

## Introduction: Rethinking Critical Theory and Maoism

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Rethinking Critical Theory and Maoism," Kang Liu reviews the existing literature in English on the relationship of Critical Theory and Maoism and discusses the need to explore and reconstruct a genealogy of Critical Theory and Maoism within the global context of political, ideological, and intellectual currents and trends. The special issue will focus on three clusters of issues: first, the western invention of Maoism as a universal theory of revolution; second, the reception of Critical Theory in China and its relationship to Maoism; and third, the relevance of Maoism and Critical Theory today. Liu raises the question in the end: can Maoism be seen as a revolutionary universalism, or a nationalist ideology of Chinese Exceptionalism?

**Kang LIU**

## **Introduction: Rethinking Critical Theory and Maoism**

The complex and contorted relationship between Critical Theory and Maoism has been explored since its inception in what is known as Althusserianism, which hailed language or the symbolic as the new paradigm of the "politics of otherness." Fredric Jameson reminds us that "what is less often remembered, but what should be perfectly obvious from any reading of *For Marx*, is the origin of this new problematic in Maoism itself" (F. Jameson, "Periodizing the '60s"). Today the French Maoism spearheaded by Alain Badiou, and the post-Maoist, post-communist "variety show" of Slavoj Žižek are still the hot tickets in the cultural and academic arena from Paris to New York, despite the recent severe political and ideological setbacks experienced by the Left in the western hemisphere. The interest in Maoist connections continues to grow, as seen in monographs and special issues of theory-oriented journals dedicated to topics such as "Badiou and China" (*Positions: Asian Culture Critique*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2005), "Žižek and China" (*Positions*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2011), and "Global Maoism and Cultural Revolution in the Global Context" (*Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2015), to name a few.

While Maoism remains a theoretical Other for the western Left, Critical Theory in China over the last two decades has acquired the status of a veritable master narrative in the humanities, especially in literary and aesthetic studies, where the names and aphorisms of Derrida, Foucault, Said, Jameson, and Žižek, among others, permeate almost every single academic paper and book chapter. Most ironic, however, is the stark absence of Maoism as a critical source of inspiration, if not *the* "origin," as Jameson claims, of the western theories that the Chinese academics embrace wholeheartedly. Meanwhile, the hegemony of western theory has been reinforced by the growing assault on the "bad influence" of western ideas by the recent champions of Chinese Exceptionalism, who have now gained new momentum under the current political circumstances.

This special issue aims to address the Chinese responses to Critical Theory's Maoist connection. The purpose is to explore and reconstruct a genealogy of Critical Theory and Maoism within the global context of political, ideological, and intellectual currents and trends, with a focus on the realms of literature and culture. Maoism in this context is viewed as a non-Chinese invention that takes Mao Zedong's thinking as a point of departure but has deviated from Mao over time. This form of Maoism may be better called global Maoism, in order to distinguish it from the Chinese canon of Mao, or the official version of Mao Zedong Thought sanctioned by the Chinese party-state. Critical Theory and the Chinese canon of Mao have little in common. On the other hand, both Critical Theory and global Maoism place emphasis on human emancipation and resistance to capitalist domination and oppression. Regardless of their similarities and differences, Critical Theory, global Maoism, and the Chinese canon of Mao have all undergone significant transformations during the last several decades. This special issue will invite a group of Chinese and American critics, veteran and young, to engage in critical analysis of the meaning of these transformations and their implications for cultural and literary criticism. We believe that we will shed some light on these issues, and hopefully our discussions will open up new venues for conversation and exploration of the relationships among Critical Theory, Maoism, and the contemporary Chinese intellectual scene. (To avoid redundancy I shall use Maoism and global Maoism interchangeably below.)

I am pleased to serve as the guest editor of this special issue, as I have written extensively on related topics, from my early book *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries* (Duke University Press, 2000) to my more recent articles on Maoism, the Frankfurt School, and the debate with Žižek on Maoism. Over the years, my concerns have centered on three clusters of issues. The first is the western invention of Maoism as a universal theory of revolution. I have repeatedly asked myself the following questions: under what historical circumstances has Maoism emerged? And how is Maoism invented as a universal theory of revolution, particularly through Althusser's theoretical endeavor?

