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Examining The End of Revolution: A Foretaste of Wang Hui's Thought

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Examining The End of Revolution: A Foretaste of Wang Hui's Thought

Abstract Wang Hui is a significant contemporary Chinese thinker and a key representative of Chinese New Left thought. This essay provides a critical review of some of the themes that emerge from Wang's *The End of Revolution* as a means of situating his position in China's intellectual landscape, with a particular mind to exploring the historicity of Wang's thought as it informs his views. The essay engages some of the key discursive threads in *The End of Revolution* and provides a critical overview of Wang's positions on neoliberalism, the tension between Western articulations of modernity and China's own self-image.

Keywords Wang Hui; New Left; modernity; state; nation

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Introduction

For much of the past decade, Professor Wang Hui (b. 1959), a literary scholar at Tsinghua University, has been one of the most robust and eloquent critics of the direction, contours and consequences of China's economic reforms. An expert on the work of Lu Xun (1881-1936), Wang was awarded a PhD in literature at Nanjing University in 1988 and soon thereafter participated in the Democracy Spring movement that culminated in the Tiananmen Square repression. Wang was subsequently sent to Shaanxi for 're-education', where the plight of China's disenfranchised peasants and migrant labourers, and the manifest inequalities caused by the beginnings of the marketization of state and society became a central influence on his intellectual work. A prolific writer, renowned public speaker and one of the pre-eminent opponents of neoliberalism in post-reform China, Wang was recognized by the American Foreign Policy magazine in 2008 as one of the world's one hundred most influential thinkers.

Despite this extraordinary trajectory, comparatively little of Wang's work has been translated into English to date. The publication of *The End of Revolution*, a compilation that provides a taste of the complexity and some of the major themes in his, as yet untranslated, four-volume *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (2004 [2008]), represents an opportunity for non-Chinese readers to engage with Wang's ideas on modernity, nationhood and democracy and, his powerful denouement of neoliberalism in the Chinese context. Superbly edited by Rebecca Karl, *The End of Revolution* provides a selection of key articles and interviews published between 1994 and 2007, reflecting on the period from the Democracy Spring to the consolidation of market dominance in China (and neoliberal globalization of which Wang is a prominent critic). In this essay, we use a critical review of some of the themes that emerge from *The End of Revolution* as a means of situating Wang's position in

China's intellectual landscape, with a particular mind to exploring the historicity of Wang's thought as it informs his New Left views.¹

In the following sections, we offer a review of some of the key discursive threads in *The End of Revolution* that we deem of particular significance to students of modern Chinese history. Yet, we also concede right at the outset that such a review -- based as it is on essays in translation -- cannot cover the entire breadth of Wang's complex thought as manifest in his Chinese-language work. Instead, we foretaste here Wang's thought on neoliberalism and on the tension between Western articulations of modernity and China's own self-image in pre-modern times as progressive cosmopolitan Empire.

The New Left and the Critique of Neoliberalism

Until the emergence of the New Left movement in the 1990s, the reform era intellectual landscape was dominated by a narrative in which 'traditional' China was obliged to catch up with the 'modern' West. Progress towards this conception of modernity meant distancing from non-Western traditions embodied in the authoritarian continuities of feudalism and Maoism. Liberal intellectuals envisaged a process in which the market would foster the liberation of society from the state. In basic terms, most 'liberals' and 'neoliberals' see the pre-modern Chinese state, embodied in the imperial bureaucracy, as predatory and all-pervasive, and suggest that these qualities atavistically configured Chinese modernity as a whole. In that sense, there are similarities between Chinese 'liberal' and 'neo-liberal' views and those of Karl Wittfogel (1957), who at the height of the Cold War, castigated the Chinese pre-modern polity as one of 'Oriental despotism'.

