

## INTRODUCTION

### *Literature and Revolutionary China*

#### I

In my opinion, the deep division within contemporary Chinese thought or theory does not mainly reside in how to understand and criticize existing social problems. Rather, major divisions exist more in the field of history. These divisions are not so much due to entanglements about the facts of any particular case, as historical materials can always be made to speak to different theories, and individual cases can also be exaggerated by anyone who wishes to present him or herself as an interpreter of history. Indeed, anyone can list a series of individual cases to pass judgment on history. Ideas, class-specific memories, positions, and even an individual's physical senses, hidden behind dazzling academic jargon and amid the sound and fury of self-delusional depoliticization, in actuality all manifest a strong political quest, regardless of whether or not one is willing to admit to it. Max Weber states that "you serve this god and you offend the other god when you decide to adhere to this position."<sup>1</sup>

1. Max Weber, "Part I Science and Politics," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans., ed., with an introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 77–156.

In this sense, as I have suggested elsewhere, the sixty-year history of contemporary Chinese literature has in essence become a battlefield.

In his review of the first volume of Feng Youlan's *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Chen Yinque states that “for those who write about the history of Chinese philosophy, when it comes to the ideas of the ancients, they must not begin to write until they acquire a sympathy based on understanding. . . . They must learn to think and imagine so as to reach the same state of mind as the ancients, and, even if they do not share the same views, they must express a willingness to understand.”<sup>2</sup> In recent years, many scholars in China have accepted Chen's “understanding-based sympathy,” which has also become a scholarly approach in the study of the history of contemporary Chinese literature.

But what does such a sympathy mean? What is to be understood? And how to sympathize? According to Chen, sympathy is a kind of attitude. In this sense, then, “understanding-based sympathy” is premised on the establishment of a particular kind of attitude toward history. In my view, this attitude is both scholarly and political, for—at least with regard to contemporary [since 1949] Chinese history—there is no transcendent or pure scholarship. A historical attitude here must direct its attention to the problematics (*mingti*) of the “resistance of the weak,” an issue that is both historically specific and theoretically challenging.

Throughout the twentieth century, this issue of resistance of the weak was Marxified—or, more specifically, Leninized—in China as well as in other parts of the world. According to [Alain] Badiou's succinct summary of the *Communist Manifesto*, communism

means, first, that the logic of class—the fundamental subordination of labour to a dominant class, the arrangement that has persisted since Antiquity—is not inevitable; it can be overcome. The communist hypothesis is that a different collective organization is practicable, one that will eliminate the inequality of wealth and even the division of labour. The private appropriation of massive fortunes and their transmission by inheritance will disappear. The existence of a coercive state, separate from civil society,

2. Chen Yinque, “Feng Youlan zhexueshi shangce shencha baogao” [Review report on Feng Youlan's *History of Chinese Philosophy*, volume 1], in *Chen Yinque ji: jinmingguan congkao erbian* [Collected writings of Chen Yinque: Second publication of the jinmingguan collection] (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2001), 279.

will no longer appear a necessity: a long process of reorganization based on a free association of producers will see it withering away.<sup>3</sup>

Supporters and detractors of this resistance of the weak debate among themselves not only the legitimacy of the Chinese revolution, but also issues of justice in the future. Different political positions tend to condition different historical attitudes, including different scholarly views. When positions and historical attitudes are completely opposite to one another, I have a hard time seeing the possibility of compromise and communication between different schools. Debates tend to result in friends becoming strangers and going their separate ways.

Once we have established our own historical attitude through which we emphasize the legitimacy of the Chinese revolution, we also recognize that this legitimacy was grounded in the [social foundation of the] resistance of the weak and in the demands of labor—that is, the laborers—to be liberated from a state of alienation. With this attitude, I do not believe I have any reason to interpret modern rebellion as any sort of illegitimate political pursuit.

At the same time, with this attitude there could be a scholarly or conceptual danger of interpreting our history as a garden of Eden, one that was serene and wonderful. Such an interpretation can evoke an original sin implication that not only might delegitimize the various kinds of exploratory ideas and resistances that existed in the socialist period, but also might dampen any courage and drive to imagine and create a new future. In fact, I agree more with Chen's further explanation of what he meant by sympathy based understanding: that "it is very easy for this kind of attitude of sympathy to fall into the bad habit of providing far-fetched interpretation" due to the fact that "the ancient materials either no longer exist in full or are too difficult to decipher; and, without a process of careful reading and comparison, there is no history of philosophy to speak of."<sup>4</sup> In other words, when we use our own contemporary theories, knowledge, and attitude to reconstruct history, we are prone to making mistakes in which "the more systematized [our] theory is, the further we are from a relation to the essence of ancient thoughts and ideas."<sup>5</sup>

3. Alain Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," *New Left Review* 49, January–February 2008, 34–35.

4. Chen Yinque, "Feng Youlan zhongguo zhexueshi shangce shencha baogao" [Review report of Feng Youlan's *History of Chinese Philosophy*, volume 1] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1980), 247.

5. Ibid.

According to this logic, we ought not to remain only at the level of stressing the legitimacy of the Chinese revolution. On the contrary, besides the powerful empirical facts that the legitimacy of the revolution generated, I am more concerned with the irrationality to which this legitimacy also gave rise. What this means is that we should not take the simple route of being confined by our position and attitude; instead, we must return to the complexities of historical trajectories. Such complexities, additionally, are not a simple totality of specific cases and historical detail—too often we have seen certain specific cases and details being singled out and magnified from a particular narrative point of view, when in fact the self-proclaimed universal narratives embedded are quite ideological. Rather, the complexities here refer to structural issues and trajectories, as well as to the range of entangled logics within.

