

LIU KANG

AESTHETICS and MARXISM

Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their
Western Contemporaries

最先朝气蓬勃地投入新生活的人，
他们的命运是令人羡慕的。 马克思
纪念全世界无产阶级的伟大导师马克思逝世一百周年

AESTHETICS AND MARXISM

POST-CONTEMPORARY INTERVENTIONS

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Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries

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For Yazeng

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PREFACE

This book analyzes the relationship between aesthetics and modern Marxism by focusing on the Chinese case. At the same time, it highlights connections, parallels, and differences between the Chinese aesthetic Marxists and their Western counterparts. The heroes are a diverse cast, ranging from writers and philosophers to political leaders, playing in the various acts of the historical drama lasting nearly a century. Common among them, obviously, is a strong emphasis on “culture” and “aesthetics” in theory and practice. This historical study of the formation of aesthetic discourse in modern China, especially in Chinese Marxist traditions, is combined with theoretical reflection on wider political and cultural issues pertaining to the problems of modernity, alternative modernity, and postmodernity. The key questions raised in this book not only traverse a broad spectrum of fields of inquiry, but also involve a host of historical and intellectual traditions, Marxist ones in particular. Although these issues cannot be comprehensively covered in one volume, the chapters that follow alert readers to some important, yet often unnoticed and neglected links among the distinct theories and practices within modern Marxist traditions on issues of culture and aesthetics.

In light of the centrality of “culture” in contemporary society and social thought, we need to examine these connections to deepen our understanding of discrete and heterogeneous modern aesthetic traditions, as well as to seek new alternatives in both theoretical and practical senses. It is possible that some alternative model of cultural criticism could be extrapolated out of Chinese aesthetic Marxism, as indeed its major thinkers have aspired to do. I would be gratified if readers found this study useful as an introduction to that Marxism and its principal theorists. The Chinese Marxist “model” does not claim universal validity in the manner of some current Western theories, paradoxically by way of fetishizing difference and

otherness. Nevertheless, it contains implications beyond regional and geopolitical boundaries.

Rather than a “detached” observation, this book is an “intervention,” in a small way, into the subjects under discussion. I try to apply dialectical method in both the historical description and explanation of Chinese theories and my own critical position. This dialectical thought is intrinsically self-reflexive, as is evidenced by the use of Chinese aesthetic Marxist practices in rethinking modern traditions and the legacies of revolution and modernity. Analogies to this thought are noted in the ways that modern Western Marxists reflect on capitalist modernity and postmodernity. Rethinking the “rethinking” of culture, politics, and aesthetics, I examine historical events and the less tangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which events are mapped out. Insofar as the dialectic of “practice” (or history proper) and “theory” constitutes the very problematic of Marxism (which as the “principal contradiction,” lies at the heart of Chinese Marxist traditions), the reinscription of “self-reflexivity” as a proper Marxian dialectic represents a renewed effort at cultural critique.

The central thesis of this book is that culture and cultural revolution are inextricably related to the Marxist projects of critiquing capitalist modernity and constructing an alternative modernity. Aesthetics and culture have been of primary concern in Chinese Marxist circles. In this respect, the diverse practices and designs of Chinese Marxism are similar to those of Western Marxism, or an equally distinct variety of Euro-American Marxist intellectual enterprises. But save for a partial grasp of Maoism, Western Marxists had little awareness of what their Chinese colleagues were doing in a different context. Thus, although it is generally understood that Maoism transformed the ways that Europeans thought about Marxism, by comparing Chinese aesthetic Marxism and Western Marxism we can gain insight into the historical development of modern Marxism.

Chinese aesthetic and Western Marxism both create a theoretical space for critical interventions by empowering cultural politics. European and North American cultural politics have fostered an oppositional vision centered largely on the problems of domination and resistance, manipulation and self-government, and consent and coercion in modern capitalist society. In contrast, aesthetic Marxism in China has served the twofold mission of critiquing the intrinsic contradictions of revolutionary hegemony and offering a constructive vision of culture in a postrevolutionary society. Herein lies the value of Chinese aesthetic Marxism, with implications that reach beyond China proper in the world of global cultural critique. Moreover, being non-Western, Chinese aesthetic Marxism has self-consciously questioned the inherent Eurocentrism in Marxism itself. If this Eurocentrism is to be challenged and problematized, questions posed

by Chinese aesthetic Marxists cannot be neglected. Its originality, as well as its historical and structural limitations, has allowed Chinese aesthetic Marxism to make a crucial difference in the struggles of the real world. Hence, it is a significant development within Marxist tradition, deserving critical attention.

