

Introduction

Arif Dirlik

The idea of putting together another special issue of *boundary 2* on China had three sources. The most important (and serious) reason has to do with changes in the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the last fifteen years and the intellectual retrospection they have provoked among Chinese intellectuals. While what is offered in the following pages is only a small sampling of contemporary discussions, they hopefully impart some sense of the range of inquiry that characterizes the Chinese intellectual scene.

They also indicate, I hope, how much intellectual issues have changed since the *boundary 2* special issue "Postmodernism and China" was published ten years ago (vol. 24, no. 3 [Fall 1997]). I will return to this question below. The celebrations of an abstract modernity in the 1980s in response to the loosening of the existing socialist structure are now tempered with an anxiety about modernity's consequences that has come with success in the capitalist world economy. Enthusiastic participation in global capitalism has brought unprecedented wealth and power but also all the contradictions of a capitalism superimposed upon the ruins of a revolution-

boundary 2 35:2 (2008) DOI 10.1215/01903659-2008-001 © 2008 by Duke University Press

ary past that is increasingly a distant memory—and not even that to new generations brought up on a flourishing urban consumer society. But the anxieties have once again raised the issue of socialism as an integral part of the search for a Chinese modernity. The Chinese contributors to this volume represent important voices in these discussions, while the contributors from outside of China (or outside of the involvement in day-to-day debates over these issues) document some of the activity toward overcoming the problems occasioned by China's incorporation in a global capitalist economy. These discussions are not always welcome to the authorities, who claim monopoly over the understanding of socialism, which in their case daily becomes indistinguishable from capitalism. Still, there is sufficient experimentation with economic and political forms to keep alive the idea of socialism and claims to an alternative modernity, partly cultural and partly organizational.

How these changes have been received in the United States provides the other two reasons for the volume in the provocation they have offered. Anyone with any degree of familiarity with China and studies of China in North America and Europe will be aware of the role fantasies of one kind or another have played in the appreciation of that country. Even those who have devoted lifetimes to the study of that country are not immune to fantasizing or peddling their fantasies to the public at large, and there are always Chinese witnesses who, for reasons of their own, are anxious to authenticate such fantasies.¹ Still, it is difficult not to be appalled by the simplification, to the point of simplemindedness, of Chinese com-

1. This is commonplace in clichés concerning the longevity and the homogeneity of Chinese society, and even of the idea of China. It has been well documented in such studies of historical stereotyping of China and Chinese as Harold R. Isaacs, *Images of Asia: American Views of China and India* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); and Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967). As these works, and similar ones by Colin Mackerras and Jonathan Spence, demonstrate, such stereotyping may be positive or negative, often the one slipping effortlessly into the other, as recent swings between China adoration and China bashing testify. For some recent works noteworthy for their levels of viciousness and obfuscation, see Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: And What It Means for the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); and Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006). While politics is important in the representations of China, the Chinese Revolution, and Mao in these works (Terrill used to be quite an admirer of Mao and the revolution in his time), marketing considerations in the selling of books at a time of the so-called China threat should not be ignored.

plexities. A reductionism that lends itself to policy making, or even everyday public comprehension of what is foreign, may be understandable in terms of an effort to make manageable what may otherwise escape comprehension, but it is not, therefore, to be encouraged. The reduction of complexity makes for neither good understanding nor good policy. Instead, it opens up explanation to the intrusion of prejudice, wishful thinking, and, at the extreme, the substitution of one's own concerns for the realities of others. The price to be paid for the distortion that inevitably results from reductionism is not merely the wasted effort of generations of scholars studying China. The latter also have to face the fact in the end that the complexities to the uncovering of which they have devoted their lives are of little intellectual and political consequence against the urge to make the foreign—in this case, China—manageable. The price is misjudgment with fatal human consequences, “ours” or “theirs.” What makes it even more appalling is the part intellectuals of distinction play in this kind of reductionism when confronted with the “alien” Chinese and their “five-thousand-year-old civilization.”

