Beyond the Cultural Dominant:  
For a Textual Politics in Modern China*

Ching-kiu Stephen Chan

Department of English, The Chinese  
University of Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

Drawing references to the recent debates in the crisis of modernity in the West (including the debate on postmodernism), this paper attempts to analyze the project of cultural modernity in China since the May-Fourth Movement. By tracing the development in textual strategy, cultural formation and institutionalization through three significant stages in the history of modern China (marked respectively by the year 1919, 1949, and 1979), the author discusses the changing relationship between Culture and Revolution. With an emphasis on the cultural text's "representation" of Revolution, the paper intends to outline the possible crisis and revolution in the formation of subjectivity and investigate the historical subject's realization of the dominant hegemony through cultural/textual discourse.

For this purpose the paper is divided into four parts. The first section deals with the relationship between tradition and modernity and argues for the significance in recognizing the form of historical consciousness in cultural/literary modernity, the emergence of which depended, distinctively, upon the active and sometimes radical rejection of its past. The significance of a radical break or rupture (versus the mitigatory effect of the reliance on continuity as emphasized by tradition) is analyzed, and the historical context under which modernity in China emerged as such a project of "ruthless forgetting" is also discussed.

In the second section, the author raises the issue of textual politics in modern China by tracing the emergence of a counter-discourse during the May-Fourth era and assessing the implication of the subsequent legitimation and nor-

* [Part of the paper was presented at the International Conference on "Modernism & Contemporary Chinese Literature" held at the University of Hong Kong in December 1987; a version of it was read at the Conference "From Modern to Postmodern Condition" held in Taipei and organized by the Department of Foreign Languages & Literature, Tsing Hua University, in December 1988.]

malization of culture after Mao Zedong's talk on art and culture at the Yenan Forum in 1942. Whereas the changing positions of culture vis-a-vis Revolution is here reconsidered, the more recent development towards a renewed attempt to intervene in politics with culture is also addressed. The third section confronts the configuration of culture in modern China with its institutional constraints. The case of "high modernism" in the West is brought in to reveal the effect of institutional framing on all cultural text, thus clearing the ground for a re-appraisal of the extent to which the radical anxiety of the radical intellectuals after the May-Fourth Movement also carries political (viz. anti-institutional) message.

Finally, the paper ends with a note on the possibilities opened by the debate on postmodernism in the West for an alternative tactic in the Chinese project to strive for a modern subjectivity under current cultural-political situations. The author proposes that to move forward in our quest for modernity, it is perhaps useful that we begin to (i) rewrite the cultural text of modernity, (ii) re-situate the modern subject as a historical subject, and (iii) speak (up) for the position of such an active and conscious historical subject by participating in the production and reproduction of culture as discourse.

Modernity has never been conscious of itself except in its crises, which stake out its history.

— Gérard Raulet

"From Modernity as One-Way Street to Postmodernity as Dead End" (162)

"Modernity" is in crisis in the West, not only because its original project has proved to be "incomplete," as Jürgen Habermas rightly proclaims, but the legitimacy of its "originality" must not be left unchallenged, according to Jean-François Lyotard. To Habermas, the "modern" captures the collective consciousness of we "moderns" and positions us in such relationships to our past, our tradition, and our history that in the end, should there be an "end," it can present itself as the ultimate transition from the old to the new, the ultimate transformation of the past into the present. In the rational framework of the Germanic mind, "post-modernity" — the irrational rupture of culture in contemporary society — is a blatant evidence of what he calls "anti-modernity" and ought to be considered "false negation of culture."

To the equally non-compromising view of the French deconstructionist,
however, "modernity" implies a total disintegration of value-bound beliefs, and a necessary recognition of the "lack of reality" of contemporary reality in those parts of Europe and (especially) America now labelled the post-industrial, late-capitalist West. As a corollary, Lyotard daringly re-presents, rewrites, the current state of sociocultural upheavals in the "advanced" cultures as a crisis of the "post-modern condition"—one in which all forms of totality, of what he calls "the grand narratives" have lost their total credulity, and "language-games" become our only tactics of survival.

The implications of this and other related concerns for China's move toward "modernization"—textually, culturally and politically—will be discussed here with respect to the sociohistorical conditions of the language, the tradition, the intelligentsia, the subjectivity, and the institutionalized network of power relations implied through the production and reproduction of what might constitute the Chinese "unconscious." Through an analysis of some dominant strategies discernable in the cultural politics of China since the first revolutionary days of the May-Fourth era, it is hoped that not only the ostensible text, but also the unconscious subtext of culture might become more accessible to the modern mind in crisis. After a glimpse of this hidden "text," we may then ponder, however pre-maturely, over some possible tactics for an alternative "game" of culture in China.

I. TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY

Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier ...

— Paul de Man

Blindness & Insight (148)

If the appeal of modernity does "haunt all literature" (my emphasis), as de Man suggests in his article "Literary History and Literary Modernity" (152), then the inherent paradox of all projects of modernity within a cultural history is both inevitable and unsolvable. For modernity might be best captured by that historical consciousness which wakes up one day from the nightmare of its past and finds itself obsessed by an irresistible desire to break
away from other consciousness, to break out of time and reality, indeed outside of history itself, until it nears some higher, more authentic moments of "originality."

It was in such a gesture of wiping away one's past, of rejecting whatever that came earlier in one's nightmare, that Lu Xun wrote in 1924:

人睡到不知道時候的時候，就會有影來告別，說出那些話——
As one sleeps to a time when time itself is lost, there comes the shadow to take its leave, with words such as these ...

"The Shadow's Leave-Taking"

Wild Grass

Literary modernity in twentieth-century China is generally understood to have originated with the May-Fourth intellectuals' totalistic denial of tradition in favour of rewriting history — a modern history — from a new point of departure, a new point of origin and originality. Modernity is grasped, indeed, as that moment of "ruthless forgetting" (de Man 147) — the paradoxical moment at which one rejects oneself (one's past, one's culture, one's history) so as to justify the "sublation" of that past and legitimate the total erasure of traditional culture, thus leaving room for the violent surge of a "new" history, within which a "new" consciousness of Self would then be reconstituted. Such a project of modernity is inherently paradoxical, for it claims that the only way to rewrite history is by erasing it; the only way for history to continue is for it to end — somewhere, at some point in its neverending sleep. Hence that rupture in time and in consciousness, that urge to speak of forgetting, that desire to remember the leave-taking of one's own shadow — that was what dominated the modern generation of writers in the May-Fourth era, and that is what defines the modernity of their cultural practice for the generations since.

