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Chinese Postmodernism: Toward a Global Context

Jonathan Arac

I welcome the challenge Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong have set me, to situate in a global context these challenging and informative essays on Chinese postmodernism. Yet my task seems somewhat odd. The other contributors are all expert in Chinese materials—which I am not—and they are all also very actively in dialogue with Western, primarily U.S.-based, lines of theoretical inquiry. So in obvious and important ways, the essays on which I am commenting are more global than my work has been. Perhaps, strangely but symptomatically, what *global* means here is “under Western eyes.”

One anecdote, from my earlier, limited efforts to widen the horizons of the study of postmodernism, makes a point about the difficulties in achieving a global perspective. Ping-hui Liao criticizes the geographical limitations in my introduction to a collection of essays I edited, *Postmodernism and Politics* (1986)—and he has good ground for his critique, given his own essay’s rich references to work on the postmodern in non-Western and non-Chinese locales, especially in Africa and South Asia. Yet some of the limitations in *Postmodernism and Politics* came specifically at the

publisher's request. This book was developed from *Engagements: Postmodernism, Marxism, Politics*, a special issue I had edited of *boundary 2*, which included seven more essays than the book does.

Back in the early 1980s, even the University of Minnesota Press, a pathbreaking leader in promoting theory and cultural studies, did not think they could sell a volume of materials so widely geographically spread as *Engagements* was. So they required that the book become (I say with some lingering annoyance) more NATO-centric than the issue of *boundary 2* had been. *Postmodernism and Politics*, however wide-ranging in its claims and implications, was restricted to materials from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It excluded essays from *Engagements* that had treated writers not only from Italy and the USSR but also from the Dominican Republic and South Africa. This deliberately, unconventionally wide reach of materials in *boundary 2* was untimely. It allowed my brief introduction to *Engagements* to raise questions that no longer pertained to the more restricted materials in *Postmodernism and Politics* and so were omitted. Fifteen years later, these questions are now intensively under discussion. Therefore, I place on record my earlier remarks: I discussed the possibility of "a world literature [rather] than that of any particular nation" and noted the contrast between the political-cultural situations of groups "struggling toward a nationhood" as against those of groups trying to reach "identities at once more global and more local."¹

This experience gives me sympathy for the regret expressed by the editors of this volume. They feel the lack of any contribution on Hong Kong, which, in the weeks I have been at work on this essay, has become a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Even a single essay can do much to restructure the field problematized by a collection.

Each essay in this volume offers valuable information, that is, gives form to materials—as Wendy Larson does to recent Chinese feminist initiatives or Wang Ning to the ongoing practices and debates of the postmodern in China. In addition, a further shape emerges from the concerns that cut across the essays and link them to each other, not necessarily by agreement. These links begin to crystallize a sense of what it means now to address questions of China and the postmodern. Among these linkages are references to proper names. Wang Shuo and Wang Anyi are mentioned

1. Jonathan Arac, "Introduction," *Engagements: Postmodernism, Marxism, Politics*, *boundary 2* 11, nos. 1 and 2 (double issue) (fall/winter 1982/1983): 4.

more often than any other authors of current fiction. Fredric Jameson is the most cited theoretical source; it seems clear that his months in China in 1985, and the Chinese-language preview of his book on postmodernism, effectively initiated widely shared discourse on the postmodern among Chinese intellectuals. Larger topics also recur, including the condition of politics and the various modes of coming to terms with a past that may be felt as a trauma or as a heritage (this issue links Liu Kang's discussion of *In the Heat of the Sun*, Xiaobing Tang's of *Sadness for the Pacific*, and Chaoyang Liao's of *A Borrowed Life*). The ongoing transformation of the past is registered as well in discussions of changes in the conceptions and realities of China's cities—as Wang Mingxian has observed, “what makes Chinese architecture postmodern is not the style of the individual buildings but the characteristics of the city as a whole.”

