THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND CHINESE MARXIST PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS SINCE THE 1980s

Abstract

Since 1980s, the Frankfurt School’s critique of Culture Industry has provided powerful ammunitions for Chinese intellectuals to reject rising consumer popular culture. In recent years, Chinese academics began to study the Frankfurt School’s critique of capitalist modernity from more theoretical perspectives, attempting to set Chinese problems of modernity and its legitimacy against the Frankfurt School’s theorization. However, Chinese intellectuals’ diverse responses to the Frankfurt School have largely remained at the level of academic inquiries rather than seriously engaging in practically seeking alternatives. This study will consider issues of critique of and alternatives to capitalist modernity that modern Marxists or post-Marxists, be they Frankfurt School philosophers, the Chinese Marxists or the latter-day Chinese “new left,” all wish to seek out.

Adorno believes that the critique of knowledge is a critique of the society producing that knowledge and vice versa.1 It sums up the central mission of the Frankfurt School: the critique of knowledge produced under capitalist modernity (and of course that very knowledge which produces and conditions capitalist modernity at the same time). Such an epistemological inquiry advances Marx’s philosophical objectives of interpreting the world from a more self-reflexive perspective, and meanwhile it steps back from what Marx considers the ultimate goal of changing the world through revolutionary practice. However, the Frankfurt School philosophers are by no means ivory tower intellectual elite merely confined within the enclaves of the academia, but remain faithful to Marxist commitment to social change by investing in a utopian alternative in the realm of the aesthetic, the sensuous, culture and communications. The Frankfurt School philosophers raise provocative questions about capitalist

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modernity within the historical context of Western modernity, transforming from a free-market liberal capitalism to an administered, state capitalism, and to postmodern capitalism of global reconstruction and distribution of production and consumption, predicated on information technology and knowledge economy.

It is within the same historical context of global modernity that the earlier forms of Chinese Marxism and the later Chinese conversations with the Frankfurt Critical Theory can be understood. In radically different ways the Chinese Marxists and the Frankfurt philosophers lodge their critique of capitalist modernity through both criticism of arms and the arm of criticism, that is, theoretical reflections by the Frankfurt philosophers and radical revolutionary practices by the Chinese Marxists, as both register high hope for a better world in aesthetic and cultural utopian wish fulfillments, seeking alternatives to capitalist modernity. The historical parallels between Chinese Marxists and the Frankfurt School and Western Marxism, however, are often forgotten under the geopolitical and biopolitical dichotomies of East and West and of totalitarianism, communism, liberal democracy, and so forth. Moreover, as China gradually abandons its revolutionary legacy of alternative modernity and embraces capitalist modernity, questions raised by the Frankfurt School begin to haunt China with a historical vengeance. Are aesthetic and cultural alternatives still feasible today in the contemporary world (in which China features more prominently than ever)? What would such alternatives look like in China, radically altered by global capitalism yet still deeply entrenched in a polity and ideology derived from its recent revolutionary past?

In what follows, I will first outline some historical parallels between the separate projects of the Chinese Marxists and the Frankfurt School philosopher in the first half of the twentieth century, in search of alternatives to capitalist modernity. I argue that the fascination with cultural and aesthetic alternatives in both the Frankfurt School and Chinese Marxists is not coincidental and unrelated, arising from the same historical context of the global transformation of modernity at the twentieth century. It is not simply a resonance of the so-called “cultural turn” of modern thinking, but also a radical expansion and alteration of the space beyond European continent and the linear temporality of the Western world. I will then explore the implications of the Frankfurt School ideas in the post-revolutionary China, by juxtaposing and contrasting China’s radical legacy of the 1960s and the 1970s with the era of gaige kaifang (reform and opening-up). The historical irony is revealing: only when the utopian fervors and endeavors of the 1960s and 1970s seeking alternatives to capitalist modernity gave way to the triumphant globalization across the world,
and when China fully embraced the capitalist world system and renounced its radical revolutionary past, did the Frankfurt School’s somber critique of capitalism and its legitimation crisis, rather than its utopian visions of alternatives, began to resonate in contemporary China. Third, I will examine the Chinese intellectuals’ reception of and responses to the Frankfurt School Critical Theory since the 1980s, when China began its gaige kaifang by embracing capitalist modernity and abandoning its radical revolutionary goals. The Frankfurt School’s critique of Culture Industry has provided powerful ammunitions for resisting the rising consumer popular culture. The Frankfurt School then became synonymous with Western Marxist criticism of popular culture and widely popularized in China, while Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critique of Enlightenment and Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality and critique of capitalist legitimation crisis drew little attention.

It was only until quite recently that Chinese academics begin to study the Frankfurt School’s critique of capitalist modernity from more theoretical perspectives, attempting to set Chinese problems of modernity and its legitimacy against the Frankfurt School’s theorization. Discussions of Western universalism vis-à-vis Chinese values, the Western norms or modernity versus Chinese experiences now often draw on the Frankfurt School Critical Theory as a normative theory of modernity. However, Chinese intellectuals’ diverse responses to the Frankfurt School have largely remained at the level of academic inquiries into “foreign theories” without seriously engaging its practical implications of seeking real alternatives. Finally, I will consider issues of critique of and alternatives to capitalist modernity that modern Marxists or post-Marxists, be they Frankfurt School philosophers, the Chinese Marxists, or the latter-day Chinese “new left,” all wish to seek out. In similar and changed/changing historical contexts, these theoretical reflections or revolutionary practices left their legacies and dilemma with contemporary resonance.

