


Mapping Out Chinese Modernity and Alternative Modernity

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Mapping Out Chinese Modernity and Alternative Modernity," Song Li reviews the writings of Kang Liu, particularly his *Aesthetics and Marxism*. Kang Liu studies the intellectual trajectory of Chinese Marxism from its inception to its post-Mao phases of transformation by comparing it with the cultural and aesthetic thinking of Western Marxism. It provides not only a new perspective for the study of Marxism in general and Chinese Marxism in particular, but also opens up a new space for mapping out Chinese modernity and alternative modernity. Its 2012 Chinese translation makes it more accessible in China, and it will have a far-reaching impact on the Chinese intellectual scene in the years to come.

**Song LI**

### **Mapping Out Chinese Modernity and Alternative Modernity**

Marxist aesthetics is an important part of the edifice of Chinese Marxism, as its related, extended realms of ideology and culture have always been central to Chinese Marxism. Liu Kang's *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Marxist Aesthetes and Their Western Contemporaries* is a ground-breaking work not only in the study of modern Chinese intellectual history, but also Marxism in general, particularly Chinese Marxism and twentieth century Western Marxism. Liu examines the intellectual trajectory of Chinese Marxism from its inception to its post-Mao phases of transformation, by comparing it with cultural and aesthetic thinking of Western Marxists, including Gramsci, Adorno, Benjamin, Althusser, Williams and Jameson.

The book was first published in 2000 by Duke University Press as a monograph of the author's major research since the beginning of his intellectual pursuits in the 1980s. Liu was among the first select group of Chinese students in post-Mao China to pursue graduate studies in the West, the U.S. in particular. His study of humanities and social sciences made him an even rarer member of this elite group, since most of his peers pursued the study of engineering and natural sciences. Liu received his doctorate degree in comparative literature from the University of Wisconsin—Madison in the summer of 1989, a year with historic bearing for both China and for Liu Kang himself. Liu's intellectual trajectory has been largely shaped by the turbulent years spanning from the 1960s to the present, particularly in China. During his time in the U.S. Liu has been reminiscing and reflecting on his earlier memories within the context of postmodern America. Meanwhile, China's own cultural emphasis has rapidly turned from revolutionary heroism to Western-style individualism, liberalism, consumerism, and postmodern chic.

Ultimately, what emerged from Liu's particular blend of experience and knowledge was a sense of both displacement and synchrony—displacement of space and time which is underscored by a deeper sense of historical connectedness and continuity. Liu's years of graduate studies in the United States exposed him to French theories of poststructuralism and deconstruction, Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and the academic discourses of Chinese Studies in the West, which he studied alongside Edward Said's critique of Orientalism and theoretical work bearing the imprint of French Maoism. A significant catalyst for Liu (and for a large number of the Chinese students studying literature and culture in America) was Frederic Jameson's work, which bridges Chinese and Western Marxist cultural studies. Undaunted by the enormous disparities in social and cultural life between China and the United States, Liu Kang and his cohort of fellow Chinese students in social sciences and humanities have tried to connect the different worlds by writing and speaking in both Chinese and English to different audiences.

Revolution is at the center of China's passage into modernity and attempts at alternative modernity, but within intellectual circles in the last two decades of the twentieth century, a growing distrust of revolutions in China and elsewhere was the order of the day. Chinese studies in the West hastened to reinvent modernist paradigms to discredit Chinese Marxism and revolution, echoed by the Chinese state and intellectuals who embraced modernism, postmodernism, and neo-liberalism in search of new ideological legitimacy for "socialism (capitalism?) with Chinese characteristics." Liu Kang's *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries* is therefore an attempt to reexamine the Chinese Marxist experiment of constructing an alternative modernity through cultural revolutions and ideological hegemony within the context of the twentieth century worldwide Marxist movements, particularly the traditions of Western Marxism.