Badiou, in a resolute rhetorical style, expounds on the fate and work of the Left in the West:

In many respects we are closer today to the questions of the 19th century than to the revolutionary history of the 20th. A wide variety of 19th-century phenomena are reappearing: vast zones of poverty, widening inequalities, politics dissolved into the “service of wealth,” the nihilism of large sections of the young, the servility of much of the intelligentsia; the cramped, besieged experimentalism of a few groups seeking ways to express the communist hypothesis. . . . Which is no doubt why, as in the 19th century, it is not the victory of the hypothesis which is at stake today, but the conditions of its existence. This is our task, during the reactionary interlude that now prevails: through the combination of thought processes—always global, or universal, in character—and political experience, always local or singular, yet transmissible, to renew the existence of the communist hypothesis, in our consciousness and on the ground.<sup>6</sup>

On the whole, I tend to agree with Badiou. But the question is: how do we return to the nineteenth century? I believe there is no other way except by taking the legacies of the twentieth century with us—legacies that include the good and the bad and lessons from many failures—to probe and reexamine, so that we can better prepare for the arrival of another new century. Perhaps the new century is a long way away from us. Yet, as Zygmunt Bauman states, “by itself, knowledge does not determine which of the two uses we resort to. This is, ultimately, a matter of our own choice. But without that knowledge

6. Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” 41–42.

there would be no choice to start with. With knowledge, free men and women have at least some chance to exercise their freedom.<sup>77</sup>

Of course I do know that, within the context of contemporary Chinese literature, such a reexamination could be perceived as sounding lofty.

## II

In this study, *revolutionary China* is largely a metaphorical term used mainly to draw a necessary line between it and traditional China or modern China. Many times and in many places distinctions among the three are not always clear. By *traditional China*, I refer to the ancient empire and the various cultural imaginaries and forms that existed within it. *Modern China* mainly denotes the period after China was forced into modernization in the late Qing Dynasty [1850s–1911] and the consequent Chinese pursuit, emulation, and imagination of Western classical modernity, which may be more simply identified as bourgeois modernity. Both traditional China and modern China, of course, are themselves figures of speech. *Revolutionary China*, needless to say, denotes the theoretical exploration, social revolution, and cultural practices of the twentieth century under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. In relation to this point, it is necessary to mention *Reinterpretation (Zai jiedu)*, a book edited by Tang Xiaobing that was first published in Hong Kong in the mid-1990s and that, after publication, found various ways of reaching the mainland.<sup>8</sup> The importance of this book exists not only in its generating a revolution (of sorts) in the methodological approach to the study of contemporary Chinese literature, but also in its Chinese interpretation of modernity that helped liberate the notion of the contemporary (*dangdai*) from the relational confines of the notion of the feudal (*fengjian*), a conceptual framework that had been established in the 1980s. Tang's book helped significantly broaden the scope of discussion. At the same time, however, too broad a discussion of modernity is likely to erase the difference between revolution and modernity, including how we explain the difference between capitalism and socialism.

I do not mean to suggest there are not explicit or implicit historical connections between revolution and modernity. On the contrary, in just about

7. Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2.

8. Tang Xiaobing, *Zai jiedu* [Reinterpretation] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993). Tr.: In this volume, Cai Xiang cites from the second edition of the book which was published by Peking University Press in 2007.

every aspect, the Chinese revolution can be seen as the radical inheritor of the May Fourth New Culture Movement. Or we can say that revolutionary China is the child of modernity. As for identifying the Chinese revolution as a peasant revolution, that is no more than an empirical observation based on the fact that most of the participants in the revolution were peasants. Such an identification ignores the political modernity of the Party—the core of which was a collective of modern intellectuals—that led the revolution. The revolution’s modern nature resides not only in the fact that the Party was an internationally active political organization, but also in the fact that modernizing was the major goal of the revolution, to be carried out in political, economic, and cultural terms. Indeed, in contemporary Chinese literature, traces of modernity existed in the social form shaped by heavy industry in the modern organizational model of the nation-state, as well as in the cultural expressions of radical pursuits for personal and individual freedom. Even at moments of radical debate on the form of literature, there continued to exist in-depth depictions of individual characters’ inner thoughts or feelings. That was the case regardless of whether, in contemporary Chinese literature, such depictions took the form of a “new socialist person” or a “typical character in a typical environment” (*dianxing huanjing xia de dianxing renwu*).

In fact, such modern traces exist across the board in the narratives of revolutionary China. We can recall Liang Qichao’s [1902] criticism of the “old historiography,” in which history “was always written for the court and ministers but never for ordinary people” and which “was only cognizant of individuals but not [social] groups,” “only good at describing but not prescribing,” and “only about facts and not about ideals.”<sup>9</sup> If we then recall a famous statement by Mao Zedong regarding his view of history, we realize that the latter did not come from nowhere: “History is created by people. But on the stage of old operas (and in all the old literature and art that had little concern about ordinary people), people were portrayed as dregs while their masters dominated the stage. Now you have reversed what had been turned upside down, returning history to its actual look. I congratulate you on turning a new page on the old opera.”<sup>10</sup>

9. Liang Qichao, “Xin shixue” [New historiography], in *Qingdai xueshu gailun* [An overview of Qing Dynasty scholarship], ed. Xia Xiaohong (Beijing: Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 2004), 232–34.

10. Mao Zedong, “Gei Yang Shaoxuan, Qi Yanming de xin” [Letter to Yang Shaoxuan and Qi Yanming], in *Mao Zedong wenji* [Collected Writings of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1996), 3:88.

It goes without saying that it is this kind of modern [impulse] that led to the strong antitraditional characteristics of revolutionary China. However, we must not equate the modernity pursued by revolutionary China with bourgeois modernity. First, we ought not to understand the Chinese revolution as purely a nationalist revolution (despite its strong national color). On the contrary, this revolution always had a strong internationalist tendency. Both during its early association with the Communist International and later, in the formation of the theory and practice of the Third World, there were clear indications of the international backdrop of revolutionary China. Second, such internationalism is proletarian in nature, which in turn conditioned the difference in value orientation between revolutionary China and modern China, with the former refusing to join the world capitalist system. The difference is primarily manifested in revolutionary China's attempts at transforming itself from a nation-state to a class-state, where the subalterns became the masters of the state with a newly promoted politics of dignity; where, among other things, the bureaucracy was constantly challenged and resisted; and where a new principle of relatively equal distribution was established. All of this revealed revolutionary China's "antimodern" characteristics that, according to Wang Hui, can be identified as a kind of "antimodern modernity."<sup>11</sup> Of course, there may be other identifications such as "alternative modernity" or "revolutionary modernity." At issue, however, is not what label to attach but in-depth analysis and discussion.