I. The Paralleling Utopian Thoughts of the Frankfurt School and Earlier Chinese Marxism

The objectives of the Frankfurt School Critical Theory are twofold: first, a critique of capitalist modernity and second, a utopian hope for a better humanity. The critique focuses largely on epistemological formations of Western capitalist modernity, particularly the Enlightenment philosophical ideas from Kant, Hegel, and to Husserl, Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt. The utopian expectations, however, arise from a rather pessimistic view of social revolution and transforma-
tion, during the interregnum of World War I and World War II. Unlike Lukacs and Gramsci who believed in a revolutionary agency of the working class capable of creating socialism in reality, the Frankfurt School philosophers became disillusioned with what happened in the Soviet Union where they saw alarming totalitarianism paralleling in many ways Hitler’s Nazi Germany under which Jewish intellectuals (including most Frankfurt School scholars) were subjected to brutal suppression.

The negative dialectics and critique of instrumental reason, the rationalization of reason, and other major concepts of “critical theory” amount to a double-edged rejection of both the polity of capitalist modernity and the Stalinist models of the party state or really existing socialism, a rejection shared by most Western Marxists or Western “new left.” Few alternatives, if any at all, remain for these left-wing intellectuals, whose disempowerment from political life is both an outcome of their marginal status in capitalist states and a determined choice of refusing to entrust questions of epistemology and consciousness to any political party. Instead, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, and others look for ways to link knowledge and freedom and emancipation of humanity in the realms of aesthetics and culture, and utopian wish fulfillment in high modernism in art, music, and philosophy. Rather than seeking new routes for the working class to claim political power or making the ideas of the working class hegemonic ones, the Frankfurt School philosophers raise different sets of questions in sensuous and intuitive realm, that is, culture and aesthetics via Nietzsche and Freud, concerning the ways in which humanity can become free from manipulation and domination, and cope with nature in a non-coercive, spontaneous manner. In so doing, the Frankfurt School philosophers tend to reject a lineal, progressive, and teleological logic of history as foundation of Western modernity, as epitomized by Hegelianism and elaborated by Marxist dialectical–historical materialism.

In a fundamental way, the Frankfurt School intellectual inquiries has amounted to a deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition in the West by opening up a pluralist, non-lineal thinking with a multiplicity of possibilities, or a constellation of subjective and objective moments in history. The aesthetics becomes a form of non-instrumental cognition, and the existence of possible bridges between conceptual and non-conceptual thinking. Thinking thus acquires a potency of emancipation and freedom, rather than being locked up in the service of domination or thinking as mastery. The constellational and emancipatory thinking affords the Frankfurt School philosophers a possibility to break through the Eurocentric conceptual framework of modernity from within the Western philosophical tradition, a
departure from the metaphysical foundations on which classical Marxism was based. It can be seen as an epistemological revolution, a critical step toward the emancipation of humanity in a plurality of condition of existence.

It is in this sense that we see some interesting parallels with the Chinese Marxists in their thinking on Chinese modernity and more importantly in their endeavors to translate theory into revolutionary practice. It should be noted that, first of all, the Chinese Marxists and the Frankfurt School philosophers had no contacts whatsoever and therefore there were no discernible influence on each other; and that the Chinese and the Germans differed decidedly over the issue of revolutionary theory and practice. It is nonetheless instructive to reflect on the different ways in which the Chinese and the Germans try to break away from the lineal, progressive, and teleological notions of history and seek alternatives in the realms of culture and aesthetics.

The legacy of Chinese Marxism is complex and its relationship to Western Marxism even more difficult to gauge. Early Chinese Marxists consist of radical intellectuals of the May Fourth (1919) Cultural Movement aiming at transforming China from its imperial past into a modern society, largely inspired by Western models. These modern intellectuals such as Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, Cai Yuanpei, and Chen Duxiu were drawn to modern Western aesthetic thinking as a way to reconstruct Chinese culture. It amounts to a “culturalist solution,” so to speak, to China’s modernity. “Culturalist solution” can be understood as a tendency to seek in culture, tradition, and consciousness causes and determinants that shape historical movements and ways to change these conditions through primarily changing people’s minds. The “culturalist solution” is deeply embedded in early Chinese Marxists thinking and has significant bearings on the course of their revolutionary practice. Such an inclination toward culture cannot be simply brushed aside as idealist, subjectivist, or anti-materialist, for the Chinese Marxists (and of course most modern Western Marxists) show through their theoretical and practical endeavors that historical materialism and the tenet of base-superstructure central to Marxism are far more complex than the dichotomy of materialism versus idealism or objectivism versus subjectivism.

