

Traveling Theory: Fredric Jameson's Interpretations of the Cultural Revolution and Maoism

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Abstract: In her article, "Traveling Theory: Fredric Jameson's Interpretations of the Cultural Revolution and Maoism," Xian Wang discusses how Jameson transformed or "transcoded" the Chinese Cultural Revolution into his notion of cultural revolution, regarding it as a radical means to achieve decolonization and national liberation. The Chinese Cultural Revolution therefore became a model for cultural revolution in different parts of the world, and an alternative vision of modernity. Jameson also associates Maoism and the Cultural Revolution with Antonio Gramsci's concept of subalternity, and considers cultural revolution as an ideological revolution for the oppressed classes. Taking Maoism as a traveling theory, this article argues that Jameson's theoretical intervention in Maoism and cultural revolution brings the Maoist utopian vision back to China. Jameson's understanding of the Cultural Revolution is also a significant component of his theory of globalization, postmodernism, and critique of the logic of late capitalism.

Xian WANG

Traveling Theory: Fredric Jameson's Interpretations of the Cultural Revolution and Maoism

The Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1967) was a decade-long political movement initiated by Mao Zedong (1893-1976), with a professed goal of eradicating bourgeois and feudalist ideas and remolding the minds and hearts of the Chinese through communist ideology. The legacy of Maoism or Mao Zedong Thought has been extremely controversial. However, quite a few Western leftist scholars, such as Louis Althusser, Fredric Jameson, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, still value Maoism for its efforts in exploring an alternative view of modernity. This paper is not intended to recall the historical events in the 1960s. The purpose of this paper is to examine Jameson's interpretations of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution as a case study of Western Marxism's productive entanglement with Maoism. In view of the global influence of Maoism and the Chinese state's efforts to step up its ideological control, rethinking Maoism and the Cultural Revolution may shed some light on the relationship between Maoism and Critical Theory.

Maoism refers to both a theoretical invention of Western leftist intellectuals and the actual revolutionary strategies of Third World rebels of the 1960s who were inspired by Mao's works. Before the emergence of global Maoism, Mao Zedong's ideas were largely understood throughout the world as an index of Chinese politics. By the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Mao's China had severed ties with the Soviet Union. The split between China and the Soviet Union not only undermined the cliché that the Chinese communist revolution was a byproduct of the communist movements spearheaded by the Soviets, but also changed Western ways of interpreting Mao's ideas. Among the Western intellectuals, French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser played an important role in molding Maoism into an important neo-Marxist theory. As Liu Kang argues, "Althusser's enthusiasm for the Chinese revolution and, more specifically, for the Cultural Revolution was derived from his desire to seek alternatives to Stalinism and the post-Stalinist USSR" (Liu, "The Problematics" 7).

Two of Althusser's important essays "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (1962) and "On the Materialist Dialectic" (1963) draw on Mao Zedong's "On Contradiction" (1937) as a primary theoretical foundation. In his "On Contradiction," Mao points out and analyzes "the universality of contradiction, the particularity of contradiction, the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction, the identity and struggle of the aspects of a contradiction, and the place of antagonism in contradiction" (Mao, "On Contradiction" 178). Sheldon Lu notes that, "Mao's description of the multilayered structure of contradictions in Chinese society and his emphasis on the importance of ideology and culture in the revolutionary process encouraged theorists such as Althusser to reconsider the traditional Marxian concept of the relationship between the base (economics) and the superstructure (ideology and culture)" (Lu 6). Influenced by Freud's psychoanalysis and Mao's core idea of contradiction, Althusser conceives of his notion of overdetermination. Freud uses the term "overdetermination" to account for multiple causes of the formation and the content of dreams: "each event seems to be overdetermined and proves to be the effect of several convergent causes" (Freud 137). Althusser borrows this term to propose an anti-essentialist reading of Marx's economic base and superstructure model. Overdetermination indicates the plurality of discourses in the process of social formation, which moves beyond economic determinism.