Many in the West (among them Jürgen Habermas) would trace the history of their projects of modernity to the Enlightenment, when Reason emerged as the totalizing drive of humanity toward "progress," soon to be identified
with "modernization" itself. But one of the most powerful functions of Reason as a critical category is Self-realization; in Kant, the aim of critique is to make one aware of one's own conditions of possibility and limit. In the modernist art, as is often suggested, the tendency is for the artist to launch such a critique from within the domain of art itself. For Clement Greenberg, for instance, to be aesthetically modern is to open an arena within the cultural experience (via the various media of "art") in such a way that the artistic practice becomes self-sufficient, self-conscious, and self-critical of the extent and constraint of its own power as an aesthetic form. In other words, within the domain of art, modernism as "a general paradigm of artistic production" (Frow 117) means, among other things, that the function of art is to refer to itself as that which is bound by its own limits as an art form; the desire for an aesthetic modernity is contained in the unconscious drive for art to fall out of, to break away from, its own history so that it would eventually emerge as the new principle that defines and governs the aesthetic formation of an original moment of historical consciousness (de Man 162). This dialectic between modernity and history is sometimes described in terms of a "radical self-criticism." Stephen Melville, for instance, writes:

"Self-criticism" can be "radical" only if it genuinely places its self at stake and holds itself in this condition of being at stake, assuming neither the positive guarantee of that self's inviolable autonomy nor the negative guarantee of its nonexistence; and this means that self-criticism is radically and inevitably critical—one can paint only out of the history of painting and the particular concrete paintings that matter for and constitute that history. For the art critic or historian, the confrontation with a given painting is necessarily an explication of that history within which the painting in question exerts its claim on us (Philosophy Beside Itself 16).

From critical self-realization to radical self-referentiality, modernism in the West appears to be that historical project whereby "art" becomes engaged in a persistent process of reflexive representation, creating out of its tradition,
outside of its history, a new time and space for creativity as for rupture, while simultaneously foregrounding the very constraints and handicaps of that impossible project. In short, aesthetic modernity is "at stake" because it tries to map its own history from within the rupture of its own tradition, along the cutting edge of its manifestation as a new aesthetic.

With the May-Fourth Movement, for the first time in modern Chinese history, history itself was rendered a mass experience; it is now possible to speak of cultural politics in reference to the experience of modernity in China. In The Historical Novel Lukács points out that it is through a realization of mass experience that history comes to be recognized as culturally and collectively inscribed—a totalizing process. The May-Fourth intellectuals redefined the project of modernity, which had initially been launched in response to the military imperialism of the capitalist West, in different terms. Without finding it necessary to question the legitimacy of Democracy (Mr. De) and Science (Mr. Sai) as progressive ideals of the modern rationality, they insisted that the discovery and practice of a cultural modernity would be instrumental in propelling the total modernization of China. Such culturalism—the assertion that cultural change is the key to all other changes—was indeed one of the remarkable characteristics of the May-Fourth writers, a point well argued by Lin Yü-sheng in The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness. Speaking within a discourse of "iconoclastic totalism" and situated within an ideology of progress which subordinated technological advancements to cultural ideals, modern Chinese writers affirmed their raison d'etre by celebratiung the rupture of tradition in all realms of culture on a total scale.

This form of anti-traditionalism has often been labelled "Total Westernization" (quanpan xihua 全盤西化). As for the May-Fourth Movement, it might be argued that the debate over China's project of modernity had been won in favour of the culturalist iconoclasts, writers and intellectuals who were indeed much inspired by the ideology of progress and development, Westernized style. But that grand project, of course, has not been successful in the long run, or else the issue of modernization would not have dominated the social, cultural and political agenda still, seventy years later. In recent years, the debate over the proper model and direction of modernization has been renewed, largely as a result of China's re-opening to the West since the end
of the Great Cultural Revolution. There have also been innumerable instances
of renovation and innovation, of experimentation and breakthrough, in the cul-
tural and artistic spheres. Philosophers and social scientists, however, tend to
omit the specificity of aesthetic modernity and subsume the treatment of cul-
tural modernity in their discussion of current problems in China's moderniza-
tion. Some artists and their critics, on the other hand, treat modernity and
modernism as if they were little but all-purposeful artistic "devices" easily
transferable from one cultural-historical context to another. The result is a
fuzzy notion of modernity, or even "modernism," which can hardly account
for the specific interrelationships between the cultural practice and the ideologi-
cal formation that dominate the social and aesthetic text of contemporary Chi-
na.

What follows in this paper is a preliminary attempt at describing some
features of the dynamic that has propelled the social formation of culture from
within the institution of its dominant ideology at three significant moments in
modern Chinese history, marked respectively by the year 1919, 1949 and 1979.
When a general sense is developed regarding how the "new" textual practice
worked (culturally and politically) as part of the total machinery of social
legitimation and normalization, we might then begin to discuss the Chinese
projects of modernity in terms of the specific constraints of cultural idealiza-
tion and ethicopolitical institutionalization which delimit the ideological
"subtext" of their history. Finally, some speculations will be made on the
ways of uprooting the unconscious anxiety of a cultural politics with radical
functions in contemporary society.

II. TEXTUAL POLITICS IN MODERN CHINA

The avant-garde understands itself as invading unknown
territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, shock-
ing encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future...

Modernity revolts against the normalizing functions of
tradition; modernity lives on the experience of rebelling
against all that is normative ...
Now, this spirit of aesthetic modernity has recently begun to age ... Modernism is dominant but dead.

— Jürgen Habermas

"Modernity—An Incomplete Project" (5-6)

Modern aesthetics ... allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents ...

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself ...

— Jean-Francois Lyotard

The Postmodern Condition (81)

It is well known that, for Lyotard, postmodernity prefigures the critical category of modernity and may actually be taken as "the nascent state" of modernity itself (The Postmodern Condition 79). In this light, he also finds it possible to characterize the postmodern as simply, "a mood, or better a state of mind ... that ... involves a change in people's relation to the problem of meaning" ("Rules & Paradoxes" 209). To pursue this point for my own purpose here, I would argue that a fundamental change of this nature must ultimately be realized by the modern subject as a radical rupture in the traditional mode of representation. I am suggesting, in effect, that modernity in China, qua category of critique, has to be recognized as a paradigm shift in the ways in which the collective consciousness of history draws its critical distance to the total manifestations of its past, and thereby articulates (while experimenting with) its uneasy anchorage in the unknown and unknowable realities of the present.

As historical consciousness, that is to say, literary modernity entails a revolution in the textual mode of representation through which one projects the past as the inevitable "other" of history itself. It signifies for the subjects of that history a paradigm shift in the mode of discursively remembering the alterity of past in the present and articulating the present’s mediated distance from the past. This shift in what is often called, after post-structuralism, the "textual strategy" becomes radical when it allows the subjects of history to
negate their past by enunciating within the discourse of the present—through the very text of enunciation—the negation of history itself. The strategic problem, therefore, is for the enunciating subject to cling on to and get along with the power of that magical representation while relinquishing the telos of history through an other text, in a narrative project other than the original discursive formation of what used to constitute "history."

May-Fourth: The Emergence of a Counter-Discourse

What do you mean by modernity?
When one says: There are no readers for the people who write, no viewers for those who paint, no listeners for those who compose, it means that there is no subject of history [nor of enunciation].... It is the idea of such a subject that modern artists refuse.

—Jean-François Lyotard

Just Gaming (10)

In its attempt to represent history, language itself is often trapped within the very boundaries of that representation: hence our fascination, our desire, for literary imagination.

