

Chinese Theories of "Anti-Modern" or Alternative Modernity: Arif Dirlik, Liu Kang, and Wang Hui

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**Yuyu Wu,**

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**Abstract:** In Yuyu Wu's article, "There and Back Again: A Critical Study on 'Anti-modern Modernity,'" the author discusses the arguments about "anti-modern modernity," raised by Arif Dirlik, Kang Liu and Hui Wang, and compares different contexts in which China's modernity has been understood and interpreted. Both Dirlik and Liu reflect upon western Critical Theory through analysis of the Chinese experience, while Wang brings this theory back to China. However, in this two-way journey, a structural change occurs. By justifying China's historical experience through abstract western theories, western Critical Theory has not only lost its sharp critical edge, but also transmogrified into an excuse for the Chinese experience. As a result, the insights of western Critical Theory become blind spots for interpreting the Chinese experience.

**Yuyu WU**

### **Chinese Theories of "Anti-Modern" or Alternative Modernity: Arif Dirlik, Liu Kang, and Wang Hui**

The publication of Hui Wang's, "The Ideological Situation and Modern Issues of Contemporary China" (当代中国的思想状况与现代性问题) in 1997, sent shockwaves through Chinese academia. Commenting on Chinese thought in the 1990s, Wang highlighted his argument that "Mao Zedong's socialism is a type of modern anti-capitalist modernization" (14). Deliberately reversing the Chinese New Enlightenment's mainstream interpretation of post-1949 Chinese thought, Wang's opinion soon received diverse responses from quite a few Chinese scholars, including Yang Li, Yuhai Han, Xinnian Kuang and Guimei He. In no time, "anti-modern modernity" per se became the manifesto of the Chinese New Left, serving as an essential ingredient in their view of modern (literary) history. Wang then gained a certain reputation among western leftist academics after the English translation of his writings was published in the U.S.

As a focal point of controversy in China, the philosophy of "anti-modern modernity" asks for a critical historical review. In fact, this notion is neither a product of the Chinese context nor Wang's invention; it is borrowed from left theorist Dirlik, whose theory influenced young Chinese scholars educated in the West, and their introduction of the notion through translation influenced Chinese intellectual circles in turn. Back in 1993, Dirlik's "Modernism and Anti-modernism: Mao Zedong's Marxism," was translated and published in *Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly*. This article elaborates on "anti-modern modernity" in Maoist socialism, a concept which obviously inspired Wang. The same year saw Xiaobing Tang's compilation of "Reinterpretation: Popular Culture and Ideology" (再解读—大众文艺与意识形态), which features the central argument that Chinese popular culture, as represented by Yan'an culture, stands for "an anti-modern modernist avant-garde cultural movement" (一场反现代的现代先锋派文化运动) (6). Tang's publication coincided with Yang Li's, "Revolt against Destiny: On Socialist Realism, 1942-1976," which discusses the "anti-modern modern meaning" of socialist realist literature. Due to the fact that both works are strictly literary, without considering the broader context of intellectual traditions, their ideas remained largely unknown. Published in 1996, Kang Liu's "The Problematics of Mao and Althusser," offers yet another interpretation of an "alternative modernity," which might have been an influence on Wang's thinking. In the following year the discourse of "anti-modern modernity," through Wang's detailed explication, finally found great favor in China.

Drawing on the arguments concerning "anti-modern modernity," proposed by Dirlik, Liu, and Wang, I undertake a comparative study on Chinese and western critical understandings of Chinese modernity. With François Jullien's notion of the "detour and access" of a theory in mind, I then explore how "anti-modern modernity" has completed its there-and-back-again journey. In western theorists' appropriation of the Chinese experience in their theoretical construction, China remained an outsider of the western intellectual tradition. Nevertheless, as the theory found its way back to the Chinese context, China stood out as a meaningful presence. During such a two-way journey, a series of implicit changes occur: concepts have been substituted, critical concerns modified, and ideas newly attached. The clarification of these changes is my major concern.