In following these recurrences, I hit some turbulences. Sometimes, this seems merely linguistic, a by-product of translation from Chinese into English of materials that are so new that there is no consensus on how to render the terms, but more may be at stake. For instance, consider the new literary tendency that is called in Wang Ning's essay the “new fiction of stance,” in Wendy Larson's essay “situational” fiction, and in Zhang Yiwu's essay, “new state of affairs” literature. To my reading in English, *stance* strongly connotes an emphasis on the narrator's actively taking a point of view toward the material, while *state of affairs* strongly suggests a priority to the materials. In American terms, the difference could be as great as that between the neo-Jamesian fiction of the 1950s (*stance*) and the neonaturalism of the 1930s (*state of affairs*). *Situation*, through its Sartrian overtones, comes closer to balancing self and world. These divergences prove more than simply semantic. For Zhang, Wang Anyi exemplifies new state of affairs writing in its separation “from any and every relationship with [national] ‘allegorical’ writing”; in Larson, Wang Anyi is a writer who engages in the “discourse of desire”; but for Tang, Wang Anyi's writing is marked not so much by desire as by melancholy, and her personal “tales of sorrow” are also acts of “historical reflection.”

A similar dissonance marks the readings of works produced by and around Wang Shuo. Liu Kang argues that the recent film *In the Heat of the Sun* has been opportunistically given this English title in order to capitalize on the success of the Georgian anti-Stalinist *Burnt by the Sun*. Liu's claim that a truer translation would be *Bright Sunny Days* is borne out by the translations in other essays, which do not refer to the authorized translation but are worked directly from Chinese: *Those Brilliant Days* (Larson), *Age of*

Magnificent Sunlight (Dai). Chen Xiaoming notes the title of Wang Shuo's novella from which the film was made: *Ferocious Animals*. So a change in feeling tone had already distinguished the film from the prose fiction. Meaning is reshaped by adaptation from one to another medium within Chinese culture as well as in the adaptation from one language to another for the various purposes of scholarly exchange or international film marketing.

Even so crucial a term, so well established within English, as *Third World* shows the stresses of semantic splitting. Wang Ning invokes China's place in the Third World, as a "developing" nation, in order to assert that "Jameson's construction of postmodernism . . . based as it is on a periodization of capitalism, would automatically exclude China." But Jameson's concern is a capitalism global in character; his model (despite moments of hyperbole to the contrary) does not require all parts of the global system to be the same.² From the first usages of the term, *Third World* has been linked to a global perspective. In the middle of the nineteenth century, even Paris was still not accurately mapped. At the end of the nineteenth century, the United States had only just "closed" its internal, domestic frontier, and on the map of the world as seen by the West, there were still blank spaces—as a famous moment in *Heart of Darkness* recalls. But by the end of the Second World War, the globe was fully surveyed. In this context, focused around the 1955 meeting of the world's nonaligned states in Bandung, the term *Third World* emerged.³

Since Raymond Williams did not treat this as a "keyword," let me add a few details. Originally, the point was political: to disrupt the cold war attempt to divide the world in two. The Third World resisted by being "neither capitalist nor communist" in a strategy of "positive neutralism" that anticipated the next decade's deconstructive critique of binarism. By the 1970s, the *Economist*, as cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), marked the tripartite division as (1) "developed market economies," (2) "socialist nations," and (3) "developing nations." This still follows the cold war division. But in 1974, China put forward a new definition (cited from the [London] *Times*, 13 April 1974, in the *OED*). The future leader of the post-1978 economic miracle is quoted: "Mr. [D]eng announced that the 'socialist camp'

2. I discuss problems caused by such a moment of hyperbole in "Postmodernism and Postmodernity in China: An Agenda for Inquiry," *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): esp. 139 and 145.