Chinese 'liberals' are usually more statist in orientation than 'neo-liberal' intellectuals, but both schools are clearly distinct from New Left figures like Wang, Beijing University sociologist Pan Wei, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Yu Yongding and others in their perception of state-embeddedness in Chinese early-

¹ For discussion of the genesis of the term 'New Left' in the Chinese context, see Carter (2010). The focus of this essay is on Wang Hui and the broader New Left, the contours of which we discuss below. We do not deal with Neo-Maoism, which represents a discrete position embodied by former Chongqing Party Secretary, Bo Xilai.

modern history.² Contrary to Wittfogel's conventional wisdom, Wang views the Chinese pre-modern and early-modern polity as one where state-embeddedness was tenuous. Of course, there is an acknowledgement that Mao Zedong changed the pattern of governance in the 1950s, ensconcing state power deep into even the remotest parts of the countryside. Yet, Deng Xiaoping's reforms of the 1980s have been criticized precisely because they rolled back the state, leaving under-developed parts of the country to fend for themselves. As some New Left critics see it, the removal of the 'Iron Rice Bowl' (tie fanwan), i.e., life-time job security with complementary housing and healthcare, has reduced the quality of life in China leaving the most vulnerable constituents of society trodden upon. Furthermore, in the face of economic growth, they argue that inequality, displacement, pollution, consumerism and political apathy have been tolerated by the central authorities to an excessive extent. A loose and diverse intellectual congregation, thinkers of the Chinese New Left generally operate from within the CCP establishment, and do not openly challenge the Party. Many New Left figures accept market reforms, but maintain that Chinese development should be more balanced, equitable, less growth oriented and more sustainable (Vukovich 2012).

As an editor of the highly regarded journal *Dushu* from 1996 until his ouster in 2007, Wang established his position as a central figure in China's broad New Left. Although liberalism in its multiple variations has – in the face of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) antipathy – retained centre-stage in the intellectual landscape, New Left views have enjoyed relative freedom of expression in the past decade, as intellectuals grapple with both the consequences of three decades of reform and the possibility of American decline. In well-known essays on the 'depoliticization of politics' and the 1989 student movement, versions of which are reproduced in *The End of Revolution*, and in the Chinese publication of *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, Wang established his critique of the notion of history as the teleological process it appears in the liberal narrative and disputed the Western model as the sole source of modernity, marginalizing as it does alternative sources particular to China.

² Liberals are also less critical of US foreign policy, and would rarely describe the Kosovo war as 'imperialistic', as Wang does in *The End of Revolution* (p. 63). Prominent pro-Western Chinese liberal thinkers include, among others, Nobel prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, film-maker Su Xiaokang, economist Mao Yushi, jurist He Wefang, historians Qin Hui and Xu Jilin, dissidents Li Zehou, Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming. Prominent Chinese 'neo-liberals' include, among others, economists Zhang Weiyong and Chen Zhiwu.

One of the key points of divergence between Wang and the liberal intellectual position as critiqued in *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, echoes historian Alexander Day's formulation, namely, that the liberal 'enlightenment' narrative 'conceal[s] the repressive link between market reforms and the postrevolutionary state', a veil which intellectuals should work to tear down (2011: 142). Wang is persuasive in his critique of the CCP, and the way it unabashedly embraced big business under Jiang Zemin. As a result, Wang perceives increasingly scant difference between the CCP and political parties in Western democracies, where in his rendition political institutions have become an instrument for the imposition of the market on society (pp. 6-8).

Wang's concern for the party's declining claim to representativeness identifies 'market conditions' as the culprit, and argues that 'the interests and needs of the lower strata find no expression within the political sphere' (pp. xxix-xxxi). This dislocation is one consequence of what Wang sees as the pernicious 'de-theorisation' of the ideological sphere (p. 7). Wang's lament for the declining 'politicization of politics' is extracted from the separation of economics and politics characteristic of neoliberal globalization. When the former leads the latter, special market-driven interests develop ominous leverage over political institutions (including the CCP), which in turn effect the 'disconnection of democracy as a political structure from the basic units of society' (p. xxx).