As the May 1968 events in France stunted Western Marxism, rebellious sentiments further diffused into a haunting mood among left-wing intellectuals. Western Marxists thereupon diverted their attention to China; in their eyes, the only successful case of left-wing politics and thus the ideal field for Marxist experimentation. Not surprisingly, Arif Dirlik holds China—and Mao Zedong's theory and practice in particular—as a paradigm against capitalist modernity. Dirlik, in his "Modernism and Anti-modernism in Mao Zedong's Marxism," elaborates on his theory of "anti-modern modernism," viewing Maoist Marxism as a form of "anti-modern modernity." Dirlik borrows this notion from *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, by Berman Marshall. As a matter of fact, Dirlik's theory integrates Berman's comments on Karl Marx with Mao's thought.

To clear the ground for further discussion, an explanation of Berman's concept of "anti-modern modernism" is needed. What is modernity? For Berman, modernity is an experience within specific spatial and temporal contexts. It is a paradoxical unity in constant mutation:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are... [I]t is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. (15)

Berman also distinguishes between the experiences of modernity and modernism. For him, the former is the experience of a ceaseless attempt to solve the contradictions inherent in modernity, while the latter evokes "an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own" (16). Dirlik thus defines modernity as an experience, and modernism as an effort and practice (60-61).

The question then comes to the definition of anti-modernism. According to Berman, anti-modernism is exactly a response to modernism; the two thus share the same problematic. Anti-modernism cannot possibly make sense without modernism as a reference point. More importantly, anti-modernism is actually a renewal of the modernist pursuit, as the former is born right out of the impulse of the latter: "anti-modernism represents (and is crucial to) a search for an alternative modernity that is not likely to go away so long as modernization in practice postpones (or betrays) the promise of liberation that motivates it in theory" (Dirlik 61-62). Anti-modernism and modernism can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, the antithesis and thesis of the dialectic triad, where the synthesis, or the third term, is considered by Dirlik as a "search for an alternative modernity."

It is at this moment that the notion of anti-modern modernity emerges. Berman believes that socialism is anti-modern, and yet it can never go against modernity or modernization. In the past two millennia, socialist revolution has aimed to go beyond capitalist modernity so as to produce a new modernity, which is ideally close to the Enlightenment's picture of human liberation. In Berman's eyes, Marx "was both a great analyst of modernity, and a modernist himself whose solutions to the problems of modernity embodied the deepest contradictions of modernism" (Dirlik 63). Marx realizes that though the bourgeoisie had been remarkable in transcending the past and conquering nature, the cultural cost of their endeavors is enormous – "all that is solid melts into air." This explains why Marx attempts to embody the problematics surrounding capitalist modernization and its cultural expression, modernism. The hope of resolving the contradictions is in the hands of the proletariat, itself a product of capitalist modernity. For Marx the proletariat would discover the potential of liberation in modernity, which would not be possible for the bourgeoisie. Marx thus hopes "to heal the wounds of modernity through a fuller and deeper modernity" (Berman 98). Marx's anti-modernism is an integral part of his critique of capitalism. His vision of deeper modernity, however, is utopian and vague, in that he hardly spelt out during his life time a revolutionary agenda for the realization of his vision. It should be emphasized that Marx's anti-(capitalist) modernism contains no concrete plan for an alternative modernity. For Marx, the "fuller and deeper modernity" would emerge only from within western capitalist modernity. It was the latter-day Marxists (even though Marx denied the label of "Marxist" himself), or more precisely, Russian Bolshevik revolutionaries led by Lenin, who then advocated and constructed a Soviet-style "alternative modernity" from the periphery of western capitalist modernity. Berman's rethinking of Marx's anti-modernism therefore does not lead to a consideration of alternative modernity, because various kinds Marxist and Leninist revolutionary theories and practices are out of Berman's perimeters, which concentrate essentially on Marx's own writings.

