebrate a mass culture and everyday life in China manipulated by both the (impure and underdeveloped) market and the (more supple but equally intrusive) government. Second, the implicitly or explicitly populist, nationalist, and even socialist tendency in mass cultural affirmation of the everyday distracts from, indeed hinders, the forward motion of Chinese enlightenment and progress, which, in Zhao’s context, has become a codeword for the political ideal of ‘market democracy’, and, from the vantage point of which, the everyday reality of China cannot but be characterized as ‘conservative’. The political sentiment and ideological conviction Zhao demonstrates had achieved their fantastic version in the form of futurology in China before 1989, which has since then evolved into a discourse of a universal, realized—as in the post-cold-war West—conservative utopia (this time with digital technology and stock options).

Neo-Authoritarianism and Conservatism

It will be hard to understand how ‘abandoning the élitist position’ can be used as evidence to prove someone’s ‘conservatism’ if the concrete ideological setting of Deng’s China is neglected, but, by ‘élitism’, Zhao clearly refers to the intellectual-bureaucratic consensus during the New Era, which was carried out by the ‘neo-authoritarian’ (xinquanweizhuyi) state. The express train to the universal destiny of the global market and modernism as an international language can be a smooth journey only when operated by the social engineers freed from the inconvenience of popular, local, and democratic debate on Chinese modernization and modernity. (Democracy, by the way, had never figured prominently in the pre-1989 intellectual lexicon, contrary to the popular impression as a result of Western TV images of the Tiananmen ‘pro-democracy movement’.) That, in retrospect, may explain the obsession of Chinese modernism with such aristocratic and/or politically reactionary modernists as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Martin Heidegger, and with twentieth-century Russian religious philosophers. The politico-economic message of such high modernism, to be sure, is a belated one, which finds its messengers in the late-comers to contemporary Chinese intellectual life such as Fredrich von Hayek. Nevertheless, in the economics and policy arena, the penetration

⁶ In this particular sense, this ‘neo-conservatism’ label reminds us of the Nationalists (the Guomindang) calling the Communists ‘reactionaries’ in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

of neoliberal theology is an earlier and more thoroughgoing phenomenon, and is aided by another élitist intellectual camp, namely the ‘neo-authoritarians’ (xinquanweizhuyizhe). The emotional drama of Chinese high modernism in the ‘New Era’ unwittingly travels along the historical path once described, with little emotional valorization, by the sociologist Mannheim as but another route to capitalization.⁷ For those Chinese ‘postmodernists’, however, capitalization, marketization, privatization are all part of the daily reality and thus need critical scepticism rather than sentimental reaffirmation. Even though the modernist-postmodernist conflict is implicitly or explicitly predicated on economics, the battlelines are not clear-cut and are defined as much by taste and ‘common sense’ as by ideological conviction. For instance, few modernists or former modernists in China are enthusiastic about the ‘Harvard-boys-do-Russia’ or ‘Chicago-boys-do-Chile’ models, even though Milan Kundera or Vaclav Havel remain their contemporary heroes.

Still, it is clear that such accusations against Chinese postmodernism as ‘conservatism’—the prefix ‘neo’ refers to its ‘postmodern’ appearance and post-socialist politics—can be established only in an ideological environment in which the radical, top-down revolutionary plan for sweeping, total socio-economic change is desired. Such a conservative revolution, intent on rooting out the evils of revolution and socialism once and for all, can find its model in post-communist Russia’s Five Hundred Day Plan, better known as the ‘shock therapy’ prescribed by a group of Harvard economists to convert the Soviet command system into a free-market system. By qualifying the cultural manifestations of the changing, radically heterogeneous realities of a China in transition as ‘conservative’, Zhao reveals the fervour of the embrace of global post-cold-war ideology by Chinese liberals. Such ideology, nurtured in the Reagan-Thatcher years, continues to loom alongside the climbing stock index in the Wall Street. Yet its posture as a utopia seeking realization in China today would be inconceivable without the ‘neo-authoritarian’ state and its élitist intellectuals. Such a conservative utopia, to be sure, can only be élitist, ‘independent’, and fundamentally anti-democratic in a large third-world and still residually socialist country like China, despite its advocates’ supposed commitment to democracy. While many Chinese postmodern works of art and theoretical discourses are recognizably—indeed, helplessly—symbiotic with a chaotic complex of economic and social relations in China today, their impatient and unimpressed critics seem to have a clean-cut, holistic plan which has decided not only what to change but how to change it. Its implementation—that is, the privatization of national wealth—would be impossible without the endorsement of powerful interest groups within the state bureaucracy, despite the liberal intellectuals’ tired self-positioning as some kind of politically dissident grouping.⁸

⁷ For a useful discussion of Mannheim’s observations, see Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, Hanover, NH 1990, p. 2.

The Rise of the Masses

As far as their knee-jerk reaction toward Chinese postmodernism is concerned, however, the Old Left and the New Right have much in common, both showing an instinctual distrust and fear of the new and the unknown in their dogmatic loyalty to reified institutions and doctrines as a sole path toward 'universal truth'. To this extent, despite its own ideological ambiguity, the theoretical discourse of Chinese postmodernism seems to touch upon an enormous yet nameless domain of history, namely the rising Chinese consumer masses and their incipient cultural and life-forms. In this sense, the debate against Chinese postmodernism has turned itself, unwittingly or not, into a contested claim on and bidding for this emergent style and its social agency. As the Old Left sees postmodernism as defying and undermining the discursive foundation of the Enlightenment, revolution, socialism, and the party-state, the New Right senses in the emerging ideological centrism of the 'socialist market economy' an ominous return of all the bad old things, from realism in literature and art (as critics labelled the anti-modernist genres 'neo-realism', or *xinxieshibuyi*) to populism and consumer nationalism in the political domain. Whereas the Old Left perceives the changing fashions and unapologetic individualism in China today as indicative of the penetration of Chinese society by global capitalism, the New Right discovers an alarming complicity between ruthless state power and the affirmative, even celebratory, nature of postmodern art works and theoretical discourses which legitimize local hegemony and oppression—namely, the state—by wallowing in the popular and the everyday under its yoke. In this respect, conservative criticism in China in the 1990s also takes its cue from its Western counterparts, who now frequently use the strategies, tactics, and rhetoric of the Left, in this case the intellectual obligation to criticize power at home, to formulate a right-wing agenda.

In the context of the intellectual politics of post-1989 China, the hostility toward Chinese postmodernism becomes a psychological and philosophical stand-in for something which is much older and has never made peace with the Chinese revolution and socialism—which are, after all, two definitive elements of Chinese modernity.⁹ Indeed, the attack on Chinese postmodernism reveals an unsettled confrontation with the Chinese Revolution, a confrontation which acquires its urgency in the intellectual impulse to 'return' to universal normality, namely a long delayed bourgeois modernity based on private ownership and parliamentary democracy—an otherwise 'commonsensical' move now complicated by the ideological fuzziness

⁸ A critical analysis of Chinese liberalism as an anti-democratic conservatism can be found in Gan Yang, 'A Critique of Chinese Conservatism in the 1990s', *Social Text*, no. 55, Summer 1998, pp. 45–66.