I have examined the historical conditions of the 1960s and 1970s in which Maoism emerged. This era is known for its political and social upheavals across the world. Maoism as a global theory and knowledge of revolution emerged at this juncture. However, at the time, there seems to have been two versions of Maoism. In the Third World context, Maoism was construed as guidelines for "missions of resistance," i.e. guerrilla warfare, as a radical means to achieve national liberation and decolonization. Mao's ideas regarding guerrilla warfare were espoused by a number of Third World revolutionaries, including those from Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, the Naxalbari revolutionaries of India in the 1960s, the Peruvian "Shining Path," et cetera. In advanced capitalist Western Europe, however, Maoism embodied

the "politico-cultural model," that is, cultural revolution (which in its more universalized form is emphatically deviant from the Chinese Cultural Revolution). These two versions correlated with each other, in the sense that the pathways of Third World revolutionaries and radical Left intellectuals in the West, France in particular, often crisscrossed as they sought revolutionary ideologies. Moreover, there is a deeper reason that Maoism appealed to both Third World revolutionary rebels and the Left intellectuals in the West: Mao's determined pursuit of an alternative to the existing models of modernity, either the dominant capitalist modernity or the Stalinist model of "actually existing socialism." At this time when both models sank into deep crisis, Maoism promised a real alternative. In my early studies I observed that Mao aspired to not only rewrite Western values and ideas, Marxism in particular, by way of integrating the "universal principles of Marxism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution" (in Mao's own words), but also to create an alternative vision of modernity, or a vision of alternative modernity, by way of transforming Marxism from a Eurocentric vision into a non-European, henceforth more universal, vision of modernity.

In the West, French Maoism was perhaps one of the most influential intellectual currents of the 1960s, involving a cohort of leading writers, philosophers, and artists. Major intellectual figures, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Alain Badiou, and avant-garde literary movements centered around the journal *Tel Quel*, radical feminists, and many others, were in one way or another deeply attracted to Maoism as a discursive construct and utopian vision. It should be observed that that which transpired in the 1980s and 1990s in the academic world, labeled as poststructuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, or radical theories in social, cultural, and literary studies, were closely associated with the intellectual legacy of the 1960s, in which Maoism played a central role. I have focused first on Althusser's reinvention and appropriation of Maoism as an epistemological instrument in his theory of ideology, and his incorporation of Maoist antideterminism into his central theoretical edifice of "overdetermination." Maoist antideterminism, however, is incomplete and contradictory, wavering between an antieconomism and cultural determinism. In Althusser's theory the contradiction between antideterminism and determinism is salient, too, which I consider to be a fundamental dilemma inherent in western Critical Theory and most contemporary leftist theories of culture and society. Several papers in this special issue continue to explore the relationship between Maoism and Critical Theory.

The second cluster of questions I am concerned with has to do with Maoism and Critical Theory in China: What is the relationship between global Maoism and the Chinese canon of Mao? What are the Chinese receptions and revisions of Critical Theory? And why is there a missing link (or absence) of Maoism in the Chinese appropriation of Critical Theory? For the first question, the most obvious answer is that Maoism and the Chinese canon of Mao are two different things. Global Maoism is the product of radicals and revolutionaries outside China, a revolutionary ideology in the struggle against existing political and social orders that are driven by capitalism or colonialism. Mao's canon in China, however, has been enshrined as a guiding ideology for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its party-state. The canonization of Mao into Mao Zedong Thought has been a long process that began in the 1940s but remains open-ended today, subject to revisions and modifications. During the 1960s, the revolutionary ethos that gave rise to Maoism across the world was shared by radicals in China, so the Chinese canon of Mao resonated with global Maoism at the time. (In fact, during the 1960s-70s, the CCP launched a huge international propaganda campaign to promote Mao Zedong Thought as the gospel for the world-wide revolution.) However, when China under Deng Xiaoping began to reform and debunk Mao's legacy of the Cultural Revolution and his most radical theories of class struggle, for Maoists throughout the world, from the extremist-terrorist Khmer Rouge to the western Marxist high priest Althusser and his ilk, Deng's China became a source of serious consternation. In the following decades, Deng and his successors preserved Mao Zedong Thought's iconic status as CCP's guiding ideology along with Marxism and Leninism while hollowing out its radical and revolutionary substance. Consequently, the distance between global Maoism and Mao's canon in China increased dramatically.

