

Introduction

Repetition and Magic

Just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, . . . they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.

—KARL MARX, *Eighteenth Brumaire*

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Wang Yanan, an economic philosopher and prominent cotranslator (with Guo Dali) into Chinese of David Ricardo, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx's three-volume *Das Kapital*, among others, published a series of critiques of contemporary political economic theory in various social scientific journals in China of his day.¹ With topics ranging over aspects of “the economic” as science and social practice, as philosophy and concept, nine of the essays were reprinted as a book in 1942.² The anthology's lead piece, “On Economics,” announces Wang's basic position: “Economics is a science of practice [*shijian de kexue*]; it is a science that forms itself in the course of practice; and it is only in its significance and utility in practice that it can be correctly and efficaciously researched and understood.”³ Rejecting economics as either pure theory or pure empiricism, Wang was adamant that “the economic” was a philosophy of human behavior and thus, as an academic disciplinary practice, should retain and be based in a dynamic relation to everyday materiality. The economic as a social phenomenon had to be derived from and return to historicized practice as a matter of and in the very conceptualization of social life at any given moment in time. For Wang, attempts to grasp economic concepts ahistorically—through the externalization of concepts that detaches them

from the social realities and the historicity of their own emergence—were no more than manifestations of metaphysical or idealist ideology. By the same token, he maintained that the opposite of metaphysical idealism, that is, positivistic empiricism, was also untenable as it represented an evasion of universal economic laws established in and by capitalism as a global process. While metaphysical idealism was too removed from everyday life and social practice in its insistence on ahistorical categorical absolutes, positivism served to bypass the unevenly structured materiality of global social practice through an overemphasis on specificity and a rejection of structural analysis.⁴

On Wang's account, in the 1930s and 1940s, the two malevolent trends of idealism/metaphysics and positivistic empiricism were exemplified in China and globally by two flourishing contemporary schools of economics: the Austrian School (metaphysical) and the (German) New Historicists (positivistic empiricism). Wang reserved his most scathing critique for the Austrian School, which, he believed, had thoroughly infiltrated global mainstream and jejune Chinese economics circles with simplistic theories. For Wang, the Austrian School was the more dangerous because it appeared the most commonsensical.⁵ Yet the positivist-empiricist trend as exemplified in the German New Historicists was also troubling to Wang, as many economists of the time (in China as elsewhere) seemed content to delve into endless empiricist detail, thus forsaking attention to theoretical systematicity, historicized social practice, and conceptual rigor. In Wang's estimation, the endless pileup of empirical detail merely led to a historical analytical impasse of repetitive difference, particularly, as was usually the case, when such empiricism was unaccompanied by historically cogent and materially specific conceptualization.

In accordance with his jaundiced view of the major global trends, Wang's assessment of social scientific inquiry, including economics, in the China of his day was also withering. His general observation on this issue pointed to what he deemed the worst of all worlds in China's research practices since the late nineteenth century. These practices entailed the necessary wholesale importation into China of political economy as a discipline and science due to imperialist capitalism and its attendant cultural-intellectual impositions; the subsequent ill-fitting application of this imported discipline and science to Chinese reality; and, finally, the arrival by Chinese scholars at what appeared to be an altogether logical

choice of conclusions: either the theories were faulty and one did not need them because Chinese reality exceeded or lagged behind the theorization, or the theories were fine and Chinese reality was somehow at fault for their ill fit. These two conclusions, Wang noted, corresponded almost exactly to empiricist exceptionalism (a wing of the positivist camp) and metaphysical universalism. One particular target of Wang's critique in the 1930s for his simultaneous propensity toward empiricist exceptionalism *and* metaphysical universalism—as well as for what Marx might have called his conjury of the past to minimize the newness of the present—was the economist and later (in)famous demographer Ma Yinchu.⁶ In the late 1930s, Wang castigated Ma for his willful distortion of Adam Smith's liberalism and his neglect of the historical conditions through and in reaction to which Smith produced his late eighteenth-century study, *Wealth of Nations* (which had been fully translated by Wang and Guo Dali in the late 1920s).⁷ According to Wang, Ma's distortion of Smith and neglect of China's specific history had become the premise of his famous book, *Transformation of the Chinese Economy* [*Zhongguo Jingji Gaizao*].⁸ Of particular concern to Wang was Ma's cavalier attitude toward concepts along with the way Ma based his argument about the reform of the Chinese economy upon a condemnation of the Chinese people for being a “loose plate of sand” (*yipan sansha*), referring to their lack of political organization.⁹ According to Wang, this “looseness” seemed to demonstrate for Ma a Chinese hyperindividualism, proving that “the Chinese people do not need liberalism” of either the political or the economic variety.¹⁰