Liu chooses aesthetics as the central motif of the book primarily for historical reasons. He argues that aesthetic, utopian impulses were common among Chinese revolutionaries, especially Chinese Marxists, from Mao to his comrades, companions, and dissenters. The book examines works of Lu Xun, Qu Qiubai, Hu Feng, Zhu Guangqian, and Li Zehou from the 1920s to the 1980s, and compares them with those of Kant, Schiller, Schopenhauer, Lukacs, Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse. He argues that cultural revolution and ideological hegemony lie at the heart of Chinese Marxism during the revolutionary era, primarily represented by Mao. To Mao, cultural revolution was nearly as important as peasant guerilla warfare, which ultimately led to the triumph of the Chinese revolution. Drawing on insights from Arif Dirlik, Maurice Meisner and others, Liu argues that cultural and ideological revolution allowed Mao to constitute a revolutionary subjectivity from the Chinese peasantry in lieu of a proletariat class as the agent of revolution. His book also examines the work of Marxist dissenters and revisionists such as Hu Feng, Zhu Guangqian, and Li Zehou during the PRC period, as valuable attempts to create constructive and democratic cultural spaces for the Chinese public under the increasing pressure of Mao's manipulative cultural policies. The highly abstract and theoretical debate over aesthetics that lasted for more than a decade during the 1950s and 1960s was the major intellectual event of the time that

clamored defiantly for a more pluralistic and diverse cultural and public space. The aesthetic debate was grossly undervalued in China and completely ignored in the West. The last few chapters try to highlight the critical connection of this earlier debate to the "Culture Fever" of the 1980s, which amounted to no less than a new, post-revolutionary intellectual enlightenment. The discussion of the 1990s cultural scene emphasizes the historical dimension of Chinese Marxism and revolution. Underlying Liu's study is an impulse to interrogate Western and Chinese knowledge formations on the issues of modernity, alternative modernity and postmodernity, an impulse inspired in no small measure by Edward Said's exemplary work. Said's commitment to "worldliness and change" is shown by his genuine interest in bringing discussions beyond academia and into the public sphere.

The Chinese translation of Liu's book appeared in 2012, more than a decade after its English publication. One of the reasons for the relatively long stretch of time between the English and Chinese versions of the book can be attributed to the nature of the book's subject matter. Liu Kang has been quite active in the intellectual scene in China and has published bilingually since the early 1990s. He has become well known in China for his research on western Critical Theory, postmodernism and contemporary Chinese culture. However, aesthetics, Chinese Marxism, and modern and contemporary Chinese intellectual history, the three central themes that his book traverses, have been customarily treated separately in Chinese academic circles. Especially sensitive are the assessments of Mao's political and ideological legacy, which constitute the centerpiece of Liu's book, and, of course, discussion of the "Culture Fever" of the mid-to-late-1980s, which ultimately ended in cataclysmic bloodshed during the political crackdown at Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Even now, this topic is still a political taboo, and is strictly forbidden to discuss publicly in China. All these issues added complexity to the translation and publication of the book in Chinese. After heavy revision and deletion of politically sensitive parts, the Chinese version finally saw the light of the day.

Liu wrote an introduction in Chinese to explain his conception of the new ideas and thoughts which have been added over the years and distinguish the new Chinese translation from its English publication. The book focuses on the comparison of modern Western Marxists and Chinese Marxists, whose ideas intersect by Liu's account, even though no real historically significant contact ever existed between the two distinct groups. Liu justifies his method with the following statement:

The key issue is not that China has attracted the Western Marxists, but that Western Marxists 'find' China, and that they think China provides a third option of modernization [as an alternative to Euro-American capitalism and Soviet-Stalinist communism]. Can we see what kinds of problems China has if we look at China through their perspectives? Now in China diverse ideas have emerged and have begun to compete. Chinese liberals completely denounce China's passage into modernization in an attempt to rewrite history from a liberal point of view. The rigid, ideological views of the Moscow-Yan'an model [an oblique reference to the official view of the CCP] also has its theory regarding Chinese problems. How about the Western Left's perspective on China? I think there are more connections between them [Chinese Marxists and Western Marxists] and I will look for such a connection. (Liu, 2012 3-4)