Two instances of such reductionism were important in providing the provocation for this volume. One was the notorious “Declaration” two years ago by W. J. T. Mitchell, editor of the prestigious cultural studies journal *Critical Inquiry*, and Wang Ning, a professor of foreign literature at Beijing's Tsinghua University and one of the more successful academic entrepreneurs in contemporary China.² According to this declaration, theory may be dead or dying in the United States with the right-wing capture of U.S. politics and culture, but it is alive and well in the PRC. In the utopic phrasing of the two authors, “As for the fate of critical theory in Beijing, one would never guess that it was dead or dying. Something called theory (whether of culture, of the arts and media, of literature, of language, of history or politics) has established itself as the lingua franca of international conversations about every imaginable topic: from the minutiae of everyday life in local situations to the unimaginably complex phenomenon known as globalization.”³

It is not very puzzling why Wang Ning would promote such a portrayal of the state of theory in the PRC, or at least in Beijing and Shanghai,

2. W. J. T. Mitchell and Wang Ning, “The Ends of Theory: The Beijing Symposium on Critical Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 265–70. This essay is not only full of clichés about Chinese culture and politics, it even raises the clichéd juxtaposition of oldest/newest empire that has been part of U.S. discourse on China. For a critique, see Steven J. Venturino, “Inquiring After Theory in Beijing,” *boundary 2* 33, no. 2 (2006): 91–113.

3. Mitchell and Wang, “The Ends of Theory,” 266.

which conjures images of Chinese housewives talking theory while buying chickens or doing the laundry, as in some Monty Python skit. As the article by Shaobo Xie and Fengzhen Wang in this volume suggests, Chinese academia these days is very much in the business of business, academic or otherwise, and entrepreneurship is one of the criteria for a successful career. Globalization and theory are two precious commodities in this business, even more so than in the United States. While an academic such as Wang Ning has done valuable service in bringing these commodities into the Chinese academic market, what he says about that market needs to be approached with a healthy dose of skepticism. The puzzle is why a distinguished American intellectual should not display any such skepticism, but lend his precious name to what is but an obvious distortion of issues of theory and politics in the contemporary PRC. Mitchell's apparent suspension of critical judgment is unfortunate but not unusual when it comes to distinguished American intellectuals confronting their persuasive counterparts in the PRC. It may be the hospitality, expressed among other things in endless banquets and a bottomless supply of "white lightning" (otherwise known as *baijiu*) that endows even present-day Beijing, perpetually shrouded in clouds of pollution, with magic, and fairy tales with reality. It may be unspoken hopes of a visiting appointment in the "middle kingdom" of legend, or an honorary degree from the children of Confucius and the Yellow Emperor. More likely it is an unspoken desire to convert the Chinese to one's way of doing things—a secular version of the missionary thing—that ironically seeks to pave the way to conversion of the Chinese by compliance in their self-representations, even when they push against the limits of credulity. Whatever may be the temptation, it finds nourishment in the benefit to careers on all sides when intellectual activity is being "globalized," same as capital and commodities.

It does not take a China specialist to figure out that perhaps people in China do not talk theory all the time, like some others talk story. Nor does it take either much knowledge of China or a great deal of political astuteness to question whether or not the center of gravity for critical thinking might indeed be shifting to the PRC. There are complex reasons why theory is dead or dying in the United States—if that is indeed the case—which may not be laid at the door of the right wing and its imperial misadventures; we might recall that theory flourished four decades ago in the midst of another U.S. misadventure. The misadventure then provoked opposition to the right wing in the United States and globally. The many social movements it generated not only inspired critical theory and scholarship but also bred con-

stituencies for it. Three decades later, a misadventure equally cruel and odious is met with whimpering in the United States and a complicitous silence on the part of so-called world leaders, including the leaders of the PRC, who are at one in labeling as “terrorism” all challenges to the existing order.

