

## Aesthetics and Chinese Marxism

■ Marxist Aesthetics has been a central concern in China's cultural scene for much of the twentieth century. Obviously, Mao Zedong's foundational emphasis on cultural politics or revolutionary hegemony surfaced spectacularly in the disastrous Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Equally importantly, there has also persisted a non-Maoist tradition of “aesthetic Marxism” ever since Hu Feng's theory of the “subjective fighting spirit” emerged in the 1940s to contend that subjective experience was one appropriate site of revolution and resistance. Little known outside its own locale, Marxist aesthetics in China has a long track record, with significant implications for international Marxism and cultural criticism.<sup>1</sup> Controversies debated intensely in the 1950s and 1960s among Chinese academic Marxists were quite similar to problems in contemporary European critical theory, specifically: subjectivity in aesthetic experience; praxis/practice in the cultural terrain; the relationship of humanity and Nature; and aesthetics as ideology.

However, Chinese “aesthetic Marxists” like Zhu Guangqian and Li Zehou, whose works are my main concern here, were not familiar with Western Marxist agendas despite the fact that what we customarily call “Western Marxism” (diverse Western European and North American Marxist intellectual enterprises) has also been preoccupied with “culture” and “aesthetics.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, save for a partial knowledge of Maoism, Western Marxists have had little grasp of what Chinese colleagues were doing in a different context. Thus, although Maoism undoubtedly transformed the way Europeans thought about Marxism, it also seems to me valuable to compare Chinese “aesthetic Marxism” and Western Marxism as a means of understanding the historical development of modern Marxist cultural theories. Chinese aesthetic Marxism

and Western Marxism have both created a theoretical space for critical interventions by empowering cultural politics.

I will argue here that while European and North American cultural politics have fostered an oppositional vision centered largely on the problems of domination and resistance, manipulation and self-government, consent and coercion in modern capitalist society, aesthetic Marxism in China served a twofold mission of criticizing the intrinsic contradictions within the revolutionary hegemony and offering a constructive vision of culture in a postrevolutionary society. Herein lies the value of Chinese aesthetic Marxism, a value that I think reaches beyond China proper into the world of global cultural critique. As a non-Western Marxism, Chinese aesthetic Marxism has from the start had to question the Eurocentrism inhering in Marxism itself. If this inherent Eurocentrism is challenged or problematized, then, it is my belief that the questions that Chinese aesthetic Marxism poses take on their full significance. I choose to study Chinese aesthetic Marxism because of its originality and despite its historical and structural limitations, and because I believe that it has made, and is still making, a critical difference in real-world struggles.

In what follows, I offer a narrative of the Chinese aesthetic Marxists' debates during the 1950s and 1960s, situating these in the historical conjuncture of global developments and "local" movements. My recontextualization focuses on points linking the aesthetic debates of the 1950s and 1960s and the "Cultural Reflection" of the late 1980s, for the ideological underpinnings of the latter are traceable not just to the "Cultural Revolution," but, as importantly, to overlooked moments in the 1950s and 1960s. My purpose in this essay, however, is not merely historical. I also wish to present here some preliminary notes on rethinking an even earlier rethinking of culture, politics, and ideology in a theoretical manner, commenting on both the historical events and the less tangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which the events are mapped. And of course, my own critical position, informed by the theories I discuss here, is also subject to the rigorous scrutiny of History. Insofar as the dialectic of history (or "practice") and "theory" constitutes the very problematic of Marxism (or the "principal contradiction"), the reinscription of "self-reflexivity" as a proper Marxist problematic is an integral part of our renewed efforts of cultural critique.

Modern Chinese aesthetic discourse is loaded with a *mélange* of ideological presuppositions. As a historical concept derived from Western

Enlightenment thought, it speaks at once for the political and ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie and, in a utopian vein, for true humanity in opposition to bourgeois utility. Aesthetics is primarily a concept of modernity, in the sense that it bespeaks the autonomy and separation of spheres and presupposes a self-determining and self-sufficient subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> The internal contradictions became most apparent when intellectuals appropriated aesthetics into China as an essential constituent of modernity. Liang Qichao (1873–1929), an eminent reformist and cultural enlightenment figure, extolled “beauty” or aesthetics as “the most important element of human life” and insisted that “*meishu*” or the art of beauty, or fine arts, “generates science.”<sup>4</sup> Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), founding president of Peking University, even proposed substituting “aesthetic education” for older religious doctrines.<sup>5</sup> Chinese Marxism, too, from Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu to Qu Qiubai and Mao Zedong, invariably stressed the importance of class struggle in aesthetic and cultural realms.

However, aesthetics in modern China is related to the creation of a new language of modernity and revolution. As Arif Dirlik has observed, “Learning a new language and forgetting the old has been a basic problem in Chinese politics, as is evident in the radical shifts in the language of socialist revolution.” In a fundamental sense, Dirlik continued, “it is a problem of what Antonio Gramsci described as ‘hegemony.’ The struggle to create a new language of revolution is but a struggle to assert the hegemony of revolution over its historical inheritance.”<sup>6</sup> Mao had transformed the aesthetic into a discourse of revolutionary hegemony, but in doing so, he politicized and instrumentalized the aesthetic, stripping away its function as an affective, subjective domain of culture within which hegemony operates by diffusing its values and gaining consensus from the ruled. Aesthetics itself then becomes alienated under Mao’s collapsing of political apparatuses and ideological means, which has resulted in the wholesale aestheticization of politics as well as the politicization of aesthetics.

The transformation or “alienation” of the aesthetic in Mao’s revolutionary hegemony is symptomatic of a fundamental contradiction in Mao’s project of alternative modernity in which “culture” and “cultural revolution” figured most prominently. To put it very crudely, cultural revolution was first conceived by Mao as a counterhegemonic, anti-determinist strategy of constructing an alternative modernity, against the Eurocentric teleology of modernity and economic determinism inherent in classical Marxism. But in the course of Chinese revolution, the antideterministic strategy gradually lapsed into a rigidly de-

terministic “objective law” of incessant superstructural and cultural revolution. Such a structural transformation of “cultural revolution” had severe consequences, especially in a postrevolutionary society in which the antinomy of revolution and reconstruction as the central problematic of China’s alternative modernity was exacerbated, rather than resolved, by Mao’s “continued revolution” in the cultural terrain.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in the most general compass one can say that the Chinese debate over aesthetics occurred within the context of the complex process of establishing revolutionary hegemony and modernizing the economy. It began in 1956, triggered by a self-critical essay by China’s leading aesthetician, Zhu Guangqian, on his “idealist aesthetics.”<sup>8</sup> In his 1956 essay “The Reactionary Aspects of My Literary Thoughts,” published in the widely circulated journal *Wenyi bao* [Literary gazette], Zhu Guangqian criticized his own “subjective idealist views” on aesthetics and literature and arts to “break with old, bourgeois ideas and to build new Marxist views.” Now, Zhu had been China’s foremost advocate of Western modern aesthetics, especially Benedetto Croce’s intuitive-expressive theory. His first encounter with Croce had, as he put it, “enabled me to see Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Bergson through a Crocian lense.”<sup>9</sup>

Still, it was Kantian aesthetics that provided the larger framework in which Zhu, like most other Chinese intellectuals in a variety of time periods, apprehended modern Western aesthetic theories. Kantianism bridged classical, Enlightenment, and modernist aesthetics in Europe, and it featured prominently in the Chinese aesthetic Marxists’ call to reconstruct a subjectivity in Chinese culture in the 1980s. This era in turn had its roots in much earlier cultural discussions, including the May Fourth enlightenment and the 1950s and 1960s debates over aesthetics. But writers and critics in the Republican period had hardly ever interrogated Western modernism on philosophical and theoretical levels. In this respect, Zhu Guangqian’s assiduous efforts in the 1930s and 1940s, first to introduce modern Western aesthetics and then to incorporate them creatively into Chinese aesthetic tradition, broke new ground for the eventual convergence of Marxist cultural theory, Chinese tradition, and Western modernism. His encounter with Western aesthetics, though described in the 1956 essay in a negative vein in accord with the official discourse, actually verifies Zhu’s vanguard position vis-à-vis Western modernist aesthetics, and thus it is worth pursuing here at greater length.