Chinese Marxists from its earlier intellectual leaders such as Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, to its revolutionary commanders such as Qu Qiubai and Mao Zedong, invariably stress the importance of aesthetics and culture. Lu Xun, modern China’s “cultural giant,” can be credited as creating an “aesthetics of negativity,” responding to the formidable tensions between political revolution and cultural enlightenment. Lu Xun’s aesthetic thought, together with Qu Qiubai’s ideas of fostering a proletarian class consciousness through cultural revo-
olution and popularization, represents Chinese Marxist aesthetics in its incipient, yet significant forms. But Lu Xun’s urban, cosmopolitan vision of cultural revolution differs significantly from Qu Qiubai’s rural-centered, and nativist views. Despite that Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai were the closest friends, their thoughts pointed to radically different directions China culture would head toward. Lu Xun ended his mission of critique with a pessimistic view of negativity, while Qu Qiubai’s tragic death at the age of thirty-six, executed by Chiang Kai-shek, seems to signal the tortuous journey that Chinese revolutionary intellectual would embark on during the twentieth century.

It should be pointed that these early Chinese Marxists are largely urban intellectuals dedicated to writing and research, whereas Qu Qiubai represents a decisive turn from urban Marxist intellectual to rural-centered revolutionaries. Qu Qiubai was both a major leader of the May Fourth Cultural Movement and the political leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at its tumultuous early moment. The failure of the urban working-class insurgencies led to the retreat into the impoverished rural areas and Qu Qiubai was held accountable for the defeat in the cities as the CCP leader. Mao Zedong, who actively participated in the May Fourth Movement as an ambitious young student, finally emerged as the CCP leader through legendary struggles. In the theoretical front, Mao took over where Qu Qiubai left off, thinking about the new course of Chinese revolution. For Mao, the most compelling question was not intellectual or theoretical but political and pragmatic: how to find a revolutionary agency to carry out the mission of revolution which ultimately would lead China out of Western imperialist and colonialist invasion and create an egalitarian, socialist society for the vast majority of the Chinese population, the oppressed and impoverished peasants. Mao Zedong’s theoretical reflections were always made, in the same manner of Qu Qiubai and Gramsci, with the purposes of devising political strategies for the revolution. Mao focused centrally on how to transform the discrete and unorganized peasants into a real revolutionary force. To achieve this goal, a key task was to translate Marxist principles into concrete practices of revolution. Mao’s solution of “making Marxism Chinese,” or makesizhuyi zhongguohua (sinicization of Marxism) was to endow classical Marxism as a foreign value system with a “national form.” Mao raised the issue of “national form” in his first statement on the signification of Marxism, “The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War” (1938)."
stereotypes must be abolished, chanting of the vacuous and abstract tunes must be reduced, dogmatism must be put to rest. They must be replaced by the refreshing, lively Chinese styles and airs that are palatable to the tastes and ears of the common folks of China. To separate internationalist content from national form is the behavior of those who know nothing about internationalism.7

Such a “national form” is by means empty forms but a true structural transformation of values contents. In its rural, and national-popular incarnations, this Marxism with a national form is widely accessible to the peasants, and highly effective as a pragmatic, and ideological guidance for action. It can be argued that “national form” lies at the heart of Mao Zedong’s efforts to “make Marxism Chinese.” Mao’s version of Chinese Marxism is both epistemological and political—translating knowledge (Marxist theory) into political practice entails a transformation of knowledge itself in light of the concrete political conditions. In this regard, cultural revolution is an integral part of Chinese Marxism from the outset. Mao characterized cultural revolution as an indispensable task of the Chinese revolution: “to change the objective world and in the meantime change the subjective world.”8 For Mao, revolution was at once a political, social, and cultural event. Unlike the Russia in pre-revolutionary days, when the objective conditions were considered ripe by Leninist leadership, the Chinese Revolution had to generate its own revolutionary momentum from the peasants.

During the course of Chinese revolution, Mao devised his dual objectives of creating a revolutionary agency from the peasants through heuristic and pedagogical means of cultural revolution and creating a new socialist China by the revolutionary agency of the peasants. Mao then believed that such emphasis on “practice” amid complex “contradictions” would generate a Chinese alternative to the lineal, teleological, and Eurocentric logic of modernity. “Practice” and “contradiction” are the two foundational concepts in Mao’s Chinese Marxism: revolutionary practice arises from contradictions and aims at resolving contradictions, whereas no final resolution is possible because new contradictions will emerge inevitably and new practice is called for, in an endless spin of movements called history. Contradiction is the absolute condition of existence that defies any a priori ontological presence or essence. Long after he succeeded in establishing the communist state with hegemonic power over the Chinese population, Mao remained committed to a “continuous revolution” in primarily cultural and ideological realms, culminating in the Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) with global repercussions. The Cultural Revolution was the moment when Western Marxism and Chinese Marxism (or Maoism) intersected, as many Western Marxists
turned to China for new alternatives to Western capitalist modernity and to Soviet-style really existing socialism. In the meantime, Chinese Marxism offered powerful ammunition for many Third World national independence and liberation movements.

