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Cover calligraphy Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover illustration Okinawan *Seasar* (© photograph by Ken Yonetani 米谷建)

Lions have never been found on Okinawa, and the custom of revering them as 'king of the beasts' and symbols of protection is said to have originated in ancient Persia. By the time this custom reached Okinawa via China in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, the stone figures bore less and less resemblance to real lions. Early Chinese recordings of a stone 'lion-dog' figure placed within a shrine of the Ryukyu Kingdom (currently Okinawa) date back to 1683. From the late seventeenth century, influenced by Chinese conceptions of *feng shui* 風水, the lion-like symbols or 'seasar' (シーサー, also spelt *shiisaa* or *seesar*) became known for their powers of protection against fire, and could be found in front of the gates of temples or castles, at entrances to the tombs of noble families, and at the entrances of villages or sacred shrines. Today, seasars are placed to ward off any kind of evil spirit, and many different lion-like forms made not only from stone, but from clay, concrete and other materials, with varied colours and styles, may be seen on roofs, gates and at entrances to buildings across the Okinawan archipelago. (—*Julia Yonetani*)

THE FATE OF AN ENLIGHTENMENT—TWENTY YEARS IN THE CHINESE INTELLECTUAL SPHERE (1978–98)

史 *Xu Jilin* 许纪霖

—translated by Geremie R. Barmé, with Gloria Davies

The history of the Chinese intellectual sphere that spans the two decades from 1978 to 1998 is one that is intimately bound up with the changes wrought by the Communist Party's reformist-era modernization policies. Generally speaking, those policies initiated and instituted a reform from the top downwards. Over the years this reform evolved as a process of expansion that, starting at the heart of the party-state system, gradually encompassed the fringes of the establishment and eventually the spaces outside it. In keeping and in tandem with this complex process of transformation, the intellectual world of China experienced constant splits and realignments.

I would argue that in terms of intellectual history, the most noteworthy development on mainland China over the past two decades was the appearance of what is known as the “New Enlightenment movement” (*xin qimeng yundong* 新启蒙运动) during the late 1980s. This New Enlightenment was itself an outgrowth of an earlier period of intellectual contestation that unfolded in the late 1970s known as the “Movement to Liberate Thinking” (*sixiang jiefang yundong* 思想解放运动). In the following, I will trace the history of these movements and comment on their importance and impact on the 1990s. I will also argue that in some ways the New Enlightenment was another “May Fourth” (*wusi* 五四), but of course a contemporary one which, like its predecessor that developed over the decade 1917–27, also came to be known as the “Chinese Enlightenment.” Furthermore, I believe that we can trace the origins of the ructions, alliances and changes that have appeared in China's intellectual world in the 1990s back to the New Enlightenment of the 1980s.

At one level, the “newness” of the post-1978 era is still very much a part

A shorter version of this paper, the Chinese title of which is “Qimengde mingyun—ershi nian laide Zhongguo sixiangjie,” originally appeared in *Ersbiyi sbiji*, 1998:12. This translation is based on the full, unpublished version of Xu's essay.

of the present-day and the following attempt to map a history that has yet to become properly “historical” is clearly not a wise move. This is because an observation that is within proximity of the events is likely to betray the observer’s own blind-spots, incurred as a result of his own evaluative bias and the vantage-point that he occupies. Thus, I am unable to provide a thoroughgoing investigation of the complex depths of this particular history at this juncture. But given that this is the case, I hope that by consciously adopting a “value-neutral” stance, I am nonetheless able to provide a relatively objective survey of developments and changes in the Chinese intellectual world of the last twenty years.

1. *The Origins of the New Enlightenment*

¹ This word figures power in the physiological terms of all-encompassing athletic prowess, and should be contrasted with the more abstract and popular term *jiquanzhuyi* 极权主义 for totalitarianism. (Tr.)

² See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun wenti taolun shimo* [The full story of the debates concerning the Criterion of Truth] (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 1997); and Wu Jiang, *Shiniande lu—be Hu Yaobang xiangchude rizi* [A decade’s way—in the company of Hu Yaobang] (Hong Kong: Jinghao Wenhua Qiye Chuban Gongsi, 1995), sections 5–10.

The Chinese authorities speak of the advent of the reform policies initiated in late 1978 as the beginning of a “new era” (*xin shiqi* 新时期). Put simply, the new era denotes a period during which the Chinese Communist Party initiated and guided the party-state through a systemic transition that saw the abandonment of the Utopian totalism (*quannengzhuyi* 全能主义)¹ of the Maoist Cultural Revolution past in favour of a series of modernizing policies aimed at creating a system focussed on a market economy. If one takes the social and political reform of contemporary China as dating from the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, then we can locate the “pre-history” of the New Enlightenment movement in the ideological debates that prefigured that congress, and which are known as the Movement to Liberate Thinking. The central element of that movement, which consisted of both internal and public deliberations, was concerned with the idea that “practice is the sole criterion of truth” (*shijian shi jianyan zhenlide wei yi biao zhun* 实践是检验真理的唯一标准).² That is to say, it was now argued that social reality and economic necessity should be the standard by which government and party policies should be judged, as opposed to the Maoist-era belief that ideology could determine social reality.

As we have said, the reform era was initiated from the centre of power within the state-party system, and as such it came about partly from the recognized need within the Communist Party itself that without reform, their hold on power would be endangered. That is not to say that those party leaders who launched the reforms had been dissidents during the Mao era, indeed they were, generally speaking, the selfsame people who had instituted the disastrous utopian policies of that time. It was only during the later phases of high state socialism, in particular during the Cultural Revolution, when they personally suffered the consequences of those wrong-headed policies and came to realize that they were impracticable, that these leaders began to make a concerted effort to move away from the idealism of utopian socialism. The way they managed this was to allow a form of secular socialism that emphasized economic modernization above all to come into

being. The evolution of what I like to call “secular socialism” (*shisubhua shehuizhuyi* 世俗化社会主义) was actually evident from as early as 1975 when, at the Fourth Session of the National People’s Congress in Beijing, the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 made the symbolic declaration that “within the twentieth century we will achieve the thoroughgoing modernization of agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology” (these were the so-called “four modernizations,” *sige xiandaihua* 四个现代化). At the same time, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 who was then vice-premier launched what was known as a “complete revamping” (*quanmian zhengdun* 全面整顿) of state policies in all areas of endeavour as part of an early attempt to initiate the four modernizations. Mao Zedong 毛泽东 soon frustrated these efforts and Deng Xiaoping was purged for supposedly “capitulating to capitalism.” It was only following the death of Mao that Deng Xiaoping and his cohorts engineered a return to power and took the opportunity to pursue their reformist policies.

After Deng’s reinstatement in 1977, the reformists encouraged debate on the issue of whether “practice is the sole criterion of truth.” It was part of a process initiated by the Communist Party that marked the abandonment of the tradition of Utopian socialism as well as providing a theoretical justification for the policies of secular socialism. The so-called “Movement to Liberate Thinking” was actually a public and internal party educational process that was aimed at freeing people’s thinking from the socialist dogmas of Mao Zedong and Stalin. In a sense you could see it as a Lutheran-style rebellion within the orthodox Marxist–Leninist world.