Croce, Zhu Guangqian maintained, “comes closer to Kant than to Hegel in his aesthetics,” because “Kant . . . first formulated the notions

such as 'disinterestedness,' 'purposiveness without purposes' as well as 'pure form,'" and Croce stretched Kantian aesthetics to a "reactionary extreme to defend formalist arts of the bourgeoisie in decline."<sup>10</sup> Zhu had adopted Croce's theory of intuition-expression in two ways. First, rather than focusing on Croce's language-oriented theory of symbolic representation of both logical and intuitive conception, Zhu mainly appropriated the Kantian implications of Croce's formulation of aesthetic experience as a detached, autonomous, and purely imaginary process. This, in fact, reflects Zhu's concern with the problems of modernity, captured by Kantian and post-Kantian aesthetic theories precisely as the self-conscious separation and autonomy of arts from other spheres of life. Second, Croce's emphasis on the expressive and psychological dimensions of aesthetic experience, as well as on the lyrical mode as the quintessential expression of emotion, indicates a possible point of convergence of modern Western and classical Chinese aesthetics. Taking Croce's position as a cue, Zhu incorporated a variety of modern Western aesthetic theories, from Kant's "disinterested contemplation" to Schopenhauer's notion of aesthetic experience as a "forgetfulness," with the Chinese Taoist notion of "forgetting both self and matter" as the ultimate goal of aesthetic contemplation. In particular, Zhu was drawn to the psychological theories of "aesthetic distance" represented by English psychologist Bullough, as well as to Lipps' theory of *Einfühlung*, or "empathy." Trained as a psychologist, Zhu was well versed in Freudian psychoanalysis and was in fact among the first Chinese to study it systematically. Unimpressed by its central belief in an isolated individual psyche and repelled by its parochialism, he was also among the first Chinese to criticize Freudianism.

There is undeniably a modernist tendency in Zhu Guangqian's aesthetic theory, but his earliest work exhibited a fundamental ambivalence. On the one hand, he was drawn to modernist, Kantian-Crocean notions of the autonomy of arts. Committed to the task of "contending for an independent space for literature and arts," he also voiced criticism of the Confucian pragmatic and didactical tradition that used literature as a vehicle for conveying political and ideological messages.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Zhu was critical of Confucian pragmatic and deterministic views and of the tendency in modern Chinese enlightenment intellectuals that perpetuate rather than undermine Confucian cultural determinism. On the other hand, he was troubled by Western modernist celebrations of the separation of art from life and the valorization of art. Zhu sought to complement what he took to be

the Western modernist notion of the autonomy of art by emphasizing “identity of self and matter” in aesthetic experience; to do so, he drew on Chinese classical Taoist aesthetics. “Identity” for Zhu was not simply a moment of *Einfühlung* in aesthetic contemplation, although he toyed with the correspondence between Lipps’ theory and Taoist aesthetics. Rather, Zhu’s invocation of the concept of “identity” signaled his ambivalence toward Western modernist aesthetics. In this regard, what he held to be incongruous was the modernist notion of disinterestedness specifically in light of China’s political reality, a reality devastated by violence and saturated with corruption.

Zhu Guangqian insisted that his main disagreement with Croce was the latter’s formalist propensity to totally separate aesthetic judgment from cognitive and moral political activities.<sup>12</sup> By focusing on “identity” in aesthetic judgment, Zhu demonstrated his uneasiness with the Western modernist aesthetics of artistic autonomy and the separation of arts and reality. (As I will elaborate below, Zhu’s Marxist period modified and extended, rather than entirely abandoned, his earlier “identity” theory by substituting the dialectic notion of “unity” for the more static one of “identity.” When measured against Adorno’s celebrated concept of “nonidentity,” Zhu’s distance from Western modernism becomes apparent. Though Adorno’s “nonidentity” cannot be simply equated with modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy, it is arguable that Adorno’s insistence on nonidentity as a central concept is closely linked to his theory of aesthetic experience as a site of resistance to the capitalist conceptual domination. In any case, Adorno’s view is as much a critical response to as a product of the Western modernist movements. His “nonidentity” and Zhu’s “unity” mark a major difference between the Frankfurt School and Chinese aesthetic Marxism, to which I shall return.)

Contrary to the rather misleading essentialist language he often used in his theoretical writings, Zhu Guangqian’s notion of “identity” is not a metaphysical category postulating an invariable “essence of beauty” with mind and matter are identified. Rather, the “essence of beauty” in Zhu’s view was totally relational: “Beauty does not lie in the matter, nor in the mind; rather, it lies in the relationship between mind and matter. But unlike the Kantian assumption and the common sense that conceives such a relationship in terms of matter as a stimulus and mind as reaction, it is the mind’s expression of emotion through the image of the matter. . . . Beauty must be created by mind and soul.”<sup>13</sup> Irrespective of its Crocian overtones, Zhu’s formulation of the aesthetic (or “beauty”) touched on a crucial problematic:

the subject-object relationship in aesthetic judgment. Even as he renounced his own “bourgeois idealism” in 1956, Zhu continued to insist that his relational concept of the aesthetic “is basically correct” because “to solve the question of the aesthetic, a unity of the subject and object must be achieved.”<sup>14</sup> His defense of this crucial position immediately drew criticism that charged that his attempt at formulating a Marxist notion of “the unity of subject and object” was but a reassertion of his previous “subjective and idealist” position derived from Kantian-Crocean idealism. To this kind of criticism Zhu made quick response, using notions acquired from Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* to further his new concept of the aesthetic. The exchanges between Zhu and other critics on the problem of the “essence of beauty,” which is in effect an issue of the subject-object relationship in the aesthetic experience, kindled a controversy which was to last for eight years. Most important, this controversy evolved into a theoretical debate that somehow, ironically, fulfilled Zhu’s earlier pre-Marxist wish to create an “independent cultural space,” this time in a Marxist symbolic world.

From the outset, the 1956 debate was a testimony to the resilience and ambiguity of its topic—aesthetics. It not only effectively reopened a key subject of the May Fourth enlightenment cultural critique but also generated a series of theoretical positions for an emergent aesthetic Marxism. Subtly, the debate continued and developed Hu Feng’s views of “subjective fighting spirit.” The debate also initiated in China for the first time discussions of Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*, which constitutes nothing less than a foundational text for much of Western Marxism as well as for Chinese humanist Marxist thought, that, in the beginning of the 1980s, stormed China’s cultural scene with its powerful critique of “alienation” and “reification” in socialist society. Moreover, for aesthetic Marxists, the debate was central to the establishment of a positive and constructive vision of the future, especially for Li Zehou’s theory of “aesthetic subjectivity” as a major force in the cultural ferment of the 1980s. Li Zehou first surfaced when he criticized Zhu Guangqian in the debates of the 1950s. It was in fact Li who first brought Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* to the attention of Chinese intellectual circles during that formative debate.

Subjectivity, the subject-object relation, is crucial to modern aesthetics, for it encapsulates basic tensions inherent in modernity. Since Marxism claims the only viable solution to this tension, it becomes especially important for modern Marxists to reaffirm their positions on this subject-object relationship. In this regard, Chinese Marxists

have been conspicuously incoherent and nonchalant. Early Marxist intellectuals of the May Fourth cultural enlightenment, like Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, held that their first obligation was to wage a social revolution that would reverse China's backwardness, thus bringing it in line with the evolution of history as a progressive telos.<sup>15</sup> Since the central concept of revolution, class struggle, requires a revolutionary agent—a working class—the earlier Chinese Marxists tended to posit a metasubjectivity or collective subject of revolution without differentiating the individual subject from the social collectivity. Nor did they bother to attend to the philosophical distinctions of subjectivity-objectivity, which involve an ensemble of epistemological and ontological questions of mind and matter, universality and particularity, and so on.

Mao then overdeveloped the Chinese Marxist emphasis on class struggle at the expense of other Marxist categories, especially Marx's philosophical reflections. Mao's notion of class struggle departed from the classic Marxist definition by identifying the popular "masses" as the primary revolutionary force in lieu of the genuine proletariat that only existed, according to classic definition, within a capitalist mode of production. But Mao was no populist in a strictly political sense. Antielitist predisposition notwithstanding, Mao tended to default to Leninist vanguardism and centralized party politics when the question of ultimate political authority was raised. In effect, he took it for granted that the CCP and its cadres formed the decisive revolutionary agent or subject. On the other hand, Mao oscillated back and forth between a notion of revolution that stressed "subjective initiative" and "self-conscious ability" (winning him the name of "voluntarist") and an objectivist view that held Marxism to be a universal, truthful "objective law."<sup>16</sup> Mao's philosophical essays, "On Contradiction" and "On Practice," tend to ontologize "contradiction" as the universal and objective law generating and governing the totality of the world, from society to nature. Objectivity thus became synonymous with the universal law of contradiction in Mao Zedong Thought. The subjectivity of the revolutionary agent who must initiate practice was curiously conflated with the prior, objective truth of contradiction.<sup>17</sup>

"Objectivity" was further codified into a pervasive ideological system legitimizing Mao's political rule after the founding of the People's Republic. Maoist cultural bureaucrats made objectivity a socialist-realist aesthetic principle, while they denounced subjectivity as a bourgeois and idealist concept. In spite of Mao's efforts to bring about the democratic participation of the masses, a hierarchy emerged in the

cultural institutions and the ideological state apparatuses that created crudely political exigencies, subordinating culture to politics. Mao not only remained oblivious to the conceptual ambiguity of the relations of subjectivity and objectivity, he also ignored the complexity of subject-formation in revolutionary practice. That is, despite his emphasis on “thought-reform” to foster revolutionary consciousness, Mao had little understanding of, and less interest in, the complex fabric of the individual psyche that enables an individual consciousness to negotiate with social determinations.