In his equating of the particularity of China's sociopolitical structure to the concept of liberalism and his consequent distortion of the historicity of China and of the concept of liberalism, Wang accused Ma, among other things, of “playing” (*wannong*) with concepts, here specifically by reducing liberalism to a purported individualism that equated in China to a lack of political organization. This conceptual “playing” allowed Ma (and others, such as close associate and Fudan University economist Li Quanshi) to acknowledge a given concept as the basis for a given theory (thus, to recognize its supposed universalism), reduce the theory/concept to a commonsensical or vulgar core (thus to turn the theory into an ahistorical metaphysics), proclaim the reduced core irrelevant for China because China's reality did not fit its (now distorted) content (hence to exceptionalize China), and thence to proceed to analyze China's situation as if it were divorced from

theory, as if concepts floated free of and could be abstracted from the materiality of their relevance, *and* as if China's reality were entirely outside the realm of common theorization and historical materiality. In Wang's analysis, Ma's simultaneous discarded universalism and derived exceptionalism was no mere methodological choice. Rather, it became and was intended to be a truth-claim about Chinese exceptionalism that could only ever be intensely ideological.¹¹ That is, rather than exploring categorical abstractions in their concrete historical content and manifestations, Ma appeared to be appealing to a category-free content that seemed to transcend history altogether.¹² Wang encapsulated this type of conceptual conjuring and ideological ahistorical claim to truth under the rubric of the "magic of concepts" (*gainian de moshu*).¹³

The "magic of concepts" is a felicitously suggestive formulation. Taking a cue from Wang Yanan's phrase in relation to the problem of history as repetition and conjury named in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, the current book explores some of the normative conceits—concepts—that have come to inform the study of modern Chinese history, not only in the United States but in China and more generally.¹⁴ By the same token, the following essays are sometimes not so much about China *as such* as they are about conceits—concepts—of history, philosophy, and culture as thought through China in the 1930s and 1990s. Let me explain: The normative conceits of social scientific inquiry taken up in the following essays were systematically established in the 1930s in China (although most had piecemeal origins from an earlier period) through a number of contestations and debates enmeshed in ongoing global and Chinese discussions over the nature of conceptualization in the context of a global crisis in political-economic approaches to history more generally. The essays in this book reflect on and document some of the contours of those contestations and debates, many of which revolve around the content and scope of what constitutes "the economic" in concept and social life. In the wake of the demise of Maoist socialism and global revolution in the 1980s and 1990s, many of the formerly most contested of these conceits were rediscovered or redeployed to become *the* central pillars of social scientific and humanities inquiry for a new age of global Chinese studies, in China as elsewhere. While some find in this redeployment evidence for a rupture in or a continuity of Chinese historical inquiry within a strict national historicist periodization (ruptural because the supposed linearity of "modern Chinese

history” was severed by the so-called aberration of socialism; continuous because China’s 1930s modernization can be sutured to the 1990s pursuit of capitalist modernization as if socialism meant nothing), the following essays reject such a national historicist method or premise. Instead, I suggest that a more productive way to think of these redeployments is in the terms of repetition offered by Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. My point is emphatically *not* to erase the socialist moment but rather to track how it has become eminently erasable through the resumption of normative (capitalist) social scientific conceptualization in the 1990s. The monologic dialogues I am setting up, therefore, primarily are between the 1930s and the 1980s and 1990s; in this sense, I am not aiming (and failing) at tracking the furious political battles of the 1980s over the prospects for socialism in China. That latter very important task is being undertaken by others and elsewhere.¹⁵

