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boundary 2, Vol. 24, No. 3, Postmodernism and China (Autumn, 1997), 1-18.

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Introduction: Postmodernism and China

Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong

This collection of discussions on postmodernism and China undertakes two tasks. The first task is to map out the terrain of what might be construed as postmodern in intellectual and creative activity, focusing for the most part on the People's Republic of China (PRC). The second task is to engage the question of whether postmodernity and postmodernism are relevant concepts for grasping the condition of contemporary Chinese societies, including but not restricted to the PRC.

Postmodernism as a concept was introduced to Chinese intellectual circles in the mid-eighties, with the works of Fredric Jameson playing an important part in the Chinese appreciation of postmodernism (other important figures contributing to the Chinese appreciation of postmodernism were Jürgen Habermas, Ihab Hassan, Linda Hutcheon, Jean-François Lyotard, and William V. Spanos).¹ Since then, there has been a proliferation of work

1. Fredric Jameson visited China in 1985 and taught at Beijing University during the fall semester. The Chinese translation of the transcribed lectures was subsequently published under the title *Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun* (Postmodernism and cultural theory) in 1986 (and in Taiwan in 1989). The lectures remain to this day the most widely read and quoted work in Chinese discussions of postmodernism.

that either views itself as self-consciously postmodernist or is labeled as such by others. We do not, however, have a clear appreciation of the scope and significance of such work. The first task, therefore, is to define the terrain of the postmodern in China, which also requires an examination of the Chinese situation with reference to the modernity-postmodernity shift globally. While the argument for a passage from the modern to the postmodern remains contested even within the postindustrial West, it nevertheless offers a context against which to evaluate the historical notion of Chinese postmodernity. The juxtaposition of a Chinese postmodernity and a Euro-American postmodernity is of theoretical interest because it may provide a supplement to the conditions of postmodernism in general.

The obvious continuity (or discontinuity) of the modern and the postmodern, and the somewhat parasitic relationship of discussions of postmodernism to notions of modernism, calls for the guarded use of critical perspectives from studies of modernism, if only to achieve a momentary sense-certainty through which the encounter with Chinese postmodernism becomes sensible. In his *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman differentiates modernity as (1) a socioeconomic transformation, (2) a historical experience coping with social change, and (3) the "cultural vision" based on that historical experience.² If Berman's useful differentiation of questions concerning the modern can be transplanted with some qualification into the inquiry into the postmodern, the issue of postmodernism and China may be pursued on three conceptually distinct, but socially and critically interrelated, planes. But first, a few words on the necessary qualifications, which also offer clues as to why we think it may be productive to postulate a Chinese postmodern.

A fundamental problem with Berman's approach to modernity is his restriction of the problems it presents for Euro-America. Berman has little to say about the ways in which colonization of the world may have contributed to the Euro-American experience of modernity. Conversely, as he evades the question, except for brief references to Russia, he has even less to say about the experience of modernity among those who were compelled into modernity by Euro-American coercion, who experienced it as domination from the outside, and whose own projects of modernity included a fundamental preoccupation with the recovery of local/national subjectivities.³

2. See Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 15-37.

3. For further discussion of this problem, see Arif Dirlik, "Modernism and Antimodernism in Mao Zedong's Marxism," in *Critical Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought*, ed. Arif

This distinction points to ways in which the postmodern may serve productively to illuminate the contemporary situation in the relationship of Third World societies to Euro-America. As we will elaborate below, there are plausible objections to the use of the postmodern as a category to explain this situation. Temporally speaking, if the postmodern is indeed a condition of late capitalism, it does not make much sense to apply it to situations where even the modern, as an economic and political category, remains to be achieved. Spatially, in a society such as China, where precapitalist economic relations (and corresponding social and political forms) coexist with capitalist and socialist relations, a category such as the postmodern may be applicable only to a limited sector of society, leaving out large segments of territory and population. Under these circumstances, using the term *postmodern* may seem at best to evade fundamental economic, social, political, and cultural problems, at worst as a Eurocentric recolonization of a Third World terrain marked by uneven development.

We would like to suggest, to the contrary, that it is precisely such a situation of spatial fracturing and temporal desynchronization that justifies the use of the postmodern against the spatial (as in the nation-form) and temporal (as in the development of a national market and culture) teleologies of modernity. The coexistence of the precapitalist, the capitalist, and the postsocialist economic, political, and social forms represents a significant departure from the assumptions of a Chinese modernity, embodied above all in the socialist revolutionary project.