3. For an in-depth discussion on the implications of the term *Third World*, see Arif Dirlik, "Three Worlds or One, or Many," in *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997).

no longer existed and that the planet was divided into the First World, consisting of the two superpowers; the Second World, consisting of the other developed countries; and the Third World, which included the developing countries." The basis for Chinese market socialism was here being put in place, after Nixon's 1972 trip to China, by redefining the divisions of "the planet" exclusively in economic terms. China's self recategorization in relation to its economic development seems thoroughly part of the world that Jameson delineates, in which the global logic of capital is "dominant"—which does not mean at every moment triumphant. Deng's redefinition followed the 1973 energy crisis, when the U.S. economy had entered its worst phase since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Let me dwell on one more keyword that inflects important moments in several of the essays and that is indispensable in many current anglophone discussions relating culture and politics: *ethnic*. The term is especially apt in this volume because among its early usages in Greek it did not refer, as it often does now, to minorities within a nation (there were not yet nations in our sense) but rather to "nations" within an empire. And China was for two millennia an empire before beginning, a century and a half ago, to become a nation. The usage of *ethnic* in English derives from its adaptation in the Alexandrian Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint. This adjectival form of the Greek *ethnos* (nation) had been used to describe the "nations"; in Hebrew, it is the *goyim* (those who are not Jews), a word that was felt to be pejorative. The term was taken up within Western Christian discourse to the same effect. The *OED* usages before the 1930s routinely show a meaning "pertaining to nations not Christian or Jewish; Gentile, heathen, pagan," and until the 1940s the term *ethnicity* was extremely rare, used in occasional imperialist texts to mean "heathendom," or "heathen superstition."

The current sense and usage of *ethnic* can be located in the *OED* only beginning in the 1930s, and this seems right to me. At that time, the term *racism* was coined first in French and then immediately carried over into English as a polemically oppositional naming of Hitler's policies, and the term *ethnic* was revalued so as to provide an alternative name for what had been understood biologically, in a would-be science turned murderous. The first citation in the *OED* is from *We Europeans* (1935, co-authored by the progressive biologist Julian Huxley): In place of the biological notion of subspecies it offers "the special type of ethnic grouping of which the Jews form the best-known example." Yet the *OED* definition even for this new sense cannot get clear of the pseudoscientific issue of race: "pertaining

to or having common racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics, esp. designating a racial or other group within a larger system; hence (*U.S. colloq.*), foreign, exotic." The American anthropologist Carleton Coon, in his 1939 *Races of Europe*, wrote that "like other ethnic units, the Jews have their own standard racial character" (*OED*). The now familiar usage of *ethnic* as a noun dates only from 1945, in the famous *Yankee City* series of sociological studies, and the earliest *OED* citation for *ethnicity* in the current sense of the word comes as late as 1953, from David Riesman. This transformation of meaning, then, participated in the global political crisis of the mid-twentieth century and was largely, it seems, effected in the writings of U.S. social science. This transformation, moreover, marks a Nietzschean reversal. For in modern social science, Jews were named as the ethnic group par excellence, while *ethnic* had initially been a term by which Jews denoted their others, rather than themselves as others.

The questions that worry me are, first, to what degree did American liberal social science succeed in freeing the term from its participation in both religious and biological hierarchies of insiders and others? The citations are not encouraging. A 1961 *Times Literary Supplement* citation in the *OED* defines *ethnics* as "a polite term for Jews, Italians, and other lesser breeds just inside the law" (playing off a notorious imperialist phrase from Kipling), and the very first citation for *ethnicity* defines it as one of several modes of "parochialism" that make people "feel threatened by the better educated upper-middle-class." The second question, then, is whether contemporary theoretically advanced cultural studies, insofar as it uses the term and notion of *ethnicity*, has worked free both from the original history and from the problems of American liberal social science. I am not optimistic here. I have yet to see this term successfully reinscribe the problem rather than just digging deeper into the rut.