Under the spell of totalistic anti-traditionalism, the May-Fourth writers witnessed in the different domains of their contemporary social praxis concurrent trends of anti-feudalist, anti-bourgeois and anti-patriarchal moves to bring reality out of the dark womb of its past and release the present from its deep anchorage in history. By the 1920's, while iconoclastic nationalism was high on the moral and political agenda in the heated debates among various schools of intellectuals, the ideological movements capable of bringing together the hearts and minds of the entire younger generation were geared to the invention of "new" or "original" alternatives in the production of culture. The radical culturalism of May-Fourth, I propose, consists in the fact that for the young readers of the "new literature," the everyday crises which they lived as part of the collective social condition of despair and desire had largely been mediated by the intervening practice of literary discourse—by the practice of
such quasi-Western trends of "alternative" discourse as realism, romanticism and symbolism—textual practice which played a significant role in unleashing the call for change in the dominant sociopolitical order of the time.

Furthermore, I believe that the cornerstone of this counterculture could not have been established without the revolution in language, the primary medium of all discursive representation. It is obvious that as an overall textural formation, the "new literature" that emerged with the May-Fourth Movement was instrumental in popularizing the need for and legitimating the status of the contemporary vernacular (baihua 白話) as the new national language (guoyu 国语). Now the register of any radically new representation of history became feasible only if the textual principles of making sense of those hitherto unregistered realities of history could be thoroughly re-organized. Hence, as an entire culture aspired to "newness," most writers of that "master project" were convinced of the political urgency of evoking in their text the absence of history, while at the same time erasing (through the very act of reregistering) the hierarchy of values and ideals which had dominated the traditional consciousness for the totality of that history. In this way, we might now say, the May-Fourth culture had come to define itself—its modernity—as a counter-hegemony, a counter-discourse firmly inscribed in the new language, the other text of iconoclastic totalism.

In the sense that Antonio Gramsci first gave it, hegemony must here be taken to refer to a real process, a lived reality, not a direct and stringent form of domination. On this basis, Raymond Williams goes on to argue that within the reach of hegemony no cultural practice could ever exist singularly as an absolute form of dominance. Instead, any such practice should be understood as being at all times part-dominant, part-alternative, because "it has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified; [and] it is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own" (113). Now with the counter-culture of May-Fourth, what had driven writers into their pursuit of a new literary practice was no doubt a phenomenon of history very specific to the functioning of the Confucian hegemony and its structure of dominance in the years both before and after 1919. I shall come back to this point later. Suffice it here to say that as the modern republic grew weaker
during a period of internal disintegration and external exploitation, the widespread chaos left over from the collapse of the old regime began to multiply and disseminate the initial discontent among the frustrated intelligentsia.

A pervasive discourse of despair and desire had now come to precipitate in the newly legitimated vernacular language and the newly imported literary form, thus presenting itself as a symptom of the greatest cultural disturbance ever to unsettle the new nation. And on the basis of the alternative frame of reference brought forth by this new medium of representation, the formation of the new culture became textually possible. With this, a counter-hegemonic discourse might then be opened and a new form of consciousness and sensitivity might then emerge through the new signifying system of the baihua. Thus, the literary practice initiated by the May-Fourth iconoclasts marked the first historical instant for the modern Chinese readers— for the modern subjects of history— when crises were allowed to multiply, disorder to disseminate, and changes to radicalize in and through the text.

After Yenan: The Legitimation and Normalization of Culture

There is nothing outside of text.

— Jacques Derrida

Of Grammatology (158)

We know that the culturalism of the emergent counter-hegemony of May-Fourth led eventually to the unwelcome legitimation and normalization of stringent political ideals as the primary telos of art. In the two decades following the May-Fourth Movement, most literary experimentations carried out under the influence of the “new” currents of thought, however unsophisticated they might appear to the critics today, did share one common cultural-political task at that particular time in history— namely, to test the limits and possibilities of the language, form and function of the new art by breaking radically away from both the normative constraints of aesthetic convention and the legitimate constructs of the cultural hierarchy as a whole. By the mid-1930’s, the notion of “revolutionary literature” was repeatedly conjured up to ascertain the “progressive” writers that the textual strategy was not merely for their
practice of, say, critical realism to re-present critically the "real," but also for all works of art to stir, to incite and, in the last analysis, to revolt. The most urgent "use" of art, it became clear to many who wrote at a time of mounting sociopolitical crises, was to evoke the "unpresentable" and project the unknowable future of China's Revolution through the insistent inscription of a new text within the rupture of the repressive hierarchy that contained the old.

Ever since Mao Zedong presented his definitive view on art and literature in 1942, however, the function of representation in the cultural politics of China changed significantly. With the Yenan Forum, the ideological signification of "revolutionary literature" itself was programmatically altered and drastically restricted. "Revolution" was now to be understood solely in terms of a specific type of socialist revolution that would soon be systematically institutionalized in all spheres of life-praxis after 1949. And textual strategies would have to be re-deployed within the frames of an orthodox "socialist realism" which was to dominate the critical discourse in Chinese literature for many decades.

In the 1920's, the Confucian system of value was rejected in the name of "newness." Every textual practice was a move in the language-game toward the ultimate radicalization of an "alternative" culture. In that project of modernity, the past was denied, the future had yet to be envisioned, and the present remained hopelessly caught in a labyrinth of uncertainties. The modern subject of history was then inscribed in a discourse (of despair and desire) which opened those uncertainties to the dialogic interplay among all possible subjects of that textual representation, that ideological enunciation.

By 1949, however, the subject of history was organized to relate to representation— the representation of any despair or desire, the representation of any revolution or uncertainty, or of history itself—in an entirely different way. The past was no longer strategically important for textual practice, for its apparent structures of value (it was maintained) had been ideologically, if not institutionally, transformed. Likewise, the cultural hierarchy of power relations was not a major concern for writers after 1949, despite its continual domination in the everyday unconscious of the people. The vernacular medium itself was no longer regarded as the radical alternative to the traditional medi-
um of representation; for most, its formal properties were now taken for granted as part of the most natural mode of discourse in the new culture.

Before the normalization of culture by the Communist Party as part of a total and irrefutable political programme, to represent Revolution was to articulate one’s desire for some unknown future. It was, indeed, to allow the unrepresentable anxiety of culture—of a radically “new” China—to be inscribed as the paradoxical negation of history itself. Between despair and desire, between the anxiety for the loss of one’s past and the aspiration for the realization of some idealistic future, Revolution was captured in a split representation. In its very representation, Revolution was being negated as an absolute reality. And while “newness” was being radicalized as the representation of the unknown and the unknowable, it was simultaneously reaffirmed as that which was inaccessible to the existing frames of textual and political representation.

After Yenan, the change was obvious. Revolution was no longer the historical uncertainties experienced and projected by earlier writers. Its programme was now legitimated and dogmatized as the master narrative of another, even “newer” China. The original urge to forget the past in its totality had been fully normalized and assimilated in the ideological apparatuses of the State, which was now established as the political institution of the Party machinery. Of course, even with the implantation of the Party as the State, the project of Revolution and the project of modernity were (and still are) not completed. And yet, for three decades, they were constantly being conjured up as the ultimate telos of all forms of political, cultural or aesthetic representation.