⁹ For a collection of essays analyzing the political differentiation of post-Mao Chinese intellectual discourse, see *Intellectual Politics in Post-Tiananmen China*, edited by Xudong Zhang, a special issue of *Social Text*, no. 55, Summer 1998.

of postmodernism and its incessant deconstructive operations. By 'uncovering' the hidden kinship between such 'postmodern' theorists as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, and Fredric Jameson, and the 1960s as a global period of radicalization, and between the 1960s and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (which is thoroughly stigmatized by the official ideology of the Reform régime), the opponents of Chinese postmodernism go further than merely suggesting that the latter, in addition to being a frivolous academic mimicry of Western masters, is a sinister reincarnation of the revolutionary and cultural revolutionary lunacy of Mao's China, a residue of the old political fantasy under the guise of the fashionably new.¹⁰

Postmodernism and Post-Socialist Society

Such conservative critiques of Chinese postmodernism, with their ideological self-righteousness and moral-psychological intensity, often manage to dislodge the postmodern debate by cornering it in a forced reductionist choice between socialism and capitalism, despotism and liberal democracy, state command and free market, the 'official' and the 'unofficial', popular culture and élitism, right and wrong. But to address the complexity and dynamism of the postmodern debate, it may be more productive to think not in terms of Left and Right, but in terms of the high and the low, that is, in terms of the structural transformation of Chinese society and culture in the 1990s, which allows us to consider the disoriented, divided intellectual discourse as a response to the everyday world of post-socialist China and its competing cultural and ideological forms.

One does not have to be a Marxist to see that, so long as the Chinese economy remains a shortage economy, so long as the average Chinese citizen perceives the wealth gap between her own country and that of the advanced industrial ones as cosmologically abstract—thus mythical and metaphysical—the nineteenth-century discourse of modernity, with all its trappings of teleology and hierarchy, and all the mythologies of presence, origin and centre, will remain intact and be held with equal passion by both the socialist and anti-socialist, élitist and populist, nationalist and cosmopolitan elements of the Chinese state and society at large. It should be clear that Chinese postmodernism is not only conditioned by further industrialization, a market economy, and, eventually, a commodity or consumer society, but that the naming of Chinese postmodernism itself must be regarded as a cultural and political event made possible, even called for, by the socio-economic changes and ideological imperatives of post-socialist China. The tunnel-vision of

¹⁰ For a particularly crude attack on Chinese postmodernism as an expression of Western theory and indebted to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, see Guo Jian, 'Wenge sichao yu "houxue"' (The Cultural Revolution as an Intellectual Trend and 'Post-ologies') in *Wenhua da geming: shishi yu yanjiu* (The Cultural Revolution: Historical Facts and Research), edited by Liu Qingfeng, Hong Kong 1996, pp. 347–56.

a single-minded modernism and its discursive autonomy did not disintegrate in the face of newspaper reports and TV images about the postmodern *Lebenswelt*, let alone by the appearance of a few postmodern hotel or office buildings in one's childhood neighbourhood, so long as the economic reality at home demanded an undivided focus on, and ideological valorization of, modernization. Throughout the 1980s, such modernism, flanked by humanism in philosophy, realism in literature, and a reinvention of tradition in cultural discourse, was sustained by a social mentality compatible with the radical modernization or Reform programs.

The first decade of China's post-Mao encounter with the—already postmodern, and, given the closer contact with Japan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese investors and visitors, already geographically 'multi-centred'—West was dominated by the urgency of modernization and modernity in virtually all areas of social, cultural, intellectual life, which were still fully controlled by the newly established technocratic and intellectual élite of the Reform régime and their high cultural discourses. Simply put, a more relaxed and less simple-minded approach to the ideal of the modern requires, as a precondition, a certain degree of material wealth and security, which gives rise to a certain degree of freedom and decadence, thus making it possible to look the other way, to wander, to explore or simply to entertain different options—that is, to think in terms of 'culture', not necessity. Before this moment arrives, the brutal, ruthless grip of the ideology of modernity on its believers is not something that can be conjured away. Deng's economic reform and his creation of a 'modestly affluent' (*xiao kang*) society have paved the way for the dissolution of not only Maoism as a utopianism, but also an early twentieth-century type of ideology of modernization shared by both Mao and Deng. Where post-socialism designates the ambiguous place of Chinese society in the grand narrative of the modern which has never left us, postmodernism signifies an emerging vision of a form of life corresponding and bringing cultural affirmation to such an economic reality.

The Sensuous Abstraction

At any rate, Chinese postmodernism is simply inconceivable without readily available commodity and capital—including symbolic capital—flows, without a new daily experience based on a changed, and changing, material environment. While, in societies formerly isolated from the capitalist world system—a category China, in the early years of the Reform era, still qualifies for—the mythological concept of wealth tends to be attached to some concrete cult objects (from durable consumer goods such as television sets or portable stereo cassette players to the economic, political, and cultural institutions of contemporary capitalism), for a lifeworld intimately linked to the global market—for which post-1992 China also qualifies—that mythology becomes focused on that 'sensuous abstraction' (to borrow

Paul Valéry's phrase): money. The social, collective recognition of money as the universally commensurable standard of wealth, success, freedom, and happiness in post-Mao China corresponds to the beginning of Chinese postmodernism, for, under money, the empirical world is once again unified, organized, and endowed with meaning, not by cargo-worship of specific and arbitrary objects and institutions, but by a universally applicable concept. This heightened degree of abstraction enhances social and capital mobility, thus intensifying unevenness and difference. On the other hand, however, this abstraction also levels the ground, allows new configurations of state or local resources and strengths, and legitimizes policies and strategies based on the interest of local or national communities.

As a concrete abstraction of the extremely complex contemporary economic relations, money is a great equalizer which unifies an uneven socio-economic terrain. Thus, the Pacific—and, increasingly, 'Greater China', as a shadowy empire of free-floating capital, commerce, and professionals—seem to have replaced the 'West' as the anchor of a national imagination, in which the long, bloody centuries of (European) industrialization are rendered unnecessary by the shining examples of economic miracles in the East Asian 'Little Dragons' and 'Little Tigers', which exported their way into the American Age. Once the logic and practice of financial capital become the terms by which to understand the world and according to which to organize collective and individual experience, the cultural, psychological, and socio-political elements formerly considered incompatible with modernization and modernity can be incorporated into the system according to their market value. That, more than anything else, lends a historic confidence to the cultural and social assertions of the Chinese lifeworld. More importantly, such social atomization or universalization enabled by financial capitalism and consumer society is still contained, indeed, created, by the state and thus intertwined with socialism. The convergence of statehood and market is the source of not only a post-revolutionary consumer nationalism which is increasingly pronounced in China today, but also of a post-socialism whose cultural and political structure finds a dwelling-space in Chinese postmodernism. This post-socialism derives its meaning not so much from a messianic vision of the future, but from the unsettled, postponed socio-economic relations and cultural contradictions from the past—a pre-socialist and pre-capitalist past which continues to haunt the Chinese.