It is important to note that revolutionary China's challenge and resistance to modernity simultaneously carried with it a strong local color. I do not want, however, to place the discussion of the local quality within the framework of nationalism. I emphasize its localism to stress the fact that "any political experience is always local and unique."<sup>12</sup> But we must not assume that no universality can stem from local political experiences. This in fact explains why revolutionary China would later participate in the struggle for worldwide universality, even if the struggle was mainly confined to Marxist terms. This struggle does not have to do only with the legitimacy of one locale's political experience. Rather, it has everything to do with how to construct a vision for

11. Wang Hui, "Dangdai zhongguo de sixiang zhuangkuang yu xiandaixing wenti" [Contemporary Chinese thought and the question of modernity], *Tianya* (Frontiers) 5 (1997). Tr.: For English translation, see "Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity," trans. Rebecca Karl, *China's New Order*, ed. Theodore Hutters (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 139–87.

12. Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," 42.

the world that is both universal and diverse. It is in this sense that I believe that revolutionary China is one of the most important [conceptual and historical] legacies of the twentieth century.

Precisely due to this particular local political experience, which is also a particular local literary experience, there also exists a complex relationship between revolutionary China and traditional China. Similar to the entanglement between revolutionary and modern China in the literary sphere, in the political sphere the relationship between revolutionary and traditional China is often imbued with paradoxes. On the one hand, the Chinese revolution completely turned the traditional hierarchical order upside down; this included destroying the rural clan system. Such destruction demonstrates the modern characteristics of revolutionary China. On the other hand, revolutionary China also enlisted different aspects of traditional cultural resources and successfully transformed them into locally specific modern forms. Such a transformation is multilayered. For example, while the rural clan system was destroyed by the revolution, yet because contemporary China retained the natural village as an organizational unit across the rural regions, [post-1949] society was able to effectively use the governing model of the traditional clan. In literature, therefore, we find narratives about someone who leads or is the head of the house, such as Liang Baosheng in *The Builders*. These narratives are indications that traditional ethical politics may well have continued to exist even as they were being transformed in and by China's contemporary society.

As a matter of fact, the Chinese revolution offered creative and successful experiences and models for dealing with the complex relationship between modernity and tradition. How to understand all of this remains an important area for further study, including the question of how to study the politics of resistance in the socialist period. Obviously it is not difficult to focus on ostensibly dissident views, such as the relationship between [Aleksandr] Solzhenitsyn's Gulag system and Soviet communism. Rather, the difficulty lies in how to understand the fact that Chinese socialism retained within its own system a politics of resistance that provided it with a degree of legitimacy. Mass movements (including the "four bigs")<sup>13</sup> not only became a form of resistance from within the system, but they also contributed to the formation of the structure of feeling of socialist society in which antibureaucratism was

13. Tr.: The "four bigs" refer to "daming, dafang, dazibao, dabanlun," loosely translated as speaking out freely, airing views fully, holding great debates, and writing big-characters posters.



naturally legitimate, a legitimacy that allowed constant antisystemic movements to occur. I do not attribute such resistance to influence either from the West or from Chinese tradition, because such attributions tend to turn resistance into a natural part of elite intellectual history or the birthright domain of the Chinese peasants themselves, thereby channeling antisystemic resistance into the ideological framework of a capitalist—liberal capitalist, for example—interpretation. On the contrary, the antisystemic movements originated more from the support of the system itself (including the support of Mao Zedong), in the attempt, based on communist ideals and visions, to combat or resist certain concrete practices in socialism. I believe this constitutes the essence and complexity of the politics of resistance in the socialist period. What became a problem had to do with the fact that in the socialist period, the boundaries of the politics of resistance were difficult to delimit. On the one hand, the system hoped to use the politics of resistance to overcome systemic problems of its own. On the other hand, whenever such politics transgressed certain limits, the suppression of mass movements followed—the Anti-Rightist Campaign [1957] and the Cultural Revolution being two prominent examples. At the same time, however, such politics of resistance (mass movements) were considered legitimate within the system (supported by its ideology). Such legitimacy would allow this politics of resistance to move beyond the memories of a past suppression, to call on and attract new participants for inclusion.

That is to say, we must recognize that, even in the socialist period, this politics of resistance still presented a significant danger. Only with this dialectical understanding can we explain why, during the socialist period, there always existed antisystemic movements—regardless of their forms—and can we understand how they helped constitute a vital social force in that society. Even today they remain, in the form of a tradition that continues to influence us. At the same time, I have refused to describe modern Chinese history simply as a history of ideas of elite intellectuals. I prefer to treat modern Chinese history as a spatial domain, where different forces contend with one another for ideas and interests and where contingent political opportunities occur.

Meanwhile, we must also recognize that this particular local political and cultural experience has always existed within the conflict between certain universal ideas. This local experience, moreover, can, from time to time, be suppressed by such universality. For example, the process of the Chinese revolution created a political situation that was heterogeneous in nature, be it in the governing of the minority regions or the creation of rural and urban differ-

ences. Meanwhile, this state of heterogeneity inevitably faced two challenges, one in the domain of governance and one in terms of ideology. When it comes to the form of governing, the heterogeneity was challenged by the centralized state power in its modernization pursuits. Socialist ideology, by the same token, was universal and required a tendency toward homogeneity as opposed to heterogeneity. As a result, conflicts between homogeneity and heterogeneity ensued. Recognition of the local political experience created during and by revolutionary China must therefore be juxtaposed to recognition of the local conflict with universality. In this sense, we could say that the so-called new and creative form (including newly created system) of the first thirty years of the People's Republic of China (including the Cultural Revolution period) was in fact not new enough.