In the West, it has almost become a cliché today to say that, with the advent of the postmodern age, the text functions no more as a structure of signifieds but a galaxy of signifiers. With Roland Barthes on scene, representation has not become impossible; rather, it is deemed insignificant and impotent, and doomed to appear much disfigured and much embarrassed. Reality becomes none but a signifying practice—with no beginning, no ending, no inside, no outside. Any order, hence relationship, is now arbitrary; any meaning can mean what it does not. And yet not even Barthes has given up the
notion of representation entirely: he wants to juggle with it. It is within such a textual space of alibis that the representation of reality is renamed the “embarrassed figuration” (The Pleasure of the Text 56).

In other words, representation may stay on stage, only its telos must no longer be attached to the object that it is programmed to represent. For there can be no reality which a text can adequately call into being but itself, and there remains no justifiable telos but the pleasure derived from the process of unjustifying one. Representation, in short, has earned its freedom for the postmodernist when Barthes disorients all its traditional frameworks that fostered the belief in realism, mimesis, and hence representation. But again, instead of claiming that reality no longer exists, Barthes finds it more effective, indeed more pleasurable, more radical, to defer the real from a before to an after. Hence the “real” must no longer be taken as the origin of a textual “-ism”; it has become what Fredric Jameson calls a by-product of the discourse of the “real”—the effect of reality (“The Ideology of Text” 210).

In terms of textual politics, the post-1949 era could in no way give rise to the discourse of a genuinely radical culture, even though we did come to witness the strong current of a certain ultra-leftism which continued to haunt the socioeconomic reform campaign after 1979. For not only did reality exist as the basis of an original programme of socialist revolution in China, but its ghostly existence must also be recognized under a teleological vision of Revolution which—instead of allowing cultural practice to intervene politically out of its own accord and within its own logic in all spheres of life-praxis—subsumed culture under politics and subjected all political practice to the undisputed representation of the lifeworld in the almighty narrative of Proletariat Class Struggle. Under this logic of representation, no culture might function radically as a critical text of modernity, insofar as that project was now being driven regressively into the prisonhouse of representation itself—where reality was none but given as an a priori verdict, beyond which to revolt meant merely to surrender freely but insanely to the telos of an ineffectual Revolution, and to comply negatively with the operation of that politically reductive programme.

Looking backward, we do see that the May-Fourth writers attempted to
erasure history so as to draw a critical distance between the present and the past. While they still believed in the telos of representation, their frame of reference was oriented more toward critique than consensus. In brief, the text of May-Fourth reacted and revolted, rather than conserved and compromised. But everything became textually as well as politically "presentable" after 1942, when Mao confined textual practice to the instrumental exercise of a reductive cultural politics.

It was after the Anti-Rightist Movement of the 1950's, when the Party was firmly in control of the State and the various state apparatuses, that the scene was set for an incessant construction and celebration of the Proletariat Class Struggle as the master narrative of Revolution. Thus, with socialist realism instituted as the official policy of art and literature, nothing became unpresentable. In fact, nothing could have been represented beyond the projection of a telos under this particular socialist ideal.

Now the implication of this for textual politics in contemporary China must not be overlooked. Since this legitimation of the Chinese socialist ideal as the grand narrative of modernity, the question of representation has become almost irrelevant. To put it simply, text might no longer represent differently; or, differences could no longer be represented. The alterity of history, of the subjectivity of history, has been categorically denied. As a corollary, literary practices might no longer function politically qua category of text. Their political function was now institutionally enforced, and their political consequences arbitrarily defined without regard to their primary mode of discourse as text— as textual renderings of that which can only be realized through representation within the discursive enunciations of the subjects of history.

In short, to write after the yenan Forum was to represent the presentable on the level of political consensus. The mode of representation cannot reflect the limits and possibilities of its own power as text; it earned its political value by suspending the category of politics within its own textual arena. Any value, political or otherwise, was therefore to be taken as an exclusively external asset. Aesthetic values could not—indeed they should not—be represented in any form of "autonomy." When language became transparent, when nothing became textually problematic (but merely politically vulnerable),
there is nothing outside of the text for the text to do. And if a text may not act, its power qua text, qua category of critique, must also be reassessed.

History might have been conserved as an a priori category of the "real," but because meaning had thus turned transcendental, representation was instantly reduced to the pure artifice of consensus. On this embarrassed horizon of representation, history is the history of legitimation and normalization. It is beyond this ultimate horizon, as it were, that history — radical history — awaits to be rewritten and re-presented as difference and alterity within the changing frame, the changing mind, and the changing text of a genuinely "new" and "original" modernity. And such a history desires to be written, textualized, and realized — in contemporary China.

III. CULTURE AGAINST INSTITUTION

To reject the validity of the question Who is writing? or Who is speaking? is simply no longer a radical position in 1984.... Post-structuralism thus attacks the appearance of capitalist culture ... but misses its essence ....

— Andreas Huyssen

After the Great Divide (213)

For Lyotard, art's value depends on its maintaining itself as a separate "language game," distinct from the discourse of power.... For Habermas, the postmodern is the threat, carried on from surrealism, to deauniformize art, freeing its energies for use in all of life, but he claims that this is based on a misunderstanding.

— Jonathan Arac

Postmodernism and Politics (xiv)

If the historicity of the twentieth-century Chinese culture is rooted in its radical break with "tradition," if the rupture in modern consciousness is indeed a mapping of the concurrent shifts in the social and ideological structures of life, then literary modernity cannot be defined solely in terms of
"new" stylistic, rhetorical and generic devices without describing how this array of textual innovations constitute a dominant strategy in the context of the general process of cultural production. Now it is both culturally and historically impossible to accept Western Modernism as a general paradigm of literary production in China. Granted this, however, it must be re-emphasized that to be "modern" is, after all, to confront one's past critically and ascertain one's present identity against the specific cultural formations of one's past--to place the subject of history "at stake" within the historical rupture of its passing tradition.

In the renewed discussion on cultural tradition, the recent tendency among some Chinese intellectuals to stress the concept of integrative continuity rather than radical rupture is, however, not uncritical. It is absolutely necessary to confirm, as Zhang Longxi does, the active and dynamic flow of tradition in modern life. It is also useful to propose, as Li Zehou does, that some collective system of social values—building up to a sort of traditional rationality, one might say—is "precipitated" (jidian 積澀) in the various "significant forms" of our cultural life. It is not wrong at all for them to suggest that anti-traditionalism cannot possibly free itself from the power and boundary of tradition because "culture" must ultimately be recognized as and re-integrated with the "continuum of tradition." It is not tautological to argue, as Tu Wei-ming does, that since tradition is an inseparable constituent of modernity, it cannot be objectified and alienated as an "other." All these sensible re-appraisals of tradition are totally legitimate insofar as the argument for a "traditional rationality" is concerned. They are, however, from the perspective of cultural politics, actively anti-modern(ist).