Overproduction Crises

Once China, with its extensive, if primitive, industrial power, educational capacity, bureaucratic network, and technological infrastructure, had committed itself to becoming a leading manufacturer of cheap commodities in the world, it rapidly took over its Southeast Asian neighbours as the biggest exporter to the West, mainly the US, whose imports have helped keep post-Mao Chinese industry

operating at full steam for more than a decade. Swelling Chinese foreign reserves (close to 150 billion US dollars by July 1999) and national saving (more than 6 trillion yuan, roughly 0.8 trillion US dollars) indicate not so much the rapidity of Chinese economic growth, but rather the daunting discrepancy between the massive accumulation of products, services, and capital—all an increasingly integral part of the global market—on the one hand, and a populace still extremely poor and poorly protected by modern standards, which constitutes the labour and domestic market, on the other. Where, as many believe, the high inflation caused by an overheated economy and lifting of price controls in 1988 may have contributed to the social disturbances resulting in the mass protest in 1989, a decade later, the challenge facing the Chinese government is how to reverse a steady deflation, reduce huge factory inventory, and encourage Chinese consumers to buy just about anything from automobiles to shares and housing units.

Somewhere in the process, the Chinese economy, whose core remains socialist or state-owned, became a surplus economy plagued by industrial overcapacity and insufficient domestic demand. Given the economy's huge export-oriented industrial structure, its low wages and standards of living, and climbing savings due to the heightened sense of insecurity of the working people, such overcapacity is as real as it is misleading. Once the exports slow down due to fluctuations in the international market or intensified protectionism in the US and the EU, huge quantities of products flood the domestic market, which is unable to absorb this inward flow, an inability guaranteed by an artificial exchange rate which deflates the Chinese currency, the extremely low basis and relatively slow growth of wages, the artificially high property market (due to land speculation often backed by government loans), and finally, by average consumers' determination to hold on to their cash in a time of uncertainty and an almost certain cut-back of state welfare and labour security programmes. This seems to be the way in which a phantom 'post-industrial' prosperity has been created in China; it is characterized by a still very modest level of per capita income and limited consumption capacity, and an inflated hyper-reality consisting of over-investment, overproduction, conspicuous consumption by the new rich and corrupt bureaucrats—often the same individuals—and of the enclaves of globalization such as the Special Economic Zones, luxury hotels and boutique stores, tourist-oriented service industry, urban malls, and so forth.

The surplus of commodities and capital is accompanied, to be sure, by a bubble economy of images, signs, and discourses. The saturation of the media and the mass culture industry, the constant flow of international fashion and advertisements, and the virtually simultaneous consumption of the latest MTV or Hollywood hits with the residents of American suburbia, made possible by digital technology and the internet, all reinforce and amplify the impression that daily life in China today has been an integral part of the timeless now of global capitalism. It is no

surprise that China has become the world's number one producer of Video Compact Diskette Players, a cheap computer-based hardware popular in China but virtually absent in the West, whose software supply relies almost completely on piracy. Thanks to VCD, a great number of Chinese urban consumers now share the visual culture of the postmodern West at a much cheaper price. It was rumoured that the VCD version of *Titanic* appeared on the streets of Beijing and Shanghai a few days before the film had been released in the US. Chinese postmodernism, like all varieties of this cultural trend, is made possible by, and almost exclusively dependent upon, the technology of reproduction and representation, not that of production, where China has gained the reputation of being the world's biggest labour-intensive, heavily polluting workshop, instead of a significant player in the capital-intensive advancement of science and technology. In this sense, it might not be grossly inaccurate to call China a probational, virtual postmodern society.

The huge discrepancy between the daily life under residual socialism and the hyper-reality of the fledging market is keeping Chinese society in a permanent state of economic mobilization and ideological agitation. At the same time, the market has also made visible the persistence of the socialist system and the discourse of the unconscious of the rising consumer masses—their frustrations, fears, resentments, their newly achieved freedoms and sense of power, their obsessions with the here and now, as well as their need for a new collective identity and social ideal. Market forces, with the presence and blessings of the communist party-state, have created a highly mixed mode of production. The co-existence of private, communal, state, and foreign joint-venture ownerships, the different forms of employment and job opportunities, the residual pockets of the rural economy and state welfare system, which one can, or think one can, fall back upon, make visible the choices, options, and optimal combinations in economic life. In economic and sociological terms, it is the overlap and coexistence of a dazzling variety of modes of production, social structures, political lexicons, ideological discourses, and value systems, not the growth rate itself, that constitutes the conditions of possibility for Chinese postmodernism.

Ambiguity of Reforms

Neither the state-regulated market economy nor a mixed mode of production is unique to China, of course, but it is important to remember that the Chinese 'socialist market economy' is conditioned not only by its place in the multinational capitalist environment, but also by its actually existing socio-economic infrastructure, built over the previous decades of revolution and socialism. The internal ambiguity of the logic of the reforms—in this case, of socialism understood as an ongoing historical experiment—lies in its double posture of transcending dogmatic socialism by embracing a contemporary capitalist mode of production, while, in theory as well as

in practice, transcending dogmatic capitalism by means of innovative, unprecedented ways of deconstructing and reconfiguring old bundles of concepts, rights, and material forces. The implicit logic of the 'privileges of backwardness', which assumes that the institutional arrangements of advanced capitalist societies are sometimes only 'second best' and are distorted by internal flaws, is reminiscent of the historical appeal of socialism to Chinese intellectuals between the two World Wars. Doubts about free-market capitalism, whose role in recent crises in Russia, Brazil, and East Asia has caused great alarm, can find their cultural, theoretical formulation in postmodernism, in which all kinds of ideologies—from anti-capitalist, anti-Enlightenment conservatism to hyper-capitalist futurism—can find their niches only in a de-essentialized fashion, and in which socialism, like Chinese postmodernism itself, cuts across the ideological lines rather than falling neatly along one and against the other.

It seems reasonable to assume that, in trying to catch up with the West, the comparative frame of reference for China is often not the West itself, but China's neighbouring countries: South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and, in a different sense and to a different ideological and psychological effect, India and Russia. The nearly double-digit average growth rate of the Chinese economy in the past two decades is increasingly becoming a subject of study crying out for theoretical explanation. In the 1980s, the success of the economic reforms was considered to be due to a structural disengagement from socialist dogma and the embrace of market mechanisms. In the 1990s, however, continued Chinese economic growth has more often been put in stark contrast to the collapse of the Russian economy, and, more recently, to the economic depression of East Asia as a result of the speculative attack by international capital. Where the Russian situation declares the bankruptcy of any utopian dogma of absolute private ownership and the total autonomy of the free market, the East Asian economic crisis reveals the ruinous, predatory nature of the unchecked freedom of the global financial market. In both cases, it is the socialist character of the Chinese economy, its relative separation from the global system and deliberate, state-directed nature of 'reforms', that sustained economic development in China. By the end of the 1990s, more and more scholars are ready to take the Chinese economy neither as an ad hoc, patchy, and half-measure free-market economy, nor as a chaotic, corrupt, and fading command system, but as an economic, social, and political alternative in the making, an experiment whose provisionality proves to be the norm. This way of thinking finds its most provocative voice in Cui Zhiyuan's call for 'intellectual liberation' and critique of 'institutional fetishism'.