Althusser's notion of overdetermination is also an attempt to deconstruct Hegelian Marxism. Engels writes, "Hegel was compelled to make a system and, in accordance with traditional requirements, a system of philosophy must conclude with some sort of absolute truth...and for the simple reason that it springs from an imperishable desire of the human mind---the desire to overcome all contradictions" (Engels and Marx 13-4). Absolute Spirit is the core concept of Hegel's philosophy. In his brief overview of the evolution of the Hegelian idealism vested in Absolute Spirit to Marx's historical materialism and finally to Stalinism, Dowling argues that "Hegel invents the notion of Absolute Spirit, and with it a teleology of history that is so far harmless as being confined within an idealistic system. Marx then relocates this teleology in materialist terms, which so to speak gives it flesh and blood force. And the annulment of contradiction at the end of the teleological process becomes, with Stalin or any dictator coming to power as a Communist, an abolition of differences through sheer force" (50).

This historical lineage from Hegel to Marx, and finally to Stalin, helps explain Althusser's critique of Hegelian teleology and effacement of contradictions as a coded political rejection of Stalinism. It is precisely this confrontation with Stalinism that prompts Althusser's fascination with Maoism. More accurately, Mao's notion of contradiction suggested to Althusser the possibility of seeking alternative ways to think about Marxist teleology and determinism. To Mao, contradictions are universal, and the specificity of contradiction is universal. In the final analysis, universality lies only in specificities, thus

the ontological, and indeed the essentialist status of universality (appearing in Hegelianism as the Absolute Spirit) crumbles at the infinite specificities or contradictions. Likewise, Stalinist sheer power is dissolved by this infinity of contradictions. Maoism, or rather Althusser's selective incorporation of Mao's concept of contradiction, serves as some sort of magic wand in Althusser's critique of Hegelianism-Stalinism.

When Jameson elaborates on his grand scheme of literary interpretation as political unconscious, he relies heavily on Althusserian structuralist Marxism. Maoism becomes another theoretical source of inspiration for Jameson, thanks to the Althusserian rediscovery of Mao, or reinvention of Maoism. The core ideas of Maoism for Jameson then include ideology and cultural revolution, drawing on the experience of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Althusser serves as "the major mediator between Jameson's experiments in contemporary Marxism and their epochal origins in Marx's own thought" (Dowling 14). Therefore, Althusserianism is crucial for understanding Jameson's interpretations of Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Drawing on Althusser, Jameson attempts to interpret the Chinese Cultural Revolution in a theoretical and philosophical way. Jameson argues that "the concept of cultural revolution, then, or more precisely, the reconstruction of the materials of cultural and literary history in the form of this new 'text' or object of study which is cultural revolution, may be expected to project a whole new framework for the humanities, in which the study of culture in the widest sense could be placed on a material basis" (Jameson, *The Political* 95).

Jameson proposed a new concept of cultural revolution in general, based on his understanding of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. It is a rather "romantic, utopian appropriation of the Cultural Revolution" (Lu 7). It provides an alternative way to think about the humanities and what they could offer to the resistance to capitalism. However, there is an obvious difference between Jameson's notion of Maoism as a neo-Marxist hermeneutics and the Chinese reality during the Cultural Revolution:

Though 'cultural revolution' was suggested to Jameson by events in China in the late 1960s, and though he obviously considers these associations important to his argument, most readers of his book will be confused if they try to make sense of the term by placing it against its background in recent Chinese experience. It is better, for purposes of understanding Jameson, simply to treat the term as one he has made up to describe his third horizon in this new aspect, with 'cultural' signaling the sense in which a social formation must be grasped as a total structure or system, 'revolution' the sense in which a dynamic of opposing tensions organizes the structure and produces its transformations. The aim of viewing human history under the aspect of cultural revolution, in short, is to preserve the value of Marx's concept of modes of production without being led by it into the error of vulgar typologizing. (Dowling 138)