Difficult times may undermine theory; they may also serve as inspiration for it, which presents interesting historical problems that are not to be evaded by simpleminded references to right-wing victories. On the other hand, politically speaking, the PRC hardly offers a haven for theory, as the recent *Dushu* affair demonstrates once again. I will discuss this affair at length below. Suffice it to say here that *Dushu* has been a foremost forum for theoretical discussion for nearly three decades and has been particularly prominent as a forum for discussions of modernity over the last decade under the joint editorship of Wang Hui and Huang Ping. The two editors were dismissed earlier this year by the publisher, Sanlian Book Company, on the grounds that sales of the journal suffered from the political turn it had taken under their editorship. The dismissal was probably motivated by political factors, although marketing considerations should not be dismissed lightly in an environment where the unbridled pursuit of profit has taken an urgency that may not be matched in existing capitalist societies. The affair casts a cruel irony upon the claims of Wang Ning, uncritically endorsed by Mitchell. The theory that Wang Ning and others like him promote is theory that is politically obscure and irrelevant, that is more often than not lost in clichés about “Chinese characteristics.” Serious theory—theory with social and political consequences—is hardly safe even when it comes to Marxism.

The other instance of provocation is the opposite of this one, although the two are bound together by a cultural logic which, at the risk of sounding unkind, if not crude, may best be described as the search for a white man’s Chinaman that will fulfill our own desires about China, what it may be, and what it should be.⁴ In this case, it involves Wang Hui, a truly outstanding intellectual, a contributor to this volume, and the central figure in a political/cultural drama that is playing out even as I write these lines. Wang Hui has been rendered into an object of foreign adoration, by, among

4. Pankaj Mishra, “China’s New Leftist,” October 15, 2006, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/15/magazine/15leftist.html>. I do not know if I am being unfair to Mr. Mishra in the comments that follow. Formally, at least, he recognizes the complexity of the so-called New Left. But the article concentrates solely on Wang Hui, and what he has to say becomes the unified voice of the “New Left” in the title of the article.

others, the *New York Times*, which has played an important part in spreading his reputation as China's "Mr. New Left." Wang Hui and Wang Ning are very different intellectuals. But they have one thing in common: fulfillment of the fantasies of China and Chinese common among foreign scholars, the one because he is very good at working the relationship, the other because he has a keen sense of what are not only Chinese but global cultural and political problems. But the appropriation of Wang Hui in the liberal media is no less appalling than rendering Wang Ning into the promise of critical theory. Wang Hui has distinguished himself through his scholarship as an intellectual of true theoretical originality and an outstanding commentator on Chinese modernity, whose critique of modernity directly feeds into a contemporary global reevaluation of modernity. And yet, in many ways, it is foreign commentary that has made him into Mr. Chinese New Left, which not only does injustice to the "New Left" in China, such as it is, but also does him great disservice by foregrounding his politics over his theoretical contributions. What Wang may have to say about modernity is lost (and perhaps discredited) in his rendering into an iconic white liberal, albeit of a leftist bent, much the same as someone such as Wang Ning is rendered into a spokesperson for Chinese critical liberalism because of his compradorial promise of China to the gods of theory.

There is little that surprises about the response of Mitchell who, unfamiliar with the territory, is driven by a sense of cosmopolitanism—and maybe the lure of the Chinese intellectual market (if not the noblesse oblige of the guest)—to agree to the relocation of theory to Beijing, or of the Wang Hui fans who find in his writings congenial themes that also endear the author to his Euro-American readers. These are long-standing responses to China among Americans, including American intellectuals.

The goal of the present collection, however, is not to "correct" these responses, which would seem like a futile, and unnecessary, job, but to simply display that Chinese intellectual life is much richer than narcissistic American questions might suggest. What is crucial to grasp, the collection here suggests, is that the PRC, empowered by a past dedicated to socialist revolution, is in search of an alternative modernity. But what is an "alternative modernity"?

Beyond an insistence on doing things "the Chinese way," it is not quite clear what this alternative modernity might be. Modernity as concept has lost much of its coherence with proliferating historical claims on it, and the universalization of the desire for the Modern is complicated by claims that the Modern itself appears in many guises that are not to be contained