The connection between Chinese and Western Marxism that Liu tries to uncover helps him establish an interpretive or explanatory framework by which his central theses can be elucidated. The comparative approach also helps broaden the discussion of Chinese Marxism to a more global horizon, beyond just the issues in China. Commenting on Liu's earlier work on Gramsci, which then becomes the centerpiece of the book, Jonathan Arac, a leading literary scholar in the U.S. and editor of the preeminent journal *Boundary 2*, aptly sums up three major issues that Liu's work addresses. First, Liu's introduction of Mao Zedong's cultural thought sheds new light on Gramsci and Althusser's ideological sources. Arac explains:

For Liu Kang, in 'Hegemony and Cultural Revolution,' the difference between 'contemporary cultural issues' and 'social revolution' still counts. This very ambitious piece coordinates, and simultaneously criticizes, the Western appropriation of Gramsci since the 60s vis-à-vis Gramsci's Chinese contemporaries, including Mao, who also thought seriously about the relations of cultural revolution to social revolution. (I should underline that Gramsci, born 1891, and Mao, born 1893, are indeed contemporaries.) By noting the synchrony of Mao's Cultural Revolution with the Western 'discovery' of Gramsci in the 1960s, Liu forces Western readers to ponder whether the recent, enthusiastic reception of Gramsci may only have been possible because he was 'safe', having by virtue of his imprisonment never had the chance to carry his thinking into practice. And Liu renews the interest of Althusser by emphasizing his dual inspiration from Mao and Gramsci. (142)

Secondly, Liu traces Fredric Jameson's lineage to Maoism via Althusser. Arac continues:

Liu's work points to a further step here that, to my knowledge, no scholar has taken. This would involve tracing the Chinese thread through the work of Fredric Jameson, who had been inspired by Chinese Marxism

long before he brought his theory of postmodernism to China. Let me recall a moment from *Marxism and Form*, published twenty-five years ago and (no doubt) written for the most part in the 1960s. This is the very end of the hundred-page chapter on 'Sartre and History,' almost the last words before the final long chapter 'Towards Dialectical Criticism.' At the end of Jameson's analysis, he concludes that Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason 'takes its place alongside such works as Mao Tse-Tung's 'On Contradiction,' in which culture and logic are shown to be the reflexes of social conflict; or alongside those luminous pages in which Gramsci expresses his sense of the ultimate shaping power of social groups. (142)

Lastly, but no less important in consequence, Arac compares what Liu Kang does to what Edward Said has done, praising the (then junior) scholar of Chinese origin saying Liu's work will "eventually have the substantial impact of Said's Orientalism. Like Said, Liu makes it possible to grasp that the categories by which 'we' have understood an 'other' may have been far too greatly defined by our perspective and interests, and that we have therefore failed to grasp equally important, or even more important, features of the situation, which are quite evident to those in its midst. Like Said, too, Liu makes full use of the tools of Western knowledge even as he criticizes their limitations" (142).

Arac is not alone in holding Liu's work in such high esteem. Fredric Jameson comments in his preface to the collection of essays that came out of a conference Liu Kang organized at Duke in 1990:

This collection of essays is one of the richest and most stimulating I have encountered in recent years and one that at once begins to pose all kinds of new questions and problems that Western Theory prides itself on having assimilated. My sense is that with this younger generation of literary theorists in the China field we are well beyond the debates on Western influence that were painful and crippling in the early years of the century in China. (6)

Leo Ou-fan Lee, a veteran China scholar at Harvard, writes in his postscript to the same collection that "the present volume, as a whole, abundantly demonstrates that the much talked-about 'paradigm shift' in our field is no longer merely wishful thinking or hot air" (301).