Then there was the "invasion" of western Critical Theory in China's academic circles of the humanities and some quarters of the social sciences (as the distinction between the humanities and social sciences has never been clear-cut in China). These western theories actually did not make their inroads into China during the heyday of China's "Cultural Fever" or the Cultural Reflections of the 1980s, when China welcomed and embraced modern western ideas and concepts of liberalism, humanism, and existentialism which had been prohibited completely during the Mao era. The so-called "Cultural Fever" of the 1980s was an intellectual movement with an aim for the ultimate political reform, which was crushed mercilessly by Deng Xiaoping at Tiananmen Square in the summer 1989. After Deng's pledge to continue the economic reform and opening up in 1992, China's door opened again, with a great deal of caution and selectivity toward western ideas. The former feverish espousal of western liberalism gave

way to what amounted to a vehement rebuttal of the liberal legacy by western Left intellectuals, that is, postmodernism, at least in the eyes of the post-Tiananmen cultural and ideological apparatus in China. The onset of postmodernism or the Critical Theory of the western Left from the mid-1990s onwards marked an abrupt turn in reception of western theories in the humanities and social sciences. One witnessed a peculiar "comeback" of Leftist thinking to China, via western Critical Theory and poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, only to be safely quarantined within, and confined to, the academic circles of literary studies. Any radical and revolutionary references reminiscent of 1960s Maoism have been relentlessly neutralized or forgotten. The only relics left after the meticulous cleansing were the hollowed-out references to Marxism itself in Critical Theory.

Finally, I approach the question of the relevance of Maoism and Critical Theory today. More specifically, with the warfare of universalism vis-à-vis relativism/exceptionalism raging around the world today, can Maoism be seen as a revolutionary universalism, or is it an indigenous and nationalist ideology of Chinese Exceptionalism? Western-dominated universalism based on liberal ideas of free market economy, multiparty electoral democracy, and human rights, have been challenged by rising nationalism and radical ideologies from both Right and Left extremists. Pro-globalization liberals have suffered a series of setbacks, from Brexit to Trump's "America First" policies. Political autocracy, rather than democracy, seems to hold sway across the continents, while the political Left has been on the defensive during this new interregnum. Mao's legacy, including global Maoism and the canon of Mao and its appropriation in China, henceforth pertains to the current conditions in at least two terrains, namely that of a revolutionary universalism, and a nationalist ideology of Chinese Exceptionalism. It is arguable that Maoism from its inception was a revolutionary universalism meant to stretch beyond Chinese borders, in the sense that it was not only created by Third World revolutionaries and the western intellectual Left, but also appropriated as a universal theory of revolution and alternative modernity. The canon of Mao in China, however, has waxed and waned since the start of the post-Mao era, mostly as a vacuous icon severed from its radicalism of ceaseless class struggle and revolution. Even so, it has never been rejected outright by the CCP, and remains its guiding principle and indispensable source of ideological legitimacy. In recent years, especially since Xi Jinping assumed the "core" leadership of the CCP in 2012, Mao's canon and icon have been steadily revived, even though the CCP remains ambivalent about Mao's radicalism.