For Dirlik, however, the historical experiences of the Chinese revolution play a critical role in redefining Marxist anti-modernism and modernism. While Dirlik finds Berman's theory insightful, he is skeptical about modernism as Berman understands it. Dirlik holds that it would be oversimplification if modernism in the Third World were to be regarded as a mere extension of western modernism. To give new meaning to modernism, Eurocentric modernism itself must be transcended. This explains why Dirlik takes China into consideration in his interpretation of anti-modern modernity. Mao takes the notion of contradiction to be a most efficient conceptual framework to understand a world laden with changes, splits and clashes. Contradiction as the driving force of socio-natural development plays a central role in Mao's thought: that everything harbors its antithesis turns into epistemology. It is in this sense that Dirlik believes that Mao absorbs the modernity and modern language of Marxism, overtly manifesting the complexity and contradiction of modernity in his thought. China's modernity is thus the product of an interplay between contradictions. Interestingly enough, in China's case the contradictory quality of modernity becomes the key to resolving these very contradictions. Hence, the framework of Mao's thought reflects the contradiction between modernization and modernity, even as Mao attempts to find a solution to it.

Dirlik argues that Mao's ambivalence towards modernity much resembles that of Marx, and at this very moment, Mao's Marxism can be seen as a form of anti-modern modernity in three senses. First of all, Maoist modernity is anti-modern in its resistance to globalization. Though China's modernity is also a product of capitalist modernization, Mao imprints China's historical context on his interpretation of Marxism. Therefore, the form modernism takes in China is peculiar, as Chinese society is forced into

modernity as an object, not as a subject. Mao tries to revise Marxist principles based on the specificity of the Chinese context, for, since the 19th century, China has been involved in a world largely driven by capitalism, and accordingly such a process of global capitalization has been resisted by most socialists in China (Dirlik 69). Secondly, as a member of the Third World, China has been confronted with the expansion of capitalism. The integration of Chinese history into an increasingly globalized capitalist history goes hand in hand with capitalist hegemony's attempt to incorporate China. In the Third World context, socialism is more than an alternative to capitalism; it has an appeal for national liberation from capitalist hegemony, for participation of the Third World in world history as an independent subject. Thirdly, in a globalized capitalist world, China has steadfastly insisted its own independence and nationalism. Just as no Third World country can be reduced to some homogenized "Third World configuration," China has periodically resisted western universalism and modernity when adopting western-led modernity and integrating into the modern world system. After all, Marxism is itself a product of the teleology of capitalist modernity and Eurocentrism. The complexity of Chinese modernity is articulated through nationalism. Chinese nationalism embraces modernity, and at the same time longs to move beyond it. Dirlik then regards Chinese nationalism as both modernist and anti-modernist (70).

It can thus be observed that Dirlik starts from Berman's reflections and lands in Mao's theory and practice. Berman comments on Marx's revelation of modernity's contradiction, concluding with the argument that Marxism can be seen as an anti-modern modernism. Berman, however, stops short of exploring Marx's vision for a fuller and deeper modernity, because he sees no clear clue in Marx's writings about it. Dirlik takes this a step further by rethinking Maoism as a Third World Marxism, or a Third World anti-modern modernism. In three different but interlocked senses, Dirlik delineates a Maoist modernity different from its western prototypes, including Marxism. As a self-conscious Third World scholar residing in the U.S., Dirlik's efforts to construct an anti-modern modernism out of Maoism derive from his leftist position against western domination. Dirlik in general has not been viewed as a postcolonialist critic, but his aversion to Eurocentrism and his sympathy with Third World nationalism are quite similar to the concerns of postcolonialism. Professedly a neo-Marxist and a historian of Chinese communism, Dirlik's ideas are fundamentally different from postcolonial criticism, which focuses on cultural psychological subjugation of the former colonies such as India, and the African continent.

In "The Problematics of Mao and Althusser," Liu elaborates Althusser's "symptomatic reading" of Mao, observing that Mao was in fact seeking an "alternative modernity." Liu's train of thought is different from that of Dirlik. Rather than tracing anti-modern modernism in Mao via Berman's reinterpretation of Marx, Liu tackles Althusser's theory of "overdetermination," which is illuminated by Mao's work "On Contradiction." Liu views Althusser's reading of Mao as the starting point of a theoretical revolution. During this process, certain Marxist concepts undergo structural changes: Mao's discussion on the "specificity" and "imbalance" of contradiction lays the ideological foundation for an alternative modernity, enlightening Althusser's critique of capitalist modernity.