Searches for an alternative modernity by Chinese Marxism (including, of course, its “first stage,” represented by Mao Zedong) have critiqued not only capitalist modernity, but also its determinism and teleology. Yet the Chinese critique, like that of modern Western Marxism, privileges “culture” as both a means and an end in itself in constituting an alternative modernity. In Mao’s version, the role of cultural revolution is second only to that of peasant guerrilla warfare, and key to the establishment and development of a revolutionary hegemony, the predominant feature of his socialist alternative. Such a privileging of “culture,” however, has resulted in the neglect of other critically important areas of social life, the economic in particular. In the postrevolutionary period, cultural revolution and revolutionary hegemony gradually lapsed into massive politicization and instrumentalization of aesthetic and cultural life. This severely undermined social and economic reconstruction, or the constitution of a socialist mode of production, as another central goal of an alternative modernity. Mao’s privileging of culture, as a way in its inception to counter the economic determinism of classical Marxism, was eventually turned into a “culturalist” determinism and essentialism. His plan for a socialist China as an alternative to both Soviet-style socialism and Western capitalism became a liability, and even long after Mao’s era ended, the Maoist legacy has left a huge amount of vastly complex problems in ideological and cultural terrains.

Yet contrary to the widely accepted view that Chinese Marxism—primarily represented as Maoism—is monolithic, there have always been different Marxist positions in China. This book analyzes these discrete practices of Chinese Marxist intellectuals, emphasizing the construction of autonomous cultural space in a postrevolutionary society. The tragic consequences of Mao’s Cultural Revolution and revolutionary hegemony compelled Chinese aesthetic Marxists to reflect on Mao’s privileging of culture, first, as a betrayal of the Marxist principle of the primacy of the economic, and second, as an impediment to constructive and systematic social transformation. Chinese aesthetic Marxism, especially Li Zehou’s “philosophy of practical subjectivity,” reaffirms historical materialist concepts as well as the categories of material “practice” and “mode of production” vis-à-vis the language of contemporary cultural criticism.

This is not to suggest that Chinese aesthetic Marxists followed the agenda of Western Marxism; the Chinese have self-consciously critiqued

Western Marxism and its Maoist connections. Significantly, the Chinese Marxist experience in a postrevolutionary society and the vision that has emerged from it have drawn a different cognitive map, an alternative “cultural topology” for contemporary cultural studies. They offer us an epistemic alternative for understanding the genealogy of the critical notions and conceptual schemes by which modern Chinese cultural history has been interpreted. *Aesthetics and Marxism* investigates these “topological cultural spaces” from the critical perspective informed by Chinese theories themselves, while also juxtaposing these theories with Western Marxist ones, so that their assumptions can be mutually challenged in illuminating ways. Granted, it is only a preliminary experiment, and as such, subject to the most relentless scrutiny of history.

In this book, I craft a narrative of the genealogy of the aesthetic discourse in modern China within the context of its conceptual migrations, modifications, and divergences, from classical German thought to modern Western Marxism and cultural criticism. Most of the Chinese theorists discussed—with the exception of Mao—are generally unknown to intellectuals in the West. While Lu Xun is perhaps familiar to a larger audience, the names Qu Qiubai, Hu Feng, Zhu Guangqian, and Li Zehou, have little or no resonance to English readers. Their Western “counterparts,” however—including Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Antonio Gramsci, and Louis Althusser, to name a few—are now household names in Western academic circles. While the positivist model of “influence studies” may have lost some of its credibility of late, it would be dangerous to absolutize and fetishize difference and otherness, and thus externalize the internal tensions and contradictions within modernity. The disciplinary division of “area studies” in European and North American academies, although not a result of the contemporary fetishization and institutionalization of difference, has nonetheless externalized and fragmented “modern China” as an object of knowledge from mainstream cultural and literary studies. The dominant binary oppositions within “China studies”—such as modernity/tradition, West/East, First World/Third World—further dichotomize and externalize the intrinsic conflicts of modernity, which has primarily designated the modernity of the capitalist West as a totalizing model by which all alternatives are understood as other. This account of the genealogy of the aesthetic in China’s alternative modernity tries to dismantle the totalizing myth by recuperating it as a diverse body of paradoxical and heterogeneous experiences and conditions of possibility. The concept of the aesthetic, with its unique versatility and ambiguity, incarnates the contradictory nature of modernity. Therefore, it serves as a prism through which to examine the internal contradictions and structural relations mediated and negotiated by the aesthetic itself, without either totalizing or externalizing its overdetermined internal contradictions.