While there is no space to consider at length the complex meaning of the encounters between Chinese Marxism and Western Marxism, suffice it here to say that there are certain parallels in both the Frankfurt School philosophers’ and Chinese Marxists’ endeavors to seek in cultural and aesthetic domains possible alternatives to the lineal, teleological capitalist modernity. The differences between them, however, are too obvious for most observers to even consider any worthy comparisons. The Frankfurt School philosophers are largely intellectual elites in the advanced Western capitalist society who are committed to critiquing all sorts of instrumental reasons and adamantly opposed to any party politics, whereas the Chinese Marxists, Mao in particular, are communist revolutionaries and then the state power holders determined to create a new egalitarian society by all means, including the most ruthless kinds of political domination and manipulation.

The striking differences between these two kinds of Marxists who nonetheless converge on the conviction of the necessity of seeking alternatives in epistemology, in culture and aesthetics, however, deserve closer analysis than simple dismissal of irrelevance. On the one hand, the widespread enfeeblement of the Western Marxists in social movements is exemplified by the inability of the Frankfurt School in the times calling forth active interventions of the political collectivity or agency for change. On the other hand, the debacle of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the abandonment of the Maoist alternative modernity afterward seem to suggest the impossibility of the grassroots social democracy prone to manipulations of the political party state. Knowledge, culture, and the sensuous domains of the aesthetic can become instruments of domination, and the critique of instrumental reasons itself is either increasingly relegated to obscure intellectual exercises with little social relevance or, worse still, becomes part and parcel of academic professionalism in the service of capitalist domination.

II. IMPLICATIONS OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY CHINA

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Frankfurt School’s critical edge and utopian visions seem to become further eroded by the historical events since the end of the cold war and the new era of
globalization and postmodernity. Even in the 1970s and 1980s, Jürgen Habermas’s reconsideration of rationality and reason against the earlier Frankfurt School philosophers’ radical critique of instrumental reason signaled a decisive chasm between the aesthetic and utopian impulses of the earlier philosophers and the rationalist tendencies in the latter-day cohorts of the critical theory. Although Habermas remains strongly critical of legitimation crisis of capitalist modernity, his dedication to the normativity and rationality aims to salvage fundamental ideas (universality, communicative rationality, law, ethics, discourse, etc.) of Western capitalist modernity, rather than projecting a renewed utopian hope for humanity.

“Chinese Marxism,” on the other hand, has metamorphosed from Mao’s local transformation and realization of Marx’s revolutionary goals, or signification of Marxism, to Deng’s pragmatism and Jiang Zeming’s techno-bureaucratic “theories of three represents,” that is, representing the advanced productivity, culture, and interests of the Chinese population/nation in an ever competitive world or global market, vying for resources, power and profits. On July 1, 2011, the CCP celebrated its ninetieth anniversary. However, the current leadership’s insistence on Marxism is nothing more than a developmentalism within the context of non-Western, industrializing nation-states or “emerging markets.” If we compare Habermas’s theoretical endeavors and Chinese practice of late, an interesting tension between the insistence on normativity of modernity as such and a challenge to that singular normativity can be observed. This tension is derived, however, not so much on fundamental differences of normativity of modernity as on different experiences and visions of achieving that normativity. In other words, we see a reversal from Adorno’s non-identity concept to a new kind of identity principle—of necessity for normativity, in both Habermas and China’s current leadership.

Now in hindsight, it is perhaps a great historical irony that the real and actual encounter between the Frankfurt School Critical Theory and the Chinese occurs only after the revolutionary fervor and utopian impulses all gave way to the forceful global capitalism in its triumphant neoliberal political, economic, and ideological domination. Such an irony is all the more pronounced if one juxtaposes the preceding historical review of the efforts to seek alternatives by the Frankfurt School and Chinese Marxists with the current situation. In the 1960s global cultural revolution and beyond, the Frankfurt School’s utopian yearnings became a major source of inspiration for left activists and radicals. The radical social practice of the 1960s in the West, in turn, pushed the Frankfurt School into the spotlight worldwide. Without the radical global cultural revolution of the 1960s it is
hard to imagine the extent to which the Frankfurt School Critical Theory has influenced contemporary intellectual world. Those same Western left intellectuals who “rediscovered” Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse in the 1960s also passionately embraced Maoist ideas of cultural revolution, registering their utopian hope for alternative modernity in cultural and aesthetic realms. Although none of the living members of the Frankfurt School commented on Chinese Marxism and Chinese revolution (including the Cultural Revolution) and most of the Western left intellectuals feel disappointed in what happened in post-Mao China, the broad historical context of the 1960s in which both Chinese Marxists and Western Marxists, including the Frankfurt School, converged in waging radical revolution in cultural and ideological realms, can hardly be neglected in any understanding of modern Marxism in its diverse variants.