Most objections to the use of postmodernism within a Chinese context presuppose the nation-form as the unit of analysis, which is misleading because of the increasingly problematic status of the nation as a unit of analysis, as it is undermined by forces from both within and without. The unevenness of regional development in China is no longer a manifestation only of past legacies; those legacies are being reconfigured by the incorporation of China into a global economy that both nourishes and generates differences on the same national terrain. At the same time, Chinese populations around the world have acquired enormous economic power and assert their own sense of Chineseness against the claims of the territorial Chinese state embodied in the PRC. This contestation involves not only the three Chinese or Chinese-dominated states of the PRC, Taiwan, and Singapore but also the stateless Chinese ethnicities encompassed by the term *diaspora*. Such contestation itself is a significant departure from Chi-

nese modernity as it has been enunciated through a century of revolution. The contradiction between identities that may be marked as Chinese and their dispersal into many localities around the world forces a rethinking of modernist notions of a unified and unquestioned Chinese identity, which is represented by the socialist state.

Postmodernism, at the very least, has heuristic uses for dealing with this situation of simultaneous unity and dispersal. We may also usefully think of this condition of Chineseness as a generator of postmodernity. Under conditions of a global capitalism, Chinese states and populations are no longer merely the "objects" of forces emanating from Euro-America but are themselves significant contributors to the operations of capitalism; hence the seemingly contradictory representations of China and Chinese at once in conventional Orientalist (or self-Orientalist) terms as a location of the exotic other but also as the carriers of values expanding the frontiers of capitalism. The tradition of the modern/traditional dichotomy may still be there, but the tradition now appears as a means to transcend the modern.⁴

Akbar Ahmed's observation that postmodernism is both a beneficiary and a generator of ethnicity may be paraphrased here (without altering his sense in any way): Chinese ethnicity is at once a beneficiary and a generator of postmodernism.⁵ What we need to keep in mind, especially with reference to the PRC, is that postmodernity is not just what comes after the modern but rather what comes after particular manifestations of the modern in China's historical circumstances, that the postmodern is also the postrevolutionary and the postsocialist. One of the ironies of postmodernity in China, visible in some of the contributions in this volume, is that while the ultimate justification for the use of the term may lie in spatial fracturing and temporal dissonance, which call into question any claims to cultural authenticity, Chinese postmodernists insist nevertheless on marking Chinese postmodernity as something authentically Chinese.

With these qualifications in mind, let us return to the various levels at which a Chinese postmodernity may be conceived. The first is post-

4. We are referring here to the recent "Confucian revival" that has had such an impact on mainland scholars and that finds in Confucianism the key to the recent rapid development of Chinese societies. See Arif Dirlik, "Confucius in the Borderlands: Global Capitalism and the Reinvention of Confucianism," *boundary 2* 22, no. 3 (fall 1995): 229-73.

5. Ahmed states: "Ethno-religious revivalism is both cause and effect of postmodernism." See Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 13. What Ahmed has in mind is that even as the reassertion of ethnicity challenges a Eurocentric modernity, postmodernism allows for and legitimizes the reemergence of ethnicities and cultural forms suppressed under regimes of modernity.

modernization as a socioeconomic transformation, which is embodied in new information and computer technology, the global mobility of capital and labor, post-Fordist or flexible production, and all the technologies associated with contemporary global capitalism. The particularity of the Chinese socioeconomic transformation in the post-Mao era lies in the socialist reforms aimed at technological innovation and integration with the global economy. From the beginning, the impact of the postindustrial revolution on the socialist infrastructure was a political as well as an economic event. In other words, the technological and organizational efficacy associated with the market has always been defined vis-à-vis socialist, more precisely, Soviet-style, industrialization or modernization; its application has always been introduced by intense political and ideological operations and maneuvered and orchestrated by the state bureaucracy and the intelligentsia. Throughout the 1980s, decentralization, the "invisible hand" of the market, global operation and competition, and the whole cornucopia of neoliberal economic doctrines were engaged ideologically and theoretically in order to create a "socialist market economy."

The socioeconomic change that sets the platform for discussions of Chinese postmodernity and postmodernism is, therefore, historically a state project. And it is the history of the particular state ideology or ideologies that provides the temporal as well as the social framework by which the process of Chinese "postmodernization" acquires concrete meaning as a postrevolutionary secularization. While Chinese leaders like to speak of "using capitalism to develop socialism," the current reality may well be the reverse: the use of "socialism" to achieve capitalist development. Under the guise of socialism, China has become a source of cheap labor, with far-reaching implications for economies globally. At the same time, it is the socialistic policies of the regime (such as keeping down the costs of everyday life) that make possible the sustenance of a low-wage labor force. China's massive size makes it a force in the global economy and in politics, but in terms of income per capita, China is still a very poor country. It remains to be seen whether, in the Chinese context, socialism is a necessary, even preferable, condition for a thriving market economy, and whether it is the task of a postmodern authoritarianism, so to speak, to provide social stability, job training, and a welfare system, and to protect the domestic market while engaging in an export-oriented economy.⁶ The recent birth

6. For a recent, and sharply critical, discussion of the Chinese economic miracle, see Richard Smith, "Creative Destruction: Capitalist Development and China's Environment," *New Left Review* 222 (1997): 3-41.

of a new brand of Chinese nationalism in the marketplace seems to have everything to do with this residual socialism lending itself to the most unrelenting forces of late capitalism. Yet, from a different subject-position (and a different set of ideological fantasies), the market is also becoming an indispensable, not to mention more effective, means to an end of socialism understood as a utopian notion of the state per se.