Based on his collaborative research with Chinese scholars on the Nanjie Village in the central Chinese province of Henan, Cui observes that the socialist infrastructure, economic or otherwise, can be creatively transformed in building a collective, co-operative model of economic development, in which 'group rationality' and 'individual rationality'

may reach an optimal equilibrium through the mechanism of group incentive and mutual dependence.¹¹ The Nanjie experience might be unique and cannot be generalized, as Cui's many critics have argued. But this case study is but one example of Cui's overall effort to formulate a new theory of alternative industrialization and social organization, which credits the phenomenal growth of the Chinese rural economy, above all rural industry, to an innovative system of flexible production and specialization, cooperative ownership and democratic distribution of wealth, and the organic integration of rural China and industrialization. In doing so, Cui follows the footsteps of Fei Xiaotong's life-long effort to theorize Chinese rural industrialization, which argues for the compatibility of modern industrial technology and a decentred, flexible, and co-operative rural network of production. Building on Philip Huang's theory that the ruralization of industry provides a way out of the 'involution' of the rural Chinese economy in the past centuries, Cui stresses that socialist collectivization, accumulation, and proto-industrialization paved the way for rural China to be revitalized in a contemporary market environment.¹²

Flexible Production à la chinoise

For Cui, the innovativeness of rural Chinese industry lies in it being a de facto system of 'flexible specialization' and 'flexible production'. The fact that the workers at rural industrial enterprises are also peasants who still hold on to their land under the contract system—that is, their double identity as worker/peasant—enhances the competitiveness of rural industry in a fluid market environment. Rural and communal anchors allow rural enterprises to develop highly flexible technological, organizational, labour, and operation arrangements, thus giving them advantages through efficient production when demand is uncertain. Borrowing Charles Sabel's notion of 'Moebius-Strip', Cui thinks positively of the blurred, often messy, boundaries between enterprises and society, between private and collective ownerships, which is considered to be a bad sign of immature, insufficient privatization by neoclassical economics. Cui pays particular attention to the shareholding system developed by the Chinese peasants and workers, which, instead of dismembering and privatizing the collective property of the former people's communes, turns collective assets into 'collective shares' independent of the individual shares on labour's side, while the representatives of the local community—village or township governments—remain the legal owners, and co-ordinate the interests of its employees and those of other local residents.

Cui extends his theory of flexible production in (post)socialist China

¹¹ Zhiyuan Cui et al., *Nanjiecun* (The Nanjie Village), Beijing 1996. Cui's views are criticized by his liberal opponents as a defence of the Cultural Revolution.

¹² See Fei Xiaotong, *Peasant Life in China*, London 1939; *Xiang Tu Chung Jian* (Rural Reconstruction), Shanghai 1948; and *Rural Development in China*, Chicago 1989; Philip Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350–1988*, Stanford 1990.

into many other areas of the Chinese economy, but his choice of rural industrialization as an entry-point reflects the theoretical and political importance of this issue in China today. Not only do rural enterprises now represent close to 40 per cent of Chinese GNP, absorb more than 100 million Chinese peasants, and remain the main driving force behind the improvement of the standard of living for the rural population, they are also poised to provide an alternative model of industrialization and urbanization, which, combined with the village election system, have far-reaching implications for the thinking on Chinese socialism as a form of postmodernity. What concern the theory of Chinese postmodernism most in Cui's writings are his two general concepts, namely 'intellectual liberation' and 'institutional fetishism'. By intellectual liberation, he means freedom from, and more sophisticated ways to interrogate, the traditional binary opposites such as private ownership/state ownership, market/plan, reformism/conservatism, Sinocentrism/ wholesale Westernization. It is a manner of thinking which, in Cui's own words, 'expands the imaginary space for institutional innovation guided by the commitment to both economic and political democracy'.¹³

Calling for such an intellectual liberation which is inspired by innovative theories such as analytical Marxism and critical legal studies, and, above all, by the changing Chinese reality, Cui criticizes various forms of 'institutional fetishism', which 'immediately equates concrete institutional arrangements with abstract ideas, i.e., corporate America with "market economy", the two-party system with democracy.' For Cui, such fetishistic thinking bestows concrete, historically conditioned institutional arrangements with super-historical, mysterious 'inevitability'.¹⁴ Here Cui's theoretical operations draw inspirations from Adam Przeworski, who regards socialism as political democracy combined with economic democracy; and Jon Elster, who considers current institutional arrangements of free-market capitalism as only 'second-best' for the development of productive forces. Moreover, Cui's wide-ranging account of a complex, diverse, and historically uneven reality bears an unmistakable sign of 'postmodernism', which deconstructs the previously held totalities into divisible bundles of qualities and relationships ready for reconfiguration under new historical circumstances, and which refutes the classical-modernist logic of identity to favour a more flexible, fuzzy, and dialectical thinking based on difference, resemblance, and free association.

The 'postmodern' logic of Cui's arguments, or, conversely, the pro-socialist logic of Chinese postmodernism as seen in Cui's theoretical operations, is something more readily grasped by his liberal-conservative opponents than by his 'new left' or 'postmodern' allies in China, who have devoted their energy almost exclusively to charting

¹³ Zhiyuan Cui, *Di er ci sixiang jiefang yu zhidu chuangxin* (The Second Intellectual Liberation and Institutional Innovations), Hong Kong 1994, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the contours of the newly emergent Chinese form of everyday life and its cultural manifestations. But Cui's passionate commitment to economic and political democracy in China and his belief that socialism, via the route of intellectual liberation and institutional innovation, can create a better alternative to capitalism as we know it, proves to be an important—and, for many, far too radical—intellectual yardstick, which stimulates the debate of Chinese postmodernism as a way of thinking beyond 'institutional fetishism' in general and as a form of post-socialism in particular. Where multiple layers of private, communal, collective, and state ownership have been created and legitimized to free the productive forces from the command economy of a formerly quasi-military state organization, individuals, communities, local regions and enterprises become shareholders as well as stakeholders in the new economic, social, and political environment. Scholars, notably Western scholars, are often more eager to gauge the extent to which the economic liberalization dismantles socialism and nurtures capitalism than analyze how socialism, a system created as an alternative to the lack of economic democracy in modern capitalism, is revitalized and, in its more decentred, de-essentialized, flexible forms, becomes an integral, constitutive part of the daily reality of Chinese economic, social, political, and cultural life.