Mao's revolutionary ideas were initially conceived as an indigenous theory of revolution, and, when it was being canonized from the mid-1940s onward, Mao Zedong Thought then became the central part of modern Chinese Exceptionalism. Known as the Sinification of Marxism, or "making Marxism Chinese," Mao's canon inaugurated the new revolutionary phase of Chinese Exceptionalism. During Deng Xiaoping's Reform era, Chinese Exceptionalism acquired the name "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" or Deng Theory. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CCP convened on November 2017, the CCP Constitution enshrined "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." The longish, winding neologism is now commonly known as Xi Thought, and it stands on equal footing with Mao Thought, whereas Deng Theory has only been accorded secondary status in the hierarchy of political nomenclature. In the rigid CCP naming system, "ism" is supreme, reserved only for Marxism and Leninism; Mao refused to accept the title of "Maoism" out of deference to Marx and Lenin, and preferred the title "Mao Zedong Thought" instead, and thus the application of the term "Thought" to a particular theory became the highest accolade in China. Xi Thought, however, retains the bulk of Deng Theory, namely, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics." The way in which Mao Thought is transmogrified into Xi Thought deserves serious scrutiny. Suffice it here to note that Mao's canon today is undoubtedly appropriated as a critical component of Chinese Exceptionalism, an ideology that serves the rising Chinese nationalism. As Xian Wang reminds us in her essay on this issue, "a narrowly nationalistic version of Mao's thinking is not only undesirable, it distorts universalist, utopian and egalitarian goals inherent in Maoism. What China needs now is its concept of egalitarianism and effort of cultural liberation for the working class."

This special issue is a continuation and expansion of the themes, issues and questions that I have raised, a collective effort by Chinese and American scholars whose experience and knowledge will significantly expand the scope and vision of the current inquiry.

Wang Ning's essay "Maoism in Culture: a Globalized Marxist Literary and Cultural Theory" points out two interesting ways of reinterpreting Mao's legacy. On the one hand, Wang wants to open up a critical space where Mao's ideas can serve as both local and global theory in the era of globalization, or in his own words, a "globalized" theory that "has contributed and will continue to contribute a great deal to the global Marxist literary and cultural theory." On the other hand, Wang takes pains to define (or confine?) the subject of Maoism in the realm of literary and cultural studies. While acknowledging that Maoism is "the introduction of Marxism as a universal revolutionary principle into a particular cultural

context," Wang Ning's essay mostly focuses on the implications of Mao and Maoism in literary and cultural studies as a matter of academic inquiry. Politics resurfaces only in the end, when Xi Thought and Mao Thought are compared. Wang maintains that "in Mao, the national sense is more emphasized, while in Xi, the international significance of Chinese literature and art is emphasized." A veteran scholar of comparative literature in China, Wang Ning showcases the post-Tiananmen trends that pit academic specialization and professionalism against political and ideological debates.

Continuing the discussion on Euro-American strains of Maoism, Kenneth Surin tries to tease out a new formulation of Mao-Deleuze vis-à-vis that of Mao-Hegel. Surin argues that contradiction is Mao's major contribution to Marxism, in that Mao modified the Hegelian-Marxist notion of contradiction as antagonism. However, Surin finds that Mao still succumbed to a rather rigid, inflexible Hegelian notion of identity and unity, which should be revised based on Mao's own emphasis on "antagonism in contradiction." Surin considers this to be subversive of the Hegelian "metaphysical logic" that underpinned Mao's thinking. Surin therefore suggests a Deleuzian inflection of Mao-consciousness as "Mao-Deleuze," in which Mao appears only as a "conceptual persona" or "embodied form of consciousness." The Mao-Deleuze formula, according to Surin, "does justice to aleatory encounters, incommensurabilities, heterogeneities, and irruptions and disruptions that rupture prevailing socio-economic formations." Surin's Deleuzian reappropriation of Mao can be seen as part of the western Left's continued fascination with Maoism as a theoretical alternative, if not in political practice, then to the metaphysical foundations of Hegelian-Marxism. Surin nonetheless adds a caveat before embarking on his theoretical rereading of Mao and Deleuze: his formula is in no way a historical recasting; by the same token, theory and history cannot crisscross or overlap in the Mao-Deleuze formula.