One of the most stunning and least theorized accomplishments in post-Mao Chinese economic growth, a modernization in the form of post-modernization, is the creation of a diverse, decentralized network of rural- or communal-based township enterprises (*xiangzhen qiye*), which now collectively represent more than a third of the Chinese GNP and export volume. Indeed, the township enterprise seems to epitomize the historical as well as the theoretical contradictions and paradoxes of at least one aspect of the Chinese economy. Here, one sees that the industrial penetration of the rural also gives rise to a posturban, decentralized, and place-based mode of development that promises to narrow rural-urban disparity and to rebuild rural communities in the market environment. At the same time, decollectivization allows earlier (including socialist) structures of production and social and cultural forms to reclaim parts of the reorganization of rural China in terms of a neocollectivism.⁷ The integration with the global (as many township enterprises are export oriented) reinvents the local, and *culture* in the broadest sense of the term becomes an essential "natural resource" for capitalization. In a contrary direction, ironically, in the vast terrain of the rural economy, the specters of Mao are increasingly visible in a people's war of (post-)modernization. These contradictions divide a locally bound population (which is not necessarily anti-Western, since the West provides a model of economic wealth even at that level) from an elite that already seeks to become part of a global elite (without necessarily being antistate or pro-Western). They also keep alive memories of socialism, while problematizing the meanings of modernity and postmodernity.

The relationship between a new market environment and an old nation-form is also, or perhaps mainly, being redefined in terms of the post-modern. The integration of the Chinese economy with global markets has had multiple effects on Chinese social life. On the one hand, it exposes the Chinese market and the realm of daily life to global capital and to international fashions and ideologies. This has created the impression that cities

7. For a compelling study of postsocialist industrialization and social organization in rural China, see Wang Ying, *Xin jitizhuyi* (New collectivism) (Beijing: Jingji Guanli Chubanshe, 1996).

such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen, now with cityscapes punctuated by the golden arches of McDonald's and giant Panasonic advertisements, are nothing more than Chinese enclaves of a global consumer society. On the other hand, the world market's spread into China, and China's willing entry into it, enables Chinese consumers to encounter a world of difference, unevenness, inequality, and hierarchy, often delineated in terms of nation-state borders. Against the universal claims of the world market, these differences are constant reminders of location, boundary, and community. Thus, amid the euphoria of globalization and integration, Chinese must also be experiencing what Ernest Gellner calls the "fatalistic" sense of belonging (and loyalty and love as a valorization of or "supplement" to what you cannot choose), namely, an enhanced communal identity in terms of birthplace, natural environment, color, economic condition, political culture, common history, and language.⁸ Both the sense of integration and the sense of difference (if not isolation) manifest themselves in the emerging discourse of Chinese postmodernism, which in turn makes its own symbolic space available to one or the other tendency, yielding different formal/ideological products under different social circumstances. While the emergence of global capitalism has called the nation-form into question globally, the Chinese case presents challenges of its own, not just because of the proliferation of Chinese states as part of the historical legacy of modern China but also because of an increasingly visible Chinese diaspora that has its roots in this same historical legacy but is also dynamized by contemporary economic and political forces. These social/political phenomena have created problems in the search for a Chinese identity and also pose serious challenges to narrativizing China as a historical entity. A full accounting of Chinese postmodernity ultimately cannot be restricted to any one Chinese location but must also account for motions of populations that are global and that present the very contemporary problem of contradictions in the global and the local. It is important to emphasize here that these observations pertain to problems of identity within the so-called Han ethnicity and appear to be even more complex when non-Han groups are introduced into the portrayal of Chineseness.

8. Gellner suggests that the flourishing of modern nationalisms depends both on a prevailing "universal high culture" (industrialization, rationalization, etc.) and on some social, cultural, and natural barriers that are insurmountable by individuals. This dual basis, according to Gellner, gives rise to "resentments and discontents" that are always at work in nationalist discourses and bestows on nationalism a "fated" atmosphere. See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 61-62.