Althusser's notion of "overdetermination," in "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and "On the Materialist Dialectic," derives from Sigmund Freud, but its core ideas are shaped by "On Contradiction," which further influenced Althusser's alternative modernity. Adopting Fredric Jameson's methodology, Liu no longer identifies Marxism "by specific positions," but by the "allegiance to a specific complex of problems, whose formulations are always in movement and in historic rearrangement and restructuring, along with their object of study (capitalism itself)" (Jameson 75). In this way, he contextualizes the theories of Althusser and Mao, revealing the two's respective problematics. Althusser's objective is to reject teleological and determinist implications of Marxism and Stalinism. At this moment, the Maoist alternative attracts his attention, and Mao's understanding of contradiction helps him crystalize his critique of capitalist modernity. Meanwhile, Althusser finds a problematic latent in Mao's theory and practice: the search for an alternative modernity. In his article, Liu generalizes Althusser's critical work in three aspects (10-11).

### **1. The linkage between the "specificity" of contradiction and alternative modernity**

In "On Contradiction," Mao defines, in both absolute and relative terms, the "universality" of contradiction, which cannot be separated from its "specificity":

They do not understand that it is precisely in the particularity of contradiction that the universality of contradiction resides. Nor do they understand how important is the study of the particularity of contradiction in the concrete things confronting us for guiding the course of revolutionary practice. ...Since the particular is united with the universal and since the universality as well as the particularity of contradiction is inherent in everything, universality residing in particularity (316, 329).

For Liu, Mao's definition of universality suggests that the "absoluteness" of contradiction is tantamount to specificity of contradiction at all times. In other words, for Mao this universality is an absolute specificity; almost no detailed argument concerning universality in its metaphysical and ontological sense ever appears in Mao's theory of contradiction. Mao defines universality in terms of specificity, and specificity is what Mao is truly looking for.

In his critique of Hegelianism, Althusser zeroes in on Maoist universality's epistemological and hermeneutical meaning, and designates Mao's notion as the "preliminary 'labor' of the universal," proposing that:

A real understanding of materialism reveals that this 'labor' is not a labor of the universal, but a labor on a preexisting universal, a labor whose aim and achievement is precisely to refuse this universal the abstractions or the temptations of 'philosophy' (ideology), and to bring it back to its condition by force; to the condition of a scientifically specified universality. (183)

For Althusser, the culprit is the Hegelian teleological and metaphysical universality. He observes that the so-called "fundamental contradiction" as a defining characteristic of universality does not exist beyond Hegelianism: "For this 'simple process with two opposites' in which the Whole is split into two contradictory parts is precisely the very womb of Hegelian contradiction" (195). Here, Althusser quotes Mao again to support his proposal of a "'Pre-given' Complex Structured Whole," claiming that "throughout [Mao's] analysis we never deal with anything but complex processes in which a structure with multiple and uneven determinations intervenes primitively, not secondarily" (195).

Mao denies the simplistic understanding of universality's origin both in fact and in principle, which is reflected in Hegel's teleology and determinism as an ideology of modernity. Mao refuses to prioritize such understanding for he tries to construct, in the name of universality, an alternative modernity that can stand on its own feet, independent of the teleology of western modernity. Therefore, Mao's theory on contradiction implies an implicit but outright critique of capitalist modernity, as reinterpreted by Althusser.

## **2. "Overdetermination" and the critique of modernity**

Althusser observes that Marxist materialism's reversal of Hegelian idealism involves a complicated process that includes both a reversal of relationships and a structural transformation. To be specific, Hegel's dialectic is based on an appearance-expressing-essence "expressive causality" or on the teleology and determinism of a universal "Absolute Spirit." On the contrary, Marxist dialectic involves a structural relationship between various contradictions and elements that entangle with and cross-determine each other, that is, "structural causality": it includes "the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations between those elements, and all the effects of those relations by the effectivity of that structure" (Althusser and Balibar, 186), which is "complexly-structurally-unevenly determined" (Althusser 209). This particular structural relationship is interdependent, overdetermined, and irreducible. Althusser thus reaches a conclusion of the "relative autonomy" of superstructure, and, above all, of the effect of the structure itself.