To my end, the essays in this book track loosely or rigorously the multifaceted discussions in China and globally in the 1920s–1940s (glossed as “the 1930s”) as well as in the 1980s–1990s on “the economic” and its conceptual links to social practice and social life more generally. I pay more attention in both eras to the academic rather than the Party or political side of these debates. The attempt is to understand how certain central concepts emerged—through an alchemy of common sense, debate, scientific truth-claim, and global scholarly consensus—as settled concepts of historical inquiry, which then become repeated in different eras, as if *de facto* and yet *de novo*. This is the problem named by repetition in Marx’s sense. That is, repetition is a form of temporalization, an understanding of history as hereditary through a performative enactment of a spectral return, ghosts often “resuscitated in mythical form” in the service of a reactionary politics.¹⁶ Repetition then is a problem of the dead haunting the living—what Marx called the vampiric—that produces a sense of ostensible continuity, or yet again, of never-ending circling. Marx evokes the vampire figure to name a political economy of the dead: a world soaked in blood and hauntings. I argue that the vampiric nature of the political economy of the modern world can be demonstrated in a historiography of magical concepts in social scientific inquiry. To illustrate this, each essay moves between the 1930s and the 1990s, where the move-between is intended not to erase the existence of the middle—that is, the often-disappeared socialist moment—but rather to illustrate how the very occlusion and disappearing

of the socialist moment help produce the historiographically repetitive magic of concepts that, in the practice of social scientific inquiry, erases challenges to its own normative assumptions through its smooth renarration of history in “objective” terms. That is, crudely, socialism is treated as unobjective and thus ideological, while capitalist social science is considered normative and hence objective; this allows for the challenge that was socialism to be dismissed without serious analysis. Thus if in the 1930s the conceptual landscape was open to debate and question—where concepts were acknowledged to carry ideological weight—after the beginning of the 1980s and certainly by the 1990s, the landscape came to be foreclosed by the repudiation of critique and the rewriting of histories in globally accepted “objective” scholarly terminology, where ideologies are hidden in capitalist (social scientific) normativity. In this sense, then, the relation of the vantages between and within each essay is at once conceptual and material, where each takes on both a self-contained and a connected set of issues. The internal and external relations within and among them are products of actual material linkages; but more explicitly in this book, they are presented as products of the conceptual conflations created by and through particular social scientific premises of comparison and equivalence. They are, in other words, connected through ghostly conjury, repetition, magic.

Rather than take China’s 1930s as continuous with (or ruptural from) the 1980s–1990s under the rubric of a supposedly singular national-cultural subject of history called “China”—a China that seemingly went off the (capitalist) tracks in the 1950s–1970s, only to rejoin those (capitalist) tracks in the 1980s onward—I seek to trouble the stable subject of a singular national history or conceptual community, not by deconstructing the state’s narrative nor by denying the deep historicity of China as a sometimes-unified polity or loose and dispersed historical unity in heterogeneity, but by taking different eras within the supposed national time-space and the similar conceptual languages within the supposed wholeness of “Chinese academic language” as problems in comparison and of critical repetition. As Marx evokes in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, conceptual conjury is often mobilized to envelope history in a “magic cap,”¹⁷ to produce history as a problem of continuity, to dress up dissimilar but seemingly repetitive events in disguise and re-present them as new. In this sense, my intranational comparative strategy intends to bypass ongoing and by now (in my opinion) altogether dead-end debates in the China field about continuity and rup-

ture in China's modern history while at the same time reconfiguring how we might speak of this history as both Chinese and global. In view of the fact that debates on the economic are not unique to China even though they occurred in China in unique ways, the relationality and comparability critically exposed and historically elaborated in the essays in this book focus on how "the economic" came to be detached from a historical philosophy of everyday life and practice in the 1930s and some of the ways this detachment came to be critically apprehended. This detachment helped render economic categories transhistorical, which in turn helped yield a flat terrain of history usually glossed as national space or transnational region, national history, world history, or some other spatialized and naturally temporalized category of an untroubled chronological variety. This flatness was taken up anew in the 1980s and 1990s in the name of professional and objective inquiry after the supposed more ideologically charged socialist period. The book's essays thus individually and collectively also address philosophical problems of comparability/equivalence and historical conceptualization, as well as historical problems of the relationship between concept and practice. In this reading, the magic of concepts, as the name of the problem of uncritical historical repetition and truth-conjuring, is a crucial trope for and entry into my discussions and elaborations.