The historical context of the 1960s can be understood as both a conjuncture of capitalist modernity, or the beginning of postmodern phase of capitalism or globalization, and a global revolutionary insurrections at the epicenters of capitalism as well as the peripheral Third World. Today’s mainstream media and history textbooks across the world tend to highlight the information revolution, the rise of postindustrial welfare society or affluent society, transnational capitalism, and globalized economy as the salient features of the era of the 1960s, leading up to the present globalization. The radical social movements and revolutions of the same era, however, are all but eclipsed in the dominant narrative of globalization. In today’s mainstream media and academic discourses, the “Parisian Storms” of May 1968, the Prague Spring of 1968, the Anti-War Movement and Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and the national liberation movements and guerrilla warfare across the Third World from the Andes to Nepal, to Indo-China and Palestine, and of course the Chinese Cultural Revolution, are either fading away from collective memories, or dismissed as abnormality or isolated disturbances. However, these two histories, so to speak, coalesced at the same conjuncture and are inseparably intertwined, shaping an extraordinarily complex and dynamic epoch of globalization or the late capitalist modernity. One can nonetheless never understand one side of the story without taking into account of another, as such a moment is the context in which the “rediscovered” or reinvented Frankfurt School and other left-leaning intellectual inquiries from post-structuralism to postcolonialism arise.

Now after more than thirty years, the Chinese still find the decades of the 1960s and 1970s extremely difficult to come to terms with. In the post-Mao official narrative, these decades are now portrayed as the quantum leap in advanced capitalist West in terms of scientific and technological developments and economic prosperity, and a complete
debacle in China that left its economy at least a century behind the West. The gaige kaifang that began in 1978 is generally presented as a New Long March to “catch up with” the progress of the already modernized and postmodernizing or globalizing capitalist West, cast in a decidedly developmentalist, teleological scenario of modernization. Consequently, the Chinese decade of the (extended) 1960s is usually condemned to the trash can of history in both the official and popular discourses.

Such a wholesale rejection of the revolutionary legacy, however, is paradoxically reinforced by an ideological state apparatus deeply entrenched in that very revolutionary ideology which was denounced by the post-Mao leadership. Deng Xiaoping, the architect of gaige kaifang, resolved this paradoxical ideological impasse provisionally by suspending all ideological debates around such issues as capitalism versus socialism. Mounting tensions and contradictions in China have risen as a result of the irreconcilable disparity between an ideological state apparatus and a political structure derived from the CCP’s revolutionary legacy, and a socioeconomic policy of state capitalism. Despite the unprecedented economic development that has brought China tremendous material wealth and catapulted the Chinese state to an all-time powerful status, the legitimation crisis continued to haunt the CCP leadership since the beginning of gaige kaifang.

The legitimation crisis that the Frankfurt School’s modern-day successors Habermas and Neumann are most concerned with in capitalist society shows its Chinese variation that nonetheless repeats the malaise of the capitalist state power, in that it perpetuates the combination of state intervention and private prerogative, which produces and reproduces legitimacy deficits and social injustice. The kind of structural transformation of legal reason into authoritarian decree and the colonization of the Lebenswelt, the ref feudalization of the public sphere that Habermas has addressed, all appear in the post-revolutionary China with a vehemence surpassing most advanced capitalist states, even though the so-called legal reason and public sphere, and the liberal democracy with all its electoral, multiparty political institutions are nowhere to be found on China’s soil. And yet it is such a seemingly highly unstable, crisis-ridden, and politically unsustainable China, and a leadership which often appears frightened and unconfident (or overly confident), that has risen irrevocably to become a leading player of globalization and a major world power. How to understand a China that challenges the well-established institutions of capitalist modernity while integrating itself into the capitalist world system more passionately than any other? And how to conduct a Marxist analysis of China’s political and ideological movements which seem to have tested the limits of modern Marxism in
different incarnations? The first question has summoned intellectual and political attention across the world, and yet the second question remains largely sidestepped, as Marxist inquiries on China become almost an oxymoron inside China and hardly noticeable outside. Of course contemporary Western Marxist intellectuals like Perry Anderson, and the so-called post-Marxist “rock star” Slavoj Žižek, and their venues such as *New Left Review*, sporadically produce commentaries and observations, but by and large China’s inevitable integration into capitalist world system and its rise within that system receives little systemic analysis from the Western left.

### III. Critique of Capitalism: Chinese Intellectuals’ Encounter with the Frankfurt School

The actual Chinese encounter with the Frankfurt School took place in the early 1980s, when the compelling questions of China’s challenges, if not alternatives, to capitalist modernity were yet to emerge. The enthusiastic reception of the Frankfurt School by Chinese intellectuals was primarily motivated by a rejection of the orthodox Marxism as the state ideology. The Chinese intellectuals in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution embraced all kinds of Western ideas as liberal and liberational, and Adorno and Benjamin’s disavowal of party state and authoritarianism served as ammunition to assault the state domination and suppression during the Cultural Revolution. In this respect, the Frankfurt School Critical Theory and liberal, conservative attacks against totalitarianism from Isaiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt, to Carl Schmitt serve the same purpose of debunking Mao’s hegemony. The CCP’s ideological cadres tolerated and tacitly encouraged the massive introduction of the twentieth-century Western ideas, amid sporadic crackdowns on so-called “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois liberalization.”

The first Chinese introduction to the Frankfurt School began in 1980, at the time China began to translate the twentieth-century Western writings from literature to philosophy. In one of the earliest academic papers introducing the Frankfurt School in China, the author identified three common threads linking the diverse body of the school: first, the Frankfurt School’s philosophical views are fundamentally humanists; second, they are concerned about Hegelian dialectics; and third, they try to address the issues of the changing time. The paper mentioned only two Frankfurt School authors: Marcuse and Fromm.