The very real economic success of the Chinese, centered in Pacific Asia but achieving a global reach through diasporic populations, has added to the already existing questions of Euro-American hegemony, which for a long time defined modernity. With their newly found economic success, Chinese elites have also explicitly challenged the ideology of Eurocentric modernity by reasserting native ideologies (such as Confucianism) or ideologies of an Asian mode of development (such as that of Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore, who is particularly active in promoting an antidemocratic capitalist developmentalism). In this sense, too, the economic success of Chinese populations may be viewed as a generator of postmodernity.

If postsocialism is central to the historical experience of Chinese postmodernity, its centrality lies in the social, political, and cultural vocabulary it provides, through which the more general or standard grammar of the postmodern experience—decentralization, transnational mobility, economic and cultural diversity, consumerism, and some emerging or renewed sense of locality, individuality, and diversity—can be imagined, confronted, and assimilated.

This constitutes the second topology of our discussion of Chinese postmodernism. If Chinese society experienced modernity as revolution and socialism, Chinese postmodernity is to be grasped not only in its relationship to modernity in general but also in its relationship to a socialist and revolutionary modernity. Much more clearly than in societies where postmodernity and modernity are both encompassed within the history of capitalism, Chinese postmodernism may reveal the antirevolutionary thrust of postmodernism as well as its contradictions. For while China disengages from its revolutionary past, as a postrevolutionary and postsocialist society, it still bears strong traces of that past, which serve as reminders of an earlier challenge to the capitalist world-system. The contradictions are most evident in the anomalous situation of a state that still claims socialism to legitimize itself, but must nevertheless demonstrate that legitimacy by being more successful at capitalism than capitalist societies (which to some extent it *has* demonstrated by registering enormous rates of growth). While Chinese postmodernism may be most striking as an antirevolutionary repudiation of a socialist modernity, what may make Chinese postmodernity unique is that, within a postsocialist situation, postmodernity itself may serve as a site of struggle between the legacy of the past and the forces of the present.

Here Chinese postmodernity may serve as a periodizing concept.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, thinking about history and culture in China has been dominated by the categories of modernity and the Enlightenment. Chinese communism was arguably the most forceful, and ultimately most successful, expression of an ideological commitment to modernity. Since 1978, a radical break with the revolutionary past has called into question the earlier framework of experiences, values, and ideologies. This questioning has itself been overwhelmed by new patterns of production and consumption that have accompanied China's integration into the global capitalist system, exacerbating the problem of representation in a radically unstable situation of everyday life and culture. Market, consumption, and media, all conceived in global rather than merely national terms, have replaced revolutionary mobilization as the dynamizing force of social change, announcing the triumph of the ideology of consumerism, but also opening the way for the liberation of peoples and localities by a plurality of worldviews, for the assertion of difference, and for the revision of the past and the creation of the future. Dizzying change and bewildering fragmentation not only undermine inherited narratives but call into question the very possibility of encapsulation within a coherent narrative of the past, the present, and the future. If postmodernity as a concept helps grasp this condition, the condition also suggests reasons why the Chinese facing this experience should find in postmodernism a discourse that speaks to their experience.

The third and last terrain of interrogation is the cultural vision that is developed out of the experience of postmodernity, or cultural postmodernism, as illustrated in fashion, music, architecture, video, art, literature, and theoretical discourses. It may be a truism to say that, in China in the 1980s, the issue of postmodernism first emerged not as a theoretical challenge (as the cliché goes) but as an aesthetic expectation. This observation, far from dismissing the problematics of Chinese postmodernism as those of mere borrowed forms and homegrown fantasies, should open up discussions of the historical and theoretical implications of the expectation for a *houxiandai zhuyi* (postmodernism) as a self-fulfilling prophesy and should unravel the aesthetic complex that becomes the surest sign, indeed a conspicuous stage, of the changing economic, social, political, and cultural relations in post-Mao China.⁹

9. It might be useful to point out here a particular feature of the Chinese term *houxiandai zhuyi* (postmodernism), which has somewhat different implications in a Chinese historical context than it has in a Euro-American context. In periodizing the "modern" in Chinese history, dating back to the initial encounter with Euro-America during the Opium War

Any honest student of the brief, yet convoluted, history of Chinese postmodernism would have to admit that, during most of the 1980s, postmodernism as a discourse preceded postmodernism as a reality, and that the intense collective experience of change, similar to that of the West on a macrohistorical scale, did not give rise to the Euro-American feeling that "the modern was now over."¹⁰ If the history of post-Mao China can be seen as a speeding up of the socioeconomic evolution of the postwar West, recorded by a historical camera, then modernity with a vengeance is clearly the force that shaped the same libidinal and ideological landscape that gave rise to both a high modernism and a parasitic postmodernism at the same time.