in the forms and practices of an originary European modernity.⁵ Being Chinese itself is in the process of radical transformation, as populations of Chinese origin overflow the boundaries of the PRC (not to speak of the many internal divisions and differences). Perhaps we could describe the insistence on an “alternative modernity” as “a will to difference.” Whether the issue is economics, politics, or social practices, tagging “Chinese characteristics” on practices of modernity has almost become habitual with Chinese intellectuals—even when those practices are marked by sameness rather than difference, and their future very much in question. Much the same may be said on the question of socialism, which is open to experimentation (except for a revival of Maoist days) and represents overlapping but different things to the Party and intellectuals. On one issue, however, there is a reasonable degree of clarity. Much of the talk on “alternative modernity” in China and abroad is premised on differences in history and culture, which is seemingly reasonable, but also ignores that these alternatives, such as they are, are severely limited by their entrapment within a global capitalist economy, which bears upon it all the hallmarks of its origins in Europe and North America. There is, however, a different way of grasping “alternative,” in terms of a socialist alternative to capitalism, which understood “alternative” not in terms of different pasts but in terms of different futures: alternative economic, political, and social forms to those prevailing under capitalism. This was, of course, the way Chinese revolutionaries conceived of alternatives in their pursuit and justification of revolution. It is calls for reconsideration of this revolutionary past by the so-called New Left (in my reading, inside and outside the Party) that have motivated the suppression of at least some of the dissident voices in China. It is a situation that should benefit from an extended dialogue. This, unfortunately, is open to arbitrary silencing of some views over others in the Party’s insistence on being the arbiter of what may or may not be socialism—even when it is openly acknowledged that neoliberals hold sway over the policies of the Party and the government. The silencing, needless to say, also sweeps aside the deepening of problems in Chinese society even as the new elites (Party and non-Party) celebrate their acceptance and inclusion in global capitalism.

These issues are visible in the recent “*Dushu* affair,” the dismissal of Wang Hui and Huang Ping as editors of the prestigious *Dushu* magazine,

5. I have discussed these problems at length in Arif Dirlik, *Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

which, during their tenure, opened up discussions that to some became hallmarks of the “New Left.”⁶ *Dushu* has served as a critical voice in Chinese intellectual life for nearly three decades. The voice has changed over the years, dropping old tones and adding new tones in response to changes in the internal and external circumstances of Chinese society—which is a tribute to the journal’s dynamism. Over the last decade when Wang and Huang served as coeditors, *Dushu* became an important publication organ in the critique of modernity and of China’s modernization. It has assumed the characteristics of a public institution in its own right in serving as a voice for the sense of “maldevelopment” that has become pervasive in recent years among many in China, and not just among “New Left” intellectuals. When the Sanlian Book Company dismissed Wang and Huang as editors, the explanation given was that the journal had been losing readership under their editorial policies, becoming more obscure and politically one-sided—an interesting reason in a bureaucratic Party-state that will not allow for serious dissent. The politics of the affair is still obscure. Nevertheless, to some, it was always astonishing that a journal published by an official publisher (Sanlian) could usurp the role of a public voice when the Party-state has made a strenuous effort to monopolize the notion of the public. If such is the case, the affair represents the state’s reappropriation of this role.⁷

A closer look at the *Dushu* affair may provide insights into the changing circumstances of Chinese society that are the subject of the essays in this volume. Does the recent dismissal of Wang Hui and Huang Ping as the journal’s editors point to just another shift in the journal’s history in response to the changing circumstances of Chinese society, as the official reasoning of the publisher would suggest? If so, does the shift imply that the concerns of the last decade are no longer relevant to the present generation of readership—and do not sell? What marks off the journal’s voice over this past decade during the editorship of Wang Hui and Huang Ping? What were the circumstances that the journal responded to during those years? Are those circumstances no longer relevant? Or is a new generation oblivious to the concerns that they represent? Has the journal’s appeal suffered, therefore, raising marketing concerns, or is it the uncomfortable

6. Wang Hui, perhaps the one intellectual best known to foreigners, for reasons already mentioned, is also a professor of Chinese studies at Tsinghua University. Huang Ping, a well-known sociologist, has held high positions in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, most recently as the director of its new American studies program.

7. I am grateful to my student Guannan Li for this insight.

questions it has raised concerning China's development, raising political and cultural concerns?