The Potential of Postmodernism

For those who want China to remain on the course of catching up with the phantom images of nineteenth-century, 'classic' modernity, or for those who uncritically accept postmodernism as a graduation certificate from the mandatory course of modernization and a one-way ticket to the timeless present, the subject of Chinese postmodernism either threatens a premature ending to the national discourse of modernization, or gives China an undue prestige and harmful illusion that it has passed the ordeals and tests of the modern. In sociological terms, the arrival of the 'postmodern' merely confirms the open secret that the Chinese economy and its forms of everyday life have already outgrown the bureaucratic control and ideological tutelage of the Reform régime—whose popular support, if not political legitimacy, was damaged by the tragedy of Tiananmen in 1989, and whose ideological void and political beleagueredness are exposed by the farce of Falun Gong in 1999. For both its proponents and opponents, Chinese postmodernism, as both a cultural vision and a social ideology, is intertwined with a Chinese experience for which neither socialism nor capitalism seems to provide satisfactory answers. It is connected to the conviction that innovative thinking is urgently needed: minimally, to understand why, how, or how long the Chinese economic, social, and political structure can manage to muddle through; and, maximally, to articulate a new theory for a new social system, a new democracy, and a new cultural-intellectual discourse in the making. The modernism-postmodernism break, established in Western theoretical discussions, offers a symbolic framework through

which to renegotiate the continuities and discontinuities of time and space, and therefore finds its currency in the intellectual effort to formulate a cultural and ideological reorientation, whose meaning in contemporary China is, however, always more political and socio-economic than immediately 'cultural'.

If Chinese socialism is, as it is considered by Eric Hobsbawm, and, from the other end of the political spectrum, Lucian Pye, uniquely also a national and cultural—or 'civilizational'—project, then something radically historical can and must be found in this otherwise 'ahistorical' space of a civilizational nation.¹⁵ That is to say, if the political, historical meaning of Chinese socialism is not merely considered rather cynically as a disposable tool for the restoration and sustenance of a 'form of civilization', one must be ready to grapple with the changing Chinese politico-economic relations today. In the context of Chinese postmodernism, these relations point to the theoretical possibility, and its social-cultural implication, of a 'socialist market economy', of an alternative model of industrialization—via post-industrialization—and to the material and political cultures of the post-socialist consumer masses. The formation of the national market, while involving the Chinese economy deeply in the world market, has also carved out a tangible national boundary, defined in terms of the economic interest of the populace and the reach of the state, in the mental map of the Chinese consumer masses, a sense of imagination which was to be sharpened by the latter's unhappy encounter with Western mass media's fixed and distorting image of China—a China in which the emerging urban middle class now have a stake, and on which they want to lay claims.¹⁶ It is only fitting that such a history, or such histories, should find their new mode of expression in postmodernism, which is a style marked by internal schizophrenia, and which contains in its very texture a pastiche of previous and alien genres, styles, images, and languages. Where the historical legitimacy of Chinese postmodernism comes from both the realities of global capital and the realities of Chinese post-socialism, its imaginary self-affirmation often takes the form of a magical-realist replaying of historical narratives, memories, and desires, which never want to miss any

¹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm observes that the sweeping success of Chinese communism after World War II may be due to the Marxist-Leninist party organization's capacity of 'bringing government policy from the centre to the remotest villages of the giant country (as, in the mind of most Chinese, a proper empire should do).' *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991*, New York 1995, p. 465. For Hobsbawm, Chinese socialism benefited from the enormous continuities of Chinese history and is likely to survive as the national ideology. Pye, basing himself on the assumption that the realization of universal modernity requires the actualization of the modern bourgeois nation-state, argues that China is 'really a civilization pretending to be a nation-state', and that it still needs to turn itself from a political dinosaur into a qualified nation-state by following the classical European model. See Lucien Pye, 'How Chinese Nationalism Was Shanghai'd', in *Chinese Nationalism*, edited by Jonathan Unger, New York 1993, pp. 86–112.

¹⁶ For a discussion of market-born Chinese nationalism—with the global media as its midwife—see Xudong Zhang, 'Mass Culture, Nationalism, and Chinese Intellectual Strategies in the 1990s', *Social Text*, no. 55, Summer 1998, pp. 109–40.

opportunity to seize upon the flying images and signs of the immediate present in order to turn them into allegorical expressions of something else. To this degree, it is impossible to understand Chinese postmodernism other than as a in order historical event.

Historicity of the Postmodern and Prospects for a Democratic Culture

A glance at the history of modern China will make it clear that the particular Chinese route into the modern age has been a painful one; in order to re-orient a long, largely autonomous, and intensely self-centred civilization, modern Chinese intellectuals probably practised the most radical form of collective rationalization in the history of modern culture by fighting a 'cultural war' (against tradition) via a deceptively value-free, logical path, namely, by adopting and advocating evolution and pragmatism. This is the way in which Hu Shi defined and justified the Vernacular Revolution in the 1920s, that is, as an attempt to create something plainly, un sentimentally useful.¹⁷ Thus, the medium for modern Chinese intellectuals and modern Chinese culture, the vernacular language, is historically constructed as not only a signifying structure, but as a structure which signifies the meta-grammar of a temporality understood in the world dominated by European powers and the iron law of instrumental reason. To this extent, the May 4th Movement (1919–27) shares the internal dialectic or dilemma of the Enlightenment in general: it is both élitist in its aim to mould a new nation by fostering a new culture, and anti-élitist in its commitment to the vernacular. The ensuing historical moments, from the Chinese enlightenment in 1919 to the culmination of the Chinese revolution in the statehood of the PRC (1949), are nothing more than moments of the actualization of this logic of the modern in the material and cultural space called China.

The challenge of postmodernism to this strong historical-intellectual genealogy of modern China cannot be effectively analyzed without a critical differentiation of this genealogy itself. Obviously, there is something in this genealogy, and, in the challenge it is now facing, which is strictly parallel to the history of the modern-postmodern West—a parallel which vividly spells out the extent to which China has always been a part of a world under the tightening grip of a modernity which has been steadily losing its European peculiarities to become something truly 'universal', by coercion, power and violence as well as through internalization and assimilation. On the other hand, there is something identifiably national if not 'local', which stems from the particular, albeit by no means unique, Chinese response to the impact of the modern West, a response which always longs to 'return' to its self-identity and permanence at a projected future point

¹⁷ Hu Shi, 'Bishang liangshan' (A Forced Rebellion), in *Zhongguo xinwenxue daxi, jianshe lilun ji* (The Great Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature, Collection in Theoretical Constructions), Shanghai 1935.

on the other end of the somewhat alienating process of change. Indeed, the perception of the modern as not only constantly new and changing but ultimately ephemeral and merely transitional—a perception inconceivable without a long historical memory and sense of measure or the survival of a deeply rooted culture and ethnocentrism—determines that the Chinese modern is always searching for something that comes after the modern, or, rather, for an even yet more plural world in which one feels both modern and at home, for a contemporary identity which is thoroughly decolonized and freed from the law of modernity as such. This deep-seated cultural unconsciousness can be found at work in the postmodern turn in contemporary Chinese culture, a paradigmatic shift from heroic creation—a classic modernist fixation—to enjoyment, pleasure, and suspicion towards any coercive or super-imposed uniformity, both domestic and international, the last of which may explain the strong and emotional Chinese opposition to NATO's 'humanitarian' intervention in former Yugoslavia, as the latter shatters the expectation of the emerging Chinese urban middle class for a more pluralistic world and reveals the new world order as reminiscent of the one which, by means of its moral axiom that 'might is right', drove China into the century of radical nationalist and socialist revolutions.