Liu Kang's *Aesthetics and Marxism* epitomizes such a paradigm shift not only in modern Chinese Studies, but also in the general rethinking of modernity and alternative modernity among intellectuals across the world. At least in two directions, the book draws a kind of cognitive map for understanding the issue of modernity and alternative modernity. First, the book presents an outline of the "Moscow-Yanan Model" as the basis for rethinking the Chinese Revolution. The Moscow-Yanan Model is Liu's innovative conceptualization of so-called Chinese Marxism or Sinification of Marxism. Liu argues that Mao's conception of the Chinese Revolution, evolving over the years from the early Jiangxi period (1927-34) to the Yanan period (1935-45), depends largely on two pillars—the peasants and ideology, or the "army of the guns" (Red Army of peasants) and the "army of pens" (revolutionary ideology or cultural revolution).

Culture and ideology (or the aesthetic in the broadest sense), are at the very center of Mao's Chinese Marxism, in addition to his strategy of the armed rebellions, mobilizing the Chinese peasantry through revolutionary ideologies. However, Mao's Chinese Marxism was derived from Leninist-Stalinist ideas of revolutionary vanguard, namely the Bolshevik party, which led the revolution to victory. The core ideas of peasant rebellion and cultural and ideological revolution differ fundamentally from the Moscow Model, but, as Liu argues, the Yanan Model complements the Moscow Model rather than replacing it.

Liu's concept of the Yanan-Moscow Model only contributes to the copious work dedicated to the scrutiny of Chinese Marxism and the Cultural Revolution around the world. However, the other major concern of the book indeed breaks new ground, pointing to a new direction for understanding the historical labyrinth of modern Marxisms in plural and multiple variations. It is in the realm of culture and ideology that modern Western Marxism and Critical Theory find the China connection, or rather, invent an imaginary Maoism, mostly in its cultural, ideological, and aesthetic configurations. Liu's book painstakingly attempts to excavate the implicit and explicit parallels between the Chinese Left-Wing and Marxist thinkers such as Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai on the one hand, and the Frankfurt School philosophers such as Adorno, Benjamin, and Gramsci on the other. More importantly, Liu elaborates at considerable length on the crucial role Maoism has played in Althusser's theories of ideology and over-determination, cruising through the epochal transformation from the revolutionary era of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the heydays of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the global radical movements that swept from Paris to New York and to the Andes, which made a far-reaching impact on Left intellectual movements from the late 1960s to the present. As captured by Jonathan Arac, Liu's insights are most original when he delves into the tangled relationship between Maoism and Western Critical Theory. However, Liu has also seriously considered the complex "reverse journey" of the western Critical Theory of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and so forth, that have been widely accepted in China as a new

theoretical fashion or norm over the last two decades or so. The current Western Critical Theory bears a significant imprint of Maoism as an imaginary invention of the Western Left, while its relationship to Mao's actual thought and practice in China is extremely contorted and far-fetched.

Unfortunately, Liu's English book does not go beyond largely theoretical reflections on this critical and complicated issue. In its Chinese translation, Liu Kang's sense of foreboding over the consequences of Western Critical Theory's dominance in China's academic circles is watered down due to the changing contexts and heavy censorship. Moreover, Chinese academics over the years have been gripped by the euphoria of Critical Theory's potency in interpreting Chinese experiences and texts, only to later find themselves facing the latest development of xenophobia and distaste towards anything Western, Critical Theory included. Under such circumstances, Liu Kang's insights into these issues related to Maoism, Western Marxism, modernity and alternative modernity are all the more indispensable and valuable, as we must face new challenges in dealing with the legacy of the Revolution in China and elsewhere, and the future orientation of the intellectual Left in the West. Liu Kang's book in Chinese will have a far-reaching impact on the Chinese intellectual scene in the years to come.

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