Of Magic and Concepts

A long anthropological tradition takes magic as a ritualized key to everyday practice in precapitalist ("primitive") societies. A more recent revision of that tradition has critiqued the opposition between magic and rationality, primitivity and modernity by demonstrating that the operations and the productions of magic in and by societies are thoroughly enmeshed in modern processes. Of course Marx long ago asserted and demonstrated, through his analysis of the commodity fetish, the essentially enchanted nature of the modern world. Three major historical approaches to magic have evolved and been developed from the anthropological/sociological literature: a Weberian approach to the role of charisma in leadership regimes, or charisma as the magic of the leader; a Foucauldian/Heideggerian approach to representation in relation to "the real" where the two are, to one degree or the next, set in opposition to one another; and a Marxist/Benjaminian approach to commodity fetishism as an ideological and social form of

reification.¹⁸ Each of these illustrates a certain aspect of the relationship of magic to modernity, where magic operates not as the primitive remnant or occulted exotic but rather as a crucial aspect of the very modern global processes of state formation, language-reality mediations, social formation, and capitalist political economic procedures. Each paradigm suggests, in addition, a relationship of magic and conjury to modern temporality and social conceptualization. Indeed, as Jean Baudrillard noted some time ago in addressing the problem of the “magical thinking of ideology”: “Ideology can no longer be understood as an infra-superstructural relation between a material production . . . and a production of signs. . . . Ideology is thus properly situated on neither side of this split. Rather, it is the one and only form that traverses all the fields of social production. Ideology seizes all production, material or symbolic, in the same process of abstraction, reduction, general equivalence and exploitation.”¹⁹

My interest does not reside in adjudicating among the various approaches. Rather, I suggest how we might cast the problem of magic into a historical frame: when and how did magical thinking—here specifically in the realm of the economic—become possible and relevant in China? When and how did the economic become ideology, if we understand ideology in Baudrillardian terms as a process of “abstraction, reduction, general equivalence and exploitation” tied not only to a local social formation but a global set of contingencies and structures figured in the (inevitable) non-correspondence between concept and material history? Is “magic” a process only of negative conjury, of fetishization and repetitive performativity, or can magic point to something more socially generative and critical?

Working backward from the questions raised above, philosophically we can say that magic evokes certain lived dimensions of temporal disjuncture forced by the modern generalization of abstraction and the condition of historical displacement. As the sociologist Henri Lefebvre noted in this regard, magic evokes a past that has disappeared or is absent; as part of social life, it resurrects the dead or the absent by achieving a “repetition or the renewal of the past.” In this sense, magic “can challenge what has been accomplished and act as though what is is not.”²⁰ For Lefebvre, this imagined renewal and repetition of the past represents a form of everyday life that does not allow for an accumulation of time in the manner understood by historians or social scientists as chronological linearity or national continuities. Rather, the centrality of magic to the ostensibly seamless establish-

ment of a relationship between past and present precisely signals a form of nonaccumulation. That is, magic can signal productively the reorganization of time around a series of moments that may recall, but cannot be said to be continuous with, one another. This form of temporality is what critic Daniel Bensaïd has called “punctuated anachrony,”²¹ a syncopated quality that can help explain why everyday life—as moment and routine, as repetition and renewal—forms the crux of Lefebvre’s philosophical and historical investigations into modernity. As *creative* mediator, magic is crucial to the necessary ambiguity of modern everyday life: it is part of the quotidian suturing of incommensurate temporalities and thus participates in the disjunctive rituals that comprise the everyday. At the same time and often more persuasively or in more saturated fashion, in practical social life, magic is crucial as ideological illusion.²²

In this dual but often contradictory sense—as necessary suture and as illusion—magic suggests a lived form of reciprocal historicity mediated by disjuncture rather than continuity.²³ It thus can indicate how modern temporality can be understood and articulated as objectified experience, even as it is constructed out of severe historical displacement.²⁴ Ritual and magic hence are part and parcel of conventionalization, by helping render the modern experience of sociotemporal displacement into an objectified quotidian.²⁵ Yet, as anthropologist Marilyn Ivy has cogently put it, it is the conventionality of ritual and magic that compels belief: “Only the force of society can insure that the conventional is believable.”²⁶ To the extent, then, that social-scientific languages and concepts create conventionality both in academic inquiry and as a general common sense—thus, to the extent that these concepts mediate between past and present in a seemingly seamless “objective” fashion, abolishing temporality even as they appeal to continuous chronology—they fall squarely within the realm of conceptual (as opposed to lived) magic as here understood.