However, some newer ideas and concepts may have been articulated in literature. For this reason, therefore, when it comes to the study of the literature of this period, I would caution against a ready application of the notion of system unification (*yitihua*), a concept originally put forward by the scholar Hong Zicheng.<sup>14</sup> A literal interpretation of the concept could lead to treating the literature of the first thirty years as if it were an absolute and homogeneous system. To be sure, to go against that grain entails greater difficulties, for the object of the present study is not clearly defined: it can be described as part of the system, albeit mixed with antisystemic elements; or it can be identified as the antisystemic nature inherent in the system itself or as a system that is inherently antisystemic. Nevertheless, precisely because of such a lack of clarity, the present study provides the possibility for close textual reading of contemporary Chinese literature. It also challenges us to come up with a new methodological approach.

### III

When discussing the legitimacy of revolutionary China, one inevitably encounters challenges and questions. Issues such as violence cannot be fully addressed by relying on a certain historical attitude only. Needless to say, like many other revolutions, including bourgeois revolutions, the Chinese revolution was accompanied with blood and violence. Few people, I believe, would praise violence just for its own sake. The real issue lies in how to examine

14. See Hong Zicheng, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi* [History of contemporary Chinese literature] (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Dhubanshe, 1998).

revolutionary violence. One view stipulates that revolution is often forced and is therefore by nature violent. This description, however, does not offer an in-depth explanation of what constitutes revolutionary violence. While there exist a slew of studies on violence by the state or by the masses, when it comes to the specific violent forms of the Chinese revolution, few profound or historically sound studies exist. The factors that prevent in-depth study from occurring are very complex; some of those factors include criticisms based on memories informed by a particular class position, but more criticisms tend to be opportunistically motivated. For such critics, there is a ready resort to humanism whenever they wish to critique the violence of resisters. But when facing violence by the oppressors, they pretend neither to see nor to hear it, and their humanism is nowhere to be found. Of course one does not have to take such opportunistic criticism too seriously, but it is nevertheless the most difficult kind to deal with, for whenever we are prepared to seriously address it, it tends to quickly disappear into another system of logic.

Still, this does not mean that violence is not an important issue to address and debate. Quite the contrary. To a certain extent, violence is already not about violence itself, but a domain for debate. By entering this domain, not only can we delve more deeply into specific historical contexts, but we can also better grasp the structure of ideas in our own times. For example, among all criticisms of violence, land reform may figure as one of the most important [revolutionary] symbols. But many of the criticisms of land reform are mixed up with a positive imaginary of the traditional gentry-class structure and a tendency to resort to a moralistic discourse. Many such critics fail to realize that this rural social structure had already declined and disintegrated over a long period of time in history. After the mid-nineteenth century, the rise of the modern nation-state further demanded the establishment of a different social structure—the process of destruction of the old structure in early Chinese modern history had also given rise to landlords turning into local tyrants. The Chinese revolution was mainly to further carry out the historical trajectory and put it into practice. The scholar Du Runsheng summarizes the significance of the land reform in two points: (1) for the construction of a modern nation-state system, and (2) for the peasants to acquire their own class consciousness.<sup>15</sup> It goes without saying that such important historical events should not be interpreted only in moral terms. At the same time, I do not

15. Du Runsheng, *Du Runsheng zishu: Zhongguo nongcun tizhi biange zhongda juece jishi* [Du Runsheng remembers: Memories of the important decisions on China's village structural transformation] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2005), 18–20.

agree with the violence that occurred after 1949, especially certain discriminatory violence that emerged from the simple fact that by then the proletariat had become power holders. So it should be clear that my understanding-based sympathy largely sides with the resistance of the weak. Only when we critically reflect on discriminatory violence can we better understand the significance of Yu Luoke's *On Family Origin* (*Chushen lun*) [which critiqued such a discriminatory basis for violence].<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, however, I would still argue that even when it comes to discriminatory violence, our understanding should not remain at the level of morality alone. There are quite a few other factors to consider, including the international and geopolitical during the first thirty years after 1949.

So far as my study is concerned, I pay particular attention to criticisms from within China's own scholarly communities. One of those critiques stipulates that we return to modern Chinese history to find the origins of various strands of thought. From the very beginning of this history, there were already, albeit fragmented, thoughts and ideas akin to socialism.<sup>17</sup> The significance of these early ideas lies in the need for us to expand the resources for developing our own ideas by enlisting certain existing schools of thought in our thinking today. The truth of the matter is that the Chinese theory of socialism we discuss today tends to be too unilateral, oriented too much around Mao Zedong's words and ideas. Other communist theorists such as Zhang Wentian and Xie Juezai rarely enter our theoretical horizon. For this reason, I agree with the argument that we need to open our minds and expand our theoretical horizon further. At the same time, I do not take this argument as the politically correct point of departure in my study, because I do not subscribe to the same logic as those who foreground this view and argue that the problem with revolutionary history is that it veered off course from those early theorists' views. I prefer to examine theory within a specific historical context—which, in this case, is the context of the Chinese revolution, including all the historical experiences that created revolutionary China. I believe

16. Yu Luoke, "Chushen lun" [On family origins], *Wenhua dageming he ta de yidian sichao* [The Great Cultural Revolution and its hereditary thought], ed. Song Yongyi (Hong Kong: Tianyuan Shuwu, 1997).

17. Tr.: See Arif Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) for indications of early strands of radical socialistic thinking. Also see Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko, eds., *The Birth of Chinese Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), general and historical introductions, for summaries of early radicalism and feminism.

it is only when we enter these experiences directly that we can actually enter contemporary Chinese history to learn from both its experiences and lessons. Only when we are clear about this particular twentieth-century legacy can we actually face the future, while knowing what socialist visions from modern history can be effectively enlisted for us today.