The question of the ethnic in this volume has reference to Chinese people outside the PRC, though it also has implications not addressed here for those in China who are not Han Chinese. With regard to the PRC itself, several essays in this collection address the relationship of postmodernism to politics at the level of the state and the public sphere. The editors emphasize that the specificity of the postmodern in China is that it is post-revolutionary and postsocialist (I would gloss this by contrast to the United States, where it is *other people's* revolutions and socialisms that have been "posted"). I argued through the 1980s that postmodernism was not exclusively cultural and was therefore not incompatible with politics, and Sheldon Lu quotes my claim to this effect from *Postmodernism and Politics*. In a

subsequent essay, written early in 1989, I expressed doubt about the "possibilities of oppositional or progressive power that holds aloof from politics." I cited negatively Thatcherism and Reaganism, the "programmatic right-wing occupation of the seats of national power," and I cited positively "the current renewals of political hope in China, the Soviet Union, and Poland."⁴ From a perspective after 1989, Dirlík and Zhang suggest in their introduction that Chinese postmodernism involves a "complicity" with the regime's strategy of foregrounding consumerism and burying politics. Although the term is rather widely used in recent critical discourse, *complicity* is quite a strong pejorative, referring to co-involvement in a crime—which is, I imagine, why Wang Ning so emphatically denies the charge. To charge someone with complicity in a case like this is not simply to indicate disagreement with the policy but strongly to suggest at least the illegitimacy of that policy and perhaps its immorality. Dirlík and Zhang take up the term *antipolitics* to characterize the current relation of postmodernism to politics, a term closely related to the "postpolitics" discussed in the essay by Chen.

In the spirit of "global context," I recall that the political transformation of Central Europe, also crucially hinged at 1989, took place through a movement with a slogan of "antipolitics."⁵ So antipolitics has more political potential than this argument allows. Although it is inevitably a controversial view, a number of commentators on Central Europe after 1989 suggested, especially for the German Democratic Republic (GDR), that what happened was a revolution through the power of television. The unstoppably free circulation of images of consumer prosperity undermined the GDR regime to the point where it was helpless to resist German reunification.

These issues are intensely relevant to the relations between Hong Kong and China in their form of "one country, two systems." If China is indeed committed to consumerism over politics, then it is hard to see why so many commentators have voiced fear for the future of Hong Kong—unless the Chinese government is judged simply incompetent to carry through its economist priorities, which seems a judgment belied by the 1990s.⁶ And on

4. Jonathan Arac, "Preface to the Morningside Edition," in *Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), xiv.

5. See *Antipolitics* (1984), by the Hungarian dissident George Konrád, and on the larger context, particularly in relation to "micropolitics," my "Foucault and Central Europe: A Polemical Speculation," *boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (fall 1994): 197–210.

6. For a fear based on China's over-economistic goals, see Fredric Dannen, "Partners in Crime," *New Republic*, 14 and 21 July 1997, 18–26, a feature article billed on the cover:

the other hand, writers in a range of established Western publications—the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, *Vanity Fair*—have proposed that Hong Kong will act as a Trojan horse, bringing invisibly but irresistibly into China changes that will make China more like Hong Kong in its partially democratic politics as well as in its economy and burgeoning mass culture.⁷ Christopher Hitchens notes of Hong Kong just before 30 June that to the eye it appears to be part of the “American and multinational world”: “At street level, the ‘tone’ is set by everything from Häagen-Dazs to Planet Hollywood. There are many more Americans than British now living in Hong Kong. One could be, not in China, but in a huge and brilliant Chinatown.”⁸

The postmodern redefinition of politics as media spectacle is already at work in China. In Beijing, 94 percent of households now have color TV,⁹ and the ceremony celebrating the assumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong by the PRC was organized as a television event to be witnessed at home by the population of Beijing rather than depending on their presence in the streets or at Tiananmen Square, which was instead filled by designated participants brought in from all over the nation to represent the people in the world's media coverage.