The problem of magic also suggests epistemological issues in the practice of conceptual history. As historical philosopher Reinhart Koselleck has noted with regard to conceptual histories: “Investigating concepts and their linguistic history is as much a part of the minimal condition for recognizing history as is the definition of history as having to do with human society. . . . Any translation [of concepts] into one’s own present implies a conceptual history. . . . Obviously, the reciprocal interlacing of social and conceptual history was systematically explored only in the 1930s.”²⁷ Indeed,

as a historical datum, a concern with concepts as abstractions—their linguistic and historical specifications as well as their realms of reference—was shared by many scholars and activists in China, as elsewhere, in the 1930s and beyond. Thus, while numerous debates in China at the time—including the social history debate and the agrarian economy debate, among others—were about the urgency of contemporary revolutionary politics, as historian Arif Dirlik has argued,²⁸ yet they were also and importantly about specifying the scope of concepts that could mediate different yet common realities of and in the 1930s world.²⁹ Here, Koselleck's periodizing—originally derived from German scholarly practice but readily recognizable as transcending that particular historical case—is indicative of the global capitalist 1930s experience of general dislocatedness and crisis, the increasing domination of abstraction over life in general, and the corresponding desire to fix understanding of that generalized condition into universal “objective” conceptualization.

By the same token, Koselleck's caution that concepts have a linguistic history is at the same time obvious and endlessly complex as a historical problem; yet it is just part of the larger issue raised by conceptual history. For, although we can certainly register the historical specificity of the 1930s as an extended moment during which the historicity of concepts and their linguistic definitions/equivalences were confronted quite directly in China as globally, our concern cannot stop at the idealist level of conceptual history as a linguistic, translational, disciplinary, or even functional history of concepts. That is, rather than be limited by what, in current academic parlance, goes by the methodological label of the translatability of, or establishment of, equivalence between concepts—whether from foreign to native soil or from past to present/present to past³⁰—we need to be attentive to the historical conditions of necessity for the incorporation of concepts, not only as textual affect but as material effect into specific historical situations. In this sense, while many recent theorists have taken up the question of translation as the crux of the philosophical problem of sociohistorical forms of mediation, they often do not specify that this form of mediation is particular to the historical conditions of modernity. In other words, they do not recognize adequately, as part of their interpretive practice or premise, that the re-enchantment of the world in and through the dominance of the commodity form raises the problem of “translatability” as a historical/philosophical problem of a particular form of mediation

specific to an era of social abstraction where “equivalence” can only be given in the abstract. Without this specificity, the historical problematic of translatability cannot exist philosophically as a historicized problem of abstraction pertaining to a particular extended historical moment. Rather, it can only exist as a mechanical problem of language equivalence. Here, then, for translation as a method to have historical analytical purchase beyond a mechanical or technical applicability, it must be seen as a particular historicized form of mediation, as part of the complex problem of modern historical abstraction.³¹

In this regard, we should recognize, as anthropologist James Clifford writes, that “all broadly meaningful concepts . . . are translations, built from imperfect equivalences.”³² By the same token, as I just argued, a focus on translatability as (the search for) equivalence is insufficient to historical explanation and problematization. Instead, what is needed is attention to what historical anthropologist John Kraniuskas analyzes as the contested and violent material process rendering translation historically necessary to produce and reproduce the global uneven processes of historical materialization characteristic of modernity.³³ This is what Brazilian literary critic Roberto Schwarz calls, in an ironic or even sardonic gesture, “misplaced ideas.”³⁴ This process of “misplacement” (so close to, but so far from, displacement!) is rooted in modern imperialist-colonialist encounters: those encounters that produced global unevenness as a necessary premise of all social relations, meanwhile producing abstraction as a necessary mode of social reproduction. In other words, these are not matters merely of discursive appropriation, of genealogies of particular words (vocabulary or language change) or representational practices in disciplinary regimes or techniques. Rather, these are issues embedded within and produced through the broad historical conditions informing and forcing appropriative activity, as a matter of language and power, to be sure, but, more materially, as a matter of and in the production of the everyday and its conceptualization as an uneven yet simultaneous form of modern global social life within the abstracting processes of capitalist expansion and reproduction in different local parts of the globe simultaneously.