In an early Chinese book on the Frankfurt School, compiled in 1980 and published in 1981, the editor notes in his preface that “we are far
behind in the research on modern Western philosophy, almost total blank [in the field]." The small booklet contains a very brief overview of the Frankfurt School’s major thinkers and ideas, followed by three chapters authored by Chinese critics. The first is on Freudianism and the Frankfurt School, taking Freud as the most important point of departure for the Frankfurt School: “Frankfurt School is otherwise called Freudian Marxism,” the author claims from the outset. The chapter argues that Fromm and Marcuse attempt to supplement and develop Marxism from the Freudian angle of libidinous drives, and as such, “it reflects a petit bourgeois taste for sexual liberation in the West.” The second chapter is a rudimentary introduction of Marcuse’s basic ideas; the third, a commentary on Habermas’s thesis on ideological nature of science and technology. The booklet includes translations of several papers by Marcuse, one by Habermas on Hannah Arendt, and two Western scholar’s introduction of Marcuse and Habermas.

The haphazard nature of the earliest Chinese introduction of the Frankfurt School, however, is indicative of the utilitarianism and pragmatism prevalent in Chinese academic scene of the time. In a 2009 review of the Frankfurt School’s major ideas, the author offers an outline of the “three models of Chinese reception”:

- Humanism of the early 1980s;
- Cultural critique from the mid-1980s;
- Reflections and critique of modernity, from the 1990s to the present.

Humanism, or returning to humanist traditions, was a rallying cry of the Chinese intellectuals in the early 1980s to denounce the radical ideologies of the Cultural Revolution insisting on class struggle and the so-called “proletarian dictatorship” as two sides of the same power domination. On the one hand, Mao’s radical leadership encouraged ruthless class struggles among the Chinese public against each other. It inevitably resulted in a reign of mob terror that severely destabilized the social order and undermined economic development. To restore the absolute power that Mao had hoped for his radical revolution, a veritable martial law had been imposed from the late 1960s until years after the 1971 death of his once closest comrade-in-arms and handpicked successor, Marshall Lin Biao. Thus the “proletarian dictatorship” under Mao’s radical leadership of the Cultural Revolution became synonymous with reign of terror and massive repression and persecution against any political and ideological dissension.

After Mao’s death, those who had suffered the most, namely the urban “bourgeois intellectuals” and the ousted cadres or ex-officials
associated with Mao’s political rivals such as Deng Xiaoping, and the former Chinese president Liu Shaoqi, quickly formed a political alliance to redress the wrongs wrought against them by Mao’s radical leadership. Humanism then appeared only negatively in the massive counter–Cultural Revolution literary and artistic works, as the absent normative Lebenswelt, so to speak, amid the brutal suppression and persecution during the gruesome years of the Cultural Revolution. The traumatic, and traumatized, collective memories of the era were reinforced by the longings for love, tenderness, affections, both spiritual and corporeal, as the overarching theme of literature and arts. In the more ephemeral or abstract realm of philosophical and academic inquiries, Sartrean existentialism, Freudianism, and the classical humanism of the European Enlightenment Movement, then captured the minds of Chinese intellectuals.

As China changed rapidly into a market-oriented society in the 1990s, consumer popular culture through mass media became widespread. While the CCP continued to hold fast its control over ideological state apparatuses, particularly the mass media as the “mouthpieces” of the party state, entertainment, show business, and other popular cultural products boomed across China, and by the turn of the twenty-first century the cultural industry was recognized as a major player in Chinese economy and social life, within the context of global knowledge economy and the astonishing development of the Internet in China. In October 2007, Hu Jintao declared in his Report at the CCP 17th Congress that

we must vigorously develop the cultural industry, launch major projects to lead the industry as a whole, speed up development of cultural industry bases and clusters of cultural industries with regional features, nurture key enterprises and strategic investors, create a thriving cultural market and enhance the industry’s international competitiveness.17

Adorno’s critique of “culture industry” and the commercialization of culture then was appropriated by Chinese intellectuals under these circumstances. Of course, the critique of “culture industry” is largely confined to the academic circles of the arts and humanities, particularly among the so-called new left intellectuals who find themselves caught between a powerful party state and a commercial culture industry. In a little more than a decade, Chinese intellectuals in the arts and humanities lost the spotlight they once enjoyed in the 1980s and much of their discursive power, thanks to the alliance of the party state and media-dominated consumer culture which quickly pushed the academic elite to the periphery. In the meantime, the central stage of cultural and creative industry is being taken up by the professionals
in design, advertising, marketing, and business management, overseeing projects of creative industry underwritten largely by state funding.