Althusser, in Liu's view, does a full theorization of several traditional Marxist concepts in order to free Marxism from Enlightenment rationality as an ideology of modernity. Notions such as overdetermination, structural causality, social form, and mode of production, undergo essential transformations, with the end of economic determinism, the distinction between economic basis and superstructure, and a most important revelation that different modes of production would determine clearly-demarcated and irresistible processes of historical evolution. In this way, Marxism is changed structurally, internalized as a part of the critique of modernity. Hence Althusser, in his reading of "On Contradiction," finds a link between Mao's theory and what he himself had sought: an alternative modernity.

## **3. Alternative modernity manifested in the Chinese case**

Althusser's theorization of "specificity" originates from two particular historical events: the Russian Revolution and the Chinese Revolution. Mao's theory on the specificity of contradiction arises from the political and military conditions and necessities of the Chinese Revolution. "On Contradiction" (and the chapter on the specificity of contradiction in particular) does an exhaustive study on Chinese historical conditions and war-time strategic maneuvers. It is clear that Mao's theory is aimed at tackling specific problems confronting a revolutionary force largely composed of peasants living in an economic



backwater. Therefore, "On Contradiction" turns to a theorization of Sinicized Marxism only after several case studies of war-time scenes. Mao's peculiar attempt at theorization is also shown in his adoption of traditional Chinese resources, for example ancient military strategies of Sun Tzu and Taoism, which seriously influence Mao's understanding of dialectics and contradiction. It is thus sensible to conclude that the distinctive Chinese context inspired Mao to construct an alternative modernity through his study of China's specificity within the "universality" of Marxism (Liu 13).

To sum up, Liu traces the theoretical trajectory of alternative modernity through Althusser's symptomatic reading of Mao. He argues that Mao's ideas, as appropriated by Althusser, offer an alternative vision for western Marxists. In spite of their different approaches, Liu and Dirlik come to similar conclusions: that Mao's theory and practice serve as a prism, through which the predicament of Eurocentric, capitalist modernity can be seen clearly. Moreover, Liu's interpretation of Mao and Althusser is based both on his historical understanding of Chinese Revolution and critical reflection on western Marxism. Liu rediscovers the theoretical basis of Mao's theory of alternative modernity and cultural revolution via Althusser. He observes that the "Chinese Cultural Revolution cannot be reduced to a few presumptions about the impossibility of alternative modernity. The dominant determinist perspectives [...] on contemporary China prevent us from examining determinist and essentialist traits in Mao's thought" (Liu 20). On the question of anti-determinism and determinism in both Mao's and Althusser's theories of alternative modernity and cultural revolution, Liu has the following to say:

They [cultural revolution and alternative modernity] are posed as alternative positions of 'culturalism' versus 'economism.' Reflections on 'cultural revolution' also enabled Mao and Althusser to examine capitalist modernity from novel perspectives. To the extent that these perspectives are metacritical and self-reflexive, they serve as an epistemological method or interpretive strategy for analyzing the 'Althusser-Mao problematics' themselves. On the other hand, the antideterminist and antiessentialist alternatives have paradoxically lapsed into a 'culturalist' determinism and essentialism. (3)

What Liu reveals through his "symptomatic reading" of both Mao and Althusser is the ways by which "specificity" of contradiction (Mao) or "overdetermination" (Althusser) have transmogrified from anti-determinist searches for alternatives to a cultural determinist solution. Mao's objective is to construct an alternative modernity by cultural revolution, in which revolutionary ideology and morality would create "new man." Althusser embraces Mao in order to demolish economic determinism and essentialism, by which both Stalinist "really existing socialism" and western capitalist modernity remained entrapped. Liu, however, argues forcefully that neither Mao's fiasco of the Chinese Cultural Revolution nor Althusserian Marxism promised any real alternatives. What Liu does, in a nutshell, is to turn Althusserianism and Maoism (as appropriated by Althusser) against their own heads, painstakingly ferreting out their blindness and callousness.