In the 1960s, the Chinese Cultural Revolution became the epicenter of worldwide radical ideological cultural revolutions, from Western Europe to North America. From that time on, "the Cultural Revolution becomes a generic term to a large extent cut loose from its concrete moorings in the sequence of events in China" (Bosteels 589). To some extent, the Chinese Cultural Revolution was a turning point for Western scholars, as it presented a global context for Maoism. Maoism turned out to be a radical, revolutionary hermeneutics, or in other words, a revolutionary universalism. For Jameson, the historically specific events known collectively as the Chinese Cultural Revolution become a general and universal theory and practice of cultural revolution.

Taking Althusser as a point of departure, Jameson theorizes Maoism and cultural revolution. Clearly, the things Jameson heard about and imagined regarding what happened in China during the 1960s and 1970s, no matter how fragmented, distorted and illusory they were, had significant bearing on his efforts to theorize Maoism and cultural revolution. However, Jameson delves deeply into the manifested goals and rationales of the Chinese Cultural Revolution instead of examining its real, historical and tragic consequences. The discrepancies between what Mao said and what really happened in China are simply unimaginable. Of course, Mao Zedong did not launch the Cultural Revolution on a whim. Mao had launched a series of political campaigns from the establishment of the PRC in 1949, particularly in cultural and ideological terrains. Of all the political campaigns, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, or class struggle at the super-structural levels as well as in the realms of consciousness, was central to Mao's grand scheme, and embodied Mao's theory of "continued revolution" following the seizure of state power. Mao believed that, "in order to make the revolution possible, a revolutionary subject must be created in the first place, by inculcating proletarian class consciousness into the minds of the peasants and petit-bourgeois intellectuals" (Liu, "Maoism" 15). The Cultural Revolution emphasized human consciousness and ideological remolding. Its ultimate goal was to eliminate class inequality. However, the political power struggles in the Cultural Revolution significantly complicated the process of the movement. With the persecution of thousands of intellectuals and officials, and nationwide chaos, the Chinese Cultural Revolution ultimately resulted in unfathomable human tragedy and social and cultural

catastrophe. The Marxist historian Maurice Meisner, though sympathetic to the goals of the Chinese revolution, declares that "Mao Zedong, like any other historical actor, ultimately must be judged by the results of his actions rather than by his words and intentions" (*Mao's* 294).

Was Mao simply a Stalinist dictator? Is the Cultural Revolution a Chinese version of the Great Purges? Jameson considers the matter differently. He underscores the professed goals of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and its global vision. Jameson's notion of Maoism is best captured in his essay "Periodizing the 60s." In the essay, Jameson examines the relationship between Maoism and the cultural revolutions in First World countries in the 1960s, and concludes that "indeed, politically, a First World 60s owed much to Third-worldism in terms of politico-cultural models, as in a symbolic Maoism, and, moreover, found its mission in resistance to wars aimed precisely at stemming the new revolutionary forces in the Third World" (180). Jameson regards cultural revolution as a radical means to achieve decolonization and national liberation. The Chinese Cultural Revolution thus serves as a model for other cultural revolutions, offering an alternative vision of modernity. Jameson therefore not only turns the specific historical events of the Chinese Cultural Revolution into a general notion of cultural revolution, but also transforms Mao's writings about Chinese revolution into a revolutionary universalism, called Maoism. The concept of cultural revolution is key to understanding Jameson's version of Maoism. Jameson conceives of the notion of cultural revolution in a broad, general sense, not circumscribed by the Chinese historical events. Liu Kang argues that:

Jameson proposes three concentric interpretive frameworks. First, "text" as a "symbolic act," an imaginary and aesthetic (and ideological) solution to real social contradictions. The individual text is read against political history as a subtext, fraught with social contradiction. Second, the framework of the "social" as a vast system of langue, or class discourse, in which a text is interpreted as a parole, or individual utterances embodying an ideologeme in antagonistic, oppositional relations to other ideological and discursive formations. Third, history itself, which Jameson designates as a complex ensemble of phenomena pertaining ultimately to given "modes of production" and "ideology of form."...The most interesting point about this final interpretive horizon, or framework of history, is its definition of "cultural revolution." (Liu, *Aesthetics* 48)

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson defines cultural revolution as "that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social, and historical life" (Jameson, *The Political* 95; Liu, *Aesthetics* 48). Jameson then creates this three-dimensional hermeneutical scheme, in which culture and ideology became two pivotal bases for the interpretation of culture and literature. "Text" and "society" are two traditional interpretive frameworks in Marxism. By adding the framework of history and cultural revolution as the third dimension, Jameson further develops Marxism. As Sean Homer puts it:

Jameson sees the notion of cultural revolution opening up a whole new framework for the humanities, in the sense that the cultural practice of a given mode of production "has as its essential function to recreate at every moment the life world of that particular mode and to keep it in being at every moment." This process of cultural reproduction is not merely a secondary, super-structural activity dependent on the primary process of material production, but rather "a single immense process on all these levels." Thus, maintains Jameson, cultural producers are ideologues, although ideologues of a very special sort and all cultural texts are the sites for class struggle through the confrontation of their various ideologies. (47)

Jameson's tripartite hermeneutic scheme can be viewed as a revisionist version of Marx's dichotomous model of economic base vis-à-vis superstructure. Instead of emphasizing economic base, this new scheme prioritizes culture. It suggests that cultural dynamics can be decisive in the process of social formation. The importance of the third dimension also plays a crucial role for understanding Jameson's interpretations of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution. Jameson's "Periodizing the 60s" and "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" are two very important essays promoting his notion of cultural revolution.

In "Periodizing the 60s," the 1960s is depicted as a decade of emancipation. "For a time, everything was possible; that this period, in other words, was a moment of a universal liberation and a global unbinding of energies" (207). This tremendous energy exploded across the globe along with the promise of new liberatory and egalitarian social orders. In his essay, Jameson lists a few salient cultural trends and political movements within advanced capitalism in the 1960s. Moreover, he considers the 1960s to be the moment that the Third World countries began to make their own voices heard. In Jameson's

view, from decolonization movements to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, countries of the Third World started to establish their own cultural and political identities. He then canvasses the Third World revolutionary insurgences in the 1960s and points to Maoism as an inspiration and strategic guidance for Third World revolutionary rebels. The First World leftist intellectuals and the Third World revolutionaries converged at a spiritual Tiananmen Square, as it were, under the banner of global Maoism.

Jameson associates Maoism and the Cultural Revolution with Antonio Gramsci's concept of subalternity. In "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Jameson argues that all the works written by Third World artists and intellectuals are national allegories:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic--- necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (69)

Ostensibly, this argument seems to undermine the aesthetic value of Third World literature, but what Jameson suggests here is that literature helps forming a new subjectivity. Szeman points out that:

The concept of national allegory points to the ways in which the psychological points to the political and the trauma of subalternity finds itself "projected outwards" (allegorically) into the "cultural." Very crudely, the cultural is what lies "between" the psychological and the political, unifying "theory and practice" in such a way that it is only there that the "baleful and crippling" habits that are the residue of colonialism can be addressed and potentially overcome. A "cultural revolution" aims to do just this---to produce an authentic and sovereign subjectivity and collectivity by undoing the set of habits called subalternity. (810)

As I mentioned earlier, Mao Zedong and Althusser inspire Jameson to take cultural revolution as the third, crucial dimension in his hermeneutic scheme. Jameson further connects cultural revolution with subalternity. Cultural revolution can be viewed as a new mode of production. As Homer puts it,

the Western Enlightenment can be seen as just such a moment of struggle and as part of the bourgeois cultural revolution. In other words, cultural revolution designates the process through which social formations retrain or reprogram subjects for new modes of social life, the process through which subjects acquire new habits, new modes of consciousness and transform human practices. (47)

Cultural revolution therefore aims at educating the subaltern and helping them to break the habits of obedience, and ultimately, to find a new identity or subjectivity for themselves.