It is relevant to note that the ideas propounded during the Movement to Liberate Thinking contained a strong undercurrent of scientism (*kexuezhuyi* 科学主义), that is, the kind of materialist scientism that had been repressed during the ascendancy of the political/moral didacticism of Maoism. This scientism claimed that the sole criterion for measuring social development is the strength of productive forces and that science and technology are the pre-eminent productive forces in modern society. There is no doubt that the impact of this part of the debate in the late 1970s was profound, even revolutionary, in so far as scientism contradicted the ossified dogmatism of the past and placed material well being over ideological purity, by privileging knowledge over politics and politically-inflected morality.³ However, in the realm of mainstream ideology, this strain of scientism soon became entrenched as a form of secular utilitarianism. In practical terms, the Chinese leaders used this form of scientism as an ideology to justify their pursuit of economic change on the one hand, while stifling political change on the other hand. Thus, for numerous complex reasons and in light of the practical limitations of the time, party leaders decided to launch a range of reformist economic strategies instead of taking the path towards political and social reform that was subsequently enacted by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union during the 1980s.

³ Regarding the two main strains of scientism—materialist scientism and empirical scientism—that have featured in China, in particular during the 1980s, see Liu Qingfeng, “Ershi shiji Zhongguo kexuezhuyide liangci xingqi” [The two appearances of scientism in twentieth-century China], in *Ershiyi shiji*, 1991.4.

⁴ See Liang Qichao in Zhu Weizheng, ed. and annotated, *Liang Qichao lun Qing xue shi liangzhong* [Two works by Liang Qichao on the history of Qing studies] (Shanghai: Fudan Daxue Chubanshe, 1985), p.6.

⁵ See Wang Ruoshui, et al., *Renshi Makesizhuyide chufadian—renxing, rendaozhuyi wenti lunji* [Recognising the starting-point of Marxism—collected essays on human nature and humanism] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1981); Qiu Shi, ed., *Zhongguo dangdai jiefang sixiangde licheng—jiefang wenxuan (1978-1998)* [The path of liberation in contemporary Chinese thought—selected writings on liberation] (Beijing: Jingji Ribao Chubanshe, 1998), vol.1.

⁶ The revised version of Zhou Yang's speech appeared in *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily] on 16 March 1983. Those involved in the drafting of the speech have all written memoirs: see Wang Meng and Yuan Ying, eds, *Yi Zhou Yang* [Zhou Yang: in memoriam] (Huhehaote: Neimenggu Renmin Chubanshe, 1998), pp.414–74.

Not surprisingly, the nature and extent of the reforms that were proposed in China soon became issues of heated debate and factional dispute within the core of the reformist leadership itself. Indeed, Lutheran-style reforms often appear in the guise of what the late-Qing thinker Liang Qichao 梁启超 called “liberation by returning to the past” (*yi fugu wei jiefang* 以复古为解放).⁴ The ideological revitalization of the Chinese system in the late 1970s and early 80s could only be carried out within the limitations of orthodox Marxism, Leninism and the Maoism of the Yan'an 延安 era (that itself dated from the late 1930s to the mid 1940s). However, other thinkers who were on the fringes of the centre of political and ideological power, in particular men like the [recently rehabilitated] former Minister of Culture Zhou Yang 周扬 and *People's Daily* writer Wang Ruoshui 王若水, were prepared to take the argument much further. They were not satisfied with the limited extent of the economic reforms and the theoretical justifications that were being used to support them. Instead they began to articulate a kind of critical humanism as part of a project to formulate the possibilities for substantive political reformation in China. They too used a strategy of “returning to the past” by finding validation for their ideas in the early writings of Karl Marx, that is by identifying elements of Marxist thought that had been long-neglected in China (although emphasized as part of classical Marxism in Euro-America), such as the importance of alienation and the humanist spirit. They now reasoned that the historical tragedy of the Cultural Revolution itself had only been possible because this strain of humanism in Marxist thought had been ignored.⁵

During the early 1980s, as the materialist scientism propounded by the authorities took on the cast of becoming the new, hide-bound orthodoxy, the Movement to Liberating Thinking segued into a range of countervailing ideas that were supported by a number of writers and thinkers and that were identified with “Marxist humanism” (*rendaozhuyide Makesizhuyi* 人道主义的马克思主义). The political critique that these writers presented in articles in the press and speeches was enhanced by a certain moral courage that challenged official party opinion and that forced ideological debates into uncharted terrain. The apogee of this historical moment was reached when, at the official symposium held to commemorate the centenary of Karl Marx's death in 1983, Zhou Yang delivered a speech entitled “A discussion of a number of theoretical issues in Marxism” (which was drafted by Wang Ruoshui and Wang Yuanhua 王元化). That speech was a concise statement of the position of the Marxist humanists and it enjoyed the ultimate political cachet when it was published in the major party organ, *People's Daily*.⁶

However, although the economic reforms continued apace, the proponents of Marxist humanism were frustrated in their attempts to broaden the debate regarding ideology. The main reason for this was that Zhou Yang and his associates were all members of the party nomenklatura and, though none of them still enjoyed privileged status in the centre of power, a number of them were in positions of considerable sensitivity. Thus, they suffered the discomforting attention of the ideological bureaucracy and were readily

subject to attack from the core powerholders—themselves an alliance of factional forces with different agendas regarding the reforms. What room for movement and negotiation they previously enjoyed was even more severely hampered when in late 1983 and early '84 the party instituted a purge of “spiritual pollution” (*jingshen wuran* 精神污染), taking them as its chief target. “Spiritual pollution” was a shorthand for the dangerous ideas being propounded by these thinkers that, as party propagandists argued, could in the long run threaten the Communist Party’s ideological supremacy and its monopoly on power. Thus, if the impetus built up during the Movement to Liberate Thinking was to continue, its adherents would have little choice to do anything other than to create new discursive spaces both on the fringes of the system as well as entirely outside it. Furthermore, as it was now evident that the strategy used by the Marxist humanists of seeking a “liberation by returning to the past” had run its course, the situation forced leading thinkers to liberate themselves from the past itself, that is from the strictures of early Marxism.

The reality of the situation in China in the mid 1980s was that the government’s reform policies had generated numerous socio-political problems that could not be resolved by merely relying on the corpus of early Marxist thought. In the West, Marxism had evolved to incorporate elements of liberal thought and thereby articulated theories of social democracy. Now, in China, pressures generated by a combination of relative economic laxity and dated ideological control led to a situation in which intellectuals began to call for an accommodation between the ideas propounded by the Marxist humanists and neo-enlightenment thought. Of course, Europe had experienced an Enlightenment long before the advent of Marxism. Marxism itself was born of the Enlightenment but at the same time it was a critique and transgression of the Enlightenment. In 1980s China, Marxist humanism had launched a critique of utopian socialism and now, in its attempts to transgress or move beyond that style of socialism, a form of neo-enlightenment ideology evolved that sought to incorporate elements of Western capitalist modernity. In this manner, the logic of the Movement to Liberate Thinking, in tandem with the forces of historical development, produced an inexorable outcome, one that resonated with a collective longing for a new kind of enlightenment.