The first chapter, in remarking generally on these theoretical and historical questions, serves both to clarify key issues and problematics, and to make a genealogical query to the epistemic as well as institutional machinery in current historical and cultural studies that identify and categorize “China,” “modernity,” and “culture.” This entails discussing the relationship between aesthetics and modernity—from its origins in eighteenth-century Europe (Germany in particular) to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the prospect of an alternative modernity arose. That is, when Western capitalist modernity expanded from a local historical experience into a global movement, it spawned at once fragmentation and universalization, and opened up alternate possibilities. China’s passage into modernity unquestionably constituted one alternative, with culture and aesthetics playing significant roles. When Marxism entered the arena of China’s struggles, it transformed aesthetics from a preeminently bourgeois discourse of autonomy and separation into a powerful weapon for revolution. The relationship between aesthetics and politics, then, became a most compelling issue. The implications of this historical transformation of aesthetic discourse need to be evaluated within the context of modern Marxist traditions, in which politics (in terms of “cultural politics” and *realpolitik*), ideology, hegemony (in prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary societies), and subjectivity (or the “death of subject”) have constituted the “core” problematics. Because these issues are crucial to contemporary cultural criticism as well, it is necessary to show the connection between earlier experiences and the 1990s. The pre-Marxist Chinese appropriations of aesthetic discourse from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century were primarily motivated by the cultural politics of encountering a Western modernity. A brief investigation of Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, and Cai Yuanpei’s endeavors to bring aesthetic discourse to bear on China’s modernity and searches for an alternative modernity will demonstrate the importance of aesthetics and culture in modern Chinese history.

The remaining chapters, which focus on the development of Marxist aesthetics in China, are organized primarily by historical periods—from the May Fourth enlightenment and cultural critique in the 1910s to the Cultural Reflection of the 1980s—and concentrate on the question of interpretation. A critical feature of the Chinese Revolution was the contradiction between the two principal forces: urban Marxist intellectuals and peasants. The formation of Marxist aesthetic and cultural theories reflected this fundamental incongruity, especially in the shifting of revolutionary cultural work from Shanghai, arguably the most cosmopolitan and modern city in early-twentieth-century Asia, to the backward rural areas, first to Jiangxi, then to Yan’an, as the revolutionary base areas, and finally, after the victory of the revolution, back to the cities again. This phenome-

non has been explained either by the modernity/tradition or urban/rural models, which externalize the contradictions within the Chinese Marxist movement. Here, this contradiction is examined by probing Lu Xun's aesthetics of negativity and allegory along with Qu Qiubai's critique of Europeanization and promotion of national popular culture as manifestations of the politics/culture and urban/rural conflicts within the global experiences of modernity. Urban Marxist intellectual Lu Xun's writings are compared with the works of his Western counterparts, Walter Benjamin and Adorno, and Qu Qiubai's with Gramsci's projects, since both represent revolutionary strategies devised independently by two Communist leaders facing similar historical conditions.

As for the role of aesthetics and culture in Mao's thought, Gramsci's notions of hegemony and counterhegemony are useful in an alternative re-evaluation, largely because they were derived from comparable strategic considerations and historical conditions. Yet, there are serious inadequacies and ambiguities in Gramsci's theoretical reflections. In Mao's theory and practice, the aesthetic question of "form" or "national form" was the focal point. Mao's projects of revolutionary hegemony and cultural revolution by promulgating "national form" entailed, among other things, the "thought-reform" that aimed to transform urban Marxist intellectuals into "true" revolutionaries, modeled after the revolutionary army of peasants. This involved a massive politicization and instrumentalization of culture and aesthetics in postrevolutionary China. But such things cannot be sufficiently understood from a Gramscian perspective, for Gramsci, though close in many ways in his thought on cultural revolution, was never able to envision a postrevolution cultural space. Moreover, in exploring the key issue of constructing a revolutionary culture in a postrevolutionary society, which constituted Chinese aesthetic Marxism's main problematic, many serious misappropriations by contemporary Western cultural studies of Gramsci's strategies of communist revolution come to light. The displacement of commodification and economic inequality with erratic, fragmented "war of positions," "identity politics," and so on reveals the ahistorical and idealist tendencies of certain Western Left academicians or anarcho-liberalist "post-Marxists." It is interesting to note that many radical claims made by postcolonialist critics against Western "epistemic violence" or "subalternity" had already been put forth by Qu Qiubai and Mao in the early 1930s and 1940s. Postcolonialism, which derives much of its theoretical presuppositions from Gramsci as part of the above-mentioned strategic displacement, not only says hardly anything new about modern China; when used in China studies, the postcolonialist paradoxical debunking of a radical revolutionary legacy from which s/he finds a mirror image of her/himself, only obfuscates the real question of

coming to grips with the complex legacy of Chinese revolution and revolutionary hegemony.