Hu Feng did venture deeply into the psychic realm, which he conceived to be a crucial site of resistance. Hu Feng’s formulation of “subjective fighting spirit” attempted to capture the relationship of subjective experience or class consciousness on the one hand and representation on the other. Specifically, in the late 1940s, he contended that to represent social reality and revolution, a realism rooted in “subjective fighting spirit” was necessary. This spirit would have to be able to resist both dogmatic adherence to ideological formulas (“subjective formulaism”), and equally dogmatic submission to the narrow-minded, utilitarian propaganda of the Red Army’s political commissars (“objectivism”). Of central importance to my thesis is Hu’s argument that the “subjective fighting spirit” stems from an “interfusion of the subject with the object.” The “subject” in Hu Feng’s theory referred to the revolutionary writer, while the “object” was synonymous with social life itself. Thus, for Hu Feng, revolutionary practice at once constituted and was constituted by a revolutionary subjectivity that emerged out of the immediate struggle of “opposing fascism and feudalism, lashing out at all forms and measures of slavish ethics,” and from “fostering a critical power in combating the content of the life of the people,” who had been subject to “thousands of years of spiritual slavery.”<sup>18</sup>

In the 1940s, Hu Feng broached the crucial issue of subjectivity in revolutionary practice and aesthetic representation. Renounced by Mao as “bourgeois idealist” and “counterrevolutionary” in the 1950s, the thorny question Hu Feng raised still remains, especially in the field of aesthetics: who, after all, can judge what is beautiful? If one ascribes to the reflection theory that “objective reality” determines the “beautiful,” and human consciousness only reflects beauty in objective reality, the answer surely squares well with the principle of “socialist realism” that fetishizes objectivity and disavows subjectivity. This was precisely the position taken by many critics of Zhu Guangqian in the Chinese debate. But the discussions never resolved the problem

of *who* had the final authority for knowing objective reality, let alone judging that most evasive and ambiguous thing called “beauty.” Mao simply displaced the question by assuming an a priori revolutionary metasubjectivity embodied by the Party, with indisputable authority, because it alone understands objective, universal law. Although arguably sufficient in a political sense, this tautology is nonsense insofar as literature and arts are not the equivalent of objective reality. They are artifacts that must necessarily be created by a subject—a writer or artist—who can hardly be equated with a metasubject like the Party. Hu Feng’s theory worked to unravel the constitutive aspects of subjectivity in cultural and aesthetic realms, thereby pointing to a space different from political and economic sectors. Moreover, foregrounding the category of the subject itself revealed the inherent paradox in Mao’s simultaneous valorization of objectivity as the “universal law” and his insistence on the metasubjectivity of the Communist Party.

In subsequent debates of the 1950s and 1960s, Zhu Guangqian’s formulation of the “unity of subjectivity and objectivity in aesthetic experience” sparked further interest in examining culture and aesthetics as independent and autonomous spheres and had far-reaching philosophical and ideological ramifications. First, the notion problematized the Maoist hierarchy of objectivity and subjectivity, and threatened to unmask many other critical lacunae in the Maoist hegemony. Second, by identifying aesthetic subjectivity as the ultimate Marxist ideal, the Chinese debate reaffirmed a constructive dimension of Marxism in the cultural realm. In this latter project of expanding the cultural realm of action within Marxism, Zhu Guangqian formulated the theses enumerated below on the “unity of the subjective and objective”: (1) “Beauty” is a false concept that perpetuates the mechanical materialist conflation of “beauty” with objective reality, and should therefore be redefined as the “beautiful” or “aesthetic experience,” which signifies the subject-object dialectic. In other words, to equate “beauty” with objective reality only essentializes what is in fact a dynamic process of mediation on the subjective and objective. (2) Because aesthetic experience is derived primarily from the creative and imaginary work of art and literature, the characteristics of art and literature should be central to aesthetic inquiry. (3) Just as art and literature are ideological forms, aesthetic experience by its very nature is ideological. As an ideological form, aesthetic experience is subjective, but is determined objectively by social conditions just as ideology is objectively determined. (This is a version of Zhu’s earlier thesis of the

“unity of the subjective and objective.”) (4) The central issue of aesthetic inquiry is “practice,” through which the unity of the subjective and objective are potentially materialized.

By forcefully insisting on “aesthetic experience” as the true aesthetic issue, Zhu Guangqian underscored the problematic nature of subjectivity, and consequently was accused of harboring a “remnant bourgeois idealism.” The most prominent of his critics, Cai Yi and Li Zehou, engaged in extensive debates with him on the subject-object relationship. Cai Yi, a veteran Marxist aesthetician who adhered to Lenin’s reflection theory, insisted on the existence of “beauty” as an objective entity in the material, natural world, and on the concept of aesthetic experience as only a reflection or recognition of the “essence” of the “objective law of beauty.” Cai Yi defined the “objective law of beauty” as the “law of typicality”: what is beautiful is what is typical in nature. Cai Yi never equivocated on the absolute primacy of objectivity in aesthetics, and he continuously opposed Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* for its “residual bourgeois humanism and subjectivism.” Of course, Cai Yi found Zhu Guangqian’s theory objectionable in principle, because in his view the insistence on “aesthetic experience” as such connoted “bourgeois subjective idealism.”<sup>19</sup>

Li Zehou, then a fledging philosopher, criticized Zhu Guangqian from a more complex perspective. Li argued for the primacy of objectivity with no less passion than Cai Yi, but his description of the “objective” was far more subtle. Briefly, Li Zehou’s “objectivity” refers to social existence, which determines the objective nature of beauty. Li contended that because objectivity means the “sociality of beauty,” Zhu Guangqian was wrong to identify the social aspects of beauty as subjective. Li also criticized Cai Yi’s metaphysical proposition attributing to beauty an essentialist “natural property” as simply collapsing the natural object with “beauty,” a social phenomenon. Li’s view of “objective social existence” is primarily relational and structural: beauty as a social phenomenon must be objective, since social being is determined by structures of social relationship that lie beyond human consciousness and feelings, which are “physically intangible and imperceptible but objectively existent.”<sup>20</sup>

Zhu Guangqian tirelessly defended his views on aesthetic subjectivity. He defined “subject” and “object” as epistemological rather than ontological categories, and then critiqued the radical separation of the two in what he called “metaphysical thinking.” His argument is worth quoting at some length:

In terms of knowledge of the external world, man is the “subject” and the external world the “object” [*keti/duixiang*]. From the subject’s point of view it is “subjective,” while from the object’s point of view it is “objective.” Hence, consciousness and general psychological phenomena are subjective, and the external world to which consciousness relates itself is objective. It is undeniable that there is an apparent opposition between the subjective and the objective, but to see the two as absolutely opposed and separate is metaphysical thinking. . . . *The subjective also has an objective basis and an objective effect.* On the other hand, is there any objectivity [*keguan*] that has nothing to do with subjectivity? Having nothing to do with subjectivity means having nothing to do with mankind, and even if one assumes that it exists, it is out of our concern here. *Insofar as it becomes an object [duixiang] of our discussion, it then turns into an object [duixiang] of our knowledge and practice.* And as such it must be the object [*duixiang*] of a subject. It is an oxymoron to say “object [*duixiang*] without subject” or “subject without object [*duixiang*].” One can say that knowledge means that objective existence determines subjective consciousness, and practice means that subjective consciousness affects objective existence. This is precisely what Marx means, as we analyzed before, by the “objectification [*duixiang hua*] of man” or the “humanization of nature,” as the unity of the subjective [*zhuguan*] and objective [*keguan*].<sup>21</sup>

Philosophically, what is at issue is the conceptual ambiguity and polysemic indecisiveness both of the concepts and related terms of “subject”/“object,” “subjectivity”/“objectivity,” “subjective”/“objective.” In Chinese, there are two terms for “object”: *keti* and *duixiang*. As a noun, *keti* refers to the object as matter, the external world, nature, the opposite of mind and consciousness. But the related adjective, *keguan* [objective], and the related noun, *keguan xing* [objectivity], also refer to that which is general and universal, including specifically social totality. This is Li Zehou’s meaning, one that was sharply criticized by Zhu Guangqian for collapsing two different realms—society and Nature—into one single concept. The other Chinese term for “object,” *duixiang*, refers to the object of the subject’s knowledge, and therefore is more epistemological and phenomenological than ontological. Zhu grappled strenuously with the slippage of the concepts in his argument, for he believed that the resolution to the aesthetic problematic lay in the subject-object relation.