2. The Appearance of a Public Intellectual Sphere

In his anti-Utopian novel *1984* George Orwell depicted a bleak totalitarian world. In China, however, 1984 was the very year in which a new cultural enlightenment unfolded. A number of things occurred in the academic and publishing world that, although not particularly sensational in and of themselves, proved to be of profound significance. In the first place, a new publishing project called the “Zouxiang weilai congshu” “走向未来”丛书 (Towards the Future Series) was launched. Secondly, the *Zhongguo Wenhua*

⁷ Of course, in the late 1980s a number of other significant publications appeared, including *Ersbi shiji wenku* [The twentieth century library] in Beijing and *Xin qimeng* [New enlightenment] in Shanghai. For further details of all of these developments, see Chen Fong-ching and Jin Guantao, *From youthful manuscripts to River Elegy: the Chinese popular cultural movement and political transformation, 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997).

⁸ In the first issue of this journal its editor, Gan Yang, published an essay in which he said that “the basic task of the cultural debate in the 1980s” was “cultural modernization.” See his “Bashiniandai wenhua taolunde jigge wenti” [A few issues concerning the cultural debates of the 1980s], in *Wenhua: Zhongguo yu shijie*, no.1 (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1987).

Shuyuan 中国文化书院 (Academy of Chinese Culture) was established in Beijing; and thirdly, a group of leading younger scholars became the core contributors to the monthly journal *Dushu* 读书 (Reading), a publication that had been a forum for cautious intellectual debate since being founded in 1979.⁷ Because of the impact of these developments, I would argue that we have good reason to locate the advent of what became known as the New Enlightenment movement in this year.

The New Enlightenment was an extremely complex intellectual project. Participants aspired to a heterogeneous amalgam with Western modernization, that included elements with the potential for individual thinkers to engage in acts of critical reflection. A unity of cultural stance yet a disparity of intellectual endeavours marked the period. Of course, the New Enlightenment was closely related to, born of and a critique of the earlier Movement to Liberate Thinking. The relationship between the two is one of great complexity and ambivalence. Some participants in the earlier movement were to play an inestimable role in the New Enlightenment (here one thinks in particular of activists like Wang Yuanhua, Li Zehou 李泽厚 and Pang Pu 庞朴), yet having said that, many elements of the New Enlightenment were unique unto itself. However, I am not suggesting that the Movement to Liberate Thinking came to an end in the 1980s. Indeed it has continued to develop to this day. Some individuals who were aligned with the movement in its early days still provide ideological advice to the leaders of the Communist Party, but the primacy of its role was nonetheless taken over by the New Enlightenment in the 1980s.

The difference between the two could perhaps be expressed in the following way: if we take the Movement to Liberate Thinking as having been aimed at influencing China’s possible political reform, then the concerns of participants in the New Enlightenment was the modernization of Chinese culture itself. The publication announcement in the first issue of a key New Enlightenment journal, *Wenhua: Zhongguo yu shijie* 文化：中国与世界 (Culture: China and the World), put it in the following way: “As China moves towards becoming part of the world it is only understandable that Chinese culture will also have to become internationalized. As China works to achieve modernization, it is a corollary that “cultural modernization” will also be on the agenda. This is the shared belief of all people of conscience in the 1980s. This is an inevitable and logical part of China’s historic take-off.”⁸ Later this urge for cultural modernization was criticized for its tendency to avoid the real issues of the time, or alternatively it was critiqued for propounding a belief in cultural determinism. It is fair to say that elements of the New Enlightenment did indeed seem to be replicating the trend associated with the May Fourth Movement, or the Chinese Enlightenment of the 1920s, that of deploying intellectual issues and debates in order to solve larger social and political problems. Indeed there was within it a definite propensity for “cultural reductionism.” However, in retrospect, no matter how we evaluate particular pronouncements made at the time, it is evident that the mid- to late-

1980s marked a major historical turning point for Chinese intellectuals. Through this period of complex and interlocked cultural debate they gradually withdrew from and, in some cases, entirely broke free of the politico-ideological establishment and the state system of discipline specialization and knowledge production [that is, the strictures of official academia]. This in turn enabled them to create intellectual spaces and attain anew a form of cultural independence.

Such an independence and communality among intellectuals existed in China in the first half of the twentieth century, but it had been eliminated following the rise of totalitarianism after 1949. Of course, from the late 1970s, the Movement to Liberate Thought had seen some preliminary efforts being made by intellectuals to regain their lost status of independence, but as that was a movement that evolved within the confines—and according to the needs—of the party-state system, it was incapable of generating new intellectual or social spaces, despite the subsequent efforts of the Marxist humanists who were active on the fringes of the system. Of course, in view of the veteran party status and intellectual disposition of participants in the Movement to Liberate Thought like Zhou Yang, not only an old cultural bureaucrat but also a former vice-minister of propaganda and an active Maoist ideologue, this was hardly surprising.

The activists in the New Enlightenment movement, however, were largely from a different caste, since they were neither cultural bureaucrats nor ideologues. In many respects, as scholars engaged in the humanities they were outside the party power system and because of their intellectual disposition and training they were possessed of an independent bent of mind. Many of the people who now took a lead in the intellectual and cultural debates were of a younger generation and, informed by their negative experiences both under Maoism and during the post-Maoist years, they had a powerful urge to “leave Marx behind.” They attempted to formulate a new program for Chinese modernization on the basis of classical and modern Western thought. This was a critical moment in contemporary Chinese history but the party-sponsored state ideology still held sway over the academic and cultural establishment and, for a time, various purges led to periods of increased ideological control as a result of which room for political debate was restricted. Rather than confront the system head on, the younger intelligentsia skirted the sensitive issue of systemic political reform and went about creating new spaces for independent intellectual activity by engaging in wide-ranging, and seemingly self-isolating cultural debate.