Utopia and Sino-Marxism

This cultural collective unconscious which perceives modernity as a moment of alienation—even though Chinese intellectuals, in effect, embrace the fundamentals of the modern, from industrialization to social rationalization, with obsessive intensity—may help nurture a national consciousness more susceptible to the possibilities of eclecticism, synthesis, alternativity, pluralism, and negativity. Belief in evolution and pragmatism, although itself a product of an ideology of the modern, may also render the project of modernity more of a matter of functional efficiency rather than deep emotional attachment when the rationale of the modern comes under doubt. Chinese communism, unquestionably the most radical and brutal form of Chinese modernity, is never a transparent unity but a bundle of sometimes contradictory ideals and convictions. Its mature and theorized form, namely Maoism, is itself a vernacular discourse of contradiction and praxis. Known as Marxism-made-Chinese or Sinified Marxism (*makesizhuyizhongguohua*), Maoism is a result of complex and highly dialectical negotiations not only between the West and East, but between high and low cultures as well. With its built-in passion for the masses and constant innovation, its profound disdain for discursive or institutional reifications, Maoism may be one of the ideological-philosophical foundations for the shift to the postmodern, whose utopian truth-content finds its legitimation and distortion in market ideology during the commercial Mao-kitsch craze of early 1990s. Furthermore, Chinese postmodernism, as a liberating force conditioned by new socio-economic relations, may put an end to the ideological and political taboos leading to a rigid

understanding of Maoism as a utopian totalitarianism. Insofar as utopian totalitarianism remains the centrepiece of a socialist modernity that the New Right seeks to subvert and replace with its own, and as long as 'alternative' or 'oppressed modernity' are used as a shorthand for unrealized bourgeois longings, liberal discourse will be unwilling and unable to cope with the emergence of a postmodern, post-socialist mass culture in urban China today. This, however, may negatively endow Chinese postmodernism with a utopian, historic meaning it has so far been unable to harbour, namely, as the culture of the Fourth Estate ascending to the stage of world history.

Thus, Chinese postmodernism may ultimately be used as a (de)periodizing framework for modern Chinese history, as a way to mark a paradigmatic shift within the history of ideas of the modern, if only because it dissolves all the periods and their metaphysical properties in a keen sense of the perpetual now. Such a temporal structure, devoid of dogmas and taboos, in turn will provide us with a more effective framework to analyze the political ambiguities of Chinese postmodernism as an intellectual discourse and as a way to formulate a collective experience. In terms of the minute chronology of terminologies, the circulation of 'postmodernism' is inseparable from the other, more historical, marker, namely the 'post-New Era' (hou xinshiqi). Coined by the literary critic Zhang Yiwu, so far the most productive and controversial, and in some ways the crudest theoretician of Chinese postmodernism, 'post-New Era' is a defiant term that marks the ideological, intellectual, and—in terms of taste, habit, and behaviour—cultural break from the New Era and its high modernist-humanist discursive mainstream and hegemony. As a backlash against this nativist, plebeian celebration of the age of the masses and their everyday culture, there emerged an intellectual and cultural fashion of nostalgia for the New Era, that is, for the ideological, political, and intellectual consensus on 'Reform', for the protected freedom and inwardness of Chinese modernists, and for the exoticism of post-Mao Chinese society under the Western gaze.

To this gaze, and to this nostalgia, Chinese postmodernism offers a rude estrangement via the familiar—namely, commodities and the market—and a radical secularization or demystification through the irreducibly mundane, plebeian, and popular. Here, however, postmodernism no longer means merely the particular intellectual discourse of China in the 1990s, but its own conditions of possibility, above all the rise of the consumer masses and their own mode of cultural production and consumption.

Market Madness

It is important to maintain a historical perspective in understanding the Chinese approach to the market, which, for the Chinese intellectual and state élite, is always a matter of rational choice and social engineering, and the very content of a continued

Enlightenment, as testified by the intellectual and social consensus of the New Era. Yet, the expansion of the market and consumer-oriented everyday world, and the impersonal, autonomous operations of market forces have quickly made clear that those ‘spokesmen of the people’ and pioneers of Enlightenment, instead of controlling the system, are helplessly controlled, manipulated, and marginalized by a system which plays by its own rules. The day-to-day experience of many Chinese high intellectuals vis-à-vis the market is a textbook example of the destruction of the subject in post-humanist, poststructuralist terms. Thus, resistance to the ‘postmodern’ becomes part of an internal intellectual politics and anxiety in the 1990s, which often sacrifices the analysis of the new for the sake of a self-privileging moral heroism with various ideological affiliations—anti-communism, religious fundamentalism, Chinese cultural traditionalism, liberal Enlightenment, nostalgia for Maoist utopian puritanism, and so forth.

But those who declared war on rising consumer mass culture and its vulgarity often seem to forget the fact that ‘postmodern’ culture is merely a means of coming to terms with a new economic, social, and political situation, and that the corrupt new culture is nothing more than the affirmation, celebration, self-indulgence, and self-projection of a nebulous new class occupying the social—and, implicitly, political—space which used to deny them entry. Contrary to the call for ‘opposing the secular world’ (zhan zai sushu de duilianian) and ‘refusing to surrender’ (jujue touxiang) by writers such as Zhang Chengzhi, Zhang Wei, and Han Shaogong, or the calls for ‘restoring the humanist spirit’ (chongjian renwen jingshen) by a group of scholars in Shanghai, Chinese postmodernists offer their defence of the everyday sphere. For Zhang Yiwu, the moral indignation expressed by some Chinese intellectuals against the vulgar cultural carnival of Chinese postmodernism reveals a ‘fear of freedom’ and the ‘anxiety of modernity’. In his view, such anxiety is rooted in an ‘internal contradiction of modernity’:

In fact, the objectives of the modern are quite concrete and tangible. The improvements of everyday life are indeed extremely secular, mundane goals. However, the processes by which those goals are to be achieved are of extreme grandeur and greatness. If the worldliness of human pursuit can be seen right away, many will be disappointed. In short, the modern is the pursuit of the ordinary by means of the great and the sublime. Today, Chinese society is moving toward further improvement of life in a worldly atmosphere, and that creates an acute sense of loss and formidable resistance.¹⁸