Adorno, in a different context, tackled a very similar set of ambi-

guities. In his seminal essay entitled “Subject-Object,” Adorno calls attention to precisely the dialectic relationship between subject and object that cannot be resolved at one stroke by privileging one over the other. He regards Western thought’s separation of subject and object as “both real and illusory. True, because in the cognitive realm it serves to express the real separation, the dichotomy of the human condition, a coercive development. False, because the resulting separation must not be hypostatized, not magically transformed into an invariant.”<sup>22</sup> The preoccupation with the dialectical tension between subject and object leads to Adorno’s critical principle of negative dialectics, or the “nonidentity” of subject and object. While insisting on “the preponderance of the object” irreducible to an active subjectivity, Adorno cautioned in *Negative Dialectics* that “it is not the purpose of critical thought to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol. The purpose of critical thought is to abolish the hierarchy.”<sup>23</sup> In the essay “Subject-Object,” Adorno contended that “since primacy of the object requires reflection of the subject and subjective reflection, subjectivity—as distinct from primitive materialism, which really does not permit dialectics—becomes a moment that lasts.”<sup>24</sup>

It is in the same sense that Zhu Guangqian addressed the “unity of the subjective and objective” in which the moment of subjectivity is ineradicable. Moreover, Zhu similarly wished “to abolish the hierarchy”: “The error that [Chinese] aestheticians presently commit is to *absolutize the object while kicking out the subject at one stroke*” (emphasis in original). This error, he added, stems from “eradicating the unity of the opposites between the objective and the subjective, for superstitiously fearing the subjective and absolutizing the objective. The redundant and scholastic reasoning, like a mouse jabbing inside an ox horn, is predestined to be metaphysical in its method. This is why aesthetics at present comes to a dead-end. It is time to decide on a road for aesthetics.”<sup>25</sup> Zhu’s message is unmistakable and it took courage to articulate at that time, when the sheer mention of “subjectivity” would be not simply “politically incorrect” but dangerous. Set against Marcuse’s more assertive statements, Zhu’s words may appear rather unassuming, but the sentiment is quite similar: “Even in its most distinguished representatives Marxist aesthetics has shared in the devaluation of subjectivity. . . . And in contrast to the rather dialectical formulations of Marx and Engels, the [base-superstructure] conception has been made into a rigid schema, a schematization that has had devastating consequences for aesthetics. The schema implies a nor-

mative notion of the material base as the true reality and a political devaluation of nonmaterial forces particularly of the individual consciousness and their political function.”<sup>26</sup> While Marcuse maintained that “liberating subjectivity constitutes itself in the inner history of the individuals—their own history, which is not identical with their social existence,” thus emphasizing the irreconcilable schism between the subject and object,<sup>27</sup> Zhu envisioned greater links, or unity, between the two by way of practice.

It should be noted that Zhu’s notion of “unity” is not to be confused with “identity.” On the contrary, Zhu’s proposition of “unity of subject and object” was articulated against, albeit indirectly, the theory of “identity of thought and existence,” then triumphant in the controversy over the identity issue so prominent in China’s philosophical circles, which occurred roughly at the same time as the aesthetic debate. In 1958, the philosopher Yang Xianzhen criticized the *Soviet Concise Dictionary of Philosophy*’s confusion of two kinds of identity as Marxist propositions: the identity of thought and existence, and the identity of contradictions. Yang Xianzhen contended that the notion of identity of thought and existence was derived from Hegelian idealism, while the identity of contradictions was dialectical materialist. His view was rebuked by Ai Siqu, a veteran philosopher and a close associate of Mao from the Yan’an period, who insisted that the concept of identity was materialist. The heated exchange between Yang and Ai then developed into a major debate in the Chinese academy. In 1960, Mao saw that it was necessary to intervene, declaring that a rejection of the identity of thought and existence would inevitably lead to Kantian dualism. Accordingly, Yang Xianzhen was attacked as a “revisionist” and a “right-wing opportunist.” The philosophical debate amounted to nothing less than an assessment of Mao’s Great Leap Forward campaign of the late 1950s, which ended up as a scandalous fiasco. Yang saw behind the notion of identity of thought and existence a voluntaristic impulse that precipitated Mao’s disastrous “grand revolutionary praxis.” Although apparently defending Mao’s concept of contradiction, which the Soviet *Dictionary* attacks, Yang in fact took the question of identity as an opportunity to criticize Maoism.<sup>28</sup>

Adorno, as we know, rejected relentlessly the identity theory, but his rejection was occasioned by the historical conditions of modern capitalism. The sociohistorical underpinning of the identity theory may be the exchange value in capitalist society which generates facile sameness or identity among radically different things.<sup>29</sup> By the same token, the Chinese debates, especially Yang Xianzhen’s notion of non-

identity, were politically motivated. In a 1960 response to Cai Yi's criticism, Zhu Guangqian maintained that the philosophical debate over identity of thought and existence "touched upon the fundamental philosophical problem. Once this problem is solved, then the difference between metaphysical and dialectical modes of thinking becomes clear. In the meantime, it will solve the subquestion of whether beauty stems from the unity of subject and object under the general question [of the identity of thought and existence]." <sup>30</sup> Although Zhu's notion of unity may give the impression of being aligned with the identity theory, in fact, the crucial difference between "unity of subject and object" and "identity of thought and existence" lies in the latter's cancellation of the difference between thought and existence and the former's insistence on the indispensable *difference* between subject and object in aesthetic experience. Hence Zhu was prescient in his unremitting refusal to absolutize and essentialize "beauty" as objective existence and his tireless insistence on the *relational* nature of "beauty" and the "beautiful."

The question of practice also emerged in these heated arguments about the relation of subject-object. Following Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, Chinese Marxists generally considered practice a key link that mediated subject and object. In this respect, most telling is Li Zehou's shift of positions from an earlier insistence on objectivity to his later passionate plea in the 1980s for a construction of aesthetic subjectivity. This later notion that "aesthetic subjectivity" constituted a redefinition of the intellectual self and the deployment of an autonomous and self-determining subject came to be formulated in response to the profound intellectual crisis that followed the Cultural Revolution; I would also argue that the shift did not really constitute an abrupt break with his earlier positions. The foundational position of practice has featured prominently in Li's work from early on. Young Li Zehou, though an ardent advocate of "objectivity," was never committed to essentialist views like Cai Yi's. Instead, his parastructuralist notion of "objective social existence," understood subjectivity as indispensable social agency. Like Gramsci, who argued that objectivity always means "humanly objective" or "universally subjective," Li's shift of positions on subjectivity is grounded in historical considerations. <sup>31</sup> In his 1956 essay "On Aesthetic Experience, Beauty, and the Arts," Li introduced the *1844 Manuscripts* to Chinese intellectuals, arguing that it constituted a crucial work in Marxist cultural and aesthetic theory. Evinced little interest in the notion of alienation, Li focused on young Marx's

idea of the “humanized nature,” and made this notion the foundation of his Chinese Marxist aesthetics. This link between subjectivity and practice makes possible a constructivist view of culture and society which, though itself a utopian vision, is nevertheless quite significantly different from Maoist radical revolutionary utopianism.

Li Zehou’s utopian vision is similar in some pertinent ways to the utopianism of the Frankfurt School. Adorno inscribed a utopian hope in a certain subjective experience that he defined essentially in aesthetic terms: “Approaching knowledge of the object is the act in which the subject rends the veil it is weaving around the object. It can do this only where, fearlessly passive, it entrusts itself to its own experience. . . . The subject is the object’s agent, not its constituent; this fact has consequences for the relation of theory and practice.”<sup>32</sup> While implying that the individual subjective experience can resist the domination of rationalist discourse by sensuous receptivity, Adorno was never certain about how “the relation of theory and practice” can be affected by such an experience which remains “fearlessly passive.” As Martin Jay reminds us, Adorno’s aesthetic experience “is hardly a formula for political activism.”<sup>33</sup> Adorno, of course, was not at all optimistic in his projection of a utopia, for the profound pessimism encapsulated in his axiomatic phrase, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” seriously contorts his utopian vision.