#### IV

As a matter of fact, the focus of my study is not entirely on revolutionary but rather also on postrevolutionary China. *Revolution* here refers to a specific historical practice in China, which we can define, in a form of shorthand, as a social-political practice that takes the form of a large-scale military resistance with the goal of capturing state power. Relative to this revolution, after 1949, China essentially entered a postrevolutionary period, which is of course a metaphorical reference. What I mean by *postrevolution*, then, differs from what Daniel Bell in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* refers to as “the day after the revolution.”<sup>18</sup> I acknowledge the obvious symptoms of “the day after” that Bell identifies, but in China, there were numerous entanglements that on a fundamental level had much to do with Lenin’s theory of “achieving socialism in one country.”

The real issue may well lie in how to deal with one country’s becoming socialist. On the one hand, the nation-state as a modern governing form, along with the strengthening of the state apparatuses and management, took center stage in the international geopolitical system. On the other hand, as one country in such a modern world, how can it exist as a pure socialist country as it carries out its own modernization construction (*xiandaihua jianshe*)? These domestic and global questions—including all their mutual contradictions, conflicts, and various resultant tensions—constituted the complexities of the postrevolutionary in China.

If revolutionary ideals—including the concrete political practice leading to the realization of socialism in one country—were the original motivation of the revolution, then postrevolutionary socialist China responded to this central problematic in its own creative way. In the present study, aside from treating socialism as a universal political idea, I also intend to explore socialism in practice by specifically focusing on the following three aspects.

18. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic, 1976).

First, I interpret Chinese socialism as a historical process filled with both tensions of self-negation and impulses for continuous revolution. These tensions and impulses may have been given rise to by the characteristics of the specific historical period of the Chinese revolution—that is, the new democratic period (1940s and 1950s). But they may have even more to do with the anxiety generated by the tension between revolutionary ideals and the characteristics of the new democratic historical period. Let us take the notion and practice of the “united front” (*tongyi zhanxian*) for example. On a metaphorical level, the united front corresponds to [Antonio] Gramsci’s notion of compromise, which in theory conditions the model of practice (including the form of governing by the state) for a socialism founded in a specific global and domestic historical moment. On a deeper level, however, I interpret this historical process as one in constant response to revolutionary ideals (the communist imaginary). To be sure, no political practice can be carried out without veering off the course of the framework of theory; there are always other factors at play (including various historical contingencies). What often results is a tension between grand and long-term ideals and specific local political experiences. The desire to overcome or negate the status quo, therefore, constituted an impulse for continuous revolution within [Chinese] socialism. Throughout this historical process of self-negation, there persisted a radical spirit of experimentation and endeavors to create a concrete new system, but all of this also disrupted and affected people’s everyday life, a factor that led to the retrenchment that happened in the 1980s.

For critics, however, how to reenter this historical process for a fuller understanding remains one of the most important tasks. History cannot be hypothesized. Still, we can ask a hypothetical question: if there had not been such a self-negating history, what would China have become? For example, if there had not been the collectivization movement, what issues would rural China have faced? In the 1960s, the novelist Zhao Shuli made strong but sincere criticisms of the commune movement. But his criticisms were always premised on one key point—namely, that collectivization “stopped the rural reclassification that had started to occur after the land reform.”<sup>19</sup> We might not have been able to fully comprehend what Zhao meant by this point thirty

19. Zhao Shuli, “Xie gei zhongyang fuze tongzhi de liang feng xin” [Two letters to comrades in the central government], in *Zhao Shuli quanji* [Complete collection of Zhao Shuli’s writings] (Taiyuan: Beiyue Wenyi Chubanshe, 1994), 5:323.

years ago, but today we can. To be sure, as a revolutionary ideal, Chinese socialism could not just stay at the level of [ensuring] equality at the starting line; it also had to consider equality in the process and in outcome. So it had to be vigilant about the problems that occur in the process. The conceptual tensions revealed in Zhao's criticism are in fact highly valuable. Just this point alone, in my view, offers a concrete example of the importance of conceptual legacies of twentieth-century China.

Second, as mentioned above, I treat socialist (postrevolutionary) China in spatial terms, as a topological domain. This domain contains two levels of meaning. On the first level, socialist China was an international space in which China was located within the structure of global geopolitics. As Immanuel Wallerstein states, "geopolitics is about the structural constraints that govern, over a medium run, the interplay of the longer-term political and economic interests of the major players in the world-system. . . . An analysis of geopolitics is therefore an analysis of middle-run structures and trends. At any given moment, it is about a future that is uncertain."<sup>20</sup> If we remember the Cold War geopolitics between 1949 and 1966, we can understand what is meant by these structurally constraining factors. It is precisely the existence of these factors that partially conditioned the policy readjustments in socialist China. These readjustments exerted their influence not only in politics and economics but also in culture. For example, the accusations of peaceful evolution drummed up in the 1960s [by Mao and his supporters against Liu Shaoqi and other "capitalist roaders"] gave rise to anxiety inside China over issues of everyday life. Hence, at the same time as we consider any radical political experimentation inside China, we must also consider the presence and role of the international structurally constraining factors. Those factors constructed China as a socialist other in [Cold War] geopolitics.

On the second topological level, socialist China was at the same time a national space, constituted by the presence of different classes and groups and the struggles among them. Some classes were destroyed while many more continued to exist, including the bourgeois business class. The fact that these classes were able to "peacefully" enter the socialist stage seems to be one of the major characteristics of Chinese socialism. But the class memories of the extinguished classes and especially of the remaining ones did not readily dis-

20. Immanuel Wallerstein, "Northeast Asia and the World-System," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 19, no. 3 (2007): 8–9.

appear. On the contrary, they may have just been temporarily buried, only to reappear when the time was right, asserting strong influence on people's lifeworlds. In this sense, we can say that ideological conflicts were more often than not conflicts between memories (including the writing of family history in the 1960s). At the same time, new social strata were also produced in this domain. These new social strata also participated in conflicts, fighting for their own interests. Indeed, social practices throughout the 1950s to the 1970s functioned like a battlefield for class struggle. This battlefield was without boundaries; it challenged not only the system of private property ownership, but also its culture and the collective memory shaped and informed by this culture. From a pessimistic and fatalistic perspective, we can admit that, when socialism was established in one country, this victory may have already determined the coming doom of its radical social practices. At the same time, a temporary failure does not necessarily entail a permanent one.