During the time of fierce competition for research funding and professionalization of academic life in China, the sophisticated and complex philosophical inquiries of the Frankfurt School over the issues of aesthetics, epistemology, and the unconscious turn out to be desirable models for academic advancements for those in the fields of arts and humanities. Hence one witnesses the segregation of academic disciplines raging across China and the most pungent kinds of critique becomes absorbed in the overwhelming academic rhetoric and discourse. While the Frankfurt School Critical Theory is cited profusely by Chinese scholars to bolster scholarly research papers mandated by university administrations, the deans and chairs of the departments, those Chinese new left intellectual often seek international venues (such as conferences like this, and reputable periodicals and university presses in the United States and Western Europe) in order to make their voices known. Such a strategy may boost their domestic prestige once their voices receive “international” recognition. However, such academic maneuvers become increasingly divorced from the demands for social and cultural renovations. From the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chinese scholarly reception of the Frankfurt School has shifted toward the issues of normative modernity and modernity as a universalism or universalist values as expounded by the latter-day thinkers, particularly by Habermas. Books and articles on Habermas can only be matched by those on Adorno and Benjamin.

In the 1990s, a series of books and research projects concentrated on the Frankfurt School’s aesthetic theories and the critique of culture industry. Wang Caiyong, now a leading scholar in Shanghai on the Frankfurt School aesthetics, wrote Xiandai Shenmei Zhexue Xin Tansuo—Falannefu Xuepai Meixue Shuping (New Inquiries of Aesthetic Philosophy—The Aesthetics of the Frankfurt School). Wang then went to the University of Frankfurt to pursue doctoral study in aesthetics and art theory in the 1990s and returned to China to engage in highly specialized aesthetic studies. Zhu Liyuan, China’s veteran scholar on literary theory in the mid-1990s published Falannefu Xuepai Meixue Sixiang Lunge (The Aesthetic Thoughts of the Frankfurt School) as a definitive work on the Frankfurt School’s aesthetic theories, and the book is funded by the Shanghai Marxist Research Fund. More books and journal articles have been authored by younger scholars such as Li Jian. In his book Shenmei Wutuobang de Xiangxiang—cong Weibo dao Falannefu Xuepai de Shenmei Jiushu Zhilu (Imagined Aesthetic Utopia—From Weber to the Frankfurt School’s Aesthetic Redemption), Li Jian explores the
postmodern variations and interpretation of the aesthetic thoughts of Adorno and Benjamin, tracing their aesthetic thoughts to Max Weber.\textsuperscript{20}

Compared to Chinese studies of the aesthetic thoughts of the Frankfurt School, a large quantity of books are devoted to Habermas. Among the numerous books (from the 1990s to the 2010s, approximately forty to fifty books appeared on Habermas), Fu Yongjun’s view demonstrates Chinese scholarly community’s concern with normativity and universality, at the moment of China’s further integration into globalization and its sudden rise as a leading global power. Fu, a Shandong University scholar, acknowledges that the Frankfurt School philosophy is a critical theory, with a caveat: only when it serves as a normative theory of modernity. Fu maintains that

the Frankfurt School philosophers insist on universalism and rationalism, have faith in Enlightenment ideals and reason, and therefore firmly believe that reason can defend the justice and righteousness of our faith and that reason can transcend cultural differences.\textsuperscript{21}

Fu argues that the Frankfurt School Critical Theory draw essentially from Max Weber’s idea of rationality.\textsuperscript{22} In the concluding chapter, Fu ends with a reaffirmation of the Frankfurt School’s insistence on normative theory of modernity as universalism.\textsuperscript{23} In an awkward and tortuous way, Fu concurs that

the narrative model of global modernity endeavors to incorporate the world history into a deductive discourse that is inclusive of otherness, through the rhetoric of Western universalism. Consequently any narrative of general world history appears in a discursive model that juxtaposes both homogeneity and heterogeneity.\textsuperscript{24}

The point is, simply put, Western universalist model is inclusive of the non-West; Western universalism contains different (heterogeneous) cultural values.

Fu and his cohorts are outside the Beijing–Shanghai–Guangzhou triad, considered China’s intellectual interfaces that try to keep pace with the global intellectual marketplace in terms of processing any data, currents, and fads. In the age of raging wars of cultural relativism versus normative universalism, Fu’s cohorts look suspiciously immune to such an intellectual warfare, which now goes far beyond the academic enclave and is deeply engrossed in various kinds of radical nationalism, nativism, statism, and religious fundamentalism. China is by no means an exception in this respect, as its rapid economic growth and political, military powers have catapulted the nationalistic sentiment to an all-time height, and popular debates over
Western universalism versus Chinese values always capture the media spotlight.

An intervention by Shanghai-based Tong Shijun, a leading Chinese scholar on Habermas and modern Western philosophy, is revealing. Tong sets his argument of three kinds of universalism against NATO’s 1999 war against Kosovo and the 1993 U.S. and U.K. war against Iraq, concentrating on Habermas’s different positions vis-à-vis the two wars. Habermas endorses the 1999 Kosovo War but condemns the 1993 Iraq War. In Tong’s analysis, Habermas proposes a kind of dialectic or dialogue-oriented universalism vis-à-vis American “unilateral universalism” of the Old Empire, whereas his support for the Kosovo War is based on human rights as universal values. Since the 1999 Kosovo War had hit the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and triggered a nationwide anti-U.S. nationalist fervor in China, Tong and other Chinese scholars of modern Western thoughts find it difficult to take a stand amid the political complexity involving more than academic debates and reflections. Hence his conclusion is both inconclusive and tentative: “there are no universal values that are out there to be grasped and realized, because any value has to be interpreted in particular contexts and to be realized through concrete practices.”