The notion of “civil society” in Gramsci’s formulation, for instance, emerged from his strategic thinking on the establishment of a socialist society, drawing on the experience of civil society/state formations in the bourgeois society of the West. These considerations can be illuminated by Hu Feng’s insistence on constructing a semiautonomous, independent cultural space in postrevolutionary society, where subjectivity or “subjective fighting spirit” can resist both coercion and the consensus of bourgeois-feudalist hegemony, as well as the political instrumentalization of the revolutionary hegemony itself. The discussion of “civil society” in general and in China in particular, therefore, needs to rigorously challenge the epistemic assumptions underlying concepts based merely on the experience of capitalist modernity.

The emergence of an “aesthetic Marxism” in postrevolutionary China since the 1950s, first marked by the eight-year debates about aesthetics during the 1950s and 1960s, presents yet another interesting cluster of issues concerning the role of culture and aesthetics, discussed in chapter 4. Represented primarily by academic Marxists, especially Zhu Guangqian and Li Zehou, the aesthetic Marxists broached a wide range of problems similar to those raised by contemporary critical theorists: specifically, the matters of subjectivity in aesthetic experience; praxis/practice in the cultural terrain; and the relationship between humanity and nature, and between aesthetics and ideology. The differences between Chinese aesthetic and Western Marxists, however, have far-reaching implications. The Chinese insist on the historical materialist notions of “practice” in terms of material production, while Western Marxists—whether the existentialist humanist Jean-Paul Sartre, antihumanist structuralist Louis Althusser, or cultural materialist Raymond Williams—invariably stress “praxis” in cultural and aesthetic realms as opposed to the “economism” and “productivism” of classical Marxism. Subjectivity as a “bourgeois humanist” concept has been under relentless assault in the West, while Chinese aesthetic Marxists have invested not only the utopian aspiration of a true humanity in the notions of sovereign subjects and human agents, but also in the political and ideological legitimation and rationality of subjectivity as a new political identity. While “alienation” has long been a master trope for the Western Marxist deconstructive and negative critique of capitalist modernity, “humanized nature” in the young Marx’s 1844 *Manuscripts* became the rallying cry for Chinese aesthetic Marxists’s vision of an alternative modernity.

A last difference is noted in the widely interrelated “postmodern” debates in the West and “Cultural Reflection” in China in the 1980s, the

ideological underpinnings of which are traceable to the upheavals of the 1960s, epitomized by the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the May 1968 Parisian student movement. The political and hermeneutic questions that these debates have posed, now in hindsight, involve a paradoxical dialectic of historicizing impulses that simultaneously project some ahistorical, transcendental “cultural” and “aesthetic” categories by which actual historical events and the historicity of concepts are displaced. “Sign,” “language,” and “discourse”—and lately, Gramscian “subalternity,” “micro-politics,” and the like—have displaced and suspended indefinitely the compelling issues of social injustice and economic inequality, invoking the seemingly perpetual moment of “interregnum.” The Chinese, on the other hand, vacillated between a politically engaged, interventionist position and an eminently “aestheticist” and even metaphysical stance clamoring for transcendence over worldly issues and politics. Nevertheless, significant and powerful theoretical formations have emerged from the 1980s’ cultural ferments across the globe, providing us with the ways, conceptual schemes, and problematics to think through historical conjunctures and look for alternatives.

I find the vision of Chinese aesthetic Marxism original, not only because of the conceptual framework that it offers, but also because its own discerning positions and agenda constitute a crucially different voice that may demystify the current preoccupation of difference and otherness in cultural studies. It is ironic, therefore, that this distinct voice, arising from and self-consciously critical of the radical legacy that has helped nurture the contemporary “politics of otherness,” has remained ignored by the practitioners of that radical cultural politics.

This is not to suggest that Chinese aesthetic Marxism affords a grand, systematic theory for cultural studies, one that may replace the current “models.” I have only begun in this book to raise some questions, and we are only beginning to search for answers that affect our thinking about culture and the world.

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CHAPTER 1

Aesthetics, Modernity, and Alternative Modernity:

The Case of China

The fascination with the aesthetic is inexorably tied to modernity—understood now as a historical condition of existence and experience, cutting across temporal and geographical boundaries. As such, the question of the aesthetic pertains to modern European thought beginning with the Enlightenment, when philosophers assigned high priority to it in their reflections on modernity. The aesthetic question, however, hardly dominates discourses of modernity, which center instead on objective science and scientific reason. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno put it, the “rationality of the Enlightenment” promised “the disenchantment of the world, the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy.”¹ But as the course of history since the Enlightenment has shown, scientific rationality has failed to live up to the expectation that it would not only subsume, but also transcend natural and human existence. Instead, it increasingly betrayed its limitations in coping with the complex problems of humankind. Diverse cultures and histories have not, and cannot, be contained by a particular way of reasoning, be it scientific or otherwise. Serious challenges to scientific reason’s applicability to and capacity to resolve all human dilemmas were only raised after the unbridled faith in ideas of science, progress, and freedom began to turn against itself, and transform Enlightenment rationality into an “instrumental rationality” that served the twentieth-century powers of domination and oppression. Then, cultural and anthropological dimensions, and indeed the aesthetic dimension so dear to many thinkers of the Enlightenment, were recovered once again, as in the Renaissance when the values of humanity dimmed that of God, in the critique of modernity and searches for an alternative modernity.