This last question draws the greatest interest and is no doubt of fundamental significance from the perspective of rights discourse. Whether the change in editorship was politically or economically motivated is a normative distinction in liberal capitalist society that also structures rights discourse, which condemns political but not economic abridgement of human rights. The distinction may not be the most consequential aspect of the *Dushu* affair. The suspicion that neoliberal unhappiness with *Dushu*'s "New Left" orientation had something to do with the dismissal is plausible, even though there may have been no direct neoliberal machination. Wang Hui's reminder that the journal's subscriptions have remained at about the same level also seems to confirm the suspicion that the dismissal was solely economic.⁸ That remains to be seen. So does the future orientation of the journal under a new editor. The new editor may well decide to continue the orientations of his/her predecessors. In that case, the dismissal of Wang and Huang may be due to personal reasons. But if it is to enforce a shift in policy away from what they represented, the consequences are far more serious: the silencing of a critical voice of vital significance for society and the country at large.

It is the silencing that is the issue here, not whether it is economic or political, which makes little difference where the voices are concerned. Censorship is more or less severe depending on the country, but it seems to be active globally at the present at all levels of society, from governments to corporations to the press and even to educational institutions—more often than not in the form of self-censorship. The collusion at different levels of power makes it difficult to determine where the censorship originates. But it seems that the market is as important a consideration in such self-censorship as its political and legal consequences. We should, therefore, not dismiss lightly the company claim that the dismissal of the two editors was for economic reasons. They are silenced all the same.

Let us hope that their legacy is not suspended, for what they have had to say—and, we hope, continue to say—has not lost its relevance; indeed, it is likely to acquire greater urgency in coming years. Not the least important aspect of the Wang/Huang editorship was to bring together

8. See the interview with Wang Hui in *Nandu zhoukan* [Southern metropolis weekly], no. 140 (July 27, 2007): 24–29. I am grateful to Alex Day for bringing this interview to my attention.

humanities/social science perspectives from the disciplinary backgrounds of the two editors. If the social sciences are crucial in the study of modern societies of which they are the products, they serve human interests best when placed within the context of long-standing human aspirations to justice, truth, and beauty, which in the modern division of labor have been placed in the realm of the humanities. In bringing these concerns together, *Dushu*, under the Wang/Huang editorship, achieved a place in the forefront of cultural studies publications, not just in China but globally. Bringing together issues of subjectivity and belief in the material conditions of existence is not merely an academic matter of transdisciplinarity; it is also the point of departure for any serious critical analysis of culture, society, and politics.

The Wang/Huang tenure at *Dushu* coincided with the appearance of modernity as a problem in Chinese thinking, which itself was intimately linked to the rapid advance of economic modernization, which also produced new problems in Chinese society. Wang and Huang were well equipped to address this problem, the one as a cultural analyst deeply familiar with Chinese intellectual legacies as well as contemporary theoretical issues, the other a sociologist trained in issues of social theory and modernization, not just modernization as material progress but modernization also as a problem. Under their leadership, *Dushu* was distinguished for raising and keeping alive critical evaluation of modernization efforts in Chinese society not just as an economic but also as a social, political, and cultural problem. In her recent study of socialism in contemporary China, Lin Chun argues that during the last decade, China has entered a new phase of reform, that of retrospection and reevaluation, especially with socialist goals in mind.⁹ This is not just an academic question, but a question that is crucial to the creation of an alternative modernity to that of capitalist societies which, it seems to me, is the professed goal of the leadership in China, as well as the inspiration for the so-called “New Left” positions of Wang Hui and Huang Ping. The problems that beset China’s modernization—from regional, urban-rural, class, and gender inequalities to pollution—are also readily acknowledged by the leadership and are subject to examination. Neoliberals committed to full incorporation in global capitalism may find the revival of revolutionary memories unpleasant and obstructive. It is also possible that a new generation of intellectual youth, reared on the values

9. Lin Chun, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

of the consumer society that began to flourish in the 1990s, finds tedious the kind of political and cultural issues raised in *Dushu*, especially when those issues are couched in the languages of postmodernism and post-structuralism that Chinese intellectuals have shared with their counterparts elsewhere since the late 1980s.