A Shared Space

Zhang, in his dialogue with writer Liu Xinwu, whom he credits with a

¹⁸ Liu Xinwu and Zhang Yiwu, *Liu Xinwu Zhang Yiwu duibualu* (Dialogues between Liu Xinwu and Zhang Yiwu; A Post-Century Cultural Outlook), Guilin 1996, p. 40.

literary chronology of the rise of commoners along with the transformation of Chinese economy, is enthusiastic about the emergence of the masses out of the political shadows, a process which can be traced to the economic and social reforms of the New Era, despite the latter's obsession with the sublime and a total solution for all problems. Observing the ways by which the new mass culture penetrates into and co-exists with the state media, thus moving from the margins to the centre, Zhang sees a 'new relationship' between state and civil society, whose 'shared social space', namely, the co-operation, consultations, and dialogue between the two, is the unique environment in which the culture of the 'post-New Era' flourishes. Such a shared space, argues Zhang, conveys the cultural demands and imaginations of the consumer masses while carrying on the propaganda function of the state. This arrangement not only allows a clear hearing of the voices from 'civil society', but also helps nurture an 'invaluable social consensus' in the expanded and developed 'public sphere'. Compared to the premature Chinese civil society of the late 1980s, which seemed all but convinced of its collision course with the state, today's mature civil society is, Zhang argues, characterized by a 'non-confrontational' relationship to the state despite the different and sometimes conflicting interests between the two. For Zhang, a new, mass-oriented, democratic, and consensual cultural paradigm is undoubtedly being nourished, and the intellectual élite of the New Era will have little control over this booming field.¹⁹

Despite the predictable accusation of endorsing the government and catering to the mainstream, Zhang's position is notably communitarian, populist, and nativist rather than explicitly political in terms of its position vis-à-vis capitalism. In fact, it is the political ambiguity of the central figure of Chinese postmodernism, namely the post-socialist consumer masses, that determines the fundamental historical ambiguity of Chinese postmodernism as both a cultural paradigm and a social phenomenon. What Zhang shows us, often quite convincingly, is the way in which the imagination, tastes, and demands of the newly emerging masses fuse with the bureaucratic and ideological operations of the state, and the way in which the state and Chinese 'civil society' sometimes find their expression—cultural or political—in each other. But what is missing in this picture is a potent analysis of the dubious, make-shift category of Chinese 'civil society', which requires the breakdown of the nebulous post-socialist masses in terms of class interests and ideology, that is, to see the new class as a community, a form of life, a culture, and, ultimately, a political force.

Liu Xinwu, Zhang's interlocutor in this context, occasionally tells a more detailed story of the rise of 'civil society' from outside the state system, or on the margins of it, to the centre of Chinese social life in the 1990s, a status backed by its swelling wealth and a new social ideology. But that only makes the very notion of a post-socialist

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 56–7.

Chinese ‘civil society’ all the more nebulous, and its cultural and political influence is exaggerated. If such civil society did consist, as Liu portrays it, initially of those who were ‘nowhere to be seen in the progress of history’ and existed as ‘fodder of society’ (shehui tianchongwu)—namely the unemployed, temporary workers, and other unclassifiable elements that the socialist economy and social organizations failed to absorb—then the dramatic rise of this social group, that is, its new-found wealth in the marketplace, does not seem to be able to pose any major threat to the overall economic and social structure, despite its obvious, if traumatic, psychological effect on some state employees whose income fell or stagnated through the past decade.²⁰

In fact, the very term ‘shimin’ may unwittingly betray its true meaning—literally, as ‘market people’ or ‘street people’ as opposed to those whose livelihood depend exclusively on the state system, and whose activities constitute a ‘biosphere’ of society which can no longer be described, not to mention analyzed, within the old binary of ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ some China scholars still hold to.²¹ But, if the market is considered as the very content of so-called ‘Chinese civil society’, then the latter notion loses most of its classical social and political meaning as ‘bourgeois society’, as it is embedded in the European origin of the term. Moreover, it loses its most desirable political feature—for the Chinese followers of Hayek—that is, that there is an autonomous ‘society’, based on and self-regulated by the market principle, which is subverting, replacing, and bringing an end to the Chinese state and the superstructures of socialist modernity. The most innovative part of Zhang and Liu’s discussion of Chinese culture in the 1990s lies in its recognition that the overall market environment in China today is a product of the state, and that the state shares the new economic, social, ideological, and cultural space being created in the market. That alone gives rise to very different implications for the rise of the post-socialist consumer masses, and of Chinese postmodernism.

Plebeian Excess and Political Anxiety

Thus, the dramatic growth of the economic power of the former ‘social fodder’ class, or the commoners at the bottom of the social hierarchy of Chinese socialism, their cultural affirmation as manifested in Chinese mass cultural products—particularly TV soap operas—in the 1990s, can be regarded as a social metaphor for the economic and ideological re-orientation of post-socialist Chinese

²⁰ Ibid., Chapter 3, ‘Shimin shehui de chengzhang’ (The Development of Civil Society), pp. 43–61.

²¹ Two recent works, namely Michael Dutton’s *Street Life China*, Cambridge 1998—a theoretically inspired survey—and Gereme Barmé’s *In the Red*, New York 1999—an intimate cultural journalistic exposé—are among the first in English to grapple with those unclassifiable elements (such as *liumang*) in contemporary Chinese social and cultural life.

society as a whole. It is theoretically problematic, therefore, to celebrate the rise of the masses and their culture without questioning their implicit ideological affiliations or, at the very least, offering a critical analysis of the inherent possibilities. Thus, for Chinese intellectuals more critical of the process of globalization and suspicious of the state's role in this process, Chinese postmodernism sometimes amounts to an uncritical celebration of the status quo, thus an implicit endorsement of the ideology of commodification by means of a populist affirmation of social desire.²² The critique of Chinese postmodernism from the Left is symmetrical to that from the Right, and reveals a different kind of political anxiety: the post-socialist state now functions as an agent of international capital and special interest groups at home.

Where it is evident that the rise of Chinese mass culture corresponds to a certain kind of upward social mobility of a certain social class, and, in this process, a plebeian cultural imagination is steadily replaced by a middle-class aspiration, the newly emergent 'social consensus' or the ideological mainstream is more complex in political as well as historical terms. Postmodern mass culture, with its built-in rejection of the Enlightenment ideology of Chinese intellectuals, is proving to be more unruly and multi-dimensional than any other cultural paradigm in the history of modern China. At an existential level, Chinese postmodernism, as an expression of Chinese mass culture and forms of everyday life in the 1990s, indicates the recognition of place and community as the only space or locale of collective survival and well-being, which is in stark contrast to the utopian embrace of and self-projection into the universal modern characteristic of the Chinese New Era. A regained sense of home, while vulnerable to all kinds of nativist, nationalist, and traditionalist impulses, does help nurture an appreciation of the particular, the local, the eclectic, the plural, and, accordingly, a disdain and profound suspicion of anything dogmatic and radical, thus frustrating both the Hayekian marketeers and the spiritual combatants of the vulgar money society.