Both Dirlik and Liu begin the critical interrogation of the journey of Maoism from China to western Marxism, attempting to disentangle the complex relationship of anti-modern modernism and alternative modernity as manifested in Mao's thoughts, and re-appropriated by western Marxism. The next episode of the journey, as it were, was staged by Wang, with his "anti-modernity modernization" theory. Wang brings Maoism back to China, to conclude a there-and-back-again journey. A decisive structural change occurs in this process. The Chinese conditions and experiences in Wang's theatre no longer appear as the Other to western Marxists and intellectual Left, but become reintegrated into the problems that China faces today. Wang facilitates this change in two aspects.

#### **4. Altering the Intellectual Agenda**

First, Wang attempts to revise the intellectual agenda of the inquiries into the nature of Chinese modernity. Modern Chinese intellectuals, since the May Fourth Cultural Movement (1919), have largely concentrated on questions of why China had failed to modernize, and how China would eventually be modernized. During the 1980s Cultural Reflection period, socialist/communist theory and practice were singled out as anti-modern, or pre-modern obstacles. A decade later, intellectual debates continued to be preoccupied with dichotomies of reformers/conservatives, West/China, capitalism/socialism, market economy/command economy, and so forth. Under such circumstances, Wang believed that the real problems for China were obliterated. He then tried to steer the discussion by reinventing the theory of anti-modernity modernization. His definitions of the terms of modernity, modernism, and modernization draws primarily on Berman's, and Dirlik's discussions. Wang argues that western modernization theories extract the basic models of modernization out of Euro-American capitalism. Marx, for instance, regarded capitalist mode of production as basis of modernization. Modernization was then considered synonymous

with capitalism. Wang considers China to be exceptional. Chinese modernization was promoted by Chinese Marxists. This modernization project is therefore a socialist movement of modernization and an ideology of alternative modernity.

Wang's view is similar to Dirlik's and Liu's in two aspects. First, he draws on Dirlik in conceptualizing Marxist modernity as anti-modernity modernism. Second, he rejects simplistic and reductionist treatment of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, akin to Liu's concerns. Liu insists that "the entire experience of Chinese revolution" forms "an essential dimension in the overarching problematic of critique of modernity," and that "to dismiss or condemn the vital links" between Mao's thought and western contemporary critical thinking "only betrays a lack of understanding of the roles Chinese revolution and Mao have played in modern world history," what Mao did was criticize capitalist modernity while finding an alternative to it (9-10). On these accounts there seem to be some consensus among Dirlik, Liu, and Wang, regarding anti-modern or alternative modernity in China and the legacy of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

When one looks at their respective expositions closely, their differences become obvious. As Wang argues, "Although the popular understanding of modernization in China focuses primarily on the process of transforming the state, the economy, the military, and science from a condition of backwardness to an advanced condition, this concept does not merely set technological goals, and it does not point only to the formation of the nation-state and a modern bureaucracy. Rather, it also includes a teleological historical perspective and worldview" (13). It is precisely in this sense that Wang claims that the Chinese socialist modernization has created its own set of values, which are substantially different from those of capitalist modernization. Both Wang and Liu argue that Marxist modernization theory could provide a novel conceptual framework for thinking about Chinese modernization. Nevertheless, they differ completely on the issue of teleology of history. Liu forcefully critiques the teleological, determinist view of history embedded in Marxist thinking, including Maoism, taking into account the horrendous atrocities of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, waged by Mao's ideological determinism. Wang, by contrast, hardly criticizes Marxist and Maoist teleology and determinism. Liu anchors his critique and theoretical reflection squarely on historical experiences, whereas Wang remains highly abstract and essentially silent on Maoist radical legacy with dreadful consequences.

Dirlik, Liu, and Wang also differ on their respective approaches. Dirlik's argument about "anti-modern modernity" is based on his readings of Berman's theoretical reflection of western modernity, while Liu's observation of "alternative modernity" derives from his rethinking of Mao-Althusser theoretical lineage. In this respect, both Dirlik's, and Liu's reflections can be viewed as primarily theoretical. Wang, on the other hand, is poised to reaffirm the Chinese experience by borrowing some theoretical concepts from western Marxism. In other words, western Marxist theory is utilized by Wang to justify Maoist revolutionary practice.