The term *New Left* made some sense when it emerged in Europe and North America in the 1950s and 1960s in distinguishing a new generation of Marxists parting ways with Stalinism. It makes little sense within the context of a socialist society. Its use in contemporary China is one indication of unease that, in the pursuit of national wealth and power as it appears through the lens of private interests, the country has strayed from the socialist goals of justice and equality, and national goals of autonomous development. The “New Left” in this case refers to those who would remember and reevaluate the legacies of the revolution—not to turn their backs on the Old Left, in other words, but to critically examine postrevolutionary developments in light of the now abandoned goals of a revolutionary past. The term seemingly encompasses all those who have raised questions about post-1992 development and its social and environmental consequences. Some also believe that there may be answers, if only as inspiration, in earlier revolutionary experiences, and invoke them in criticism of present-day problems, if not out of a political desire for their revival, then at least out of a recognition that they are indispensable to grasping critically problems of modernization in contemporary China. This recognition that the revolution was not an act of madness but had on its side a historical logic goes against the grain these days—not just of the leaders of the Communist Party, but of China scholars inside and outside the PRC.

The essays collected in this volume do not convey a single message, nor do they conform to some structural whole. The diversity would have been considerably enhanced had some intellectuals of different political and aesthetic disposition responded to our request for contributions. Even with those absences here, what we observe is a wide array of interest, concerns, and involvements. As editor of the volume, I did not suggest any kind of theme for the volume. Rather, I encouraged authors to contribute something on a subject that preoccupied them at the time. Some of the contributors—Yu Keping, Wang Hui, Han Shaogong, Fengzhen Wang—are active as Party members or public intellectuals in the promotion of the issues they discuss. Others, such as Wang Shaoguang, Shaobo Xie, Pun Ngai, Chu Yiu-Wai, Alex Day, and I are concerned analysts of Chinese society, wishful of the success of some form of democratic socialism before

the present course of development leads at gathering speed to social and ecological disaster. What is at stake here is not just the fate of China and Chinese society, but a common human fate globally that is threatened by an unbridled capitalism which has shed its inhibitions at a very moment of crisis in global political organization and ecology.

It is out of such concerns that there have been calls within and outside the Party for a reevaluation of the developmental path that the country has followed over the last decade.¹⁰ How successful these calls will be remains to be seen, as already there is a powerful group that has benefited from “economic globalization.” But even this group is not entirely homogeneous. The Party/non-Party distinction is significant, but each camp has its own internal differences. There are reformers within and without the Party who even collaborate on occasion in evaluating the prospects of Chinese society. These individuals, too, have benefited from the changes of the last decade, but they also have displayed a keen appreciation of the underside of incorporation in global capitalism. The revolutionary legacy is still available to Chinese intellectuals as a reservoir of thinking about these issues. Attitudes toward that legacy are also of crucial importance in dividing intellectuals inside and outside of the Party.

It may be no exaggeration to say that China is at a crossroads—as we all are. The concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a small minority that is increasingly transnational in composition is a problem globally, including China, where a new bourgeois elite has joined the old Party elite, producing a socialist version of a transnational capitalist class. Like elites elsewhere, this elite finds in neoliberalism and globalization the expression of its vision—if through the agency of a state corporatism. While large numbers of people in China have benefited from the “Reforms” of the last three decades, spatial and social division, as well as ecological destruction, have made significant headway—visible not only in polluted cities but also in the gradual destruction of rural China. Few in China would want a return to the days of Mao Zedong, which would make no sense under present circumstances. But the revolution is among the significant legacies of Chinese society. It brings into relief the consequences of capitalism in a “global factory.” It is a resource in the critique of contem-

10. I am referring here to calls for closer attention to the plight of the countryside (discussed in this issue by Alex Day), the call for a new “ecological civilization” (*shengtai wenming*), and, above all, to the new effort to revitalize Marxism through a “Marxism project” (*Makesi zhuyi gongcheng*) that was initiated at the highest levels of the Communist Party.

porary society. And it continues to inspire confidence in the possibility of a different kind of society. It is this legacy that continues to fuel serious criticism in China. Theory may be one of its beneficiaries. But this is a politically loaded theory, not an academic theory, and if it is flourishing in China today, it is not because of the enlarged freedoms but because of new forms of repression. This is what gives contemporary theory its local coloring, against an elitist reification of theory in slogans of globalization and the like. The groundedness of theory in this instance is groundedness within Chinese society, and not in some abstract cultural characteristic attributed to China. It is, for this reason, activist theory.