Such a thoroughly secular, deromanticized and plebeian 'social consensus', as it is manifested in Chinese mass culture in the 1990s, also indicates a continued national obsession with modernity, a modernity now understood in postmodern terms as 'post-Enlightenment' (hou qimeng), 'post-utopia' (hou wutuobang), 'post-intellectuals' (hou zhishifenzi), 'post-socialism' (hou shehuizhuyi), and, equally, 'post-capitalism' (hou zibenzhuyi). This obsession constantly reminds us that the willingness to explore a path different from the one indicated by the ideologues of 'market democracy' is considered a heresy in the post-cold-war world; that, if Chinese modernization stands a chance of succeeding, it will do so only by blazing its own path in the wilderness, and, in so doing,

²² See Wang Hui, 'PRC Cultural Studies and Cultural Criticism in the 1990s', *positions*, vol. 6, no. 1, Spring 1998, pp. 239–51.

create its own form of life, its own culture, its own ideological, intellectual, and aesthetic discourse. To this extent, the Chinese revolution, the Maoist innovation of 'making Marxism Chinese', remains a potent source of confidence, if not in the realm of repressed collective unconscious. The collapse of the Soviet Union does not seem to have shaken that confidence, but only reinforced it—as 'not going down the Russian road' has become a national consensus. Such 'belated' modernization, unfolding in the era of late capitalism, is bound to be 'postmodern' if only for its active imagination which re-evokes the old and the historical. For Gan Yang, Chinese postmodernism must be considered in the context of the historical arrival of Chinese modernity, namely the beginning of the 'self-transformation' of peasant China, as hundreds of millions of Chinese peasant-workers entered history and started rewriting it.²³ In this respect, the ongoing Chinese revolution, now concentrated in the economic and cultural sphere, sees its historical precedent not only in the Russian but more pertinently in the French and American Revolutions. For Cui Zhiyuan, postmodernism would be the cultural expression of a new social system which combines economic democracy with political democracy—a combination which the institutions of advanced capitalist societies have signally failed to create. This, to be sure, is only a different way of stating that the empty signifier of Chinese postmodernism can only be filled with the phenomenological richness of Chinese post-socialism.

Looming Contradictions

Chinese postmodernism, like China's 'post-New Era', emerges with the differentiation and fragmentation of Chinese society which induces such anxiety. Where the tidal wave of globalization is creating new national and class consciousness, and thus new social tensions at home, the persistence of socialism and national autonomy renders China an anomaly in the 'post-ideological history', and produces seemingly endless diplomatic and other frictions and confrontations with the US, the self-appointed policeman of the post-cold-war world. What proves to be most unsettling to those Chinese who enjoyed two decades of rapid economic growth and relative social and international stability since the beginning of the New Era, is the ominous looming of that old, loaded vocabulary of class, exploitation, oppression, imperialism, colonialism, hegemony, and power, for whose re-appearance Chinese postmodernism is to blame. What is implied here, however, is not so much the return of the old political society but the arrival of a new age, whose new configurations of wealth, power, and social relations demand a deconstruction and reconceptualization of previous moments of history and their ideological valorizations. At a level of historical generalization, Eric Hobsbawm observes:

²³ Gan Yang, 'Shehui yu sixiang cong shu yuanqi' (Preface to the Society and Thought Book Series), in Cui, *Di er ci sixiang jiefang yu zhidu chuangxin*, pp. vff.

All 'postmodernisms' had in common an essential scepticism about the existence of an objective reality, and/or the possibility of arriving at an agreed understanding of it by rational means. All tended to a radical relativism. All, therefore, challenged the essence of a world that rested on the opposite assumptions, namely the world transformed by science and the technology based upon it, and the ideology of progress which reflected it.²⁴

In the Chinese context, this 'essential scepticism' is directed against the mythologized objectivity of both socialism and capitalism, against various versions of 'historical inevitability', although, obviously, its critical, if radically relativist, edge, is felt more acutely by those who think they have successfully discredited the official ideology of socialist modernity to replace it with universal truth in the image of liberal, free-market capitalism.

Chinese postmodernism, as a shared if not borrowed political and cultural space, is not only symbiotic with 'socialist market economy'; it also depends on the political character of the Chinese state for its own cultural and political identity, if sometimes in a negative sense. If the Chinese state is nothing more than an instrument of the new ruling class and an agent for global capital, then Chinese postmodernism is nothing more than a manipulated playground creating a cultural illusion for a society in crisis. Without a utopian dimension rooted in potent historical experience, Chinese postmodernism's commitment to the 'here and now', and all the fun and coolness it entails, is, at best, a stoic and self-deceptive survival strategy and, at worse, a cynical fatalism in the face of social polarization, unemployment, the roll-back of social welfare, and corruption. On the other hand, if China is to explore a way out of the closing of historical possibilities, Chinese postmodernism will probably make its contribution not only to the making of a democratic culture in China, but to a pluralistic world culture as well. At the present moment, we can only conclude by saying that Chinese postmodernism, in its seemingly ahistorical affirmation of the new, maintains, rather than eliminates, a unique sense of time and history—a unique temporal and historical tension—so long as all these different layers of collective experiences and memories persist in the surviving 'status quo' of Chinese socialism. In other words, Chinese postmodernism, as a Chinese vision of the new at the end of the twentieth century, unwittingly becomes a breathing space between an emergent Chinese lifeworld and the unrelenting universal claim of the absolute market as a negation of the historical experience of Chinese modernity. The fundamental irony is that, by endowing the 'status quo' with an everyday form and a cultural discourse, Chinese postmodernism becomes a way of living history and its contradictions, rather than consuming it out of existence.

²⁴ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, p. 517.

Still others discuss the general relaxation of political society in post-Mao China, the emergence of the market and its consumer mass culture, and the fashion and discourse of nostalgia. The contributors make a clear case for both the historical uniqueness of Chinese postmodernism and the need to understand its specificity in order to fully grasp the condition of postmodernity worldwide. This collection of discussions on postmodernism and China undertakes two tasks. Especially after Deng Xiaoping's visits to southern China in 1992, the ideological vacuum that emerged in the wake of the 1989 crackdown of the student protests apparently shrank as further economic reforms were enacted by Deng. Postmodernism, as the "post" preface implies, is something that follows modernism. Thus, the class structure of this post-industrial society would be constituted by a professional class, a technical and semi-professional class, a clerical and sales class, and a class of semi-skilled and craft workers. Noticeably absent is the manual working class to whom critics have said "farewell". In this post-industrial society the control of the information and knowledge would create new conflicts. Consequently, the dominant class in that group will be able to access and control information. Technocrats and bureaucrats are counterpoised to workers, students and consumers. The development of social movements in post-Mao China is closely correlated with the changing state-society relationship and can be roughly divided into three periods. Most social movements during the first period between 1976 and 1989 were large scale and expressed grievances against the state (Schell 1988; Seymour 1980; Zhao 2001).