A new postmodern political configuration defines the concerns of Sheldon Lu's exploration of the roles of artists and intellectuals in China of the 1990s. He takes as his point of departure the evident fact that, compared to much of China's long history extending up until very recently, the role of such figures is much less central. He connects this to a related diminishment in the place of the *national*: Artists have been displaced to a more global space of the *transnational*, while intellectuals—on the model of the professional, or the Foucauldian “specific” intellectual—have been displaced to the *subnational*, especially insofar as the state as such seems much less concerned to put intellectuals to use. Lu is astute on the situation of artists whose work becomes “political” precisely “by virtue of its being denied official recognition in China.” Because Lu quotes from my earlier work a strong statement on the possibilities for continuing political

“Meet Albert Yeung, Hong Kong Tycoon. He's Been Arrested for Criminal Intimidation and Jailed for Witness Tampering. He's Looking Forward to the Return of Hong Kong to China. One of his Biggest Stockholders is China's Ministry of Justice.”

7. For instance, the cover of the *London Review of Books*, 3 July 1997, bills a feature article, “Returning China to Hong Kong.”

8. Christopher Hitchens, “There'll Always Be an India,” *Vanity Fair*, Aug. 1997, 60.

9. Richard Smith, “Creative Destruction: Capitalist Development and China's Environment,” *New Left Review* 222 (Mar./Apr. 1997): 5.

relevance even in the supposedly insulated sphere of the university, I am moved to ask some questions that follow from his line of analysis: What does it mean that, in China, universities are, so far as I know, all maintained and regulated by the government? Is it really true that the state no longer has any valued role for intellectuals? Is it not, rather, that in a new age there are new avenues of recruitment? And if so, how are they to be specified?

Quite a different sense from Lu's of contemporary politics and culture emerges in Chen Xiaoming's investigation of "postpolitics" in recent Chinese films. Chen is a state intellectual, housed in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and his work reads, from my inexpert and therefore unnuanced point of view, less like what would be expected from a critic known in China as one of the masters of "post" thinking and more like a voice of the establishment. At least, to put it in Lu's terms, Chen continues to speak as if for the nation. It is sobering to consider his charge against the cultural economy of international film festivals, which, Chen argues, has distorted the works of the famous Fifth Generation directors by requiring, as the signature of Chineseness by which their work can be validated, the depiction of "political persecutions and omnipresent totalitarianism." These directors, he goes on, succumb to this demand of the other because they have become "divorced from the ideological mainstream" and therefore willing accomplices with "the West's cultural imaginary about China." That is, the West, he implies, cannot believe in the actual diminishment of the political in contemporary China and therefore must seek politics where there is none.

So far from accepting a position like that of Jameson on the "political unconscious," a residue that remains accessible to—and important for—interpretive recovery even after the surface has been scrupulously cleared of any evidence of politics, Chen, it seems, would link such inquiry with the "demonization" of China that has been much protested in recent mainland writings. In the United States, we can see demonization at work in the eagerness with which some decry the possibility that China attempted to influence recent elections but show no horror at the permitted forms of financial influence that are the engine driving our electoral system. Here a global, postnational perspective seems significant for raising a question: Why is it so much worse for the Chinese state to attempt influence (if it has) than for American transnational corporations, the profits of which depend on their investments in China, which in turn are possible only through political negotiations?

My response to this essay by a reputed "post-master" helps me

better understand why, to some of its Chinese opponents, the discourses of "post" are understood as "conservative." When we read in Chen that the so-called Sixth Generation filmmakers are not really committed to artistic experimentation but are instead "market-driven opportunis[ts]," there seems not merely hostility to the transformation in culture that the mass market has thus far accomplished but, more importantly, an unwillingness to imagine that any future good may come of this change. The tone of condemnatory cultural conservatism is unmistakable in the summary of *Beijing Bastards*: They "indulge themselves in making money, having sex, and producing unconventional artwork." Such are the cultural contradictions of market socialism.

Liu Kang, in his essay on global-commercial "popular culture" and the national-revolutionary "culture of the masses," is no less concerned than Chen with trying to define a main current for the nation, but their positions are extremely different. Chen's tone is that of brushing aside troublemakers, while Liu's essay struggles with a very complex issue that it refuses to be simply ambivalent about. Its form is that of a polemic with afterthoughts. Liu attempts to work with and through revolution, to treat revolution not only as China's history but as its legacy. He hopes for a China that need not and will not renounce key elements of its recent national past, as Germany (as a nation, if not every individual) has the Third Reich or as large elements of the former Soviet bloc have at least Stalinism and in many cases communism. Perhaps Japan here offers a model, where despite U.S. occupation, the unbroken imperial succession symbolizes a stronger sense of historical continuity.