Like most Western Marxists, Adorno was preoccupied with the issues of alienation and reification. He feared more than anything the domination of subject over object, or vice versa; and accordingly, he opposed any attempt to suppress heterogeneity in the name of identity. His hostility towards the privileging of production in “vulgar Marxism” has to be understood in conjunction with his attempts to resist the subject’s domination over nature and to restore the irreducible differences and heterogeneity in the material world. Admittedly, Adorno’s celebrated posture of perpetually playing off difference against identity makes him eminently amenable to poststructuralist thinking generally, and deconstructionism in particular. While the trenchant critique of Western culture and capitalist domination that Adorno and the poststructuralists have mounted is certainly invaluable, how plausible is the possibility of utopian peace in the real world after the deconstruction of all values, by theory at least, if not by physical force? Nor is Marcuse’s assertion of art as a radical revolutionary praxis any more viable. Marcuse’s affirmation of aesthetic remembrance as the revolutionary agent simply recasts Adorno’s concern that “all reification is a forgetting” in a Hegelian foreclosure, taking re-

membrane as the reinternalization or retrieval of a lost subjectivity vis-à-vis an externalized objective world. In other words, Marcuse is reluctant to go beyond the subjective realm and to ground artistic creativity in material practice. In this respect, Li Zehou's critique of the Frankfurt School's "idealist" notion of praxis is well taken. The Frankfurt School philosophers' tenacious refusal to grant material practice any constructive or positive status in Critical Theory, as well as their persistent denigration of "productivist" vulgar Marxism, is in sharp contrast to Chinese Marxism. Chinese views of practice and practical subjectivity, on the other hand, are imbued with an optimism about the projected future of "humanized nature." Chinese Marxist thinking insists that material and creative practices enable human beings both to objectify their essential powers—to realize fully their potential—and to humanize the natural world, signifying the unity of subject (mankind) and object (nature).

Chinese aesthetic Marxism's reinvention of practice does not start from Mao's famous notion of practice integrating theory with action. Ideologically, of course, Mao's view has been very influential; outside China its significance contributed to the notion that Maoism "sinified" Marxism somehow. Thanks to the very ambiguity of Mao's usage, "practice" also became a powerful weapon for the pragmatic leaders of post-Mao China when they turned to debunking Maoist doctrines in 1978 under the slogan "practice as the sole criterion for evaluating truth." There is plenty of room for the argument forwarded more recently that Mao's view lacks theoretical coherence in light of Western Marxists' notion of praxis.<sup>34</sup> But aesthetic Marxists like Li Zehou find that Maoist notions of practice lean too far in the direction of the voluntarist and idealist views of praxis that characterize Western Marxism. In the context of post-Mao rethinking, Li has sharply criticized both Maoist radicalism, responsible for the catastrophic Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and a Western Marxism that privileges cultural praxis over material production or practice.

Even in the debates of the 1950s and 1960s, Zhu Guangqian and Li Zehou remained adamant that "praxis" and "practice" were different entities and that the latter was the historical materialist core notion on which Marxist aesthetics could be erected. In Zhu's argument, Marxist aesthetics can be extrapolated from the first of Marx's 1845 "Theses on Feuerbach." Marx, Zhu argued, regards practice as the link, or unity, between subjective activity and objective reality, in the sense that "the thing, reality, sensuousness" must be understood

as “human sensuous activity, practice.”<sup>35</sup> Critical to aesthetic theory, practice should be grasped as “human sensuous activity,” for aesthetic experience must be defined as the concrete, sensuous experience of human beings. But Zhu was not content with the obvious connection between aesthetics and sensuousness. Practice as the cornerstone of Marxist aesthetics is explicit in the *1844 Manuscripts*. There, Marx makes one of his very few remarks on the “laws of beauty:”

In creating an *objective world* by his practical activity, in *working-up* inorganic nature, man [*sic*] proves himself a conscious species being, i.e. as a being that treats the species as its own essential being, or that treats itself as a species being. Admittedly animals also produce. . . . [An animal] produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. . . . An animal forms things in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty.<sup>36</sup>

Zhu insisted that the two theses, namely, “man [*sic*] produces universally” and “man [*sic*] forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty,” are indissolubly at one. This is not simply because “the laws of beauty” imply the creative labor, or objective material practice, that produces in freedom and in universal terms. Indeed, the Schillerian overtone of freedom and universality in Marx’s passage was accentuated by the Chinese aesthetic Marxists in the 1980s, especially by Li Zehou; but in the 1950s and 1960s, the emphasis was rather on material practice that “humanizes nature.” Marx stated that “for not only the five senses but also the so-called spiritual senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.) in a word, *human* sense—the humanity of the senses—comes into being by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanized* nature.”<sup>37</sup> In his 1960 essay on Marxist practical aesthetics, Zhu Guangqian detected in the concept of “humanized nature” a vital connection between artistic creativity and material labor:

No matter whether it is creativity of labor or artistic creativity there is only one principle: “humanized nature” or “objectified essential

powers of man.” There is also only one fundamental experience: one experiences joy and pleasure when one sees an object as one’s own “work,” which embodies one’s essence as a social being, or one’s “essential powers.” . . . *Productive labor is humanity’s grasp of the world in practical spirits, and it is thus humanity’s grasp of the world in artistic ways.*<sup>38</sup>

Zhu Guangqian saw aesthetic and material production as mutually dependent. The elimination of “alienated labor” enables an aesthetic state of playful and joyful productive labor. Zhu’s notion of aesthetic practice seems to be reaffirmed by Terry Eagleton’s interpretation of Marx’s aesthetics as a materialist rethinking of the body: to the extent that the humanized *senses* of the body as naturally given constitute the paramount aesthetic experience, the material practice of labor is aesthetic in terms of somatic pleasure or bodily experience.<sup>39</sup> But Zhu’s concern was not so much with the bodily and sensuous experience as with cultural and aesthetic work itself. His conception of cultural and aesthetic work as part of the Marxian notion of practice can be construed as a trope for cultural construction, which as a distinct kind of practice of artists, must be valued the same way as the material practices of workers and peasants.

However, on this score, Zhu has been severely criticized by Li Zehou in particular. Li argues that there are two distinct categories of practice—material and spiritual—that cannot be confused, and humanized nature does not simply mean human senses; it refers first and foremost to the objective material world as the precondition of human existence.<sup>40</sup> Li tirelessly insists on the fundamental distinction and precedence of objective, material practice over intellectual and artistic practice:

When I talk about “humanized nature,” I am referring to the productive labor of making and using tools or the concrete material activity that changes the objective world. I think this is the real origin of beauty. . . . It is not the individual’s “essential powers” of feelings, consciousness, thoughts, wills, etc., that create beauty; on the contrary, it is the essential powers of the *socio-historical* practice of the *totality of humankind* that create beauty.<sup>41</sup>

From this fundamental definition of practice as concrete material activity, Li Zehou elaborates on his constructive philosophy, arguing that to transcend the idealist enclave, the primacy of material production must be preserved as the absolute precondition of the

aesthetic state, or “humanized nature.” In other words, to humanize nature means to change the objective material world through material practice, or the development of productive forces. Marx stated in the *Grundrisse*, “the highest development of the forces of production, hence also the richest development of individuals.”<sup>42</sup> Marx’s productivist and anthropomorphic views have been rejected by many Western Marxists in the face of the troubled relationship between human beings and the ecological environment consequent on modernization. But for Li, the distinction has to be made between a productivist notion or economic determinism and material practice itself. For Western Marxists, on the other hand, alienation and reification constitute the central categories for their *critique* of capitalism. The antagonistic aspects of human beings and Nature are perceived as a part of capitalist alienation.