Class struggle is inevitable during the process of the cultural revolution. The Chinese Cultural Revolution is also known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, suggesting class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. At the beginning of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in 1966, the political movement was targeting feudal and bourgeois elements in the society, and aiming at eliminating class enemies in the Communist Party. After the establishment of the PRC, Mao believed there was still a long way to go before new socialist common sense will be installed in the minds and hearts of the Chinese population. Thus, as Ebrey explains, "To Mao the revolution had to be continued to succeed; it had to be a permanent process, constantly kept alive through unending class struggle" (314). Mao prioritized ideological struggles at superstructural level, and launched political and ideological campaigns one after another throughout his reign. As a Soviet style communist state, the leading force in the PRC was supposed to be the working class. However, Mao remained paranoid about resentment and probable subversion plots against his rule by his former political rival, the Chiang Kai-shek-led KMT regime, their rural landlord allies, and urban middle and upper class supporters, those who were overthrown during the bloody and prolonged civil war. For Mao, the cultural revolution was an effective means to indoctrinate the urban working class and vast rural peasantry, and to crack down on any ideological and intellectual dissent. Meanwhile, Mao's ultimate goal was to create a communist utopia with a Chinese twist, that is, a moral high ground where every single individual is transformed into a saint. Cultural revolution was conceived by Mao as a perfect conduit to this Maoist, communist, and moral utopia.

Ideology can be understood not only as Mao's essential means (mobilizing the masses) and ends (creating a utopian society), but also as the conceptual framework that centrally shapes contemporary Western Marxism. For Jameson, cultural revolution serves as an ideological revolution for the empowerment of the oppressed classes, "a strategy for breaking the immemorial habits of subalternity and obedience which have become internalized as a kind of second nature in all the laborious and exploited classes in human history" ("Periodizing" 188). What Jameson imagines here is a utopian world

that cultural revolution helps to build, a world in which all people are treated equally. In this world, we can "look out on the nonhuman world from a collective mind that recognizes no more difference between individual members of the group than I recognize between their arms, their legs, their hands" (Dowling 23). Drawing on Mao's utopian vision, cultural revolution for Jameson becomes the means to liberate the subaltern and achieve egalitarianism.

We now live in a world which Jameson describes as a post-modern society. Globalization is the main characteristics of this world. Jameson divides globalization into five levels: "the technological, the political, the cultural, the economic, and the social" (Jameson, "Globalization" 49). He argues that in the context of globalization and post-modernism, there is a notion of a "cultural dominant." He considers "postmodernism not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features" (*Postmodernism* 4). Because of the characteristics of a "cultural dominant" in a post-modern society, all technological, political, economic and social issues can be viewed as cultural issues. We can see "a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life--- from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself---can be said to have become 'cultural' in some original and as yet untheorized sense" (48). In other words, everything is culturalized in this post-modern world, which also means that culture is no different from commodities. This is what Jameson called "the cultural logic of late capitalism."