Insofar as Liu's major concern in this essay is the Cultural Revolution, his attempt is comparable to the debate in the United States over the last two decades around the question, "who owns the sixties?"—that is, was it a time of disgraceful excesses to be left behind or of thwarted hopes that remain a resource? Liu claims that the "vibrant" heritage of "China's own traditions and legacies" provides a counterbalance to the global homogenization of popular culture, and he locates that heritage in the "residual" traces of the Mao era, which form a "political unconscious." Here is perhaps the sharpest contrast to Chen. Late in the essay, he acknowledges that the Cultural Revolution was "coercive, manipulative, and instrumentalizing," and led to a "reign of mob terror," and he connects this to a theoretical point that opens a space for his own reflection: Mao's failure to form a theory and practice of *urban* everyday life. In reflecting on current city practices of everyday entertainment, Liu observes that current popular dance practices

in China are still collective in character, and he argues that, in this respect, they echo the mass dances of loyalty to Mao that characterized the Cultural Revolution. Liu deepens the relation of Mao to dance by adding that during the period of communist retreat in Yan'an, the revolutionary cadres joined in "avid Soviet-style ballroom" dancing.

This context intertwining Mao, the city, dance, and the USSR illuminates Liu's comments on the film *In the Heat of the Sun*, which deals with the lives of early teenagers in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution. Liu is an expert on the Soviet scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work he has translated into Chinese, discussed, and applied, and the perspective he takes on this film, and on the Cultural Revolution more widely, is Bakhtinian, treating its crudeness and transgressions as involving the carnivalesque. The topoi of inversion and the grotesque body that are central to Bakhtin's study of Rabelais are widespread in the history of revolutions, both in many popularly enacted revolutionary self-symbolizations and also as common-places in the representation of revolution, starting with Edmund Burke. It might valuably pressure Liu's line of thought to take into account the argument by Michael Holquist that Bakhtin's own work on Rabelais was a way of critically distancing himself from the socialist-realist idealization of the "masses" in Soviet ideology of the 1930s.¹⁰ Is there a Chinese Bakhtinian populism distinct from the orthodox USSR model, despite Mao's enjoyment of Soviet musicals?

Bakhtin's critique of Freud points to a cultural studies without psychoanalysis. In contrast, Chaoyang Liao, in considering the historical experience of Taiwan, opens an area shared with much recent work in cultural studies in the United States: a neo-Lacanian concern with the temporality of trauma as a mode to comprehend the relations of "history and the subject." There is a serious attempt to develop a method that will permit one to be critical without simply trashing, humiliating, and rejecting the object of one's critique. This "divisive confrontation with the historical real" is doubly registered in *A Borrowed Life*: it is thematized by the admiration for the Japanese felt by the old father, who is himself a clown and a failure; but it is also enacted by the language structuring, in which the film's dialogue is in Minnan (the vernacular form of Chinese on Taiwan) while its voice-over is in Mandarin. The essay's concern with issues of national identity-formation and the "need to explain and justify how divisive particularism can be trans-

10. Michael Holquist, "Bakhtin and Rabelais: Theory as Praxis," *boundary 2* 11, nos. 1 and 2 (double issue) (fall/winter 1982/1983): 5-19.

formed into a ground for shared experience so that . . . particularism will not stop at mere pluralist tolerance" is fascinatingly germane to ongoing U.S. debates over multiculturalism.