If science, technology, and scientific reason are the dominant themes of modernity, then “culture” becomes a key category for contemporary Western social thought in the analysis and understanding of the world,

centering on the issues embedded in postmodernity. Hence, aesthetics has acquired or regained prominence among modern Western thinkers, ranging from Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud to Martin Heidegger, and from Sartre and Adorno to Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. It now serves as an immanent critique of modernity, and a way to measure the social, political, and economic movements of postmodernity. In modern Western Marxist thought, the ascendancy of the aesthetic from Lukács to Adorno is even more glaring, and aesthetic thinking has come to identify, to a great degree, the diverse projects of contemporary Western Marxism as a critique of modernity.

Yet the negative, critical function of the aesthetic in modern Marxist traditions is only part of the story. Aside from the largely repressive role it played in so-called “really existing socialism”—that is, the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries—aesthetic discourse has been constructive in the People’s Republic of China, where Marxism was, and still is, a fundamental feature of modern tradition and social life. This positive function, however, has taken the dialectic form of critique and reconstruction. In other words, it has had both hegemonic and counterhegemonic formations, emerging from China’s searches for an alternative modernity.

In the West, the aesthetic has been primarily a bourgeois discourse of modernity, a feature that it retains in the hands of Western Marxist intellectuals despite its challenge to the dominant ideological forms of capitalism. This contradiction also characterizes the diverse undertakings of modern Western Marxist cultural politics. When Marxists in the West critique capitalist modernity, they must assume a bourgeois civil society as a social space from which to mount their attack. In Chinese Marxism, in contrast, the aesthetic underwent a fundamental transformation, from a bourgeois discourse into a revolutionary tool in struggles for state power. After the seizure of state power, the aesthetic strengthened the revolutionary hegemony created by the Chinese Communist Party. This structural shift in aesthetic discourse involved serious contradictions, particularly in a postrevolutionary society.

The genealogy of the aesthetic in modern China, then, may reveal a possible alternative to the Marxist cultural formations of the West. It may also expose internal tensions and contradictions within modernity, understood as a global experience. An examination of the historical role of aesthetics raises the following questions: How have the relationships between culture, aesthetics, modernity (or an alternative modernity), and Marxism been generally perceived and described? What is the relationship between aesthetics and modernity in the West? What is the role of aesthetics in Chinese modernity, or an alternative modernity? What are the main functions of the aesthetic and culture in modern Marxist traditions,

from Western to Chinese? And how shall we come to grips with these complex relationships, ones that lie at the heart of contemporary intellectual debates?

Indeed, these issues are pertinent to interrogating the historicity of the concepts and categories with which we engage the subjects of this study. Specifically, “critical theory” is explored as a rubric of contemporary intellectual discourse, and “China studies” as an institution of knowledge production and distribution. Since self-reflexive critiques are often central to today’s critical theory, an investigation of the historical conditions of relevant intellectual discourses or institutions is a necessary point of departure.

The Preeminence of Aesthetics in Modern Chinese Thinking

This genealogical inquiry starts from the historical resources of modern aesthetic thought and their social conditions in the West. The aesthetic is a discourse of modernity par excellence, for it articulates the intrinsic contradictions of modernity in the most concrete and “sensuous” of terms. (The term *aesthetic* in its original meaning refers precisely to “sensuousness,” or human senses.) Its inception in eighteenth-century Germany is indicative of the contrary character of Western capitalist modernity. From Alexander Baumgarten to Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Friedrich Schiller, aesthetic cognition served as mediation, reconciliation, and negotiation on two fronts: Politically, it moved between the generalities of reason and the particularities of sense; socially, it tried to negotiate between an aspiring modern European bourgeoisie yearning for freedom and autonomy, and the German feudal absolutism. It should be noted, though, that aesthetic mediation and negotiation are immanently imaginary and utopian. The aesthetic’s projection of a free, equal, autonomous, and universal subjectivity speaks at once for all humanity, and for the bourgeoisie in particular. Terry Eagleton’s study aptly uncovers the correlation between the contradictory, mediatory, and utopian nature of aesthetic discourse, and the concrete political conjuncture of eighteenth-century Germany. It is in the sense of rigorous historicizing scrutiny that the versatility and ambiguity of the concept of the aesthetic should be understood, both in the Western and Chinese contexts. The aesthetic, as Eagleton argues, has “a certain indeterminacy of definition which allows it to figure in a varied span of preoccupation: freedom and legality, spontaneity and necessity, self-determination, autonomy, particularity and universality, along with several others.”² This indeterminacy of definition, however, is actually historically determinate:

The category of the aesthetic assumes the importance it does in modern Europe because in speaking of art it speaks of these other matters too, which are at the heart of the middle class's struggle for political hegemony. The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artifact is thus inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order. . . . But my argument is also that the aesthetic, understood in a certain sense, provides an unusually powerful challenge and alternative to these dominant ideological forms, and in this sense an eminently contradictory phenomenon.³

It is crucial that Eagleton insists on the specific class character of universal humanist concepts of the aesthetic and subjectivity. Many current cultural and social theories either refuse to recognize, or attempt to obfuscate, the still-dominant class character of contemporary societies. But it must be added that "class" as a social formation is susceptible to structural overdeterminations from a multitude of factors. It is now widely acknowledged that class formation is subject to the influences of race, gender, and ethnicity. Impacts of cultural values and geopolitical differences on social classes must be considered, too. In the Chinese context, for instance, the mediatory and reconciliatory functions of the aesthetic have to be grasped not only with respect to different class formations, but also different cultural and geopolitical formations, which have decisively affected class and discursive formations.

The aesthetic discourse mediates and negotiates the contradictions within Western modernity on several levels: first, the abstract philosophical realm; second and perhaps the least abstract, the realm of social life; and finally, the ambiguous domain of psychology, which itself also mediates between abstract ideas and concrete social practices. On the first level, the aesthetic discourse mediates the fundamental dichotomies of Western metaphysics, between rationality and sensuousness, and between epistemology and ethics. In a political as well as sociological sense, it promises to reconcile the mounting tensions between free, autonomous individuals in a civil society and public sphere, and the regulatory, coercive, and authoritative powers of the state. On the third level, the aesthetic is probably at its most effective: its imaginary, sensuous, and utopian projection of subjectivity promises to unify logic-reason with sense-experience, ontology and ethics with epistemology, and particular individuality with general sociality. During the process of its migration from eighteenth-century Germany to twentieth-century China, however, radical structural changes took place. On the metaphysical or philosophi-

cal level, the tension between scientific rationality and ethical, ontological reflection is now compounded by the presence of an alien system of values—an Oriental culture as old as those in the West. Philosophical differences are ultimately connected to practical social issues. From the standpoint of an imperialist power in the West, the Nietzschean “will to power,” seen in the Western context as a disruptive and subversive force to scientific reason, served to disseminate and reinforce the Eurocentric rationality of modernity to the rest of the “alien and barbaric” world. Such a reinforcement was largely carried out in reality by the barbarous, brutal means of violence and force. To this aggressive assertion of power, the Chinese responded by intensifying the intrinsic tensions of Western modernity, asserting the *ti-yong* dualism or “Chinese essence or substance versus Western practical use.” In other words, the internal contradictions of Western modernity were externalized or fragmented by the various Chinese/Western dichotomies. Formulated after the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, in which China was defeated by its rapidly modernized and aggressive neighbor, the *ti-yong* dualism was a culturally reassuring position that affirmed basic ethical and cosmological values that gave continuity and meaning to Chinese civilization, and that would enable adaptation and absorption of Western modernity.⁴

The Chinese solution to the external social and political tensions of modernity, embodied by the *ti-yong* dichotomy, was grounded on the assumption that only internal cultural and psychological (or spiritual) values—perceived as inherently superior to the materialist, instrumentalist, and scientific reason of the West—could empower a materialistically and technologically backward China in its own search for modernity. As the intrinsic tensions of Western modernity were transfigured into the preeminently cultural and geopolitical dichotomy of the “materialist” West against the “spiritual” East, structural transformations in both the cultural and psychological domains took on complex dimensions. Culture must now bear the burden of not only solving the paradoxes of Western modernity, but also reaffirming and empowering China’s own national identity. Hence, a crisscrossing and collapsing of the “interior” and “exterior” boundaries become inevitable. “Interior,” or psychological and spiritual transformation would provide vital subsistence to “exterior,” or social and political transformation.