However, what started out as a collective unconscious tactical response to the socio-political status quo ended up as having a major strategic significance. As participants in a broad cultural endeavour, New Enlightenment activists not only sought to break free of political ideological strictures, they were also interested in transcending or transgressing disciplinary boundaries. By developing various non-official channels for intellectual expression, as well as by finding a place for their ideas in the interstices of the media that

⁹ See Chen and Jin, *From youthful manuscripts to River Elegy*; Wang Hui, "Dangdai Zhongguode sixiang zhuangkuang yu xian-daixing wenti," (revised version), *Wenyi zhengming* (Changchun), 1998.6, which appeared as "Contemporary Chinese thought and the question of modernity," *Social Text* 55, 16.2 (Summer 1998): 9–44.

remained under state-party control and on the periphery of public expression, over time the New Enlightenment activists were able to create a communal intellectual sphere. This new sphere of expression differed from the traditional theoretical and academic disciplines in so far as the official realm of theory sought to achieve or maintain hegemony over state ideology (fundamentally, the Movement to Liberate Thinking never went beyond this aim). In this context, the academic establishment was a specialized form of professional knowledge production that was assigned a specific place in the architecture of the state system. The communal intellectual realm that now developed in China, however, reflected aspects of what Jürgen Habermas has termed the "public sphere." It became a realm in which matters of public interest, whether social or cultural, could be discussed either unofficially in open academic forums or through the public media. Indeed recent research has shown that unlike the case of Eastern Europe, civil spaces in China did not evolve in open opposition to state power. On the contrary, due to the nature of the Chinese Communist Party's economic reforms, a complex interaction developed between the establishment and those outside it.⁹ Its nonofficial (*vis-à-vis* state ideology) and public (*vis-à-vis* disciplinary specialization) nature are evidence that this was indeed a public intellectual sphere. Only when such an environment exists is it possible for intellectuals to become public intellectuals, that is to say, no longer to be spokespersons for state ideology or merely to be academics working solely within a narrow disciplinary specialization. Although, to this day, the independent intellectual world of China that was born of the New Enlightenment movement has no guarantees for its further existence, after years of tumult it has managed to survive against all odds and continues to develop. On the basis of this alone the New Enlightenment has an undeniable historical significance.

3. *The Homogeneity of the New Enlightenment*

The factors at work within the New Enlightenment were far more diverse and contradictory than those present during the Movement to Liberate Thinking. Yet despite these disparities, as an intellectual movement it maintained both a significant momentum and homogeneity. How was this possible?

Extraordinary parallels occasionally occur in Chinese history. If we take it that there are points of similarity between Kang Youwei's 康有为 late-Qing attempts to change the imperial system through "returning to the past" and the Movement to Liberate Thinking in the 1970s, then perhaps we can also detect points of similarity between the May Fourth Movement and the New Enlightenment of the 1980s. In fact, some participants in the New Enlightenment were to employ just such a transhistorical evocation when they claimed that their efforts in the 1980s were a revivification of the May Fourth era.

In 1989, Wang Hui 汪晖 observed that May Fourth was an intellectual movement that had been founded on a “homogeneity of attitude,”¹⁰ and I would argue a similar consensual approach existed among participants of the New Enlightenment of the 1980s. In other words, the reason that the New Enlightenment was, superficially at least, a united intellectual movement was that the participants took part in it on a basis of shared values and attitudes. A desire to “re-evaluate all values” became the general impetus of the various intellectual currents and schools that made up (or were generated by) the movement. The reason why comparative work on Chinese and Western culture became a core pursuit at this time was not because participants were really that interested in Sino-Western cultural comparison or thought as such, but rather it was because they were people who were attempting a critical evaluation of these systems so as to establish a local cultural legitimacy for various new agendas for modernization.

Another aspect of the homogeneity of approach that was evident in the New Enlightenment movement was the general anticipation among intellectuals of an idealized view of the ultimate ends and meaning of Western-style modernization. Although there were numerous differing interpretations of what this ultimate goal actually was, the ways of appreciating it, the intellectual methodology applied as it were, shared a particular understanding of historical teleology. There was an unstated consensus as to the future shape of things that modernization seemed to promise. In this sense there was a clear lineage between the New Enlightenment and the Movement to Liberate Thinking, the only difference being that the teleology of the Liberationists invoked a temporal linear view of development that depicted capitalism as a necessary stage on the path to socialist modernization. Indeed, Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮, a prominent novelist who enjoyed nationwide fame during the Movement to Liberate Thinking went so far as to declare that it was time that the Communists “rehabilitated” (*pingfan* 平反) the reputation of capitalism. “Capitalism,” he declared, “is a form of human social development and one that cannot be transcended.”¹¹

The New Enlightenment thinkers were at pains to avoid talking too much about the politically sensitive dichotomy of capitalism versus socialism. Instead they availed themselves of what were then fashionable theories of modernization and developmentalism in China. Some depicted Western capitalism as being value-neutral, a state that could be scientifically quantified by a range of technical statistics and evaluations. Or others, following Talcott Parsons, said that capitalism consisted of three particular features: the market economy, democratic politics and individualism. By engaging in such a rhetorical sleight of hand they produced a transhistorical and universalistic argument that avoided a clear articulation of how these ideas challenged the Chinese status quo and the historical specificity of the Chinese situation.

Despite the fact that the intellectual ambit of the New Enlightenment thinkers was extremely broad and complex, incorporating within it many disparate Western theories and currents of thought, it was possible for them

¹⁰ Wang Hui, “Yuyan yu lishi: Zhongguo xiandai lishi zhongde ‘Wusi’ qimeng yundong” [Prophesy and history: the ‘May Fourth’ enlightenment movement in modern Chinese history], *Wenxue pinglun* (1989): 3–4.

¹¹ Zhang Xianliang, “Zhongguo gongchandang gei zibenzhuyi ‘pingfan’ shi Zhongguo lishide da jinbu” [The Chinese Communist Party’s ‘rehabilitation’ of capitalism is historically progressive], quoted in Qiu Shi, *Zhongguo dangdai jiefang sixiangde licheng—jiefang wenxuan*, vol.1, pp.604–5.

to maintain a vague but common intellectual premise that this modern Western discourse was in contrast to traditional, and particularly traditional Chinese, thought. Again, in a fashion that was not dissimilar from the style of the intellectuals of the May Fourth era, the New Enlightenment activists were inclusive in their approach to new ideas, accepting of mutually-contradictory values and systems, interested in understanding everything they came in contact with in a somewhat ill-defined manner. In other words, Western modernity was constructed as an integrated whole that Chinese intellectuals imported without regard for its inherent tensions.

Although the various schools of thought had their own theoretical predilections, conflicting elements among the theories being propounded at that time did not lead to ruptures or a conscious split within the intellectual world. Everyone was interested in “cross-disciplinary” approaches and sought to use the “latest” methodologies to effect a formal integration of the disciplines of psychology, sociology, political science, economics, scientific philosophy and cultural anthropology (among others). The immediate aim of this holistic approach was to analyse questions of historical and contemporary relevance to China. Apart from scholars like Jin Guantao 金观涛 and Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, few other intellectuals had the methodological training or self-awareness necessary to engage in such a project. Thus, although there were stark divisions among people at the time, the vague consensus that existed among intellectuals resulted in the issues of moment being expressed in terms of the choice of values specific to the particular discursive terrain of China at the time. As a result none of the conflicting views were expressed in terms of epistemological differences. There was a basic intellectual premise, a commensurability that made conversation possible and the contestation was one that took place between equals standing on level ground. Thus sincere and honest exchanges and highly emotive debates were commonplace during the New Enlightenment. It was a time of deeply held views and strongly wrought emotions; it was also a period of openness and chaos.