The overriding concern of this essay, I find, is to escape the postmodern critique that argues that identity necessarily leads to the terrors of state-nationalism. It attempts, instead, to define a "divisive cleaving" that may be "affirmed nonoppressively," that will not be in the form of "self-righteous possessiveness" but rather in "shared want." This is the payoff for its Lacanianism. Part of the excitement for the U.S. reader is the essay's participation in an ongoing attempt to imagine and articulate an emerging political community—a newly "wanted" Taiwanese existence—an emergence evident in the essay's numerous references to on-line conversation groups in which its concerns are being discussed. This very contemporary mode of electronic public sphere differs greatly from the perhaps archaic festival forms that engage Liu, but it also differs from the melancholy, isolated subjectivity that Xiaobing Tang chooses to study. It is almost as if these three essays on relations to the past themselves display a kind of series, running from realism (Liu), through modernism (Tang), to postmodernism (Liao).

Tang's essay on postmodern melancholy in Wang Anyi's *Sadness for the Pacific* is notable for its willingness to operate in the register of literary criticism. To claim of *Our Uncle's Story* that it is "among the few truly complex and challenging works in contemporary Chinese literature" is to take on the task of evaluation with an authority that many contemporaries distrust. Tang's emphasis on the critical force of the need for negativity in Wang's story—his analysis of her choosing "melancholy subjectivity" as her critical response to the "postmodern challenge," her critique of what we might call the contemporary "lack of lack" (the problem with which Chao-yang Liao also engages)—associates his position with that of Adorno on modernism in his *Aesthetic Theory* and related late essays. In elucidating Wang's use of Singapore in her story as a symbol of modernity, this essay joins in dialogue with the analysis of Shanghai in Dai Jinhua's essay. Shanghai stands for a China that has historically long been open to Western modernity; Singapore stands for a trajectory of authoritarian capitalist development that may indicate a future for China as well as a past once not chosen.

I have suggested several ways in which Tang's essay calls to mind key issues from modernism, and in concluding my reflections, I will develop further relations between Chinese postmodernism and Western modernity. For example, Wendy Larson asserts that Chen Ran's writing denies

readers "the natural ease that we expect from a literary work." In a long history of Western literary innovation, a defining mark of ambitious literature has been its rejection of "ease" as a conventional pseudonature that must be challenged. In 1798, William Wordsworth warned his readers that the everyday language he had used in his poems might produce a "feeling of strangeness and awkwardness."¹¹ Gustave Flaubert's first novel, *Madame Bovary* (1857), provoked the authoritative critic Sainte-Beuve to exclaim that his writing seemed more clinical than belletristic: Flaubert "wields the pen as others wield the scalpel. Anatomists and physiologists, I find you on every page!"¹² During the First World War, D. H. Lawrence tried to find techniques by which to convert his hatred for the society around him, through his writing, into "noiseless bullets that explode in their souls."¹³

Zhang Yiwu's discussion of postmodernism and Chinese fiction of the 1990s begins from the end of the "radical illusion of the 80s called modernism" and the failure of China to develop according to the "utopian illusions of socialism." This highlights more than some of the other essays, but quite in line with the introduction, the ongoing complication of periodization. If the 1980s in China are to be considered the prime moment of modernism, then insofar as the nineties are so strongly felt to be "after" the eighties, after Tiananmen, then they must be the moment of the postmodern. Drawing from a recent novel, Zhang focuses this change in an image: "The great glass tower of modernism has been shattered." This figure recalls a classic of nineteenth-century Western modernism. In Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, the speaker rails against the "Crystal Palace" (from the 1851 London Great Exhibition as appropriated in Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*), which stands for sentimental, utopian dreams of centralized planning against what is perceived and feared as chaos. In the China of the 1990s, there is a clear analogy to the dominance of the market (chaos) over the centralizing dimension of (sentimental, utopian) socialism.