These differing views confirm that even such a widely accepted wisdom in the West is also historically conditioned and partial; it cannot exhaust all other alternatives, either conceptual or real. Insofar as Marx’s notion of “humanized nature” is eschewed by Western Marxism for its outmoded productivist tendency, a constructive view of practice as a utopian vision is unlikely to emerge. Terry Eagleton, for example, on the one hand concedes that Marxism remains “the single most creative aspect of the aesthetic tradition,” and on the other hand, cautions against the “premature aestheticization” of aesthetic experience that Marx’s “romantic humanist” views may entail, and against “premature utopianism,” which is either “desirable but unfeasible” or “inevitable but not necessarily desirable.”<sup>43</sup> Eagleton’s concern, however, emerges from a specific understanding of “material practice” in Marx’s aesthetic view that somehow constricts its rich meaning to the body and senses as material realm. Mostly concerned with the problems of representation and communication, Eagleton offers only a hazy identification of Marx’s economic categories with the aesthetic ones. If, as in Eagleton’s theorization, aesthetic experience and utopianism remain locked within conceptual and/or sensuous realms of culture, a positive utopianism that does not risk being self-complacently illusory is hardly possible.<sup>44</sup>

But it should be added that Li Zehou’s emphasis on material practice as the precondition of aesthetic fulfillment is not simply productivist. His somewhat crude positions of the earlier period developed into a psychologically oriented theory of aesthetic subjectivity. In his major philosophical work of 1979, *Critique of the Critical Philosophy: A Study of Kant*, which tries to connect historical materialist categories

and Kant's reflections on human rationality and subjectivity, Li expatiates on his "aesthetics of practical subjectivity":

Marx's "humanized nature" . . . means productive labor as the fundamental social practice of mankind. . . . Man [sic] becomes the master of nature . . . through active social practice that unifies the oppositions of man and Nature concretely and historically. Only then the real unity of contradictions, between man and Nature, truth and virtue, sensuousness and rationality, laws and purposes, necessity and freedom, becomes possible. . . . Rationality can thus become sedimented or congealed into sensuousness, form into content, and the form of Nature then becomes the form of freedom—which is also Beauty.<sup>45</sup>

Drawing on Kant and Piaget, Li Zehou here conceives of a grand historical process of material practice that transforms humanity from its natural form to a "form of freedom," an internalized, or sedimented rationality embodied by a creative subjectivity. How exactly the material practice of productive labor transforms mankind into beings fully developed both in sensuousness and rationality is never clearly described, and the overemphasis on rationality inherent in Li's theory is certainly problematic. However, what emerges from Li's theory are the contours of a constructive utopianism of freedom and beauty which lies not in nonmaterial forms of thought but in concrete material practice. That is, Li envisions a positive and constructive alternative "post-Marxism," distinct from the various negative and pessimistic post-Marxisms and Western Marxism. Because Marxism, from Marx and Engels through Lenin, Trotsky, and Mao all the way to Lukács and Gramsci, has always been a "theory of revolution and a theory of critique," Li asserts an urgent need to "creatively transform Marxism from a critical philosophy and revolutionary theory to a *constructive* philosophy. It is precisely for such a reason that my philosophy has nothing to do with the entire Marxist theory of class struggle and proletarian dictatorship, and that mine is a 'post-Marxism.'"<sup>46</sup>

Li Zehou's insistence on the primacy of material production as practice also contradicts his overall vision of aesthetic subjectivity that takes culture, rather than material production or economic development, as its central site of reconstruction. The aesthetic also serves cognitive and heuristic functions in Li's project of reforming education and psychology. In this respect, his ambitious project coincided with Zhu Guangqian's. But their differences are quite revealing, too. Li was primarily concerned about the Cultural Revolution's impedi-

ment to economic development. In the 1980s, Li criticized Mao's "idealist tendency" by privileging dialectical materialism over historical materialism. Yet in the 1950s and 1960s when he might very well have sensed the danger of excessive stress on cultural revolution at the expense of economic development, he could still only express his disagreement obliquely by critiquing the "idealist tendency" in other scholars, such as Zhu Guangqian. Zhu, on the other hand, envisioned the need for an independent and autonomous cultural space as the most pressing issue. It is arguable that both Li and Zhu grasped the contradictions in Mao's revolutionary hegemony from different angles. Both the neglect of economic development and politicization of culture and aesthetics were equally serious problems that undermined the project of China's alternative modernity. In hindsight, the questions raised in the aesthetic debates during the 1950s and 1960s were in one way or another tied to the increasingly intense and frequent ideological and political campaigns in the terrain of culture and aesthetics. The relationship between aesthetics and ideology, then, became a compelling issue in the debates.

The debates over the ideology-aesthetic relation should be understood both as a criticism of ideology and as an endeavor to examine productively the tangled relationship between ideology and aesthetics. The interrogation of ideology in the debates challenged and problematized the official concept, and the difficulties encountered by aesthetic Marxists in their attempt to constitute an original ideological critique are themselves quite revealing.

The project of Chinese aesthetic Marxists parallels Althusser's undertaking of roughly the same period. There is, of course, a remarkable irony in Althusser's Chinese connection. Althusser was more than an admirer of Mao and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, like many French radicals of the 1960s. His theoretical works bear significant imprints of Mao, especially his central concepts of "contradiction and overdetermination" and "structural causality." But Althusser's work has been viewed in China quite unfavorably, by both the orthodox Marxists who categorically relegate Western Marxism to the ranks of bourgeois social democrats and the oppositional intellectuals who condemn Althusser's sympathies for Maoist radicalism. During the humanist Marxist protests against "alienation under socialism" in the 1980s, however, Althusser's antihumanist Marxist view was smuggled in by Hu Qiaomu, a member of the Politburo of the CCP and the official ideological spokesman, who reproached the humanist

“distortions” by referring to the earlier “unscientific” Marx of the 1844 *Manuscripts*. These complex conceptual transmigrations reaffirm the sociohistorical determinations of thought, an empirical fact often obscured by voracious aspirations for theoretical sophistication and post-structuralist obsession with language. These kinds of border-crossings are especially relevant in the case of the inquiries into ideology in which Althusser and Chinese aesthetic Marxists were engaged under similar historical conditions.

The historical conjuncture in which these theoretical inquiries took place was the crisis of socialist ideology prompted by the process of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union. Althusser was devoted to the search for productive answers to the questions raised by the denunciation of Stalinism at the twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956. Toward that end, as Valentino Gerratana has written, Althusser felt it “necessary to draw up a Marxist balance sheet of Marxism itself—of its far-from-linear history and its largely unexplored potential for further development. The main stress was on the philosophical aspects of the undertaking.”<sup>47</sup> One major contribution is Althusser’s celebrated notion of ideology as a representation of imaginary relationship of individuals to real conditions. Althusser’s objective was to differentiate “ideology” from “science” “in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e., subject-less) discourse on ideology.”<sup>48</sup> Clearly, Althusser wanted to defend Marxism as a true science vis-à-vis ideology and “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs). But most valuable in his work is not his tenacious distinction between the “ideological” and the “scientific” Marx as a result of the so-called epistemological break; rather, it is his original analysis of the workings of ideology. The Chinese, such as Zhu Guangqian, also intended to revive a true Marxist notion of ideology and art, not so much against anti-Marxist, bourgeois humanist distortions as against “mechanical materialism” or “metaphysical thinking,” as coded terms signifying Mao’s ideological orthodoxy.

Zhu Guangqian begins his discussion of ideology by saying that “the distortions of Marxism have created great obstacles to the aesthetic path.”<sup>49</sup> These “distortions,” he suggests, are caused by one of the sacrosanct tenets of the orthodoxy: Lenin’s reflection theory. Lenin, of course, cannot be criticized explicitly, but the misappropriations of his view can and are: “The aesthetic inquiries in China,” Zhu writes, “invariably apply Lenin’s reflection theory simplistically and uncritically, based on his ‘Materialism and Empiriocriticism’ as the sole classic text.”<sup>50</sup> To say that our consciousness reflects objective

reality is a correct materialist statement, Zhu maintains, but only to a certain extent: insofar as “red” is a sensation caused by the material property of things as objective existence, it is correct to say that our senses reflect reality; but when we say art is a reflection of reality, it is altogether a different matter. Art reflects reality in much more complex ways than mere sensory and scientific reflection, for art is historically and socially conditioned, whereas sensory and scientific reflections are not. Art is a refraction of reality as ideology. To bolster his argument, Zhu quotes the famous passage from Marx and Engels’s *German Ideology*: “If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear up-side down as in *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.”<sup>51</sup> Zhu’s emphasis is on ideology as a relatively autonomous realm with particular sociohistorical determinations:

Ideology does not simply reflect the [economic] base of the same historical period, for superstructure may lag behind base. That is to say, ideology at a given historical period contains both new and old strata, the new reflecting the contemporary base, and the old, the residual influence of the previous one or more historical periods. This simple fact has much to do with many critical issues in literature and the arts, including traditional form, traditional ideas, the continuity of and opposition to tradition, the limits and immanent contradictions of authors, etc. Finally, as a superstructure of the same base, one ideology can influence another ideology. For example, literature and the arts can reflect legal, political, religious, and philosophic views of the time.<sup>52</sup>

