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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists through the 1949 Crisis*, by David Der-wei Wang. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 496 pp. US\$60 (Hardcover). ISBN: 9780231170468.

In the winter of 1949, Hu Feng, one of the most acclaimed literary critics of the time, wrote a poem titled “Time Has Begun.” The reorientation of temporality reveals a messianic strain culminating in the birth of the new socialist regime. The content and form of this lyrical subjectivity speak to an “epic” era that is determined to build the future upon “the ruins of time.” The paradox is that the aspiring, dynamic, and grand narrative of socialist revolution involuntarily conjures up the extraordinary work of Chinese lyrical tradition at its most intense. David Der-wei Wang, professor of Chinese literature at Harvard University, attempts to illuminate the double bind of the lyrical through a comprehensive review of Sinophone literary and cultural productions during the political upheavals of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Wang defines lyricism as “a poetics of selfhood that informs the historical moment and helps define Chinese modernity in a different light.” This definition derives from two different but not totally unrelated intellectual trajectories: contemporary Western theoretical interventions into the problem of modernity and modern Chinese contemplation on *shuqing* (抒情), with both genealogical dimensions traceable to ancient time. On the one hand, Western literary theorists, including Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Paul de Man, and Walter Benjamin, all “took up lyricism as a way to critique the perilous, epic time”; on the other hand, modern Chinese intellectual thinking, ranging from Chen Shih-hsing’s “lyrical tradition” to Li Zehou’s “lyrical ontology” (情本體 *qing-benti*) and Shen Congwen’s “lyrical archeology” (抒情考古學 *shuqing kaoguxue*), ruminates on the problem of selfhood and artistic expressions in the time of Chinese national crisis.

Moreover, Wang uses this critical lyricism to question the dominant narrative of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese modernity emblemized by “revolution” and “enlightenment.” Current paradigms of Chinese literary discourse, from the May Fourth Movement to the postsocialist revolution, betray a fascination with macroscopic imageries, sublime subjects, and epic representations, all of which are motivated by a strong sense of political

urgency. In the shadow of this epic grandeur, the lyrical seems to be “too weak and trivial to carry the weight of modernity’s demands.” Wang contends this view by arguing for a more nuanced understanding concerning the relation between “the lyrical” and “the epic” in Chinese modernity. He examines the intellectual trajectory of the renowned contemporary Chinese thinker Li Zehou to illustrate this point. Li Zehou’s pathbreaking essay on the interplay between “enlightenment” (启蒙 *qimeng*) and “national salvation” (救亡 *jiuwang*) has been regarded as the zeitgeist of the postsocialist era. The 1980s intellectual politics sought to disarticulate itself from the political imperative of Maoism through a prioritization of “enlightenment” over “national salvation.” However, Wang contends that such epic impulse of political intervention tends to result in an introverted tendency, in which the grand narrative of political revolution persists in postsocialist subjectivity. In order to avoid this “involution,” Wang draws us to another dimension of Li Zehou’s thought: “affective and aesthetic sensibilities,” which serve as “a complement to and critique of the causes and consequences of enlightenment and revolution.” Instead of regarding Li’s emotive turn as a political ennui, Wang views it as a philosophical as well as historical development originating from Li’s stance in the “Great Debate over Aesthetics” with Zhu Guangqian and Cai Yi in the late 1950s. Thus, It is tempting to further argue that Li’s turn from politics into aesthetics reflects the intensification of Chinese modernity in the shifting practice from transforming exteriority (nation-building) into reengineering interiority (emotive subject formation).

After a theoretical discussion of lyricism, Wang turns to in-depth case studies on those artists and intellectuals who nevertheless speak out, with varying political beliefs and aesthetic tastes, on the impact of national crisis on lyrical selfhood. Drawing on examples in novels, poetry, music, film, painting, and calligraphy, Wang presents an extravaganza of lyrical heteroglossia that reveals the transformation of selfhood, literati, and aesthetics in response to national cataclysm and mass movements. One is amazed by Wang’s capacity to move back and forth between different genres, texts, disciplines, and intellectual genealogies: modernist poet Feng Zhi, Taiwan Musician Jiang Wenye, modernist painter Lin Fengmian, calligrapher Tai Jingnong, and film director Fei Mu, to just name a few. One of the most extraordinary examples is his reading of the personal and literary career of Hu Lancheng, whose literary talent, dubious political practice, and entangled love affair with

Eileen Chang all contribute to a peculiar “lyricism of betrayal” termed by Wang. In this case, Wang asks an ethical question: if lyricism is tantamount to the expression of “one’s innermost and sincere feelings,” can it be taken to evade one’s social as well as political responsibilities in the era of unprecedented barbarism? More specifically, how should we read Hu Lancheng’s vertiginous rhetorical espousal of a lyrical China against not only his public collaboration with the Japanese regime, but also his personal disloyalty to his lover Eileen Chang? Meanwhile, Wang expands the horizon of this question by invoking the similarities between Hu Lancheng and Martin Heidegger. The juxtaposition of Heidegger’s “poetic turn” with his acquiescence to the Nazi cause during World War II speaks to a similar paradox that calls attention to the political consequence of lyricism. How should we evaluate Heidegger’s “openness to Being” in conjunction with his endorsement of Nazi propaganda? It is a little surprising that Wang does not touch on the love affair between Heidegger and Hannah Arendt. Intertwined with the thematic of betrayal, forgiveness, and reconciliation, the affective, political, and philosophical undertone of this legendary relationship could have contributed to illuminating on Hu Lancheng’s betrayal of Eileen Chang.