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These preliminary differentiations may help us focus more historically on the central issues of Chinese postmodernism by disengaging from some heated, yet ultimately unproductive, debates regarding Chinese postmodernism. The first of these debates is about China's qualifications to be a postmodern society and, by implication, about the "authenticity" of a Chinese-style postmodernism. Cultural conservatives, realists, and modernists in China tend to see Chinese postmodernism as comically out of touch with Chinese reality—as defined by common sense, that is, in terms of income per capita; the illiteracy rate; the vast rural population; the socialist economic, social, and political infrastructure; and so forth—and therefore unwarranted. Meanwhile, apologists of Chinese postmodernism are busy pointing out the presence in the Chinese cities of postmodern enclaves and logos that are in every respect as authentic as their Western originals. The result is an escalating antagonism along the battle lines that might be called "postmodernism for postmodernism's own sake." Under these circumstances, any critical account of the issue would be forced into the corners of empiricism and nominalism, both of which in turn feed the

(1839–1842), Chinese historians have used two terms, *jindai* (recent) and *xiandai* (contemporary), the former referring to the period 1839–1919, and the latter referring to the period since 1919 (the May Fourth Movement), but even more specifically to the period since 1921, when the Communist Party was founded. In historical periodization, therefore, *xiandai* refers specifically to the period of the Communist Revolution. The Chinese term for *postmodernism*, therefore, may be viewed generally as meaning *postmodern*, but it also carries strong connotations of *postrevolutionary*.

10. Paul Bové, preface to *Early Postmodernism: Foundational Essays*, ed. Paul A. Bové (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 4.

prevalent suspicion that Chinese postmodernism is produced by the social (and particularly intellectual) fantasy of, and a prolonged obsession with, catching up with the West.

This is to some extent valid, as is evidenced by the insistence of Chinese postmodernists on the authenticity of Chinese postmodernism, which conveniently overlooks the fact that *authenticity* is a term that is called into question by postmodernism. Authenticity also implies holding on to the idea of an authentic Chinese national terrain, which is hardly tenable, since even those Chinese critics who participate in the conversation about a Chinese modernity or postmodernity are widely dispersed globally, bringing to bear on the discussion the cultural orientations and prejudices of their many locations. It is more productive, under the circumstances, to approach the question of Chinese postmodernity as one aspect of a global postmodernity mediated by the terrains and histories identifiable as Chinese. Finally, it is also important to bear in mind in these discussions a distinction between postmodernism as a description of some social and cultural reality, and postmodernism as a concept with which to grasp and make sense of a complex reality that does not lend itself to comprehension through categories marked by the spatial and temporal teleologies of modernity.

A more constructive response to the accusations brought against Chinese postmodernism is perhaps to avoid dutifully characterizing the causal relationship between a certain material condition and a certain cultural-theoretical expression, all of which are, in effect, based on the particular body of experience of the West—above all, the United States. Rather, what can be derived from the Bermanian differentiation is that all three (conceptual) levels of the process of postmodernity could, and in fact did, function relatively autonomously and claim their own empirical, ideological, and historical authenticities. The cultural vision of postmodernism, for example, once available to individuals and communities, could produce a historical experience of its own, which would in turn define its own socio-economic truthfulness. The postmodern rhetoric of the disappearance of center, origin, teleology, and depth is as much an appropriation by the postmodern secularization as it is an articulation of it; the Derridean game of the sign and the text is not so much a space in which a postsocialist subjectivity grows as the very grammar by which it is constituted. Desire and pleasure, considered in the market or consumer context, are integral parts of material and social production as is the production of more desire and pleasure. The political economy of Chinese postmodernism offers, therefore, more than a hint that the reform bureaucracy of post-Mao China not only has grasped

the market mechanism but also has managed to legitimize it in terms of human nature, as the liberation of the forces of production. This has become more apparent since the Tiananmen tragedy of 1989, but especially since the nearly total release of market forces following Deng Xiaoping's "imperial" visit to the south, when he gave his blessings to the total release of market forces without worrying about their consequences for socialism. The message clearly was that the market economy and the promotion of consumption would serve as distractions from politics, which were always fraught with the danger of a repeat of the events of 1989. To the extent that Chinese postmodernism celebrates a mass-consumer culture, it then appears in its complicity with the strategy of the regime, much as postmodernism in the United States is complicit with the unfolding of a global capitalism.