Anticipating Raymond Williams’s distinctions among the cultural “dominant,” “residual,” and “emergent” in complex ideological formations, Zhu unremittingly insists on the necessary differentiations and correlations among ideology, superstructure, and economic base.<sup>53</sup> In his 1979 preface to *A History of Western Aesthetics*, Zhu Guangqian revises his earlier position on ideology by underscoring the relative independent and autonomous position on ideology vis-à-vis the general superstructure. He argues that such a view can be found in Marx’s seminal formulation of “base” and “superstructure”: “The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structures of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.”<sup>54</sup> The relationship between “legal and political superstructure”

and ideology (“social consciousness”) is, in Marx’s definition, parallel rather than hierarchical. In other words, ideology neither merely belongs to nor is subjugated to superstructure. Zhu asserts that the distinction of ideology and superstructure sustains the Marxist notion of the social division of labor: “the ideology of each different realm has its distinct historical continuity and relative autonomy in the historical the process.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Zhu insists that the concepts of “superstructure” and “base” are relational and metaphoric: “‘Superstructure’ is relative to ‘economic structure’ or the ‘real foundation,’ and these terms are all metaphors. The gist of it lies not so much in terminology as in three essentially different driving forces of history. These are: (1) economic structure or real foundation; (2) legal and political superstructure; and (3) ideology in a broad sense as a system of ideas and values.”<sup>56</sup> Analogous to Althusser, Zhu substitutes the doctrine of linear historical causality or determinism with a notion of multilinearity or overdetermination.

The Chinese reinvention of the Marxian notion of ideology clearly evidences what Pierre Bourdieu calls the struggle for “symbolic capital,” or the battle against “symbolic violence.”<sup>57</sup> If ideology is a heavily contested battlefield of such symbolic warfare, then the debate about ideology itself strikes at the very center of the contention. The significance of Zhu’s advocacy of the relative autonomy of ideology from the “legal and political superstructure” must be understood in this light: when everything is politicized by the absolute authority of the Party or monologic ISAs, the relative autonomy of culture is no small symbolic capital to gain.

Aesthetic reflection is ideological rather than scientific, not only because of its historical and social determinations but also because of the constitutive role played by subjectivity in the formation of ideology and aesthetic experience. Zhu’s insistence that subjectivity is ineradicable in aesthetic experience, contrary to Althusser’s theory of subjectivity through interpellation, argues that ideology requires the active force of subjectivity in its formation. The workings of ideology are “extremely complicated,” Zhu writes, and the process of ideological formation is “often unconscious. The ideological totality of the individual’s lived experience and cultural upbringing, his worldview, his view of life, and his class consciousness, etc., is fraught with emotional colors. . . . Ideology and lived experience are inseparable to the extent that ideology works through the individual’s lived experience.” Because “ideology is an emotional, affective system of thought which determines the individual’s attitudes towards things and his ideals about

life and art,” aesthetic experience is ideology *par excellence*.<sup>58</sup> Althusser similarly emphasizes the emotional, affective, and unconscious aspects of ideology, and as Terry Eagleton points out, if ideological statements by Althusserian definition are both subjective and universally valid, ideology has a certain affinity with the Kantian notion of aesthetics.<sup>59</sup> In this respect, the similarity between Zhu’s and Althusser’s concepts is obvious. Interestingly, however, they differ markedly on the question of subjectivity. If Althusser’s view of subjectivity and ideology smacks of a certain “political pessimism,” as Eagleton observes, Zhu’s more optimistic view of subjectivity cannot be interpreted simply as an expression of radical idealist utopianism.<sup>60</sup>

Ironically, Zhu Guangqian and his Chinese colleagues may arguably be more justified than Althusser in asserting the repressiveness of the political mechanism of interpellated Subjectivity under Mao’s rule. Their recognition of the constructive possibilities inhering in material practice, however, have directed them away from remaining locked into the issues of consciousness and ideas. In fact, Zhu Guangqian has been repeatedly criticized by Li Zehou and others for his lingering idealist influence, which resulted in his ambiguity about material practice. Li views material practice first and foremost as the productive labor of making and using tools in changing the material reality—in other words, economic activity as the “real foundation” for change in a historical materialist sense.

Yet Li himself is far from consistent on this issue. His concept of the objectivity of social existence is, as we know, parastructuralist. His view of ideology also reflects this structuralist propensity. Li regards ideology as some Janus-faced thing, subjective insofar as ideology is a social consciousness reflecting an objective economic base; and, as a given fact in the social reality partaking of that very process of social formation, it is part of the objective, material social existence. It is worth noting that Li maintains a strong aversion to the language-centered modern Western philosophy and aesthetics. Certain Western Marxists or post-Marxists identify language as the very material form and substance of ideology, drawing on structuralist and post-structuralist notions. But in Li’s theory, it is unclear what constitutes the mediating link between the material practice of productive labor and cultural formations, because materiality does not denote language or the process of signification in his notion of practice.

A difficulty arises, then, concerning the problem of representation. Zhu Guangqian had already broached the issue of mediation and signification in the 1960s, by proposing (and drawing on Henri Lefeb-

vre's differentiation of *l'object present* and *l'object présenté*) a distinction between a "thing" (thing A) and the "image of a thing" (thing B) in aesthetic experience. "Thing A" is a natural object unrelated to human beings, whereas "thing B" is a socially and ideologically determined and mediated human perception.<sup>61</sup> Between the late 1970s and early 1980s the heated debate about "imaginary thinking" or "imagination" became a major event in the circles of literary and art criticism. The debate was essentially concerned with the issue of representation: the Chinese phrase *xingxiang siwei*, literally meaning "imaginary thinking" or "think in images," concisely summarized the search for new forms of literary and artistic representation that would free literature and the arts from the straitjacket of nonimaginative, formulaic "socialist realism." Zhu, then already more than eighty years old, was most energetic in the debate, promoting "imaginary thinking."<sup>62</sup>

Representation was also a major issue in the humanist Marxist protests against "alienation under socialism." The question of representation was brought to bear on the phenomenon of ideological alienation, referring to the Maoist hegemony that had turned a revolutionary theory into a quasi-religious dogma. Wang Ruoshui, an outspoken critic of socialist alienation, accused the Maoist ISA of manipulating of representation to cultivate Mao's personality cult. Invoking Marx's seminal semiotic analysis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, which stated that the small peasants "cannot represent themselves, they must be represented," Wang Ruoshui poignantly pointed out that in Mao's China, too, the peasants had to be represented by the "new masters," as Marx put it, "as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other class and sends them rain and sunshine from above."<sup>63</sup>

The humanist Marxist upheavals in the early 1980s, reproved and crushed by the Party as "bourgeois spiritual pollution," brought the crisis of Maoist ideological representation into sharp relief. It re-emerged as a central issue in the "Cultural Reflection" of the late 1980s, only to be registered on the other side of the problematic: representation was then less about installing new voices than about finding an audience not only responsive to but also constitutive of its new forms. Chinese aesthetic Marxism, and Li Zehou's theoretical formulations in particular, proved to be immensely successful in this regard. Li's "aesthetics of practical subjectivity" had captured the imagination of hundreds of thousands of young Chinese intellectuals. That his abstract philosophical monograph on Kant sold nearly one hundred thousand copies, inducing a "Kant Fever" of no small scale in

China's intellectual circles in the 1980s, cannot be explained as merely a result of interest in "theory." It is no coincidence that the Chinese aesthetic Marxists, Li in particular, played leading roles in this intellectual movement that signaled a watershed in China's cultural scene. Although Chinese aesthetic Marxism no longer has the centrality in China's intellectual scene it once enjoyed, the critical space and the momentum it created has had lasting impacts, not the least of which is the problematic that it formulated in the "Cultural Reflection." In the 1990s, the problematic of cultural transformation and reconstruction becomes more complicated as it must now confront capitalism in its current phase of transnational/flexible production, which inevitably involves China in a process of globalization that makes any self-sufficient, enclosed socialism meaningless.