Thus, unlike Koselleck or Clifford, whose formulations of the problem of equivalence ultimately are irresolvable (there can never be perfect linguistic, historical, or social equivalence),³⁵ the “magic of concepts” or magical concepts, in Wang Yanan’s sense as well as in the sense evoked in the essays

in this book, does not register only a linguistic, self-reflexive, or methodological impasse. For, all of those merely lead to a historical-conceptual dead end or increasingly circular or involuted modes of analysis that ultimately lead to claims of cultural or historical exceptionalism. Rather, the “magic of concepts” is at one and the same time a condemnation of a lack of historical-conceptual reflexivity as well as a potentially generative call for an engagement with the conceptual complexity of history as lived global and local experience and social practice. It is from the specificity of those processes of production and reproduction of the social experience of everyday life that the significance and utility of various concepts for analysis of social life are derived. It is also from that experience that these concepts gain the ability to indicate the contours of a possible futurity that is *of the world* rather than exceptionally apart from the world as either a utopian nowhere or an idealized recovery of some distant (nonexistent) past. What the magic of concepts indicates is that to ignore the dialectic between concepts, history, and the present/future is to deny the relational temporal dimensions of the historicity of concepts. And, to do that is to engage in sleights of hand, methodologically and, more importantly, ideologically. Indeed, denying such a dialectic upholds a pursuit of normative conventionalization and thence of a politically and socially truncated version of extant common sense, in which futurity—and with it, politics—can be erased as utopian and thus unthinkable.

China Studies, Concepts, Translations

While the relationship of concept to history has arisen insistently in China studies—most recently, since the 1980s onset of the rethinking of the role of Marxism/Maoism in Chinese history—discussions of and proposed resolutions to the concept/history problem often continue to be stuck in a cycle of nativist/foreign (Chinese/Western) claims. In the most general of terms, recently what we can call China-centered scholars (those who take the contestation of Eurocentrism in history as a key target of critique so as to recenter Chineseness) as well as “national essence” (*guocui*) scholars (those who take the discovery of the revival and/or survival of native traditions as a key goal of writing history and understanding the past) insist that foreign (“Western”) concepts can only ever collide with Chinese reality, that such concepts can never be adequate to China’s reality. This nativist or neonativ-

ist tendency (whether invoked by Chinese or non-Chinese scholars, by national essence or anti-Eurocentric scholars) recapitulates a frequent refrain in area studies more generally. That is, the area (whichever one) is so historically different and unique as to be *sui generis*, culturally so different as to be describable only in its own conceptual terms. Yet problems raised by the adequacy of concepts to history cannot be construed so narrowly as a problem of the operationalization of native method, as a genealogy of native concepts, or as the establishment of pure equivalence in application between a unique culture and a set of concepts derived from a geographical or temporal elsewhere.³⁶ For, it is the specific conditions through and in which concept and history are mediated—the structured historical conditions demanding mediation—that must form the core of concern among those analyzing disjunct histories (whether the disjunctures are spatial or temporal or, more likely, both), if reifications of imputed native authenticity or of some external conceptual unity are not to be elevated and valorized. This problem is discussed variously in the first and fourth essays in this book in a relatively concerted fashion. For example, as discussed in the fourth essay, so far as Wang Yanan is concerned, China's conditions were shaped by what he called its “hyocolonized” (*cizhimindi*) situation in the global 1930s.³⁷ Putting aside for the moment the contestedness of the term *hyocolonization* and its relation to semicolonization (problems that are particular to a form of Chinese historiography), we can recognize this condition (whatever it might describe or name) as one of forced mediation. In such a condition of historically forced mediation, as Roberto Schwarz points out, “anyone who uses the words ‘external influence’ is thinking . . . of the cultural alienation that goes with economic and political subordination.”³⁸ Since the process of subordination—or of historico-cultural alienation—is raised by the problem of concept-history mediation in the era of imperialism as a violently enforced necessity, asserting an authentic native reality in the form of a primordially existing social excess outside conceptualization and historical materialization can only appear as evasion, ideology, or, in short, magic. What appears—or what some analysts wish to preserve—as a social space of untouched authenticity can only be the mystified or reified domination of concepts over life.