Here, the causal relationship is found not between the economic and the cultural, or the base and the superstructure, but rather within the respective histories of economy and ideology, of content and forms. And it is the historical chain of signification, with all its gaps, omissions, repressions, and contradictions, that becomes the location for a critical diagnosis and a dialectical narrative. In an environment that nourishes "the identification of the commodity with its image" and the "symbiosis between the market and the media,"¹¹ the structural rather than the mechanical relationship between economy, experience, and culture becomes all the more important. In the postmodern condition, production and culture mingle with one another through a dialectical third: commodification and consumption. Thus, the encounter with postmodernity is first and foremost a cultural encounter; in other words, the contact with global capitalism is to a great extent the contact with its culture, discourse, ideology, and vice versa. If postmodernism is, paraphrasing Jameson to eliminate teleology, the cultural logic of global capitalism, then in the Chinese context it must also be at one and the same time the cultural logic of a postrevolutionary, yet residually socialist, Chinese form of life.

Historicization necessarily leads to a political understanding of the issue. In fact, the discourse of Chinese postmodernism has become one of the focal points of recent cultural-political debates among Chinese intellectuals. While the question of the authenticity of Chinese postmodernism receded from the front line of theoretical debate (but certainly not from the

11. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 275.

public discourse), it was replaced by questions concerning its political implications. This shift has less to do with the internal theoretical evolution in the Chinese field and more with the tidal wave of marketization unleashed in the early 1990s. Ironically, when consumerism and mass-consumer culture swept the country and reshaped the Chinese landscape, postmodernism as a descriptive paradigm, or, better still, as a sign of a collective anticipation, became a useful political label. As the theoretical interest in Western writings on postmodernism yields to a critical urgency of mapping out the dizzying changes in Chinese culture, or, more precisely, popular culture, categories that used to be the building blocks of the discourse of postmodernism—global capital, the international market, consumption, mobility, decenteredness—all melt into the background of an avalanche of case studies on topics ranging from TV soap operas to advertisements, from social fashions (such as nostalgia) to “the new state of affairs” (*xinzhuangtai*) of everyday life. In a sense, one may say that the discussion of Chinese postmodernism flourished only in its afterlife, namely, as Chinese culture studies. Most of the essays included in this collection fall into this category.

Like its Western—in particular, American—counterparts, Chinese culture studies has as its explicit goal the study of mass culture and various forms of everyday life. And like its Western counterparts again, underlying Chinese culture studies is a paradigmatic shift from intellectual discourse to mass culture, from high theory to “low” text, from literature to other media, especially visual media. Unlike culture studies in the West, however, the Chinese encounter with the booming everyday world and its cultural manifestations overlapped with the most brutal moment of an all-out effort to establish a market economy and to integrate with global capitalism. The deconstruction of the aesthetic-philosophical discourse of humanism and the high modernism of the 1980s, which for Chinese postmodernists is nothing more than the last mythology of the New Era, allows a more concrete context in which a decisively postmodern critical sensibility takes shape.¹² The rejection of total submission to the intellectual genealogy of universal modernity here also gives rise to a postcolonial perspective from which to look at Western discourse. The Chinese discourse of postcolonial criticism, often framed in nativist terms, both indicates the heightened awareness of power relationships in cultural production and manifests the

12. See Zhang Yiwu, “Zuihoude shenhua” (The last mythology), in *Renwen jingshen xunsi lu* (In search of the human spirit), ed. Wang Xiaoming (Shanghai: Wenhui Chubanshe, 1995), 137–41.

kind of confidence derived from the Chinese economic success in the global market. While the Chinese critique of hegemonic hierarchy and teleological progress are theoretically valid, the main thrust of such a critique lies clearly in its assertion, sometimes celebration, of the legitimacy and richness of the present — of secularization, locality, the everyday world, and, ultimately, “the people,” whose invention is conditioned as much by the emergent market as by the residual (socialist) state.

Thus, the sociological specificity of a Chinese postmodern culture may lie in the fact that, in critic Zhang Yiwu's words, “the poetic aspirations for a ‘civilization’ and ‘life of abundance’ designed by the discourse of modernity now become a realistic choice in the everyday sphere itself.”¹³ The demise of intellectual high culture in the face of consumerism then gives rise to a whole variety of *jouissance* that is derived from the public's widespread belief that they are decidedly putting something behind them and shifting all kinds of socialist or modernist paradigms of social value, psychological pattern, cultural mode, and stylistic fashion. The critical affirmation of mass culture obviously draws its theoretical inspiration from postmodernism, postcolonialism, critical theory, and cultural studies in the West, particularly in the United States. But to determine the historical meaning of Chinese postmodernism is to determine the correlation and differentiation between various forms of post-isms that form a linguistic maze in contemporary Chinese cultural criticism: post-Maoism, postrevolutionism, postcolonialism, postsocialism, postmetaphysicalism, postutopianism, post-New Eraism, postexperimentalism, post-Fordismism, postallegoricalism, post-Fifth Generationism, and so forth. Nearly eight decades ago, during the May Fourth New Culture Movement, the first Chinese “cultural revolution” was driven by a “pathos of novelty,” when every publication carried in its title the adjective *new*. The third “cultural revolution” of the present day is marked by *post-* as its signifier. Against the background of the first and the second (socialist) cultural revolutions, this third cultural revolution may signify exhaustion with the promise of modernity, even as China would seem to be achieving the long elusive goal of modernization and moving beyond.