4. *Latent Critical Responses*

One of the crucial underpinnings of the unanimity that existed within the New Enlightenment aura was a near universal approval among Chinese intellectuals of modernity as it was articulated in Euro-America. Although deep tensions and conflicts existed within the traditional formulations of Western modernity, China's New Enlightenment thinkers were only interested in pursuing their own approach of inclusivity, and they accepted the panoply of Euro-American thought and introduced it to China in a cargo-cult-like fashion. Thus from the outset although there was a discernible surface homogeneity of intellectual approach, the seeds of dissension and deep-seated heterogenous differences of view were dormant within the very theories that Chinese thinkers were pursuing.

The various theories of Western modernity bestowed upon the Chinese intelligentsia an intellectual resource that validated their calls for a new “enlightenment,” but at the same time those very theories proffered an intellectual tradition of self-negation that would eventually equip the intelligentsia with the wherewithall to engage in a self-reflective critique of the very paradigms of modernity that they were pursuing with such enthusiasm. Even though this critical self-reflexivity was at the time more of a potential and possible tendency than a reality, it was evident in all the schools of thought of the 1980s New Enlightenment. For example,

Towards the Future: The authors in the “Towards the Future” editorial and publishing group were classified as disciples of scientism. The core members of their editorial collective were scholars at the Academia Sinica who worked on the history of science or scientific philosophy. For this reason the “scientific spirit” and “scientific methodology” were the mainstays of their activities, and they stated as much in the editorial dedication to their book series. They declared that, “The scientific and technical revolution of the twentieth century is rapidly and profoundly transforming the social activities and everyday existence of the human race.” They went on to say that their series was part of an effort to commingle the results of natural science, the social sciences, as well as literature and art in a fashion that could be propagated within the society as a whole.¹²

As we have previously noted, the materialism of the scientific approach had played an important role during the Movement to Liberate Thinking, but following the advent of Marxist humanism its conservative underbelly became more pronounced. For the “Towards the Future” group, scientific empiricism now came to replace materialism and via the introduction of scientific philosophy and methodology it played the role of an avant-garde theory in the ranks of the Enlightenment intelligentsia. In reality, the scientific approach of thinkers like Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn contained within it a critical falsification of the “myth of truth” identified by Jean-François Lyotard in his depiction of the metanarratives of Western modernity. The “Towards the Future” group repeatedly emphasized the scientific spirit and scientific method and incorporated a profound element of critical rationalism that created the basis for a subsequent self-reflective critique of modernity.

Culture: China and the World: In contrast to the “Towards the Future” group the writers for *Culture: China and the World* championed the traditions of humanism. This is evident from the sociological composition of the members of the collective: they were scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Peking University. Their particular interest was in introducing Western humanist thought from its earliest classical origins up to the modern period. They laid particular emphasis on translating works on German and French phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, religious studies, writings of the Frankfurt school and various tracts on anti-rationalist thought. These currents within the humanities are part of the Western

¹² “Bianzhe xianci” [Editorial dedication], Zou xiang weilai congshu.

¹³ See, for example, Liu Xiaobo, “The inspiration of New York: meditations of an iconoclast,” translated by G. Barmé, *Problems of Communism* 40 (Jan.–April 1991): 113–18; and Barmé, “Confession, redemption and death: Liu Xiaobo and the 1989 protest movement,” in *The broken mirror: China after Tiananmen*, ed. George Hicks (London: Longmans, 1990), pp.52–99. (Tr.)

modern intellectual pedigree. Their emergence constitutes a posture of challenge to the intellectual dominance of rationalism and forms part of the complex scenario of Western modernity. Of particular importance in our discussion is the introduction at this time of the works of a number of postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Frederic Jameson and Daniel Bell. All of these writers made an appearance in the viewfinder of the Enlightenment thinkers and elicited differing levels of interest. At the time, however, their powerful deconstructive impact on theories of modernity were little appreciated or understood. The prodigious rise of postmodernism as a field in 1990s China is without doubt closely linked to the initial introduction of these thinkers and their work in the late 1980s. The doubts and concerns of the members of “China: Culture and the World” regarding the impact of modernization, the loss of humanistic values, and the crisis of meaning, although inherent in their work in the 1980s, was never fully explicated. However, in their anxieties—formulated before the full impact of the market economy was felt—we can perhaps find an intellectual lineage with the debate of the loss of the humanist spirit that was to feature so prominently in the 1990s, and which will be touched on below.

The Academy of Chinese Culture: In relation to this, the stance of the Academy of Chinese Culture was, relatively speaking, on the fringe. It was far from the intellectual mainstream. It was made up predominantly of scholars working in the Chinese and Sino-Western philosophy departments of Peking University. Unlike many of their fellows, this group was not interesting in generating a new fashion in intellectual activity and instead its members concentrated on comparative scholarship and the introduction of Western academic works. Influenced by overseas Confucian scholars like Du Weiming 杜维明, who was invited to lecture in China, their approach was generally moderate and conciliatory. They were not heedless proponents of Western culture and they maintained an empathy for traditional Chinese thought. The moderate “cultural conservatism” promoted by a range of new Confucian thinkers like Qian Mu 钱穆, Fu Weixun 傅伟勋, Yu Yingshih 余英时 and Lin Yusheng 林毓生, as well as the mainland philosopher Li Zehou’s “East-West amalgam” (*Xi ti Zhong yong* 西体中用) were featured in a range of major publications during the New Enlightenment years. Although their views achieved little of the notoriety of extreme anti-traditionalists like Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波,¹³ these cultural moderates have acquired a particular historical relevance and their efforts provided the bedrock on which the “craze for national studies” (*guoxue re* 国学热) of the 1990s developed.

The various strains among these different schools in favour of a critical self-reflection on Western modernity did not initially find any socio-political expression. Nonetheless, signs of future ruptures were already evident in the New Enlightenment project; and, in fact, the origins of all of the intellectual

disagreements of the late 1990s can be located in the complex and subtle differences that were already evident in the earlier decade.

5. *Disconnection in the 1990s*

The 4 June incident of 1989 forestalled the development of the New Enlightenment. During the early 1990s Chinese intellectuals, generally speaking, entered a period of hibernation. It was during this phase of public inactivity, however, that people began to engage in a profound reassessment of those earlier years. I would argue that such a period of self-reflection was an inevitable corollary to the intellectual foment of the late 1980s, but that it was ushered in perhaps ahead of its time by political fiat and repression. The long-term result of this premature hibernation was that the latent contradictions and tensions within the Chinese intellectual sphere and the theories that had been introduced and propounded during the 1980s finally broke out into the open.