For, in the language-game of China's modernization, to refrain from projecting/rejecting oneself—indeed, to fail to negate and sublate one's own history and sense of history—is to represent "modernity" from within the rigid constraints of the traditional paradigm. G. A. Cohen has reason when he suggests that "History begins when men stand beside one another, when man stands beside himself and outside himself" (20). Now Cohen's problem is that he has excluded the position and positioning of women from his analysis. But his point might have effectively refuted the view that since modernity
and tradition add up to a virtual continuum, it must not alienate itself (from its own tradition). Such a position on modernity, I believe, has missed the critical turn of the screw in the politics of culture in contemporary China. In fact, whereas the more conservative critics of Chinese culture today recognize the negligence and lament the degeneration of tradition and "traditional consciousness" (Tu18), radical advocates of a renewed trend of anti-traditionalism direct their attacks critically upon the stagnancy of modernity and the "modern consciousness" itself.

In the larger historical context of China's various projects of modernity carried out under the huge banner of Four Modernizations, the unlikely demand for any form of totalistic Westernization might well be naive, but its strategic significance and political implication cannot be neglected. For granted that the dominance of the traditional rationality is still "everywhere," as the conservative critic claims, it becomes today all the more urgent to severe oneself strategically from it, and to set aside a critical distance between consciousness and its condition of limits and possibilities. This might be the position of an iconoclastic totalism, but it is also the stance of a radical self-criticism — that cultural and political stance which, I think, is much desired in any project of modernity at this historical stage of China's modernization.

**High Modernism: Text as Institution**

Instead of non-interference and specialization, there must be interference, crossing of borders and obstacles, a determined attempt to generalize exactly at those points where generalizations seem impossible to make.

— Edward Said

"Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community"

Modern art, in the West, has often been described by recent critics as "the essential locus of the commodity-form in advanced capitalist society" (Kroker and Cook 18). To trace the historical cause of the commodification of art in contemporary western society, Peter Bürger studies the sociocultural
formation of art in the 1920's, when, he argues, avant-gardism represented a radical break from the dominant text of aesthetic modernism both preceding and following its manifestation as an alternative artistic movement in the decade after the end of the Great War. For the students of modern Chinese literature interested in the machinery of textual politics, much can be learnt from Bürger's distinction between two culturo-aesthetic formations of modernity in the early twentieth-century Europe. In the modernism proper, art is organized as an autonomous category of experience. As textual formation, the modernist art is self-sufficient and self-referential; as an ideology of this nature, it is firmly instituted in bourgeois society. Under this specific type of aesthetic rationality dominant in what is often called "high" modernism, art is an end all by itself and must therefore be separated categorically from life, politics, and other domains of social praxis. Under the historical condition of a bourgeois economy, art has become "the highest stage of capital in its fully estheticized phase"; it "reinforces capital by transforming the commodity-form into a purely self-referential and excessive site of power" (Kroker and Cook 19).

The avant-garde of the 1920's, however, considered such aestheticist mode of self-reflexive representation ultimately ineffectual and advocated, instead, the "reintegration/sublation [Aufhebung] of art in the domain of life-praxis" (Wolin 14). But what, according to Bürger, distinguishes avant-gardism from the modernist ideology is the former's insistence on re-organizing an alternative life-praxis—a re-integrated/sublated practice of life as art—within the domain of the aesthetic on the level of form and representation. With this textual politics, Bürger suggests:

What is negated [by the avant-garde] is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life-praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art becomes practical once again, they do not mean that the contents works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that
works have as does the particular content *(Theory of the Avant-Garde* 49).

Bürger, in effect, sees the avant-garde as an alternative practice of modern aesthetics, perhaps even an "anti-modernism," which negates the emergent culture of modernity at the level of its systematic legitimation in the dominant hegemony of its time. This counter-culture of modernity, be it surrealist, futurist or dadaist, "no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution [of bourgeois 'autonomy']" which is "as present in the individual work as the individual work functions within the institution" (Bürger, "The Institution of 'Art' " 23). And it is this textual act of revolt that our contemporary currents of postmodern avant-gardism want to re-activate through their targeted critique of "high" modernism as a legitimate and normalized establishment. In the words of one of their advocates, Jonathan Arac:

A postmodernism of resistance, then, arises as counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also the "false normativity" [Habermas’ term] of a reactionary postmodernism. In opposition, ... a resistant postmodernism is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo- historical form, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliation ("Introduction" to *Postmodernity and Politics* xii).

Whereas the modernist normalizes "autonomy" as the bourgeois ideology of art, the postmodernist sees the only alternative to this cultural dominant under the capitalist system in the radical rejection of art as any form of systemic integration or institutional redress.

Such a resistant postmodernism is indeed a threat to Habermas’ own attempt at redressing the false normativity and total fragmentation of the modern consciousness. For Habermas believes in the integrative order of consensus attainable through the exercise of what he calls "communicative rationality,
"on the ultimate horizon of lifeworld where social relationships (or communicative actions) are all united under the telos of order, compromise and mutual understanding. As one of his followers puts it, Habermas argues that "the discontents of modernity are not in rationalization as such but in the failure to develop and institutionalize in a balance way [i.e., on that ultimate horizon of lifeworld] all the different dimensions of reason [including that of "aesthetic rationality"] in the modern world" (McCarthy 177).

Textual strategies after poststructuralism, as we know, have restructured the paradigm of consciousness as a new paradigm of language. But the latter is not to be arrived at on the basis of a conception of language as an instrumental medium opened for the telos of reaching consensus. Rather, language in the post-modern text operates through a system of differences, contradictions, and indeterminacies--structural principles which organize and position subjectivity amid some polyphonic language-effects of "meaning" and "value."

In his call for the re-institutionalization of order in some structurally possible dimension of rationality, Habermas, in the words of a neo-conservative critic, is "scratching where it does not itch" (Rorty 164). The problem with Habermas, the critic continues to argue, "is not so much that he provides a metanarrative of emancipation [as Lyotard claims] as that he feels the need to legitimize that he is not content to let the narratives which hold our culture together do their stuff" (164). Habermas' defendants have suggested, in turn, that postmodernism "misses the boat" when Lyotard accuses their mentor of reducing all language-games to the meta-game of truth," insisting that in the theory of "universal pragmatics" truth-claims are but one type of "validity-claim" (among two other types of claim, namely rightness and truthfulness) and are therefore not privileged in any way (Ben Habib 113). And the debate goes on.

Obviously, no easy compromise or consensus can be reached. With a third approach, as we have seen, Bürger suggests that the original avant-gardist strategy in contemporary culture is to de-institutionalize, i.e., de-autonomize, art. In other words, while breaking away from the institutional dominance of culture, art must be simultaneously negated as a "free" and "autonomous" practice, and reinscribed as an active social text playing its authentic role as
both social and textual agency in the various games of life-praxis. Bürger’s insight is that just as the commodity form under capitalism has become an end all by itself, the aesthetic form in modernism is projected as that end in its own terms. Given this role of the “modern” text in modern bourgeois society, the counter-discourse of an avant-gardist culture could be understood as both a revolt against the social-hegemonic institution of commodity-value, and a revolt against the cultural-hegemonic institution of the aesthetic value itself.