Third, China's postrevolutionary and systematized socialism can also be explained as a productive apparatus (*zhuangzhi*). This apparatus consists of highly complex mechanisms mixed, for example, with revolutionary ideals and their various and specific manifestations on the practical level, as well as modern forms of governing and managing models. This set of mechanisms simultaneously produced revolutionary ideals of equality and new social classifications and divisions; visions for [an alternative] political society and desires for a new lifeworld; concepts of the collective whole and of the individual; an emphasis on mass participation [in politics] and a bureaucratic management model; and so on. Combined, these contradictions constituted the complex panorama of Chinese socialism of the time. These contradictory elements were juxtaposed to one another in postrevolutionary socialist China, giving rise to various radical conflicts during this period. In this sense, I do not think it is enough to identify sources of contradictions in socialism as emanating only either from Chinese tradition or external threats. We must also enter and explore the structure within, or the apparatus itself, to look for the roots of the contradictions.

When contradictions abound, they cause crisis in a society. In this sense, we can say that socialism not only produced its supporters, it also produced its own opponents, and that the establishment of a socialist country does not mean the end of revolution. On the contrary, it could well mean the beginning of another revolutionary period. At the same time, however, we must carry out a careful analysis of who the opponents were. They could be supporters of revolutionary ideals, whose criticism may well have hinged on a refusal to



accept the loss of these ideals. They could also be supporters of modernization ideals. How to understand the interpellation of the modern, especially technological modernization (which was upheld in the socialist period), is in this sense key to understanding both the socialist period and its aftermath.

## V

In this study, I do not intend to offer yet another description of a particular history. I am mainly interested in what literature narrated throughout this historical period and how it narrated. Therefore, I do not entangle the issues on the level of factuality and the related conceptual framework of reflection theory. Despite the fact that, thirty years since the start of the post-Mao era, few people would resort to reflection theory to define literature, we nevertheless notice a rather strange phenomenon. There are critics who, to argue and prove the legitimacy of the present, stress the fictionality of literature. When they turn to history, however, they suddenly wish to stress whether or not literature realistically reflected life. It goes without saying that theory here becomes something equivocally employed only in a self-serving manner.

The literature I study in this book belongs to the period between 1949 and 1966, known as the seventeen-year literature. A few works will be from outside this period, such as some of the early works by Zhao Shuli written during the 1940s. As just mentioned, I am not interested in the issue of realistic truth. Instead, I am more interested in what imaginaries and concepts the literature of the time offered. Indeed, I am interested in the various ideas or concepts forwarded via literature. These ideas or concepts are both theoretical and emotional. The fact that we always construct our everyday life based on certain ideas means that literature, in this sense, is always useful. When studying this literature, one should not start by trying to separate it from politics. On the contrary, we must precisely situate it in relation to politics for an in-depth exploration. In this sense, I agree with [Gilles] Deleuze [and Félix Guattari]'s comment on Kafka: "Writing for Kafka, the primacy of writing, signifies only one thing: not a form of literature alone, the enunciation forms a unity with desire, beyond laws, states, regimes. Yet the enunciation is always historical, political, and social."<sup>21</sup> Literature is always situated against a certain kind of political backdrop; or, put differently, the political is always part of literari-

21. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 41–42.

ness. It can be a political act to discuss the state or a collective, but it can also be a political act to tell an individual's story.

Broadly speaking, the literature of the seventeen years mainly concentrated on themes such as nation-state/world, individual/collective, national [identity]/class, and so forth. The emphasis on nation-state, national identity, and class constituted the political characteristics of the literature of the time. Today, however, whenever the state is mentioned, the label of statism follows; when issues of national identity are evoked, it [national identity] is quickly labeled as nationalism; whenever the masses are evoked, it is viewed as no more than populism. This problem may very well itself be a fundamental cause in preventing certain critical views from coming to the fore. In fact, this problem pertains to more than literature, despite the fact that it is often manifested by way of discussing literariness. I do not deny that in the politicization of literature, some literary texts (including some of the good works) could become political mouthpieces and even serve to support certain policies; as such, in Deleuze [and Guattari]'s words, these works include the "inability to transcend the totality of the legal, state, and social systems." It is in this sense that I agree with the literary movement of the 1980s in its protest against using literature as a tool for class struggle. At the same time, what I do not agree with is the binarized or dichotomized way of understanding the relationship between the state and the individual. As a matter of fact, the perspective of state politics provided the literature of the socialist period with a narrative model through which to perceive the world in a profound way. I have called it a top-to-bottom narration. This way of narration was premised on concrete form[s] of experience, which manifested themselves not only in an attempt at narrating metahistory but also a particular political imaginary for the nation-state. If we reject outright the intervention of the political perspective of this metanarrative (which includes nation-state, history, and so on), we can well lose our political ability to have a dialogue with the world, including a corresponding ability to narrate [and tell stories about the world].

Even though the seventeen-year literature retained a close relationship with the politics of the state, we can still detect a certain form within that transcended this relationship. Several factors contributed to this form. On the one hand, when the politics of the state and writers shared a consensus, there was no conflict between the two. But as soon as the conflict between the politics of the state and an individual writer arose, the relationship could become murky. One typical example is Zhao Shuli. With reference to the existing discussions of this writer, my argument is that, while it is certainly im-

portant to explore “the Zhao Shuli path,” what is equally important is to explore the question of why this path ended. There are multiple reasons for the end. To be sure, there was direct interference by the state (for example, the 1960s criticism of the middle character [that is, a character who was neither purely good nor purely evil]). But the end of this path could also be related to another modern Chinese intellectual tradition that, as the scholar Luo Gang [of East China Normal University] has put it, can be described as the radical urban intellectuals’ romantic imagination of the world. In addition, to what extent Zhao (or whether or not he) exerted a strong influence on contemporary Chinese literature remains a debatable question. The truth of the matter is that much of the seventeen-year literature was a variation on the Western bildungsroman model, and Zhao’s fiction does not fit that model.