Another cause of the profound ructions in the Chinese intellectual world was that with the political and economic stability engendered by the reforms, in particular following Deng Xiaoping's call for rapid marketization in 1992, people began to give voice to widely disparate views of the present state of China as well as the way ahead. The homogeneity of approach that I spoke of earlier gave way to profound and mutually antagonistic viewpoints. In my view, the 1990s saw three distinct periods of rupture and debate in the intellectual sphere. An outline of these will help us understand the present state of thought in China.

Rift One: Thought Versus Scholarship

In the early 1990s, a number of writers looked back on the New Enlightenment years as a time suffused with bombast and overblown rhetoric. They concluded that the academic style that had come into being as a result was both "superficial" (*fuzao* 浮躁) and "vacuous" (*kongsbu* 空疏). Alert to these shortcomings a number of intellectuals now consciously withdrew themselves from contemporary debates to concentrate instead on the pursuit of specialized scholastic research. Their aim was to build a solid basis for Chinese scholastic and cultural projects by devoting their energies to the rebuilding of academic standards and traditional national studies. A series of non-official scholastic journals were produced as part of these devoted academic endeavours, and they included *Xueren* 学人 (Scholar), *Zhongguo shehui kexue jikan* 中国社会科学季刊 (China Social Sciences Quarterly, produced in Hong Kong), *Xueshu jilin* 学术集林 (Scholarship Collection), and *Yuanxue* 原学 (Original Studies). The "craze for national studies," that

¹⁴ This quotation is from a letter addressed by the philosopher Li Zehou to the editor of *Twenty-first Century*. See *Ersbiyishiji*, 1994.6: 159. It was a sentiment that was representative of a swath of intellectuals at the time.

¹⁵ The voices of both camps found expression in a number of journals: *Xiandai yu chuantong* [The modern and the traditional] published essays expressing the opinions of those social-engaged thinkers, and *Chinese Social Science Quarterly* as well as its 'sister publication' *Zhongguoshuping* [China book review] promoted the views of the academicians. The major participants in this wrangle were Zhu Xueqin 朱学勤, Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明 and Yang Nianqun 杨念群. For the relevant articles, see *Xiandai yu chuantong* (Guangzhou), 1995, nos 6 & 7; and *Zhongguoshuping* (Hong Kong), 1995.6. Yang Nianqun, a latecomer to the discussion, published an indirect critique-cum-response to Zhu Xueqin in *Reading*. See *Dushu*, 1997.6.

¹⁶ Wang Yuanhua, editorial note to the first issue of *Xueshu jilin* (Shanghai: Yuandong Chubanshe, 1994).

¹⁷ This is an ironic reference to the expression 'take leave of revolution' or *gaobie geming* 告别革命, a formulation of the philosopher Li Zehou and the literary critic Liu Zaifu 刘再复 who published a controversial book with that title in 1995. See Li Zehou, Liu Zaifu, *Gaobie geming* (Hong Kong: Tiandi Tushu Youxian Gongsi, 1995), ch.2, n.27. (Tr.)

is, traditional scholarship, in the wider publishing market and among mainstream readers during the early to mid 1990s, was a partial beneficiary and popularization of the work of academics who had concentrated their efforts on these projects.

However, some intellectual activists who were still devoted to the more public intellectual style of the 1980s New Enlightenment were critical of this return to the ivory tower, or a situation in which "thinkers fade out and academicians come to prominence" (*sixiangjia danchu, xuewenjia tuchu* 思想家淡出, 学问家凸出).¹⁴ Subsequently a not inconsiderable discussion about which should hold preeminence, academic work or social intellectual engagement, unfolded.¹⁵ All participants agreed with the proposition mooted by Wang Yuanhua, a leading thinker and writer mentioned earlier, that in "academic work there could be engagement and in engaged intellectual work there should be academic content."¹⁶ The crux of the problem was that people now had very different views of the enlightenment project as a whole. They inquired: How was the legacy of the 1980s New Enlightenment to be regarded and built upon in the very different discursive environment of the 1990s? In fact, some scholars had completely turned away from an engagement with those earlier efforts, or, rather they "took leave of the Enlightenment."¹⁷ Most noticeable among this group were younger scholars in their late twenties and thirties who rejected the common concerns that Chinese intellectuals had previously championed. Rather than public engagement they preferred to find a peaceful niche as specialists within the disciplinary structure of the party-state's academic establishment.

Another, and larger, group of post-Enlightenment academics were those people who engaged in a re-evaluation of the original May Fourth Enlightenment of the 1920s. They re-examined the significance of the radicalism of that era and reflected on why it had seemed so attractive to intellectuals in the 1980s. They questioned both 1920s and 1980s radicalism for its holus-bolus rejection both of Chinese totalism and of Chinese tradition. They developed a new appreciation for the elements of cultural conservatism that had appeared in the May Fourth era and which the radical modernizers had denounced. Taking a lead then both from the May Fourth and its 1980s revival, these academics argued that the intellectual romanticism of the past had to be replaced by a more serious and viable epistemological approach both in regard to the introduction of Western currents of thought, as well as towards traditional Chinese philosophy. They now engaged with indigenous Chinese thought in a spirit of "sympathetic understanding" (*tongqingxingde lijie* 同情性的理解). It is noteworthy that, as of the time of writing, the so-called engaged intellectuals still failed to appreciate or accept this alternative approach to the legacy of the May Fourth and the possibility of an "alternative Enlightenment." Indeed, as the 1990s progressed and the Chinese intellectual world regained its former vivacity, the rift in intellectual orientation between "the engaged" and "the academic" continued to widen.

Rift Two: The Humanist Spirit Versus Common Concerns

Following Deng Xiaoping's 1992 "Tour of the South" (*nanxun* 南巡), during which he made a series of speeches supporting further radical reforms while visiting Shanghai and the Special Economic Zones of Guangdong, China's economy moved into the fast-lane of development. The rapid growth of a consumer market economy in the ensuing years was for some people who had advocated modernization in the 1980s a realization of their hopes. The social realities of China in the 1990s and these radical changes had a direct impact on intellectuals and led to new divisions among them. A number of intellectuals—represented broadly by the "two Wangs" (*er Wang* 二王, that is, the writers Wang Meng 王蒙 and Wang Shuo 王朔)—celebrated the advent of the market economy and argued that it was the most efficacious remedy against the "extreme leftism" of the Maoist past as well as an inevitable corollary to secular prosperity. The proponents of this strain of thinking—in particular Wang Meng—advocated "shunning the sublime" (*duobichonggao* 躲避崇高), which was something of a nihilistic formulation that rejected all forms of idealism.¹⁸