Yet, the disengagement from intellectual high culture and the embrace of the everyday pose two challenges to the pioneers of Chinese culture studies. First, there is the need to formulate a theoretical qualification of globalization, or global capitalism, as a Chinese experience,

13. Zhang Yiwu, “Xin zhuangtaide jueqi” (The emergence of the new state of affairs), *Zhongshan* 2 (1994): 115; translation by Zhang Xudong.

and to perform a close analysis of its relationship to the state as well as to the everyday sphere. Second, there is the need to use theory itself, which contains its own historicization, self-reflexively. However, in meeting these challenges, Chinese postmodernists are often put on the defensive by their liberal and conservative opponents, partly because of the postmodernists' almost total absorption in mapping out an explosive new cultural space, and partly because of a structural separation between critics on the front line of cultural studies (and cultural journalism) and theoreticians in the traditional disciplines of philosophy, aesthetics, and literary theory, a pattern that formed during the 1980s, when theory enjoyed unchallenged authority in developing a semi-autonomous intellectual discourse vis-à-vis the state ideological apparatus. Last but not least, the theoretical discourse of mass culture has yet to clarify its own stand in a differentiated social and intellectual sphere in specific fundamental ideological and political terms.

Not surprisingly, from these weak spots, liberals have waged their attack on the new critical discourse, which they playfully, and somewhat contemptuously, have labeled "postology" (*houxue*, the Chinese term for theories with the prefix of *post-*, but it can also mean postscholarship or "late-born learning"). In a frequently quoted article by Lei Yi published in *Dushu*, the author accuses the "post-" critics of confusing First World problematics with Third World situations, and of universalizing theoretical discourses of postmodernism without a much needed process of nativization. The general validity of Lei Yi's point is obvious on a superficial level. However, his call for a "study of the Chinese context" has a political implication that reveals what is truly at stake in this debate. By rhetorically praising the courage of confronting the epistemological hegemony of the West through the works of Michel Foucault and Edward Said, Lei Yi is in fact deploring the lack of such courage in Chinese post- critics to confront the hegemony and power in their own Chinese environment.¹⁴

This position and strategy are shared by other liberals. In an article published in Hong Kong, Henry Y-H Zhao discerns an unholy alliance between Chinese postmodernism and mass culture that aims to "destroy elite culture." By a self-positioning of elite intellectuals as a critical priesthood on the margins of modern society, Zhao defines the rise of mass culture and its theoretical discourse as "neoconservatism." For him, there seems to be a short circuit between a "conscious challenge to the global victory of late

14. Lei Yi, "Beijing yu cuowei" (Background and dislocation), *Dushu (Reading)* 4 (1995): 16-19.

capitalism" and "an apology for the degradation of contemporary culture."¹⁵ Xu Ben, another critic, further argues that a premodern-modern distinction is more crucial than an East-West opposition, and that the "chief form of oppression" in China is not the imperial or "postcolonial" West but the totalitarian regime at home. Based on his suspicion that the Chinese discourse of postcolonialism is centered on a celebration of indigenesness, and not on critical resistance (its resistance is directed to the "discursive oppression from the First World"), Xu immediately subjects Chinese postmodernism to a political trial of ideological identity with or loyalty to the Chinese regime, or to the universal West. The verdict is by no means unpredictable. Criticizing the Chinese discourse of postcolonialism, Xu Ben writes:

[Chinese postcolonialism] is out of touch with Chinese reality. By elevating the discursive oppression from the First World into the chief form of oppression experienced in China today, it shuns—unwittingly or not—the violence and oppression that exist in native social reality. Although "Third World" criticism from China takes pains to keep a distance from the official discourse of nationalism, it nonetheless avoids any critical analysis of it. Its antagonism has only an international edge and no domestic pointedness. Therefore, not only can this discourse coexist peacefully with the official discourse of nationalism; it accommodates the interests of the latter. By ignoring immediate oppression at home and criticizing a "global" one at a distance, it developed a phony mode of resistance-criticism in the humanities that is extremely conducive to the state's ideological control and appropriation.¹⁶

By placing the Chinese debate over theory, mass culture, and nationalism against the global background of capitalist euphoria and ideological homogeneity, liberal criticism (which no doubt has its own version of postmodern reality) nevertheless shows the implicit link between the cultural vision of Chinese postmodernism and the historical experience of post-revolutionary China. It is necessary to underline here that the debate over postmodernism is not to be grasped in terms of contrasts between East and West, First World and Third World, politics and antipolitics, et cetera. Not the least important aspect of these debates may be that postmodernism is

15. Zhao Yiheng, "'Post-ism' and the New Conservatism in China," *Ershiyi shiji* (Twenty-first century) 27 (Feb. 1995): 11; translation by Zhang Xudong.