Radical Anxiety, Radical Intellectuals

Consensus is a horizon that is never reached.

— Jean-François Lyotard

The Postmodern Condition (61)

Let me confess, and speak frankly: My commitment to literature was not as faithful as it might have seemed ....

— Mao Dun

“From Guling to Tokyo”

After this brief look at the intricate relationship between a radical counter-culture of modernity and the institutionalization of art in the West, how do we reconsider the functional modes of the social subsystem of “art” in modern Chinese society? Under the current sociopolitical condition, how is a new aesthetic possible and how must textual strategies be redeployed accordingly? Looking back at the history of modernity in China, could we perhaps try to theorize a properly “modern” culture in the May-Fourth era as that which radicalized itself by uprooting the traditional institution of literature and the literati? Looking further back into our tradition, could we try to describe from a modern perspective how art functioned politically in feudal society? And with these considerations, could we then begin to speculate how in the years after 1949, art was re-established as a political institution in which Revolution (as an utopian vision of the Proletariat) was being transformed into a semi-autonomous system of value-ideals all by itself, without any virtual relationship to concrete life-praxis? Such a process, should it be continued, could have been carried to the extreme of an absolute autonomy; the political con-
tents and messages of individual works could have been persistently foregrounded and reified, to the effect of neutralizing the genuine political function of art as a critical discourse.

Autonomy, in fact, has never been a question for the intellectuals in China. For thousands of years, the institution of values and ideals has been working very effectively. Tradition, we know, was that ultimate institution which had seldom been challenged, much less uprooted. Recently, it has been suggested that the Chinese cultural tradition is a hyper-static system with a collective structure of consciousness that fosters stability and represses variance in its basic formation. In his fascination study entitled *The Deep Structure of Chinese Culture*, Sun Longji draws our attention to the fact that historical changes (*dong* 動) in China are almost always realized as unwanted instances of disorder (*luan* 亂); hence, in Chinese the expression *dong-luan* (turmoil, upheaval) is often used when referring to incidents of sociopolitical unrest.

Sun argues convincingly that with every instance of chaos (*dong - luan*) that punctuated the long course of Chinese history, fewer and fewer differences could be recognized in the process of cultural formation, thus resulting in the reification of structure which Sun, among others, characterizes as "ultra-stable" (*cao wending* 超穩定).

(For us, however, there would seem to be one significant exception to this historical indulgence in a harmonious and integrative (*hehe*和合) order of culture: May-Fourth. It was the moment when despair became the ultimate condition of representation, as it were—when the indulgence in the possibility of hopelessness as an agency of revolution became itself a critical act of subversion, a concrete practice of discourse that gave voice to a whole culture of anxiety which we must recognize as "'modern.'")

In their pioneering analysis of the institutionalization of values and ideals in traditional Chinese society, Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng ask these questions with regard to the politics of culture in China: How did the feudal system succeed in sustaining a strong and centralized autocracy throughout the entire course of Chinese history? Why did the kind of culture and society typical of the capitalist system fail to emerge in that long course of history? Like Lin Yü-sheng, Jin and Liu attribute the lack of radical disturbance in the
Chinese hierarchy of power relations and value systems to the exceptionally strong integrative and redressive function of the Confucian hegemony. The disruption of that totalizing order has only become possible after the collapse of the ancien regime associated with both the political revolution of 1911 and the cultural revolution following the historical May-Fourth Movement of 1919.

But before these revolutions took place, in maintaining the order of a cultural discourse within a safe and stable system of consensus, the Chinese intellectuals had played a significant role as a dominant social category.

How does the intelligentsia become radicalized? For us, Chow Tse-tsun has already suggested that the May-Fourth Movement was in essence an intellectual revolution caused by a sudden rise in political interest among the new intelligentsia. On the eve of the May-Fourth incident, Chen Duxiu had likewise argued that "the purely political revolution is incapable of changing our society" (Chow Tse-tsung 227). Yet even though the modern intelligentsia has undergone fundamental changes effected by Western influences, a traditional mode of thinking is still discernable at the source of the wholesale disintegration of the Confucian hegemony itself. It is now necessary to identify the intellectual predisposition typical of the iconoclast's belief that ideological changes must provide the backbone to all other social transformations.

For Chen Duxiu and other culturalistic intellectuals of his time, the most basic and urgent revolution for China must involve a change of some "fundamental ideas," defined in terms of the formation of a new ethic without which people would remain in perplexity. Paradoxically enough, as Lin Yü-sheng has observed, Chen's anxiety over the fate of China and his hope of effecting changes through and among the young intellectuals were evidently rooted in the traditional Confucian ethic which stressed the close link between the values of "self-cultivation" (xiushen 修身) and "state-administration" (zhiguo 治国).

The crux of the paradox, I submit, may be located in the very category of the traditional intellectual (shi 士). The problematic of modernity is in part a question of subjectivity, of the subject of history locked and imprisoned in the cultural unconscious of an entire people. According to the analysis of Jin and Liu, it was almost impossible for intellectuals to be radical under the
traditional system. For cultural practices would ultimately have to function inside the network of power relations under the political hierarchy. Hence, it was extremely difficult, though not impossible, to exercise the politics of art without having to redress any cultural values found outside the hegemony and re-integrate any extra text into the dominant network of culturo-ideological relationships.

In traditional China, the Emperor, as Son of Heaven, was recognized as both the sovereign patriarch of the state (guo 國), or the nation-(as)-family (guojia 國家), and the symbolic authority on moral values. But in everyday practice, it was rather the ideal shi (orjunzi 君子, the Confucian "gentleman") who championed the hegemony of the ethical discourse. For the ultimate aim of life for the shi was, ideally, to apply all his human virtues (ren 仁) first to the righteous management of the state, and eventually to the peaceful regulation of the entire universe. Sun Longji characterizes the system that nourishes such qualitative values of life as a culture of xin (心, or the heart-mind), in which the highest ideal of "ordering the universe" (pingtianxia 平天下) could only be attained in a state of Great Harmony (datong 大同) or Great Peace (taiping 太平)(126-7).

Hence, whereas the political system (zhengtong 政統) in China was headed indisputably by the Son of Heaven, the ethical order (daotong 道統) had always remained within the control of the category of shi intellectuals as a whole. But it is when the modern shi had to fight for their cause amid the collapse of the established systems of value (within which they had been raised) that the dividing line between private conscience and public responsibilities became most difficult to draw. Given the instability of both the ethical and the political orders, intellectuals in the modern era experienced great frustration in trying to seek compromise between the cultivation of self and the administration of state. This dilemma, materialized at the historic moment of May-Fourth, becomes the root of much anguish, anxiety, and disillusionment in the generations to come.

Now granted that many deep-structural cultural values were rooted in the Confucian institution of the shi intellectuals, we must ask ourselves how the May-Fourth Movement became a substantial break from the hyper-static con-
tinuum of tradition. How, we must ask, could the May-Fourth writers effectively turn their back on the traditional hegemony while still somehow aspiring (albeit in their unconscious) to be a modern shi advocate in the new culture? How, in other words, could the modern Chinese intellectuals be radicalized?