Around this time another band of cultural critics who claimed to champion postmodernism published articles in which they interpreted China's 1990s mass consumer culture as a universal form of "postmodern culture." They announced with a grand flourish that China's "modernity" had hereby come to an end and that a "post-new era" (*hou xin shiqi* 后新时期)—one that was inextricably enmeshed with secular society—was waiting in the wings.¹⁹ A group of scholars working in the humanities in Shanghai, however, had a completely different take on things. Situated in the financial and commercial centre of China, these writers, unlike those in Beijing, were already deeply aware of the pressures being brought to bear on culture and academia by commercialism and the demands of the market. Their response to these pressures was articulated in a series of conversations that appeared in the prominent Beijing-based journal *Reading*. In these they championed once more the spirit of the cultural enlightenment. They were highly critical of both the nihilism of the cultural marketeers like Wang Meng, as well as of the postmodernists, and in response they called for a public and intellectual affirmation of the spirit of humanism and social life that was under threat from the extreme utilitarianism of an increasingly marketized society. Their stance, not surprisingly, elicited the spirited opposition of the vulgarists and a heated public debate ensued.²⁰ Over time the proponents of the humanistic spirit came to pursue rather different ends. The more moderate scholars and writers of this group concentrated on the kind of projects that had originally been formulated by the proponents of "Culture: China and the World" in the 1980s and they undertook an epistemological examination of the darker aspects of modernization. Another more extreme group, known by the shorthand name "the two Zhangs," *er Zhang* 二张, because its main proponents, the writers

¹⁸ For details, see Ding Dong and Sun Min, eds, *Shiji zhi jiaode zhongzhuang—Wang Meng xianxiang zhengming lu* [A clash in the cusp of the new century—a record of the controversy surrounding the Wang Meng controversy] (Beijing: Guangming Ribao She, 1996). [See also Barmé, *In the red: on contemporary Chinese culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.283–6, 296–315. (Tr.)]

¹⁹ See, for example, Zhang Yiwu, "Xiandai-xingde zhongjie: yige wufa huibide keti" [The end of modernity: an unavoidable issue], *Zhanlue yu guanli*, 1994.3; Chen Xiaoming et al., "Houxiandai: wenhuade kuozhang yu cuowei" [Post-modern cultural expansion and dislocation], *Shanghai wenzue*, 1994.3; and Zhang Fa et al., "Cong 'xiandaixing' dao 'Zhonghuaxing'" [From 'modernity' to 'Chineseness'], *Wenyi zhengming*, 1994.2.

²⁰ For a compendium of the relevant articles, see Wang Xiaoming, *Renwen jingshenxunsi lu* [A record of reflections on the humanist spirit] (Shanghai: Wenhui Chubanshe, 1996).

²¹ For details of the later humanist debate and the 'two Zhangs', see Yu Shi, ed., *Yi bi wei qi: shijimode wenhua pipan* [Pens as banners: *fin-de-siècle* cultural criticism] (Changsha: Hunan Wenyi Chubanshe, 1997), and Xiao Xialin, ed., *Wuyuande sixiang* [Thoughts not in anger] and *Youfende guitu* [The end-point of concern] (both Beijing: Huayi Chubanshe, 1995).

²² On this state of affairs see, for example, Xiao Gongqin, "Zhongguo shehui gejiejeng-de zhengzhi taishi yu qianjing zhanwang" [The political stance of the various strata of Chinese society and prospects for the future], and Sun Liping et al., "Zhongguo shehui jigou zhuanxingde zhongjinqi qushi yu yinhuan" [The short- to mid-term outlook and dangers for China's transitional social structure], *Zhanlue yu guanli*, 1998.5.

²³ See Weng Jieming, ed., *Yu zongshu tanxin* [Heartfelt exchanges with the General Secretary] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehuikexue Chubanshe, 1996), and Xu Ming, ed., *Guanjian shike: dangdai Zhongguo jidai jiejuede 27ge wenti* [A critical phase: twenty-seven issues in urgent need of resolution in China today] (Beijing: Jinri Zhongguo Chubanshe, 1997).

²⁴ See Gan Yang, "Ziyoude linian: Wusi chuantong zhi queshimian" [The concept of freedom: deficiencies of the May Fourth tradition], *Dushu*, 1989.5. This article was one of the wellsprings of early 1990s critiques of radicalism. During the late 1980s many articles on thinkers, from Hayek to Popper and so on, appeared in *Reading* and *Towards the Future*.

²⁵ For details, see Chen Minzhi and Ding Dong, eds, *Gu Zhun xunsi lu* [A record of reflections on Gu Zhun] (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1998). [Gu Zhun's Cultural Revolution-era critiques of socialism and Maoism written in the form of diaries and research notes were published posthumously in the mid-1990s. (Tr.)]

Zhang Chengzhi 张承志 and Zhang Wei 张炜, advocated a moral absolutism and in their numerous and popular essays they attacked commercial society and advocated a form of socio-cultural populism.²¹

Rift Three: Liberalism Versus the New Left

The realities of 1990s' China created a complex environment that has been depicted as a kind of "post-totalism" or "post-totalitarianism."²² It was an environment that gradually fostered the stark political differences within the cadre of intellectuals who had an interest and involvement in contemporary social issues. During the decade, one group of former New Enlightenment intellectuals found succour in the post-totalitarian aura and came to support the enterprise of secular socialism by concentrating their energies on devising strategies for national strength and development. They were no longer interested in contributing to the expansion and further renewal of public intellectual discourse, rather they set a course on achieving ideological ascendancy in their own right, thereby divorcing themselves from involvement in the kind of intellectual domain that I have described so far. Representative efforts of this group can be found, for example, in Weng Jieming's 翁杰明 *Yu zongshu tanxin* 与总书记谈心 (Confiding in the General Secretary) and other works devoted to issues of national policy.²³

The most significant development in the late 1990s was the public standoff between groups that have come to be characterized as "the liberals" (*ziyouzhuyi* [者] 自由主义[者]) and "the new left" (*xinzuopai* 新左派). During the decade one could say that there had been a thoroughgoing victory of liberalism in the realm of popular ideas. The word "liberalism" itself had achieved a cultural cachet previously enjoyed by such terms as democracy and science, even a certain inviolability. Of course, liberalism in its various forms had been an aspect of a popular intellectual interest in democracy and as such did not receive particular attention. The first public proponent of liberalism was Gan Yang 甘阳 who, when commemorating the eightieth anniversary of the May Fourth movement in 1989, said the old slogan of "democracy and science" current in the 1920s should now be replaced by one in favour of "freedom and order." That article, published in the May 1989 issue of *Reading* was one of the triggers for the re-evaluation of radicalism in the 1990s.²⁴ This new interest in gradual socio-political transformation was further enhanced by the 1995 publication of the diaries of Gu Zhun 顾准 and the surrounding frenzy of interest in him, one that fed into a widespread interest in liberalism.²⁵ This fascination was further fuelled in 1997 by the extraordinary, and unexpected, impact of the publication of Chinese translations of F. A. von Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* and *The Constitution of Liberty*. Both books were best-sellers. Another important forum for liberalism was *Gonggong luncong* 公共论丛 (Res Publica), edited by Liu Junning 刘军宁, which propounded a relatively conservative form of liberal

thought, that is, one represented by the neo-classical liberalism of von Hayek. These thinkers and writers—some of whom had been active in the 1980s New Enlightenment, others who were newly-active political scientists—advocated the pursuit of an Enlightenment agenda: their concern was to see the project of modernization in China fulfil its promise to allow for the protection of free speech, independent thinking and democratic reform, as well as providing a legal framework for the protection of property rights and economic freedoms.²⁶