16. Xu Ben, "'Disan shijie piping' zai dangjin Zhongguode chujing" (The situation of "Third World criticism" in contemporary China), *Ershiyi shiji* (Twenty-first century) 27 (Feb. 1995): 17; translation by Zhang Xudong.

an issue in intra-elite struggles, in which it serves as an intellectual weapon for those among the Chinese elite who are willing to recognize globalization and mass culture as irreducible moments of a contemporary Chinese reality, who find in postmodernism a means to grasp critically both the legacies of past hierarchies and their reconfigurations under a regime of global capitalism, and whose antipolitical politics may not lead to radical resistance to oppression and exploitation but at the very least may open up cultural spaces in which such resistance assumes new forms. Postmodernity in China confronts a historical legacy that differs from its Euro-American counterparts. Having experienced modernity as colonialism from the outside and as a coercive state project from the inside, postmodernity may allow for the emergence of alternative social and cultural formations that do not so much signal the end of modernity as mark the beginning of imagining alternatives to it.

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This collection of essays is aimed at making the problems of a Chinese postmodernity explicit and available to critical interrogation. In doing so, it acknowledges the fundamental ambiguity of the issue of Chinese postmodernism, namely, its possible complicity in the culture of global capitalism, its origins in mass participation in economic life, and its evasion of issues of political participation. Thus, the critical effort at redefining the national culture in terms of enhanced freedom and a new logic of imagination in the everyday world both prefigures new paradigms of Chinese culture studies and is hampered by its internal difficulties and external resistances. Culture studies in China may share with its Euro-American counterparts an evasion of politics or even the depoliticization of everyday life. If this problem appears with greater urgency in the Chinese case, it may be because of the centrality to Chinese postmodernism of the intricate relationship between the everyday sphere, the state, the (elite) intellectuals, and the omnipresent ideology and culture of global capitalism. Yet, ambiguity, understood dialectically, is not only the mode in which Chinese postmodernism is articulated; it also points to the directions in which we may engage this problematic and the search for cultural and social alternatives. In Walter Benjamin's words, it is "the figurative appearance of the dialectic, the law of the dialectic at a standstill."¹⁷

The essays in this volume grapple with the intriguing problems that

17. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 171.

may render Chinese postmodernism unique historically and that therefore make it all the more relevant to grasp "the condition of postmodernity" in both Chinese and global contexts. In all of these senses, it is possible to suggest that postmodernism as a way of grasping contemporary China must account not only for commonalities between China and others in a global condition of postmodernity but also for the ways in which China itself may be a generator of postmodernity as a result of its own unique historical experience and the contradictions that are the legacy of that experience. Obviously, this is a question that is far too broad and weighty to be encompassed within one volume, but we have made an effort through preliminary inquiries into selected aspects of the question to open up a terrain for future inquiry.

The theoretical and political concerns discussed above are reflected in the essays that follow. The essays deal primarily with postmodernism in the PRC, with two contributions concerning Taiwan. It is our deep regret that, because of strict space limitations, we were unable to include discussions of postmodernism in Hong Kong.

Thematically, the essays fall into four broad areas. Wang Ning and Ping-hui Liao map the terrain of the postmodern in the PRC and Taiwan, respectively. Liu Kang and Sheldon Lu explore the relationship between global capitalism, the changing status of Chinese intellectuals, and cultural expression, with Liu Kang stressing the realm of mass culture and Sheldon Lu focusing on artistic expression. Chaoyang Liao, Xiaobing Tang, and Wendy Larson inquire into the question of identity as expressed in literary works identifiable as postmodern: Chaoyang Liao examines the problem of identity in Taiwan against the legacy of Japanese colonialism; Xiaobing Tang uses Wang Anyi's works to examine Chinese identity with specific reference to the Pacific and diasporic Chinese; and Wendy Larson focuses on the relationship between postmodernism and feminism. Finally, Zhang Yiwu, Dai Jinhua, Chen Xiaoming, and Wang Mingxian examine the relationship between postmodern aesthetic forms and their political implications. The volume concludes with comments by Jonathan Arac on Chinese postmodernism in a global perspective.