That Li Zehou's original work has offered rich "symbolic capital" to an audience in need of spiritual nourishment is obvious enough; the point is that in Chinese aesthetic Marxists' undertakings lies the powerful appeal of their reinvention of Marxism, which not only unsettles the monolithic orthodoxy of Maoism but, more significantly, breeds a constructive alternative that is at once utopian and practical. In China at least, Marxism remains a vitally productive and positive discourse. Apart from being a predominantly critical theory of capitalism, Marxism in China can mean something positive and productive, against the Party's instrumentalization of Marxism as an ISA. This vocation, however, is socially and historically grounded, just as Marxism in the West today sees the critique of the postmodern condition, or "late capitalism," as both its historical occasion and mission. Since the strength of Marxism lies primarily in its fundamental conviction of the dynamic process of history as a totality, in which the economic, or the material practice of productive labor, is the ultimate determinant, it offers an epistemological horizon that confronts and counterposes the political, ideological, and intellectual fragmentations in the present world. Of course, in contemporary Marxism the homogenizing inclinations, especially with respect to the issues of race, gender, and nationhood, and other internal contradictions such as the culturalist tendencies in theorizing culture, must be rigorously confronted, too. It is the impassioned drive of seeking alternatives that has characterized the historical fortunes and misfortunes of diverse Marxist projects. As a self-conscious inquiry of alternative modernity, the vitality of Chinese aesthetic Marxism depends on its ability to insist on both its critical and constructive vision in this rapidly changing world, and to continue its searches for alternatives.

## NOTES

- 1 For a preliminary discussion of Marxist cultural and aesthetic theories in 1980s China, see Liu Kang, "Subjectivity, Marxism, and Culture Theory in China," *Social Text* 31/32 (spring–summer 1992): 114–140.
- 2 For a classic account of Western Marxism, see Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1971); also see Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971).
- 3 For an analysis of the ideological nature of the aesthetic concept from a Western Marxist perspective, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Also see Josef Chytrý, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); and J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).
- 4 Liang Qichao, *Yinbin shi heji* (Shanghai: Zhonghuan shuju, 1964), 176.
- 5 Cai Yuanpei, *Cai Yuanpei xuanji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 328.
- 6 Arif Dirlik, "Revolutionary Hegemony and the Language of Revolution: Chinese Socialism Between Present and Future," in *Marxism and the Chinese Experience*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), 27.
- 7 For fuller accounts of Mao's revolutionary hegemony and cultural revolution, see Liu Kang, "The Problematics of Mao and Althusser: Dialectics, Alternative Modernity, and Cultural Revolution," *Rethinking Marxism* 8, no. 3 (1995): 1–25.
- 8 Zhu Guangqian (also known as K. C. Chu) was born in 1897 in Tongcheng, Anhui Province. He studied English at the University of Hong Kong, and in 1925 went to study in England and France. He received his Ph.D. in 1933 at the University of Strasbourg. Back in China the same year, he taught at many Chinese universities, and especially at Peking University, where he taught until his death in 1986. Criticism of Zhu Guangqian's idealism was part of an ongoing campaign in ideological and cultural realms. In 1955, shortly after the Korean War (1951–1953) ended, Hu Feng (1902–1985), an unorthodox Marxist literary theorist critical of Mao, was singled out for attack. Hu had outraged Mao with a direct critique of Maoist cultural policy. Mao, for his part, condemned Hu's literary theory of "subjective fighting spirit" and accused him of engaging in "counterrevolutionary activities." Hu Feng was imprisoned for over two decades and "rehabilitated" only in 1980. A significant casualty was Hu Feng's Marxist cultural theory that dealt with the issues of constructing an independent cultural space in a postrevolutionary society.
- 9 Zhu Guangqian, "Wode wenyi sixiang de fandong xing" [The reactionary aspects of my literary thoughts], in *Meixue wenti taolun ji* [Essays of the debate about aesthetic problems], vol. 1 (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1957), 1.

- 10 Ibid., 7.
- 11 Zhu Guangqian, “Zuozhe shuoming” (Author’s note), in *Zhu Guangqian meixue wenji* [Collected aesthetic essays of Zhu Guangqian], vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1982), 17.
- 12 Zhu Guangqian, “Keluoqi pai meixue de piping” [Critique of the Crocean school of aesthetics], in Zhu, *Collected aesthetic essays*, 1:165.
- 13 Ibid., 153.
- 14 Zhu, “Wode wenyi sixiang de fandong xing,” 22.
- 15 For Li Dazhao’s Marxism, see Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).
- 16 For discussions of Maoism see Fredric Wakeman, *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung’s Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), and Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).
- 17 Mao’s concepts of “contradiction” and “practice” have been subject to criticism by Chinese Marxists in the Post-Mao period (see Bill Brugger and David Kelly, *Chinese Marxism in the Post-Mao Era* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990]).
- 18 Hu Feng, “Zhishen zai wei minzhu de douzheng limian” [Situating ourselves in the struggle for democracy], in *Hu Feng pinglun ji* [A collection of Hu Feng’s literary criticism], vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1985), 17–22.
- 19 See Cai Yi, *Meixue lunzhu chubian* [Primary essays on aesthetics] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1982).
- 20 Li Zehou, “Mei de keguan xing he shehui xing—ping Zhu Guangqian, Cai Yi de meixue guan” [The objectivity and sociality of beauty—comments on the aesthetic views of Zhu Guangqian and Cai Yi], in *Meixue wenti taolun ji*, 2:31–45.
- 21 Zhu Guangqian, “Lun mei shi keguan yu zhuguan de tongyi” [On beauty as the unity of the subjective and objective], in *Meixue wenti taolun ji*, 3:26, emphasis in original.
- 22 Theodore Adorno, “Subject-Object,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 498–499.
- 23 Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Pantheon, 1973), 181.
- 24 Adorno, “Subject-Object,” 504.
- 25 Zhu, “Lun mei shi keguan yu zhuguan de tongyi,” 28–29.
- 26 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 3–6.
- 27 Ibid., 5.
- 28 For a brief discussion in English of the identity debate, see Brugger and Kelly, *Chinese Marxism*, 89–93. Also useful is Yang Xianzhen’s own recol-

- lection of the debate in his *Wo de zhexue "zui'an"* [My philosophical "criminal records"] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1981).
- 29 Fredric Jameson argues that Adorno's notion of "nonidentity" must be understood in connection with the form of economy: nonidentity is a refutation of money as exchange value that erases critical differences of social relationship (see Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* [London: Verso, 1990], 15–24).
- 30 Zhu Guangqian, "Meixue de xin guandian bu neng shi 'zhuguan yu keguan xiang fenlie' de guandian" [The new aesthetic view cannot be one of 'a split between subject and object'], in Zhu, *Collected Aesthetic Essays*, 3:312.
- 31 Gramsci's words are quoted from Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 121.
- 32 Adorno, "Subject-Object," 506.
- 33 Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 78.
- 34 Brugger and Kelly, *Chinese Marxism*, 119–138.
- 35 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1987), 107.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 62.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 38 Zhu Guangqian, "Shengchan laodong yu ren dui shijie de yishu zhangwo—Makesi zhuyi meixue de shijian guandian" [Productive labor and man's artistic grasp of the world—the view of practice in Marxist aesthetics], in Zhu, *Collected Aesthetic Essays*, 3:290; emphasis in original.
- 39 Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 196–234.
- 40 Li Zehou, *Meixue lunji* [Essays on aesthetics] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1980), 153–159.
- 41 Li Zehou, *Li Zehou zhexue meixue wenxuan* [Collected essays of philosophy and aesthetics by Li Zehou] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1985), 464–465; emphasis in original.
- 42 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 541.
- 43 Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 229–230.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 208–209.
- 45 Li Zehou, *Pipan zhexue de pipan: Kande shuping* [A critique of critical philosophy: a study of Kant] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1979), 402–403.
- 46 Li Zehou, "Zhaxue dawen lu" [Philosophical dialogues], in *Wo de zhexue tigang* [Outlines of my philosophy] (Taipei: Fengyun shidai chuban gongsi, 1990), 4–6.
- 47 Valentino Gerratana, "Althusser and Stalinism," *New Left Review* 101/102 (1977): 112.
- 48 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 182.

- 49 Zhu, "Lun mei shi keguan yu zhuguan de tongyi," 14.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1974), 47.
- 52 Zhu, "Lun mei shi keguan yu zhuguan de tongyi," 17.
- 53 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121–128.
- 54 Marx, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 4.
- 55 Zhu Guangqian, *Xifang meixue shi* [A history of Western aesthetics], vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1979), 18.
- 56 Ibid., 16–17.
- 57 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- 58 Zhu Guangqian, "Lun mei shi keguan yu zhuguan de tongyi," 34.
- 59 Eagleton, *Ideology*, 18–20.
- 60 Ibid., 146.
- 61 Zhu Guangqian, "Lun mei shi keguan yu zhuguan de tongyi," 36–37.
- 62 See, for instance, Zhu Guangqian's conclusion of *A History of Western Aesthetics*, in which he applies "imaginary thinking" to the key problems of aesthetics.
- 63 Quoted in Brugger and Kelly, *Chinese Marxism*, 143.