Chinese scholars in this volume may not have the luxury of separating theory and reality. Thus, they invariably engage themselves in disentangling the complex relationship among global Maoism, the Chinese canon of Mao, and western Critical Theory. Zeng Jun's essay tries to offer a "cognitive mapping" of Maoist aesthetics embedded in Western Marxism, i.e. Critical Theory. Zeng Jun addresses the "contemporaneity" of Mao's literary thoughts and western Maoist aesthetics in order to interrogate the ways by which western Marxists invent their "Maoist aesthetics." Zeng delineates a fascinating genealogy of western Maoist aesthetics that includes the works of Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, Philippe Sollers, Etienne Balibar, Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and others.

Perhaps no one embodies the crucial connection between "western Maoist aesthetics" and Critical Theory better than Fredric Jameson. As one of the most influential Marxist literary and cultural theorists in today's world, Jameson's impact in China can hardly be exaggerated. There is a Chinese version of Jamesonism, which consists primarily of his theory of postmodernism and his essay on the Third World allegory. As a leading Marxist literary scholar residing in the United States, a bulwark of pro-capitalist ideologies in the eyes of many Chinese, Jameson's esteem in China largely derives from perceived ideological affinity, and particularly his position as an uncompromising critic of capitalism and standard-bearer of Marxism. Curiously, however, the Chinese Jamesonism has a singular missing point, that is, Jameson's Maoist connections. Jameson's Maoism is hardly mentioned in China, despite the fact that Maoism constitutes a centerpiece in Jameson's interpretive frameworks, drawing on Althusser's theory of ideology, structural causality and overdetermination. (Chinese Jamesonism, or the Chinese reception and appropriation of Jameson's works, is an interesting issue worthy of further inquiry.) Xian Wang's essay traces the theoretical lineage from Althusser to Jameson, with a meticulous analysis of the revision and transformation, and indeed, of the reinvention of the traveling theory, Maoism. Wang's essay calls for a forceful historicizing and contextualizing of Mao's legacy, in order to rekindle the emancipatory passion and egalitarian idealism inherent in Left thinking, while warning against various attempts to bring revolutionary theories to an ideological foreclosure.

Of all western Maoist variations, the Althusser-Mao formula (to borrow from Surin's Mao-Deleuze formula) is unquestionably the most powerful one, with far-reaching and enduring impact. Yan Fang in her essay "Politics and Culture: Maoism as a Western Reincarnation," addresses precisely the Althusser-Mao problematic, drawing on Althusser's own conception of "problematique," in a painstaking effort to excavate the conceptual and theoretical (often highly abstract) DNA, as it were, inherent in the theoretical couplet of Althusser-Mao. Yan zeros in on how Mao's ideas influence Althusser's conceptualization of ideology. Yan has engaged in substantial and sophisticated analyses of not only the high theories but the unforgettable historical experiences of Mao's Cultural Revolution, and "the mass ideological revolution" conceived by Althusser and his brand of French Maoists, who grossly misunderstood and misjudged what had really happened in China. Yan's argument is quite compelling; she writes that the Althusser-Mao amalgam "elevates ideology to such an extent that ideology or ideological struggle becomes synonymous to the search for 'alternative modernity.'" In the end, the

Chinese Cultural Revolution waged by Mao as an ideological struggle turned out to be one of the greatest debacles of his reign. To this day, ideology remains a heavily contested realm in China, often rising as an impediment to China's construction of a modern nation-state with rule of law and political democracy.