To answer that question, we cannot forget that, for a typical Confucian shi, to govern was to govern properly—that is, in line with the established order of the ethico-political hierarchy. Politics (zheng 政) called for rectification (zheng 正), and rectification was nothing but maintaining the order, normality and legitimacy of the system itself. To politicize, in this traditional sense, was to govern, to speak and to write within the dominant hegemony. To be political, for the traditional shi, was to revert chaos, whenever it occurred, to order; to practise a politics of culture within the traditional network of power relations is, inevitably, to rewrite and represent differences, wherever they emerge, as compromise and consensus. In terms of dongluan, we might now conclude that to contain any cultural practice within the power network of the dominant hegemony is, undeniably, to curtail changes and reduce disorder in society to their absolute minimum.

Historically speaking, it is important to remember that one of the more urgent tasks for the committed intellectuals in post-May-Fourth China was to disrupt the ultra-stable order of the existing system. Leo Lee, therefore, has reason to celebrate the Wertherian, Promethean, and Byronic “romantic temper” in the May-Fourth writers. Indeed, it has become customary to distinguish the “romantics” from the “realists” in early modern China on the basis of the expressed opposition between the “art for art’s sake” doctrine held by the Creation Society (Chuangzao she 創造社, 1921-29), and the “art for life’s sake” tenet maintained by the Association for Literary Studies (Wenxue yanjiu hui 文學研究會, 1921-30). To characterize modern Chinese literature of the 1920’s as “romantic” is, after all, not inaccurate; it is surprisingly useful if by “romantic” we mean not only emotional energy but aesthetic and ethical profundity as well. By the latter I mean to suggest the specific cultural and ideological predisposition among the May-Fourth intellectuals to realize social revolution through discursive practice. And as the iconoclastic production of text were carried out in line with the traditional “ideologeme”
which identified any self-strengthening movement of a nation-family with the self-cultivating exercise of the Confucian ethos of ren, the alternative discourse in modern China, be it romantic, realist or symbolist, became an open field for the testing of a new ethico-aesthetic order. By subverting on a deep structural level the hyper-static hegemony of the ancien regime, the modern intellectuals of the May-Fourth era radicalized themselves via the formation of a new politics, spelled out, in the new vernacular discourse, through the negation of legitimate values in the social text and the defiance of a normalized structure of consciousness fixed for the subject of history.

The main thrust of Jin and Liu’s analysis is to arrange the three subsystems of culture, economy and politics safely within the totalizing order of the “ultra-stable system.” Given this theoretical framework, it becomes clear that the (political) function of art in traditional China was a highly organized and normalized one. As institution, literature balanced and counter-balanced the extra tension and extra text working in the other realms of the total system. It served, inevitably, as the agency for maintaining a semblance of integrative order (hehe) in the general layout of the social text. As a result, any resultant deviations (for there had been many) could hardly be crystallized and activated as a radical force to disturb the compromising machinery of the hyper-static socio-ideological order. This insistence on consensus as the central mediation of social differences, I believe, ultimately implies a systematic textual-political constraint for those who want to act and write differently by doing different things with their text and producing different effects through its politics.

IV. THE SUBJECT AT STAKE—NOTES FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TACTICS

The modern criticism of art as an institution was initiated, in China, by writers of the May-Fourth era, during which the attack on the traditional function of literature was radical and totalistic. The “new” literature, of all schools, played a significant role in promoting the progressive culturalist pro-
gramme which eventually, under the specific historical condition of the time, led to the dominance of the League of the Leftist Writers in the 1930’s. From then on, Revolutionary Literature was increasingly normalized until it became the legitimate text for the emergent hegemony of culture. After the Yenan Forum, and after the successful implantation of the Party as State in 1949, art was programmatically instituted under the name of “socialist realism” as a major ideological state apparatus—tending toward, as history has revealed, a repressive machinery for partisan politics whenever deemed necessary. During the notorious Great Cultural Revolution, the programme was further deployed to serve the ends of irrational power struggle at all levels of the ultra-stable hierarchy, the systemic order of which was not so much upset as repressed, deemed irrelevant, left un-problematic and rendered, somehow, a victim to be rescued.

After this catastrophic disturbance in all spheres of the sociocultural order (Or was it yet another dongluan in our history?), how do writers today deal with the political institution and the political function of art? To refrain from these questions is, I think, to continue to accept the hegemony of culture as redress at its best, and dogma at its worst.

What follows is no answer to the question. I can arrive at no conclusive outlet, but find only critical detours:

How we conceive postmodernism, then, is critical to how we represent both present and past—which aspects are stressed, which repressed.

—Hal Foster
“Postmodernism: A Preface”
Anti-Aesthetics (xi)

1. Rewriting the Cultural Text

To avoid the question of culture is to avoid questions concerning the ways in which we see the world; it is to remain imprisoned, therefore, in a cultural unconscious.

—Arif Dirlik
“Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice” (14)
To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric (Adorno 22). What does it mean to write in China today?

It is now clear that just as the collapse of the ancien regime was no less the symptom of a corresponding dongluan in the social hegemony, the cultural crisis experienced by the May-Fourth iconoclasts was nothing if not radically political as well. My contention is that, for the genuinely progressive modern writer, the kernel of a new ethic and aesthetic is to be discovered (through literary discourse) in the insistence upon both the political dynamic of cultural practice and the cultural dynamic of political representation. In the 1920's, at the root of the "new culture," such a radical textual practice was at work—aesthetic growing over into politics, and vice versa.

Before 1942, culture and politics had multiplied in a dimension never fully contained by political dogmas or cultural "isms." But the Yenan Forum set the agenda for some regressively "revolutionary" changes on the political role of art. By 1949, when the ideology of Revolution was fully institutionalized in all spheres of life, culture and politics became one—the teleological politics for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. For forty years, Chinese politics had meant an unending series of faction struggles, a wargame of private desires and gang powers. With this setting, textual politics never attained the dynamic status that it could have.

Today, that misguided role of culture must be seriously reconsidered. Unlike the violent domination of culture by politics, the growing-over of culture into politics has to mean that a "pure" aesthetics is no longer possible, for its frame of reference and principles of organization must ultimately function within the dynamic of its interplay and interaction with the institutional limits and possibilities of its role as cultural practice. The question is not only how one can write within the institution, but how one must strive to write about those limits and possibilities—how one can write, without being thus institutionalized.

2. *Positioning the Modern*

It is always useful to remember, as Habermas does, the historicity of the
modernity:

Modernity revolts against the normalizing function of tradition; modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative ("Modernity — An Incomplete Project" 5)(My emphasis).

The culture of May-Fourth, as we have seen, wrote with a thrust of totalistic anti-traditionalism. Modern Chinese literature emerged as a radical alternative to the normalizing dominants of tradition — until it subsequently established itself as the norm and compromised all subsequent text with that establishment. Now the problem looms large: Has our project of modernity become, as Habermas would have it, "dominant but dead"?