The aesthetic, then, became a favorable topic for those Chinese intellectuals who wanted to mediate and reconcile the intricate tensions and contradictions arising from China’s passage into modernity. In the course of its structural transformation, the inherent contradictions contained within the aesthetic concept became exacerbated. To begin with, the aesthetic discourse that tried to bridge the traditional Chinese value of har-

mony with Western dualism was unavoidably at odds with modernist ideas of autonomy, independence, and subjectivity. Second, when Marxism was introduced into China, a transference of the class character of subjectivity occurred: it was no longer the bourgeois subject, but a newly emergent, revolutionary subjectivity, that the aesthetic discourse should identify. Such a transference entailed a demystification of the universalism that the aesthetic discourse embodied. Third, the utopian aspect of the aesthetic discourse, in the process of conceptual transgression and transference, became increasingly politicized. The politicization of aesthetics and aestheticization of politics thus became salient features of modern Chinese history.

In other words, aesthetic discourse in modern China is loaded with a mélange of ideological presuppositions: as a historical concept derived from Western bourgeois thought since the Enlightenment, it carries an ideological baggage advocating at once for the political hegemony of the bourgeoisie and a utopian notion of true humanity in opposition to bourgeois utility. Aesthetics is primarily a concept of modernity, in the sense that it bespeaks the autonomy and separation of social spheres, and presupposes a self-determining and self-sufficient subjectivity.⁵ Contradictions inherent in aesthetics become most apparent when transplanted into China.

The aesthetic is first hailed by modern Chinese intellectuals around the turn of the century as an indispensable constituent of modernity. Liang Qichao, eminent reformist scholar and ardent advocate of cultural enlightenment, extolled “beauty” or aesthetics as “the most important element of human life.” He insisted that “*meishu* [literally, the art of beauty, or fine art] generates science.”⁶ Wang Guowei, another prominent intellectual regarded as a founder of modern scholarship in China because of his efforts to integrate German philosophy and aesthetics into traditional Chinese thought, devoted his whole life to the promotion of the aesthetic ideal as the paramount model of modern life. Founding President of Peking University and renowned social reformist Cai Yuanpei proposed to replace religion with “aesthetic education.”⁷ Chinese Marxists, too—from early intellectual leaders such as Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, to revolutionary commanders such as Qu Qiubai and Mao Zedong—invariably stress the importance of aesthetics and culture. Lu Xun, modern China’s “cultural giant,” can be credited with creating an “aesthetics of negativity,” responding to the formidable tensions between political revolution and cultural enlightenment. As we shall see, Lu Xun’s aesthetic thought, together with Qu Qiubai’s idea of fostering a proletarian class consciousness through cultural revolution and popularization, represent Chinese Marxist aesthetics in incipient, yet significant forms. But Lu Xun’s urban, cosmopolitan vision of cultural revolution differs greatly from Qu Qiubai’s

rural-centered, nativist view. The incommensurability between Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai signals the bifurcation of Chinese Marxist cultural and aesthetic theories in the decades that followed, thereby intensifying the tensions within Chinese modernity.

The May Fourth intellectual movement of 1919 was the culmination of China's encounter with modernity in all its antagonistic and contradictory aspects. Of these contradictions, the most salient was the Western intrusion that threatened to destroy China's sovereignty and colonize it entirely. Going hand in hand with this imperialist attempt, though, was the promise of a progressive modernity. It is crucial to bear in mind the complex circumstances under which China entered the modern era in order to understand the breaks, ruptures, discontinuities, revolutions, and violence that dominated modern China's history. In fact, this is also the manner in which modernity itself as a universal, global phenomenon ought to be understood: it is a moment fraught with conflicts and incongruities, breaks and ruptures. Likewise, May Fourth intellectual inquiries and social formations, governed by the historical conditions of modernity, are necessarily fragmented, fractured, and contradictory, even though their ostensible goals and claims invariably call for unity, totality, and universality. The radical iconoclasm and antitraditionalism that characterized the May Fourth movement thus cannot be construed as "totalistic," or as producing totalizing resolutions to China's problems.

The universalist and totalizing claims of the May Fourth intellectuals, however, reflect their awareness of China's social change as an integral part of a global modernity. To be sure, there were inherent connections between the forms of May Fourth cultural radicalism and iconoclasm, and the deep-seated "Chinese cultural predisposition" or "monistic and intellectualistic mode of thinking."⁸ But it is equally undeniable, and far more significant, that this radicalism fundamentally transformed traditional values, to which radical intellectuals themselves were thoroughly indebted. Marxism, as Arif Dirlik argues convincingly, represents the single most powerful intellectual, ideological, and political force in modern China, not only contributing to the radicalization and diffusion of China's social formations, but also to the spatial and temporal fragmentation of Marxism itself as both a product and critique of Western capitalist modernity.⁹ It is wrong, therefore, to insist that the tenacity of its unique tradition has obstructed China's entry into modernity, for China in modern times has experienced probably the most intense social, political, and economic ruptures and changes of its entire history. Oddly, until today, the immutability of China's culture has been held as a truism in the West. It is not the "immutability of Chinese tradition" but the persistence of such a view that is problematical, based as it is on an assumption of Western mo-

dernity that could only see changes in other parts of the world as derivative, reluctant, if not reactionary. It has been hard to see changes in the non-West as positive attempts to create alternatives to Western modernity. These alternatives, then, have often been discounted as either a "historical anomaly" or, in the Chinese case, "the immutability of tradition."