It is precisely from the premise of global capitalist unevenness that Wang Yanan refused the idea that there is a primordial Chinese social reality outside conceptualization and historical materialization. For him, the geographical

problem of “Eurocentrism” was the historical problem of capitalism. As he recognized, there is a historically specific experience to which the importation of concepts corresponds. In addressing this issue in the 1930s, Wang Yanan wrote witheringly of those who mobilized a China-centered, self-referential conceptual universe to grasp their current situation: “If they want to understand things this way as a mode of ‘self-fulfillment,’ of course they are free to do so; but they actually are advocating for it: using conclusions that bear no relation to reality in order to suit the demands of reality.”³⁹ For Wang, this so-called nativist-based methodology only managed to evade substantive engagement with China’s contemporary (nonreducible) problems. Not only did it work to inscribe an enduring China as a mythical real standing outside the historicity of imperialist-capitalist imposition, but it also inscribed a counterpart “West” that was also outside history. It failed, then, to grapple with the actuality of abstracted social relations as a fact of the modern capitalist world. With his deep suspicions about Chinese exceptionalism as well as a culturally reduced “West,” and his simultaneous cautions about proper thinking about political economic theoretical concepts, Wang’s concern about imported concepts rarely revolved around their applicability to China or their “sinification,” as it were. For such concerns he had only contempt. Instead, his concern was with the coerced ways in which conceptual imports arrived (through capitalist imperialism and invasion, thus as commodities in a fully fetishized and ideological sense) and the consequently mechanical or slavish ways in which many in China either “applied” them or rejected them out of hand. Indeed, Wang’s emphasis on the dialectic between practice and concept points to the inevitable mediated nature of conceptualization in an era of forced interaction (the inevitably mediated nature of the temporal present of global capitalism).

In Wang’s understanding, the importation into China of political economic theory was irrevocably marked by the continuously violent and ongoing historicity of incorporation, and the concrete materiality of the transculturation and enforced modes of mediation as actually lived social processes. The question posed for Wang hence was not whether imported theory and concepts fit Chinese reality or Chinese reality fit imported theory and concepts: this mode of posing the question was a red herring as well as an alibi for lazy thinking. In Wang’s view, the tendential global reach of capitalism through its violent expansion over the world already had imposed

upon all countries and societies a partially universal character in the form of a shared set of economic, social, political, and cultural problematics. These shared problematics were the inevitable condition produced by and resulting from the historical formation of capitalism as a global systemic structure and the increasing abstractions in and of life. To the extent that post-Opium War China (1840s and beyond) had become firmly embedded in the global capitalist system—a fact that, for Wang, was not in doubt—classical or postclassical political economy, which derived from and arose to explore and explain capitalism, were eminently relevant to China's contemporary reality. And yet for Wang the generalization of capitalism and of the economic theory tied to it clearly did not erase the historical specificity of China's current situation. To the contrary, it rendered that temporal specificity—or contemporaneity—historically concrete, globally synchronous, and legible. In other words, China's specificity could be seen only in relation to the generality rendering it visible. In this sense, capitalism and China could not be treated as external to one another; they had to be seen and researched as mutually constitutive of, albeit obviously not reducible to, each other.