In order to reinforce his thesis of Chinese anti-modernity modernization, Wang extends the beginning of the ideas of anti-modernity modernization to the late Qing Dynasty of the 1880s—1890s, as if the origin of such radical views did not merely belong to Mao and his communist disciples, but can be traced way back to the formative years of China's modernity. Wang offers a laundry list of pre-modern and modern thinkers and their respective views, from Youwei Kang's one-world utopia, Taiyan Zhang's egalitarianism, to Yat-sen Sun's principle of the people's livelihood, and finally, to various kinds of criticism of western capitalism by Chinese socialists prior to the formation of Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Wang argues that those pre-CCP leading figures, intellectual or political, were involved one way or another with planning and strategizing about Chinese modernization in political, economic, social and cultural realms. Wang wants to prove that the Chinese anti-modernity modernization has a considerable history and rich legacy. Maoist revolution is the heir to this rich legacy and not the solitude creator. In Wang's own words: "that the basic characteristic of Chinese thought on modernity is doubt. As a result, at the heart of the search for Chinese modernity in Chinese thinking and in some of China's most important intellectuals stands a huge paradox" (15).

It becomes obvious that despite their similar considerations of anti-modern modernity and alternative modernity, Dirlik, Liu and Wang are fundamentally different in their respective critical stands. Dirlik's Chinese experience and Maoism serve him as concrete case studies in reflecting and critiquing western theories of modernity and modernism. Liu's critical position is twofold, aiming at both western theories and Chinese experience. Wang, however, utilizes western theory to justify Chinese exceptionalism or Chinese characteristics. In the end, the central issues during the course of traveling theories have been altered in each case.

## **5. Departing from the specific contexts**



Both Dirlik and Liu engage in reflecting and critiquing western theories of modernity from theoretical and textual perspectives, while Wang deploys western theories in explicating Chinese experience and practice. An ironic turn occurs here. Both Dirlik and Liu insist on rigorously contextualizing and historicizing their subjects, namely western theories and Maoism. Wang, however, takes western theories out of their specific contexts and historical conditions when applying western theories in the analysis of Chinese experience. In other words, Dirlik and Liu try to retrieve the historical contexts of abstract theories, whereas Wang simply ignores the historical contexts even though his manifest objective is to question the historical specificity of Chinese experience.

Wang argues that modernity is embodied in Chinese reality and experience in terms of the ultimate goals of Chinese modernity: 1) Establishing a modern nation-state. Wang believes Mao's socialist ownership served the purpose of building a prosperous modern nation-state well. Mao mobilized the whole country to strive for modern nation-building by waging the campaigns to turn private to public ownership of properties, setting up collective People's Communes in rural areas in order to centralize a traditionally loosely connected peasant society. By so doing, Mao achieved his objective of effectively levying and collecting taxes from China's vast rural areas, unprecedented in Chinese history, and amassed resources for industrialization. However, the underlying prototype of a modern nation-state here is completely western, with teleological goals of industrialization and centralized, efficient taxation mechanism, to name just a few. Here, Wang completely ignores the historical contexts from which western modernity originated. 2) Ensuring equality and justice. Wang contends that Mao successfully eliminated "three great differences," i.e. those between workers/peasants, urban/rural, and mental labor/manual labor, thus achieving basic social equality and justice. Again, Wang relies completely on false reports and fabrications manufactured during the Mao era, which by the time Wang writes his paper, have largely been debunked as blatant lies. 3) Achieving nationalist goals. Wang extols Mao's effective social mobilization to turn Chinese society as a totality serving the nationalist goals of the state. As Wang puts it: "Mao's socialism is both an ideology of modernization and a critique of Euro-American capitalist modernization. But this critique is not a critique of modernization itself. Quite the contrary – it is a standpoint based on a revolutionary ideology and nationalism that produced a critique of the capitalist form or stage of modernization. For this reason, on the level of values and history, Mao Zedong's socialism is a type of modern anti-capitalist modernization theory" (14). Wang contradicts himself by claiming the Mao's success of nationalist goals while insisting on "modernization itself" as an ultimate universal telos with no national boundaries. One may ask: what exactly is this "modernization itself," if it does not originate from the western, and capitalist historical context?