On the other hand, what is perhaps more important, within the close relationship between literature and politics, is how we explore a more invisible way of writing that “transcends the totality of the legal, state, and social systems.” This way of writing stemmed from valuing egalitarianism (*ping-deng zhuyi*), which emphasizes the sharing of mutual interests. In this kind of writing, the individual is always examined by being placed in the context of a collective. While such narration expressed strong disapproval of extreme individualism (which is often interpreted as part of the rule of the jungle), it is also against any form of oppression. This explains why antibureaucracy and antiprivilege were always major themes in the seventeen-year literature. In terms of form, this way of writing provided an opportunity for writers to develop an ability to tell other people’s stories well. I believe that how to tell other people’s stories well was not only a challenge to a writer’s personal experience and his or her own values, but it was even more a challenge to their narrative skills. Obviously, this kind of equality-oriented ideal and respect for lower-class people could not easily be understood by anyone upholding an extreme individualist view. Precisely because of the presence of such ideals, regardless of whether one applauds or condemns this literature, it is difficult to resort to the “totality of the legal, state, and social systems” for a full interpretation.

There are many difficulties in analyzing literature of this period. On the one hand, the quality of works is not even (just like in any historical period). On the other hand, we must not separate literature and politics in a rash manner. Instead, we must examine literature and its history in the context in which literature actively interacted with politics. And we must do so by reading and analyzing the texts closely and carefully.

## VI

This book has seven chapters.

Chapter 1 is titled “The National/The Local: Conflict, Negotiation, and Capitulation in the Revolutionary Imagination.” This chapter mainly examines the relationships between the state and the local and between the knowledge of modernity and local knowledge in the context of the postrevolutionary socialist period. While there was an emphasis on centralized control by the central government, the local and local knowledge nevertheless persisted. To a certain extent, I do not agree with the view that Chinese socialism was totally antitradition. In actuality, that could not have been possible. Revolutionary China inherited China’s traditional territorial space and, inevitably, its corresponding knowledge of various places. The key for us is how to understand tradition in a dialectical manner. I am of the opinion that so-called tradition tended to exist largely in the form of local knowledge or, put differently, existed as localized tradition. This tradition must be understood differently from that of the elites (in the form of a canon). In this sense, modernity and tradition constituted a relationship that mutually enlisted one another. For example, when natural villages were retained as the basic administrative units for the socialist state, parts of the traditional culture and power relations in these villages inevitably were retained. What was retained could on the one hand lead to ideological conflicts, but [on the other hand] it could also be used by modern knowledge. For instance, in literature, the leader-like characters (*dairouren*) are often portrayed with a high moral overtone (such as Liang Baosheng in the novel *The Builders*). Such a depiction cannot be explained by the model of modern technocrats but can be better understood if we search for the ideal type in the traditional kinship system. By extension, it is important to realize that the village constituted one of the most important spatial units in the seventeen-year literature and was more important than the family.

Chapter 2 is titled “The Mobilization Structure: The Masses, Cadres, and Intellectuals.” It mainly discusses the so-called mobilization structure and the relationships between different groups within this structure. Strictly speaking, this structure was a social organizational form that was not systematized. Yet there is no question that it played a particularly important role in political and cultural life in China. The implication of mobilization no doubt had a Leninist slant to it—namely, imposing class consciousness from outside. But its importance to the Chinese revolution lies in the fact that it helped address the

problem of China's lack of a large number of industrial workers and a corresponding lack of theoretical guidelines [for implementing Marxist revolution in a rural context]. Via mobilization, the proletarian class could be created as a kind of political proletariat. This political intervention led to the formalization of the class struggle in China and helped identify the embodiment of the proletariat class—namely, the military. If we look more closely at the image of demobilized soldiers portrayed in that literature, we can have a clearer idea of what the political proletariat class meant and how its implication also pointed to the importance of the practice of individual reform. At the same time, this social organizational form also emphasized the creative spirit of the masses on the premise that ordinary people had a natural inclination toward socialism. It therefore also emphasized a respect for the masses with the belief that they were the subject and agent of the revolution. By extension, it gave rise to promoting the masses as the embodiment of social morals and a belief that the new socialist person could be portrayed through them [the masses as the embodiment of social morals]. It goes without saying that, even within the mobilization structure itself, there were layers of contradictions and various expressions.

Chapter 3, “Youth, Love, ‘Natural Rights,’ and Sex,” focuses on the relationship among these concepts. What I would like to add here is that revolution requires passion, but postrevolutionary socialism also needs the production of passion. If passion was once being produced via a slew of representations of sex and romantic love as well as of war (including sacrificing one's life), in the postrevolutionary socialist era in which individualism (including personal romantic love and sexuality) was deemphasized, the production of passion was increasingly transferred to the domain of literature. How to produce passion that corresponded to socialist politics thus became a major question. Otherwise, we cannot explain why revolutionary China's politics could have bestowed so much attention on literature. In this sense, we can assume that various kinds of efforts at the popularization of literature (such as the new popular lyrics movement) had something to do with the endeavor of producing passion. In producing passion, literature also produced youth, or literary youth. I briefly touch on the issue of literary youth again in chapter 7, but the topic requires a more extensive exploration. On the one hand, the literary youth, symbolized as the new socialist persons, were the agents of the socialist future. On the other hand, they were also a major antiestablishment force. As such, the phenomenon of literary youth, together with layers of various

related issues, presents itself as an important subject for further exploration. This is not only about the first thirty years of the socialist period but is also related to the thought liberation movement of the 1980s.

Chapter 4, “Renarrating the History of the Revolution: From Hero to Legend,” focuses on why, in the postrevolutionary socialist period, there was a constant retelling of revolutionary history and how it was retold. A modern nation is first of all a political entity, but such an entity needs cultural support. How best to tell the history and the legendary construction of this modern nation constitutes an important issue of narration. In this narration, the most important task is to establish a collective value system, for the purpose of forming political identity within a nation. Such an identity is both political and historical. In this sense we can see why a depoliticization process must begin with dehistoricization.