Another exiting chapter focuses on Shen Congwen’s traumatic encounter with socialist modernity. Wang argues that Shen’s alienation from socialist regime not only reflects the incommensurability between Shen’s lyrical sentimentality and revolutionary heroism, but also reveals a tragic confrontation between a primordial traumatism and modernity’s defiance of tradition. Amid a mixture of personal and political crisis, Shen resorts to an “abstract lyricism” (抽象的抒情 *chouxiang de shuqing*). In a manner similar to German intellectuals’ “internal exile” during the height of Nazi power, Shen withdraws into a transcendental state of mind. Shen’s lyricism draws him into the ancient culture of Chu, as the suicide of Qu Yuan bespeaks a dialectical preservation of utopian ideals through self-negation. Meanwhile, Shen’s fascination with material culture—remnants of the ancient civilization—yearns for a mediation between the abstract and the realistic. Wang compares Shen with Walter Benjamin in their similar contemplations on the ruins of history. Just as Benjamin’s conception of “natural history” criticizes the process of transience and the logic of decay inherent within the European Enlightenment, Shen’s “abstract lyricism” radically undermines Chinese socialism’s conception of human freedom and historical teleology.

In the final chapter, “Towards a Critical Lyricism,” Wang takes a more audacious attempt to tackle with the question of ethics in contemporary global literary studies. Inspired by Gayatri Spivak’s radical reorientation in the prioritization of the aesthetic over the political, Wang proposes that critical lyricism might serve as a Chinese alternative to the crisis of literature in the postpolitical era. Spivak’s turn is part of a major intellectual shift in recent American academia from New Left political radicalism to a more conventional contemplation over ethical dilemmas in the age of globalization. Wang’s critical lyricism is intertwined with, although not exhausted by, this paradigm shift. Methodologically, Wang’s close engagement with multiple texts and genres speaks a passion to disarticulate literary criticism from theoretically and politically informed paradigms. Genealogically, Wang seeks to bring Chinese literary criticism into a creative dialogue with its Western counterparts. Geographically, Wang embraces Sinophone discourse that circulates within and beyond national boundaries. All of these contribute to the current debates of the “ethical turn,” whose penetrating effects are felt through debates over the talks of “after theory,” in our (re)conception of Chinese literary studies, in the incertitude of the very disciplinary boundary of the literary, and in a (re)definition—so far as definition is possible at all—of the limits and purposes of what Chinese literature can do in the rise of China’s geopolitical hegemony.

Wang’s admirable excavation of modern Chinese literary theory has a profound methodological implication for Comparative Literature mired in Eurocentrism. The next question is how to engage the possible incommensurability between the Chinese and the Western theoretical traditions, given their radical different historical consciousness. For example, without engaging the entangled interplay between history and philosophy, rhetoric and politics, Wang singled out the poetic aspect of Heidegger’s thinking to empower his Chinese lyrical criticism. For Wang, the lyrical is endowed with a redemptive capacity for spontaneity: to be lyrical is to create a complete freedom that transcends social and political constrains. Heidegger’s poetic dwelling, on the contrary, is informed by a desperate sense of finitude. Heidegger’s “openness to the world” means none other than human being’s groundless condition referred by him as “thrownness.” In light of this, Heidegger’s poetic turn reveals his utter despair over the worldliness of human condition, as he puts it: “Men is the shepherd of Being.” Heidegger’s rumination on poetry as the “unconcealment of truth” cannot be disarticulated from his

pessimistic understanding on the limitation of humanity. For Heidegger, what for Wang is constitutive of the transcendence—the poetics of being—becomes that which is wholly constituted. Moreover, Wang’s reading of Heidegger reveals the liberal humanistic undertone of his lyrical criticism. Illuminative as it is, this interpretive strategy might overlook the way that aesthetics and politics have become almost incorrigibly intertwined in history. Instead, Wang offers a humanistic reconstruction of a succession of events, thoughts, and art works in Chinese modernity, which, despite their divergent political and historical connotations, are yoked together to form a “critical lyricism.” Thus, the complicated and overdetermined historical process through which the lyrical unfolds itself by confronting political urgencies is downplayed. Wang’s investigation into the conceptual ramifications of lyricism could have become more powerful with a discussion of the inevitable historical inscription of ideas. Just as Wang argues that lyricism culminates in response to national cataclysms and political turbulences, one is tempted to ask whether lyricism can sustain such intensity in the loss of the political.

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