The two most celebrated themes of the May Fourth movement, coined by Chen Duxiu, a major Marxist intellectual and the first leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), were democracy and science. While these two concepts did in general grasp the main features of Enlightenment rationality, they went through a structural transformation during and after the May Fourth period that radically altered their "original" meaning. Already heavily contested and polysemic in their Western context, these notions were further complicated in their new setting. In Chen Duxiu's inaugural formulation, they were offered as "cures" for China's political, moral, and intellectual ills.¹⁰ On the other hand, these concepts were considered mainly as modern alternatives to the Confucian tradition in both a cultural and intellectual sense by Hu Shi, another leading intellectual figure in the May Fourth movement who later crusaded for Anglo-American liberalism.¹¹

At first, "science" was enthusiastically embraced by people of diverse political and ideological persuasions; it was seen as an encompassing method or paradigm to comprehend and interpret all phenomena in the world. Not until the 1980s' debate about culture was the predominant "scientific paradigm" challenged, although science or scientific discourse was equally touted by an overwhelming majority of Chinese intellectuals during this period. A prominent critical voice in the debate was, in fact, the scientistic revision of Marxist dialectical materialism and historicism, represented by Jin Guantao.¹²

"Democracy," in contrast, underwent a tortuous journey in modern China. In the minds of May Fourth intellectuals, democracy may be characterized as an "attitude" or "ethos" in the Foucauldian sense, as a mode of relating to the world, or a way of thinking, rather than a concept of political institution or system of jurisprudence and governance.¹³ Democracy in China has been entwined with various rival political forces, and its discursive formation and transformation attest to the conflictual and antagonistic nature of China's modernity. The articulation of "democracy" in China has been decidedly "extradiscursive": it was caught first between Guomindang's (Nationalist Party) procapitalist, protofascist ideology and the CCP's revolutionary one. Then, pro-Western liberals and staunch nationalists all vied for the ownership of the word. The government, masses, and intellectuals often seized on issues of democracy in their conflicts and coalitions alike after the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established

in 1949. The most recent episode in which "democracy" was invoked, used and abused, and manipulated and deployed by all sorts of political forces, both domestic and international, was the 1989 Tian'anmen event, labeled by its proponents and supporters as a "democracy movement," but condemned by official opponents as "political unrest." For crusaders of a Western-style democracy, Chinese "socialist democracy" is seen as "anti-democratic," diametrically opposed to democratic principles of an American brand. By such principles, though, both "seeds" and "failures" of the pro-Western, pro-American democratic movements in China are measured in the West.¹⁴

This brief excursion indicates the extent to which crucial concepts such as democracy and science have been mutilated, rarefied, or extended by different and contentious political forces. Under these circumstances, these terms could hardly have any cohesive and systematic meanings. "Democracy," because of its discursive "hybridity," has often proven, in the Chinese context, to be at once too mighty as a political and ideological catchword, and too vacuous and feeble as an intellectual and critical concept. Although "science" has always been valorized as an infallible and incontestable paradigm of China's modernity and modernization, its much ontologized status risks being manipulated by political powers, too. Scientism, or the valorization of scientific reason, has a troublesome legacy in China, the follies and fallacies of which have yet to be fully exposed.

Aesthetics, contrary to the grandiose and "masculine" status of both science and democracy, is frequently perceived as humble, submissive, and "feminine." Surprisingly, however, it generally holds out a resilient and persistent site in modern China. Aesthetics, or the aesthetic discourse, opened up a significant space in both theory and practice, and performed a decisive role in modern Chinese cultural politics. Nonetheless, for the most part, it has evaded the selective eyes of actors as well as spectators. Captivated by the spectacle of China's political struggle, China observers are unable to cast a glimpse at the structure of the amphitheater, as it were, in which historical dramas are played out, let alone savor the theatrical and aesthetic effects surrounding the scene. These aesthetic effects are neither side effects nor marginal influences; they are often the very loci of dramatic acts, as ideological and political campaigns almost always began in artistic and literary circles.

Li Zehou, China's major proponent of "aesthetic Marxism," formulated his highly influential thesis of China's struggle for modernity largely in political and sociological terms, calling it "a dual variation of enlightenment and national salvation." The thesis was expressed in a musical metaphor ("dual variation"), yet ironically, Li and countless interpreters paid scant attention to the metaphor and its aesthetic effect, that may bear,