Chapter 5 is titled “Narratives of Labor or Labor Utopias.” In the narration of revolutionary China, *labor* was always one of the most important concepts. The narratives about it were not only political but also (in Zhao Shuli’s words) full of understanding or *qingli* [emotion and reason]. Labor as a concept was premised on the basis of understanding or *qingli*, a premise that contributed not only to the configuration of a particular kind of structure of feeling but also to the establishment of a sense of social justice. The positive valuation of labor brought a sense of dignity to the laboring masses. In this sense, we can say that the Chinese revolution was also a revolution in winning dignity for the masses, or, put differently, the revolution was itself a social practice based on the politics of dignity [for the masses].

Chapter 6 is titled “Technological Revolution and Narratives of Working-Class Subjectivity.” For quite some time, we have been discussing the demarcations between socialism and capitalism. Often, we find the boundaries are not always that clear. Still, boundaries that differentiate the two have always existed, manifested in the distinction between the different historical contexts of revolutionary China and modern China. The demarcation lies in the issue of who is considered the master. Even though during the socialist period the promise for workers and peasants to become masters was not fully realized, efforts to realize this ideal nevertheless never ceased. And such efforts were always echoed in literature. In the representations of labor, we can see manifestations of modern tensions, mainly between circles of experts and the participation of the masses [in various endeavors]. The latter’s participation was more than in politics; it was present in knowledge production as well. In the

process of mass participation, democratization was also gradually transmitted from the political arena to that of economics. The so-called Anshan Constitution was one such example. To be sure, to what extent the masses were able to participate, and what kind of social crisis was caused by repression from management, are some of the questions that merit further and separate discussions. The issue that I am concerned with here is, if the subjectivity of the masses can be realized and established only through their own participation, once such participation comes to a halt, what accompanies this end would be the disappearance of the subjectivity of the subalterns.

Chapter 7 is titled “Cultural Politics, or Political Cultural Conflicts, in the 1960s.” By the 1960s, I refer specifically to the first half of the decade, before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. The importance of this period lies in the fact that the city and its corresponding importance had steadily increased during this period, generating a series of challenging issues—such as the problem of the individual, desire, and consumption—that the Chinese revolution had to confront. We ought not to assume that because Chinese socialism emphasized the collective, the individual had in turn disappeared. On the contrary: in producing the collective, socialism was also producing the individual. The problem was that this individual produced in socialism did not acquire a corresponding legitimacy. While on the one hand, socialism produced more and more individuals, on the other hand, it tried to contain the individual by way of criticizing individualism. As a result, not only were there increasing tensions and conflicts between the individual and the collective, there was also tension and conflict in how to understand the relationship between individualism and the individual. To a certain extent, incidentally, this tension can explain the political demands for the restoration of the individual in the 1980s. To contain this individual, especially individual desire, class struggle became the political form and method through which this tension was addressed. Yet at the same time, behind class struggle there were demands for the formation of an obedient personhood capable of controlling selfish desire. An immediate challenge that this new person faced, in addition, was whether or not she or he was capable of shouldering the mission of the continuous revolution. Continuous revolution demands a politically decisive ability to challenge and subvert, while it also requires a mode of production that can continuously turn out passion. We can find all of these tensions in the film *The Young Generation*, for example, especially the issue of how the literary youth were enlisted in political terms. In this sense, I tend to agree that

the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution was, in part, intended to overcome the obedient society produced in the 1960s and the corresponding crisis in the continuous revolution.

In “Conclusion: The Crisis of Socialism and Efforts to Overcome It,” I reiterate my overall historical attitude. On the one hand, we must in earnest summarize the positive experiences and lessons of the Chinese revolution. On the other hand, I also make efforts to explore [the various factors that caused] crises in socialism. My examination addresses the socialist production apparatus, practices to overcome crisis, and the resources employed to do so. If we view the various attempts to overcome the crisis as historicized, we can say that its [overcoming crisis] earliest manifestation occurred in the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, followed first by the call to never forget class struggle in the 1960s and then by the Cultural Revolution; it ended in the 1980s. With that, the entire twentieth century also came to an end [in its revolutionary sense]. This chronology reflects the conceptual characteristics of China’s antiestablishment movement on the one hand. On the other hand, it also demonstrates efforts made to search for new conceptual resources. This search revealed uncertainties in socialist theory about conceptual resources for overcoming crisis. It also implies that, when in the 1980s such a search turned to the West (which is the topic of my next project), it would produce much bigger social crises. I do not, however, believe that this search has ended. It will continue until we create a new socialist form.

## VII

When literature, as Hayden White puts it, “pretends to let the world speak for itself,”<sup>22</sup> there already exist differences between imagination and practice and between fiction and facts. But between imagination and fiction, we can still discern a kind of historical discourse of narrative that is influenced and conditioned by a range of factors. Some of the influences and conditions seem obvious, while most come from the political unconscious of a particular historical period. The key question I want to explore is, why write this way? I therefore focus on issues related to the intertextuality between literature and social politics. This is my methodology, even though I do not believe it is the only correct one. As a matter of fact, I cannot believe there is only one cor-

22. See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).



rect methodology. Nor do I believe mine is the best research method, but it is the most suitable one for me. What interests me more is the fact that, in the study of contemporary Chinese literature, we must pay attention to the question of methodology, especially how a particular one can be pushed to a point where a narrative model of our own can be formed. Needless to say, as we push our point, shortcomings in our methodology are revealed that in turn can prompt us to find a way to address and overcome them. In this sense, I do not deny that there are limitations in my methodology, and I also respect those employed by other scholars.

In the final analysis, however, the issue of methodology is not the most important one. What is important is that I hope to reestablish a kind of narration in which, regardless of how the world changes, falls or fails, I still want to respond to the manifested revolutionary ideal of equality—that is, the “communist imaginary,” in Badiou’s words. And once again, we can only bring with us the conceptual/theoretical legacies of the twentieth century to return to the nineteenth century.