Wang emphasizes repeatedly that Chinese modernity is embodied in concrete, real practices. These real practices effecting historic modern transformation turn out, in Wang's account, to be the "Great Leap Forward" and "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," denounced by Chinese public and the CCP alike, as the heinous crimes against humanity committed under these slogans were uncovered publicly. Wang, however, comes out to defend these absolutely unforgiveable crimes, as he is obviously well aware of the post-Deng Xiaoping CCP leadership's ambivalence about denouncing the Mao legacy. After all, the CCP leaders fear the de-legitimizing consequences of further public queries into the root causes of the historical catastrophes. Wang lists a series of "contradictions" as a result of "modernization and rejection of rationalization": "on the one hand, Mao Zedong centralized power to establish a modern state system; on the other hand, he launched the Cultural Revolution to destroy that system... On the one hand, he used the nationalization of the economy to subsume society under the state goal of modernization, in the process stripping individuals of all political autonomy; on the other hand, he was horrified and pained at the use of state mechanisms to suppress the autonomy of 'the masses'" (15). Mao's historic debacles become thus understandable and excusable because of these "contradictions," and the ultimate culprit turns out to be western: "in sum, inherent in China's socialist modernization experience is a historical antimodernity. This paradox has cultural roots, yet it is infinitely more important to search for an explanation in the dual-sided historical discourse from which Chinese modernization emerged (namely, the search for modernization and reflections on the devastating consequences of Western modernization)" (15). Alas, by Wang's account, the real crimes and calamities are merely a "paradox" with "cultural roots." Instead of confronting the real consequences and causes of Maoist legacy, we have an "infinitely more important" task, which ought to land itself on condemning "the devastating consequences of Western modernization" rather than probing what really happened under Mao's China.

It now should become abundantly clear that Wang completely strips Dirlik's theoretical critique of its historical context, turning the latter's critical reflection on western theories into an unabashed justification of Maoist practice. In order to defend Maoism, Wang dismembers Chinese history of Mao era, and dodges, often times fabricates real historical evidences. Wang's falsification and distortion of

historical facts have been sharply repudiated by leading Chinese historians such as Kuisong Yang. At Wang's hand, however, western Marxist theories transmogrified from a relentless, uncompromising critique of capitalist modernity into an affirmative instrument of legitimation for the CCP reign. No wonder ever since Wang published his paper in 1997, he has aroused disconcerting controversies and disputes.

Arif Dirlik's theoretical reflection on modernity and alternative modernity is largely seen in China as an external academic exercise, useful for reference. Liu takes Althusser as his point of departure in his dual critique of both western Marxism and Maoism. Both his U.S. leftist colleagues and Chinese academics, however, may not recognize his insight and its relevance. Wang's position, as I have shown in this paper, is to defend and promote his pro-Maoist politics by appropriating western leftist and neo-Marxist theoretical discourse in the service of his politics. Wang's seemingly deferential gesture is warmly reciprocated by many western leftist academics, thus helping him gain both admiration and disdain back home in China by different ideological camps.

Wang's formulation of "anti-modernity modernization" goes a step further than Dirlik's theory. It is a there-and-back-again journey, starting from the Chinese context and eventually returning to it. As a self-conscious Third World scholar in the U.S., Dirlik intends to construct a self-reflexive theoretical model by drawing on Chinese experience. Liu, a Chinese American scholar, takes a critical perspective in rethinking western Marxism and Maoism. His consideration of alternative modernity, Althusserianism and Maoism is anchored on solid historical contexts. Unlike Dirlik's reflections, which are less concerned with critiquing Chinese experiences than questioning western theories, Liu's rethinking seriously engages both western theory and Maoist theory and practice, and remains critical through and through. Wang, however, shows us how a critical, and historically grounded western Marxist theory can be used to justify Maoist catastrophes by stripping Dirlik's theory of its contexts and fabricating historical facts. Since his paper's publication, Wang has remained a highly controversial figure as both a guru of the Chinese neo-leftist academics and an unabashed apologist for Maoist repressive legacy and Mao's political heirs. By justifying China's historical experience through abstract western theories, western Critical Theory has not only lost its sharp critical edge, but also transmogrified into an excuse for the Chinese experience. As a result, the insights of western Critical Theory become blind spots for interpreting the Chinese experience.

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