Here, the fact of a universalizing capitalism was not the problematic aspect of the use of political economic theory in China, as universalizing capitalism had forced China into political economy's theoretical and material ambit. Global capitalism could not be understood without China; China could not be understood without global capitalism. What most troubled Wang was the magic wielded by his fellow economists and social scientists (Chinese and foreign), who erased the global generality of the current situation, so as to protect a purportedly enduring and untouched Chinese reality—a genuine and unsullied native sphere—outside it. This magic already had become a method and an ideology; it had become a widespread and seductive process of conjury premised upon retrospectively constructed false temporal (national) continuities as well as conceptual confluences and reductions. Its primary content was the instantiation of an ahistorical culturalist essence attached to a would-be nation-state, serving not to connect China to its history and past but rather to sever China from historicity in general and from the contemporary moment in particular. Yet, by the same token, Wang was also quite certain that those who denied China's specificity in order to apply some set of theories from “advanced” countries and philosophies in mechanical and unmediated fashion were also at great

fault. Indeed, his lifelong project was to think through and elucidate how Chinese reality and global universal capitalist socioeconomic theory could be united analytically, historically, and for the specification of a global present and a national future, whose futurity could not be foretold.

In Wang's view, it was necessary to turn attention to the concretization of the philosophy of political economy in China as a specific practice linked to its global systemic nature. It was, hence, futile to concentrate on the foreign origins of the concepts. A critique of Eurocentrism—its posited unitary historical teleology, and its linguistic-discursive impositions—was necessary but not adequate. In this sense, Wang's endeavor, at its most abstract, can be seen as answering Henri Lefebvre's demand that modern philosophy be recalled to its original vocation by "bringing it back into the sphere of real life and the everyday without allowing it to disappear within it."⁴⁰ The essays in this book are intended as a modest contribution to that project as against the detachment of philosophy and the economic from everyday life as adequate to sociohistorical inquiry.

The Essays

Each of the essays that compose this book was written for a specific occasion or in answer to a specific historical question raised in the China field or in academic practice generally. They were written over a period of a decade and intended, originally, to be crafted into a monograph. I instead have decided to just leave them as intellectually connected essays. Each essay, therefore, is a self-contained argument while also receiving amplification and elaboration in relation to the other essays. The topics represent some of the things I have been thinking and teaching about for the past decade. They also can be considered as a first approach to Wang Yanan and his circle of thought. A monograph that takes up Wang more centrally is in progress; I hope there to elaborate more clearly on some of the emergent themes here, and to take up interlocutory aspects of Wang's thought that are inadequately developed in the present volume.⁴¹

The first essay, "The Economic, China, World History: A Critique of Pure Ideology," explores the recent debates about the nature of the eighteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese economy. The essay examines the instantiation of an ideology of "the economic" as a form of implicit or explicit comparison that sutures past to present in magical fashion. Fundamentally antihis-

torical, “the economic” is an empiricist conceptual methodology that now dominates—as it did in the 1930s, albeit differently—much inquiry into modern Chinese history. The essay discusses how “the economic” became a dominant mode of writing world history: critically in the 1930s and normatively in the 1990s.

“The Economic and the State: The Asiatic Mode of Production” moves to a discussion of the centrality of the untheorized central state in Chinese history. By exploring the significances of the Asiatic mode of production as a form of statist culturalism—in the 1930s and, in a very different register with utterly different resonance, in the post-Mao period—this essay brings to visibility the magic of the ahistorical state as a default narrator or narrative center of national and imperial thinking.

“The Economic as Transhistory: Temporality, the Market, and the Austrian School” and “The Economic as Lived Experience: Semicolonialism and China” both centrally take up Wang Yanan and his critique of liberalism and incipient neoliberalism (the Austrian School) from a non-Communist Marxist perspective. Wang’s critique of the Austrian School of economics, as discussed in the third essay, along with his elaboration of “semicolonialism” as the lived experience of imperialist capitalism in China’s 1920s–1930s, as discussed in the fourth essay, were intended to bring economics back to its roots in everyday life. The reappearance in the 1990s of the doctrines of neoliberalism (in Hayekian form) and issues of semicolonialism (in cultural postcolonial form) are taken up in counterpoint.

The final essay, “The Economic as Culture and the Culture of the Economic: Filming Shanghai,” compares two films about Shanghai—one from the end of the 1940s and one from the 1990s—and about economy, culture, and China’s imagined historical trajectory. The comparative discussion illuminates how the economic becomes thoroughly culturalized by the 1990s. A brief afterword concludes the volume.