This analogy may help to elucidate a feature of Zhang's exposition that does not come clear to me in my ignorance of the actual Chinese works under discussion. He defines the important movement of "new state of af-

11. William Wordsworth, "Advertisement" to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 443.

12. Quoted by Francis Steegmuller in his edition of *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 231.

13. Quoted from Lawrence's letters in Jonathan Arac, *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 152.

fairs" fiction by its shift from the standpoint of "author" to that of "individual." This may mean no more than a shift from omniscient (author) to point-of-view (individual) narration, but it seems to suggest a larger shift, in which the voice of the fiction is no longer understood to be speaking authoritatively for the people as a whole collectivity (sentimental utopia) but simply for a sole self (chaos). This shift, in turn, may be compared to what I have analyzed in U.S. narratives of the last two centuries as a struggle between "national" narrative modes and narratives that by virtue of self-consciously displacing themselves from national address have become identified in U.S. culture as "literary."¹⁴

Dai Jinhua has produced an extremely rich reflection on "imagined nostalgia" over a wide range of recent Chinese cultural texts. Her remarks on the success in China of *The Bridges of Madison County* and on the ads for "Confucius Family Liquor" are intriguing. She makes the very important point, which complements Chen's essay, that the new Chinese nostalgia films can be produced so elaborately only through transnational capitalization, involving sums far beyond what could be earned on the Chinese domestic market. I would like to understand this economic point more fully. It seems to suggest that if the Chinese domestic market for film were better developed (exploited)—for its potential size is known to marketers the world over—then the character of Chinese films might change in a way that brought them closer to domestic, intranational concerns than Chen now finds them. Dai's interpretation of the recent vogue for Shanghai—as in several recent internationally circulated films—is highly provocative: This city, which was the locus of the most intense Western penetration—for capital, culture, and communism—symbolizes now the long history of China's belonging to a larger world.

Prerevolutionary Shanghai is but one instance of the crucial role played in Dai's explorations by the experiences of great cities. Contemporary Beijing is equally important for the "destructiveness of construction work" so overwhelmingly in progress that the city seems enmeshed in "postwar reconstruction." Only around Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, when I was there in 1994, have I seen a level of massive city-building-in-progress to match the spectacle of China in recent years. Dai emphasizes the loss

14. I study the emergence of this problematic in "Narrative Forms," *Cambridge History of American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2:605-777; and I trace some of its twentieth-century ramifications in *Huckleberry Finn As Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

of what was familiar and recognizable. Her delineation of this experience recalls a privileged instance of Western literary response to modernization, in Baudelaire's "Paris Pictures" (*Tableaux Parisiens*). As he wrote in "The Swan," "Old Paris is no more."¹⁵ The city he had known was being destroyed and reshaped—Haussmannized—as old neighborhoods were demolished and a system of boulevards was imposed on the old capillary system of streets and alleys. Public health was one motive, but political hygiene was another. After the Revolution of 1848, and the coup of Napoleon III in 1851, care was being taken to open up lines of fire by which troops could hold insurrections more effectively in check, and lines of communication by which working-class quarters could be isolated; the unprecedented breadth of boulevards made barricades more difficult to erect. Baudelaire considered himself by this time to have been "physically depoliticized."¹⁶ After the loss of revolutionary hope, after the antidemocratic brutality, what remains is melancholy: "Paris changes, but nothing in my melancholy has budged." And melancholy breeds allegory: "New palaces, scaffoldings, . . . old neighborhoods, everything . . . becomes allegory." The Baudelaire construed by Walter Benjamin, my guide here, brings us to the allegorical melancholy Tang finds in Wang Anyi, together with Dai's "imagined nostalgia."

Given the echoes, what differences most importantly distinguish Paris of the 1850s from Beijing of the 1990s? Perhaps that Haussmann's projects were public works, built on tax money, while it is the world's privately invested capital—although only with governmental permission and without the rights of landownership—that is rebuilding China. Where does this difference register? Perhaps most evidently in the neon names of transnational corporations that shine over Beijing in the nighttime sky, a sky that already in Baudelaire's Paris no longer showed any stars.¹⁷

15. Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Garnier, 1961), 95. This and subsequent references to this poem are my translation.

16. Quoted from Baudelaire's letter of 5 March 1852, in Claude Pichois, *Baudelaire*, trans. Graham Robb (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), 177.

17. On this point in relation to Baudelaire, see my discussion in *Critical Genealogies*, 213.