IV. Conclusion: Rethinking Cultural Critique and Social Intervention

The historical trajectory of the Frankfurt School in China and Chinese Marxist alternatives seems to signal the aporia of critical theory and left intellectual inquiries in the era of globalization. From the abandoned Chinese Marxist project of cultural alternatives to the political and social inactivism and pessimism of the Frankfurt School philosophers one may at least draw the conclusion of impasse: if the divorce of theoretical reflections from social intervention has disempowered the Frankfurt School Critical Theory for political action, then the Chinese revolutionary practice that put cultural and aesthetic theory to test in often brutal and violent ways seems to indicate the impossibility of seeking true alternatives through cultural and aesthetic transformations as non-coercive and emancipatory routes toward humanity’s freedom. The critique of “cultural industry,” the administered society, instrumental reason and legitimacy of modern capitalism can offer limited insights into China in a period of transformation toward a society and polity yet to be comprehended. Such insights, while diagnosing the problems of China with all their incisiveness, stop short of probing further the question of what, if any,
alternatives can possibly be thought, if in practice alternatives that can be imagined had actually been experimented and then doomed.

As the Chinese state and Chinese public share the common objectives of modernization or China’s fuxing (rejuvenation), it is imperative to rethinking the legacy of the Frankfurt School Critical Theory and variants of modern Marxism in terms of constructive vision and cultural reinventions and innovations, not simply within the Chinese context but a broader global context. The absence of constructive vision and agenda for cultural reinvention and innovation in Western left thinking leaves a serious lacuna when cultural reinventions and structural transformations become central to social change in the globalized world today. For the Western intellectual left as well as and for the Chinese intellectuals, commitment to social intervention is indispensable if any critical inquiry that professedly aims at creating a just and democratic society for the majority of humanity can bring their knowledge to bear on the social reality.

The Frankfurt School Critical Theory now is viewed by many Chinese scholars as a normative theory of modernity or universalism, and the issues of Chinese modernity and Chinese values vis-à-vis the Western norms or Western universalism draw some attention. However, the discussion of these Chinese scholars remain largely confined to academic circles, even though the questions being debated have immediate political repercussions such as the rising nationalist sentiments versus the perceived Western hegemonic “soft powers,” that is, Western universalism. The social intervention and social change for a more just social life across the world that the Frankfurt School and the earlier Chinese Marxists have sought and tried to put into practice now seem to be infinitely sidestepped or postponed, if not completely abandoned. Instead, we see critical theory turned into another intellectual discourse or theoretical, rhetorical exercise in today’s global intellectual marketplace. Ultimately, if the subject of the Frankfurt School and Chinese Marxism may have some practical implications, the original missions of those thinkers and revolutionaries, their failures, achievements, and expectations will have to be questioned again.

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Endnotes

Acknowledgment of Rights and Credentials: The Editor-in-Chief and two blind reviewers had offered the previous manuscript of this article import, inspiring, and substantial comments. I would like to give them my heartfelt thanks. However, due to the fact that
their suggestions should require a large amount of space to fully respond, I am looking forward to seriously and carefully considering them in my future work. I also would like to sincerely thank all editorial members of this journal. The remaining errors belong to me.


2. For studies of the Frankfurt School’s aesthetic theory, the most incisive one is by the leading Marxist cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic (London and New York: Verso, 1990). Martin Jay’s definitive study in English of the Frankfurt School has also addressed the crucial aesthetic dimension in the critical theory. See Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).


4. Earlier U.S. scholars of modern Chinese Marxism in the 1970s tend to emphasize the “subjective” or “voluntarist” propensity. See, for instance, Fredric Wakeman Jr., History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-Tung’s Thought (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). More critical scholars such as Arif Dirlik, however, suggest a rather complex but no less “idealist” origins of Chinese Marxism such as Russian anarchism. See Arif Dirlik, The Origins of Chinese Communism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). PRC studies of Chinese Marxism in the mid-1980s had briefly engaged Euro-American studies of Chinese Marxism, but theoretical exchanges between Chinese and Western scholars on the nature of Chinese Marxism have been sparse, mainly because Marxism, Chinese Marxism, and Mao Zedong Thought (the Chinese official term for Maoism) remain politically highly sensitive in the PRC.

5. For a comprehensive study of Chinese Marxist’s cultural and aesthetic dimensions, see Liu Kang, Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).


10. Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the CCP, announced that “only by carrying out reform and opening up can we develop China, socialism, and Marxism,” and that “we must continue to follow the strategic thinking that only development counts and firmly carry out the central task of economic development, and we should not waver in the slightest in this pursuit.” See full text of Hu Jintao’s speech at CCP Anniversary Gathering, July 1, 2011, China Daily website July 2, 2011 (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/cpc2011/2011-07/01/content_12818048_11.htm).

11. For an incisive account of the twentieth-century history that acknowledges the significance of cultural revolts and revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, see Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991 (New York:
15. Ibid., 52.
22. Ibid., 5–7.
24. Ibid., 345.