Another characteristic of the cultural dominant of late capitalism is cultural homogenization in the process of globalization. To leftist intellectuals such as Jameson, cultural homogenization also means Americanization. Jameson explores Americanization as a global cultural phenomenon: "The standardization of world culture, with local popular or traditional forms driven out or dumped down to make way for American television, American music, food, clothes and films, has been seen by many as the very heart of globalization" (Jameson, "Globalization" 51). One of the concerns about globalization and Americanization is the marginalization of national cultures. Although Western intellectuals such as Althusser, Jameson, Žižek and Badiou have different opinions on Maoism, they all consider Maoism or cultural revolution to be an effective way to resist globalization and Americanization. In a sense, "Maoism promised a radical way out of capitalist alienation, urban decadence, Western imperialism, selfish individualism, cold reason, and so forth. Under this utopian and romantic vision of Mao, warm human bonds would be restored, life would have deep meaning once again, and people would have faith" (Buruma and Margalit 41). Maoism, universalized and extracted out of its historical contexts, now serves as an imaginary weapon for the Western intellectual left's resistance in an uncanny but not entirely unlikely way. Mao, after all, once coined a metaphor for American imperialism as a paper tiger. Insofar as the Western left's resistance remains on paper, Maoism serves their purpose well.

The legacy of Mao and the Cultural Revolution is entirely different for China. While Maoist discourse still provides ideological legitimation to the CCP, the atrocities committed under the guise of revolution and liberation, particularly during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, have remained the most painful and tragic events in Chinese modern history, and assessment of Mao's legacy is controversial and divisive even today. The current CCP leadership simply prohibits any public reflection on and commemoration of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The significance of Western interpretations of Maoism to China is that they create a new space for us to rethink Mao's legacy. Western Maoism brings back the utopian vision of cultural revolution. While the traumatic memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution can hardly be forgotten, Mao's egalitarianism still resonates with millions and millions of poor and disempowered Chinese. For the leftists across the world, whether members of the intellectual left in advanced Western societies, or leftist political parties in Latin America and Southeast Asia, the legacy of Maoism waxes and wanes at different historical conjunctures.

After the death of Mao in 1976, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) began a process of reform and globalization that canceled Maoist radical policies and renounced the legacy of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping reversed Maoist ideological and cultural determinism and made economic development his utmost priority. Meanwhile, Deng retained Maoist rhetoric and ideological discursive formations to legitimate CCP rule, despite the fact that his economic reform and opening up inaugurated immense social and economic inequality and injustice, which were completely at odds with Maoist socialist egalitarianism. Within the last four decades, China has been transformed into a largely market-driven economy under the ever-powerful authoritarian political regime of the CCP. These changes reflect Deng's "theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics." Deng's pragmatism, developmentalism, and economic determinism have brought tremendous economic growth, catapulting China into its current position as the second largest economy in the world in a span of less than forty years. Yet Deng's lopsided reform has resulted in extreme social injustice and corruption, turning China into one of the most economically and socially unequal, as well as politically repressive, countries in the world. While

Mao Zedong believed that human consciousness can be transformed into a productive force for the construction of a socialist economy, Deng insisted that economic development was fundamental for Chinese socialism. As Guo Jian argues, "if Stalin's 'economism,' as Althusser saw it, ruined a chance for the Soviets to pass over bourgeois modernity under socialism, Mao Zedong's organized class struggle on super-structural levels certainly did not save that chance for China either" (349). Neither cultural determinism nor economic determinism works in contemporary China. To move past the opposition between Mao's and Deng's theories, we have to reintroduce Mao's notion of multilayered contradiction, Althusser's concept of overdetermination and Jameson's analysis of cultural revolution.

After tracing the trajectory of Maoism as a traveling theory, it becomes obvious that we still find Maoist egalitarianism relevant in the case of China. And Jameson's theoretical intervention serves as a compelling reminder of the global resonance of Maoist utopianism. In the social, economic and political environment of China today, radical Maoist politics cannot be revived. Maoism is mostly deployed to legitimize socialist rule and promote nationalism. But a narrowly nationalistic interpretation of Maoism distorts Mao's vision of universalism. What China needs now is Maoism's concept of egalitarianism and its cultural liberation for people who are underrepresented. Jameson's interpretations of Maoism and cultural revolution bring the utopian vision of Maoism back to China. They are also globally significant because they offer an alternative way to think about globalization, post-modern society and the logic of late capitalism.

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