In opposition to the proponents of liberalism were the “new leftists.” The epithet is one that, because of obvious historical and ideological associations has, unfortunately, accrued a negative inflection in popular discourse in China; an odium that is not shared by the expression “liberals.” The ideas of the leftists also had their origins in the New Enlightenment of the late 1980s, but they first found a voice among Chinese academics studying and teaching overseas, mostly in the United States. Influenced by unorthodox neo-Marxian thought, they were highly critical of the liberal ideology that dominates Western mainstream politics. In response to its advocates in China they propounded what they call “institutional innovation,” that is, a supposedly unique form of Chinese-style modernization that would somehow transcend both socialism and capitalism.²⁷ The overseas leftists were joined in late 1997 by a major advocate within China when Wang Hui published a lengthy essay entitled “Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity.” A challenging and incisive account of the dilemmas of intellectual life, Wang’s paper sent a shockwave through his fellow intellectuals. He followed it with a series of articles that presented a theoretical analysis of how, during the 1990s, there had been a complex intermeshing of global capital with the local power oligarchy of China. In many ways a lone, and lonely voice, Wang alerted readers to the repressive mechanisms and relationships embedded within “globalization.” Through his efforts he hoped to engage in a reflection and reconsideration of the prevalent views of modernity that would then form the basis for a revival of the critical edge of intellectual endeavour in China.²⁸ While intellectuals had previously limited their critique of capitalism to an analysis of its cultural dimension, now the new left, inspired by the work of Wang Hui and others, extended that critique to incorporate the socio-political dimensions of capitalism.

The term “new left” encompasses a range of views and advocates. It is worth noting that the extremists in this camp employed Rousseau’s theory on the natural rights of man as part of their advocacy of radical populist democracy in China.²⁹ The result of this situation was that the extremist new leftists and the conservative proponents of liberalism ended up in a stand-off and their mutual opposition led to a deep division in the intellectual world as a whole. Although [at the time of writing] there has been no direct and major confrontation between the so-called two schools, nonetheless, their split is profound, profound not only because of differences of view and

²⁶ See, for example, Li Shenzhi and Liu Junning’s prefaces to Liu Junning, ed., *Ziyoushubuyide xiansheng: Beida chuantong yu jindai Zhongguo* [Heralds of liberalism: the Peking University tradition and modern China] (Beijing: Zhongguo Renshi Chubanshe, 1998), and Dong Yuyu and Shi Binhai, eds, *Zhengzhi Zhongguo: Mianxiang xin tizhi.xuanzedesbidai* [Political China: in an age of systematic choices] (Beijing: Jinri Zhongguo Chubanshe, 1998).

²⁷ See Cui Zhiyuan, *Dierci sixiang jiefang yu zhidu chuanguangxin* [A second movement to liberate thinking and institutional innovation] (Hong Kong: Nuijin Daxue Chubanshe, 1997).

²⁸ A modified English translation of Wang Hui’s “Dangdai Zhongguo de sixiang zhuangkuang yu xiandaixing wenti” (originally published in *Tianya* 5 [1997]: 133–50) appeared as “Contemporary Chinese thought and the question of modernity,” in *Social Text* 55, 16.2 (Summer 1998): 9–44. (Tr.) See also Wang Hui, “Dangdai Zhongguo de xianzhuang yu xiandaixing wenti”; Wang, “Kexuezhuyi’ yu shehui lilunde jige wenti” [‘Scientism’ and a number of issues concerning modernity], *Tianya*, 1998.6 (translated in Gloria Davies, ed., *Voicing concerns: contemporary Chinese critical enquiry* (forthcoming, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); and Wang, “Guanyu xiandaixing wenti huida” [A response to questions concerning modernity], *Tianya*, 1999.2).

²⁹ See in particular Cui Zhiyuan, “Hunhe xianfa’ dui Zhongguo zhengzhide sanceng fenxi” [The ‘mixed constitution’ and three levels of analysis of Chinese politics], *Zhanlue yu guanli*, 1998.3, and Han Yuhai, “Zai ‘ziyouzhuyi’ zitaide beihou” [What lurks behind the façade of the ‘liberal’ stance], *Tianya*, 1998.5.

³⁰ For a discussion of this stand-off, see “Xunqiu ‘disantiao daolu’—guanyu ‘ziyou-zhuyi’ yu ‘xin zuoyi’ de duihua” in Xu Jilin, *Lingyizhong qimeng* (Guangzhou: Huacheng Chubanshe, 1999), pp.276–302, translated by Barmé as “In search of a ‘third way’—a conversation regarding ‘liberalism’ and the ‘new left wing’” in Gloria Davies, *Voicing concerns: contemporary Chinese critical enquiry* (forthcoming, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

scholastic approach, for in the late 1990s these rival schools of thinkers believed that they were representative of the interests of larger groups and social strata. For example, the conservative liberals felt their theories would in the long run support the growth—and political rise—of a Chinese middle class and its access to political power, while the radical leftists declared in no uncertain terms that they were on the side of the dispossessed and exploited low strata of Chinese society. Another point of fundamental contradiction was that in these debates, the various groups of intellectuals showed that whereas they had shared a common discursive ground during the 1980s, by the mid to late 1990s there was a fundamental divide between ways of talking, thinking and reasoning among Chinese intellectuals. The liberals, for example, still employed the mainstream language of the Western Enlightenment, while the leftists utilized the more peripheral discourses of post-modernism and neo-Marxism. There was now an obvious incommensurability between the two: the liberals were dismissive of both postmodernism and neo-Marxism, while the new leftists were strident in their denunciations of what they regarded as the mainstream hegemonic discourse of the liberals. This epistemological fissure has led to the most profound split in the Chinese intellectual world.³⁰

At the time of writing, this stand-off was still unfolding and the majority of intellectuals active in the public realm were becoming involved and taking sides. But that is by no means the whole story as a disparate center-inclined group of thinkers concerned with both freedom and justice had formed a “third way” between the liberals and the new left. They believed that if there could be positive interaction between neo-liberalism and what could be termed social democracy then it was still possible that the radical disjuncture that had developed among Chinese thinkers and scholastic public activists could be ameliorated through conversation and a discussion based on common ground.

Thus, by the end of the 1990s the Chinese intellectual sphere had been completely transformed. While the origins of this change can be identified in currents of thought that first appeared in the 1980s, it was not until a decade later that the divergent aims, intellectual approaches and discursive strategies of participants in China’s intellectual life rent the fragile homogeneity of the New Enlightenment asunder. A unified intellectual sphere in which people can engage in profitable dialogue no longer exists. The consensus of the New Enlightenment has collapsed, very much in the way that it did during the original May Fourth movement. Does this mean we are experiencing some inescapable historical destiny?

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