In this light, postmodernity offers a different perspective for considering the relationship between art and the world. It offers us a cultural and aesthetic model that draws attention to its very limits and possibilities as aesthetic form and cultural practice. Between art and life-praxis, the postmodern text puts forth a strategy that "works from a position within both and yet within neither, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe" (Hutcheon 180). In short, postmodernism makes full use of the reflexive function of modernism and brings it all the way to the utmost margin of radical self-criticism.

Thus conceived, the crisis of modernity is indeed a crisis of positioning — of drawing the margins that separate text from, as it were, the extra-text. In the West, after modern art is institutionalized as an autonomy free of any extra-textual interference, the cultural practice has lost its power of self-criticism. The advent of postmodernity, then, is most welcomed in its denial of the modernist institution by reintroducing into culture the category of critique.

A postmodern sociopolitical perspective is, therefore, one in which the modernist programmes (projects of Enlightenment, Emancipation, etc.) are considered "to have at best failed, at worst to have been the cause of the ills from which the twentieth century suffers" (Burgin 165). Now what has happened to the grand narrativizations of history in twentieth-century China? In
considering this, let us bear in mind the complex of questions suggested by the postmodern problematic, namely:

(i) Radical self-criticism: the ultimate position on the modern;
(ii) Anti-institutional practice: the textual strategy of heterogeneity;
(iii) The crossing of borders between text and extra-text: a project to transform the relationship and break the barrier between culture and politics, while preserving the specificity of art as a social practice.

3. Speaking for the Subject

*Only* subjects can be involved in crisis. Thus, only when members of a society experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their identity threatened can we speak of crises.

— Jürgen Habermas

*Legitimation Crisis* (3)

It would be agreed that narrativity is thoroughly dependent upon subjectivity—the positioning of a subject of discourse whose very existence is composed of language itself. But Habermas’s concept of crisis, which involves the subject, presupposes that “social integration is at stake, i.e., when the consensal foundations of normative structures are so much impaired that the society becomes anomic” (Legitimation Crisis 3). Habermas holds that subjects act communicatively through language because they want to “come to an understanding in the horizon of a lifeworld ... [which] serves as a source of situation definitions that are presupposed by participants as unproblematic” (Theory of Communicative Action I:70). Such a position on language and subjectivity, set up on the theoretical basis of “consensus,” is clearly untenable from a postmodern standpoint.

For modernity is a reality of multidimensions, of polysemic differences.
And yet the world cannot speak for itself, cannot produce meanings, unless it produces through and speaks within the arena of our discourse. But we are in part the productions of that discourse; and as subjects we are constantly giving out "messages" that, far from being oriented toward mutual understanding, escape our own communicative intent because they have often been put into us without our ever knowing, much less understanding it.

Consciousness, in effect, finds itself "facing the necessity of having to choose a language" (Bakhtin 295). But it is surely not a social language of consensus that is needed, but a dialogic discourse of differences which would move within and speak up for the subject. And we-its speakers—would in turn read, receive, and re-articulate the long long story which it has related through us, to us, and for us.

The recent study of the role of subjectivity in Chinese literature undertaken by Liu Zaifu is a welcome shift of focus in critical approach. But that which appears to be most urgently wanted in contemporary critical discourse is a conception of subjectivity which "entails the existence of a gap between self and other, self and world, and the self and its deeds" (J.M. Bernstein 52), one which posits through language the full dynamic of the ethico-political subject. For we must address the problematic of modernity within the cultural and historical constraints of the language of representation. Without the mediation of language, neither history nor the unconscious can be realized in the text. And if indeed history is a continuing process of alienation, contradiction, and the separation of self from other, then to summon up the moments of this history for the subject as the crisis of subjectivity is not only the primary concern for any form of cultural criticism, it should well be the central task in all variants of historical dialectics.

Be it history, be it the unconscious:

What we can see in a text the first time is already in us, not in it; in us insofar as we ourselves are a stereotype, an already-read text; and in the text only to the extent that the already-read is that aspect of a text that it must have in common with its reader in order for it to be readable at all. When we read a text once, in other
words, we can see in it only what we have already
learned to see before (Barbara Johnson, The Critical
Difference 3).

Discourse, as a social practice, constitutes but cannot dominate the text of
modernity without the involvement of the subject—reading, speaking, and
rereading. Once, the modern Chinese writers saw the stereotypes of themselves
in the very discourse with which they tried to represent the crises of their cul-
tural and historical existence, just as today, in tracing our own paths toward
modernity we all want to position ourselves (our stereotypes) in their text, in
our text, through which we expect to read about their story, and history, and
speak of our own.

*

One cannot for a moment pretend to have finished reading or writing the
project of modernity. Given that any discourse would always imply the
unceasing production of differences and counter-discourses, as well as the con-
stant transformation of subjectivity, one is forever faced with the difficult
question of overdetermination (Althusser): Which set of difference and what
structure of contradiction are the more “dominant” under a specific cultural
condition at a particular moment in history? And how can the instances of
dominance be determined with regard to the function of ideology, to which the
activities of writing and reading clearly belong?

The “dominant” never works in stasis; rather, it mobilizes the collective
unconscious in order to function. It is “the discourse whose presence is
defined by the social impossibility of its absence” (Terdiman 61). For the
Chinese writers and readers today, to work toward a critique and politics of
culture is to act against, and to open possibilities for alterity in, the
“dominant” discourse. All that remains, or so it seems, is to activate the dif-
ferences between the possible and the impossible, between the presentable and
the unpresentable.
WORKS CONSULTED


Jameson, Fredric. “Architecture and the Critique of Ideology.” *Architecture, Criticism, Ide-


BEYOND THE CULTURAL DOMINANT


超越文化的主導：現代中國的文本政治初探

陳 清 僑
香港中文大學英文系

摘要

本文參照近二十年來西方對「現代」危機的論述，探討五四以來中國文化的「現代方案」，就三個主要歷史階段的發展（1919、1949、1979），分析文化構成、體制運作、主體形態及文本策略等問題，並針對文化對「革命」的反應及干預，闡釋意識形態及霸權策略如何在語言論述中具體落實、進而鞏固成為文化的主導。在中國的現代化歷程中，文本的發展及生產方式有何演變？文章分四個部份來提出這個問題：傳統與現代的關係；文本政治的衍生及演變；文化與體制的對立；主體的危機與突破。論述的重點在探索當前中國文化政治的出路，據此，作者對五四時期的反傳統主義、文藝「現代性」的歷史意識，以至於「再現」的方法、文人傳統與體制之間的關係等，都提出看法。

最後，作者並對當前中國作家應如何面對文化藝術的政治功效的課題，分三點提問：一、作者當如何創作而不為體制所吸納？二、作者如何劃定文化實踐的界線，以確保文本以內的跟文本以外的既相包涵，又相排斥？現代文化當如何防止淪為「主導而僵化」的建制典範？三、主體如何於說話中發揮自我批判、反支配、反體制的文化實踐作用？說話既體現了文化主體的歷史（無）意識，現代作者當如何改變其文本策略，使文化與政治之問的界線與關係得到突破與重現？