When Critical Theory and western Marxism are deployed directly to tackle the historical and social conditions in China, issues of modernity, alternative modernity and "anti-modern modernism" then acquire a critical potency that would put theoretical discourses to test in the arena of realpolitik, with implications far more dire than academic debates. Wu Yuyu's essay "Chinese Theories of 'Anti-Modern' or Alternative Modernity: Arif Dirlik, Liu Kang, and Wang Hui" singles out discussions by three authors. Wu's main objective, in fact, is to illustrate how Wang Hui's thesis regarding "anti-modern modernity" is conceptually linked to western Marxism by comparing his views with Arif Dirlik's notion of "anti-modern modernism" and my discussion of "alternative modernity" via Mao and Althusser. It is not exactly a study of influence. Rather, Wu takes us down the tortuous path of the traveling theory, using the ideas of three authors as case studies of the relationship between western theory and Chinese contexts. Wu argues that Dirlik's "anti-modern modernity" and my "alternative modernity" bring western Marxist theoretical reflections to bear on Chinese historical conditions and, in turn, challenge the Eurocentric assumptions intrinsic to the universalist appeal of Marxism. Dirlik and I investigate Chinese historical experiences as the backbone of Mao's revisionism, or Sinification of Marxism. Wang Hui, however, follows the journey of western theory back to China again in an attempt to justify or find an excuse for the Chinese experience, namely Mao's revolution. Wu concludes that "as a result [of Wang Hui's re-appropriation of Dirlik's appropriation, and possibly Liu's, too, of western Marxism], the insights of western Critical Theory become blindness for interpreting the Chinese experience."

The next two essays lead us a bit farther from the connection of Maoism to Critical Theory, into the broader historical context of the reception and re-appropriation of Critical Theory in China. Zhu Guohua's essay, "From the 'Other' to the 'Master Narrative': the Chinese Journey of the Frankfurt School," addresses what I call in the earlier pages the "invasion" of western Critical Theory in China's academic circles, especially since the 1990s. Zhu offers a detailed, well-researched account of the journey of Frankfurt School Critical Theory in China in order to illustrate the underlying pragmatism in Chinese academic application of this theory to China's cultural conditions, particularly the rising consumer popular culture from the mid-1990s. Zhu argues that the Chinese academic (mostly humanities) usage of the Frankfurt School betrays a kind of instrumental reasoning or utilitarianism that the Frankfurt School philosophers had set out to repudiate. In Zhu's view, Maoism may help unravel the universal values of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, as both Maoism and Critical Theory, even without any actual contacts, are concerned with the critique of capitalist modernity and share a similar utopian vision for the future of humankind.

Zhang Xiaohong's "The Political (Un)conscious: Rethinking Aesthetics in a Cross-Cultural Context" borrows Jameson's famous formulation of the "political unconscious," though not to open up a conversation on one of Jameson's most crucial concepts largely ignored by Chinese Jamesonian enthusiasts. Rather, Zhang takes us further away from the thickets of theoretical inquisitions into Maoism and Critical Theory, to the terrain of aesthetics in general, and cross-cultural variations in particular. Zhang argues that "the very term of aesthetics has an uneasy relationship with ethics and politics, which, consciously or unconsciously, reflect changing sociopolitical circumstances." Zhang engages in a cross-cultural investigation of the culturally specific nuances of critical terms like race, class, and gender, all of which have bearings on our perception and conception of aesthetics. Here Zhang reminds us once again of the critical linkage between Mao's Chinese canon, global Maoism, and Critical Theory, namely the conceptual matrix of the aesthetic, or the ideology of the aesthetic, as the British critic Terry Eagleton would have it, that underlies most theoretical and practical considerations that this special issue intends to confront.

Finally, the review essay by Li Song offers a fresh opportunity to revisit some of the issues that my 2000 book *Aesthetics and Marxism* has raised. Li's comments on the Chinese translation and the preface to the Chinese translation, published in 2012, reveal the changing historical conditions and contexts of the English and Chinese as well as a critical lacuna in the English book. Simply put, the English book "does not go beyond largely theoretical reflections on this critical and complicated issue" and delve into the complex historical events and movements that shape all the theorizing. I have highlighted in the 2012 preface to the Chinese edition the "Moscow-Yan'an Model" that prioritizes culture and ideology (or the aesthetic in the broadest sense), as opposed to the Stalinist approach with its exclusive dependence on a rigid, bureaucratic-technocratic machinery that oppressed, rather than capitalized on, the mass movement and mass support. But what exactly would such a Soviet-China lineage mean today, given that the hundred years anniversary of the Soviet October Revolution in 2017 almost completely escaped our attention? These are some of the issues that we as a collective in this special issue are keen on

exploring, and the editing of this special issue is therefore an ongoing conversation amongst the authors and beyond. "

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