Rationalism, Modernity and the Nation

One of the recurrent preoccupations in Wang's oeuvre is modernity and its relationship with the nation. Unlike the holistic, teleological conception of modernity of the Hegelian school, Wang sees modernity as 'paradoxical [and] containing intrinsic tensions and contradictions' (p. 75). He thus rejects the notion that 'modernity' can simply be transposed from one context (the West) to another (China). These tensions and contradictions are aptly summed up in the description of Chinese modernity as 'anti-modern modernity', by which Wang means that anti-traditional views were accompanied by anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist positions. Contrary to liberals who view this contradiction as self-defeating, Wang argues that it is 'the source of modernity's self-renewal' (p. 79). In practice, Chinese modernity was born out of the struggle against Western colonial domination, but when the colonial yoke

was removed, worship of Western rationalism became even more entrenched among Chinese political and intellectual elites.³ Although Wang's critique of the residual worship of Western rationalism in China and the Hegelian bias it speaks to are highly pertinent to envisioning China's future, the roots of that worship can be traced back to the May Fourth Movement of 1919. A substantial body of literature has built up concerning rationalism in this period, which Wang does not fully engage with.⁴

In critiquing the 'over-rationalist' spirit of the May Fourth Movement, Wang seems to be charting other historic paths to modernity or, in other words, socially mellow alternatives to nation-statehood in its early-modern Western iteration. Yet, the alternative on offer is ambiguous and redolent of existing ideas. For instance, his critique of Western nation-statehood as repressively thrust (or self-inflicted) upon Asia is reminiscent of Duara (1996). Duara's treatment was itself an impressively detailed riposte to Joseph Levenson's influential work in the field of Chinese history (1958 [2005]). Levenson portrayed proponents of tradition in early twentieth century China like Liang Qichao or Zhang Binglin as unself-conscious compared with the pro-Western modernisers of the May Fourth Movement. Duara drew parallels between Liang, Zhang and the conscious, if tentative, pan-Asianism of Tagore and Gandhi in charting what might have been a softer Asian alternative to organising the late-colonial world. He also underscored Marxism and Shi'ite fundamentalism as challenges to the modern nation-state bailiwick, and discussed at length the sub-ethnic and class strains that inherently subverted the cohesion of the nation state.

Following Duara and some more recent work by Chinese foreign-policy theoreticians like for example Zhao Tingyang (2005), Wang seems to point to possibilities where the Chinese civilizational trope Tianxia ('All under Heaven') could be resurrected to relax the particularistic straitjacket of the Westphalian world order (Carlson 2011). Notably, Lucian Pye observed that China was unique in being a civilization pretending to be a nation state (1992: 235), and Chinese exceptionalism has been invoked along much the same lines by Martin Jacques (2009), Zhang Weiwei (2012) and other proponents of a 'China Model'. These analysts share the conviction that China's path to super-power status will differ from the one traversed

³ Wang consistently criticizes this tendency, but neglects how Maoist ideology precipitated a backlash against the oppressive rationalism of Soviet-style Marxism. Neither does the Lu Xun expert discuss the great author's role in advancing the 'worship' of rationalism in China

⁴ For a useful overview of this literature see Mitter (2004) chapters 1-4.

by European powers and the US. Because pre-modern China was a civilizational rather than an all-pervasive polity, Wang, Zhang and Jacques each imply that China will not behave imperialistically on the world stage, settling instead for symbolic (i.e. tributary) recognition of its new leading status.

As yet, however, China appears to be sticking with Westphalian protocol as ardently as its counterparts in the West. Consider for example, the pomp and accolades enjoyed by leaders from even the smallest and poorest countries during their visits to Beijing, a treatment that betokens an insistence on treating sovereign states as equal, quite in contrast to the pre-modern hierarchical Tianxia framework.

Another criticism of Pye's civilizational argument, which Wang seems to readily embrace, is that it understates Mao's achievement in unifying the country, spreading Mandarin as the official language, increasing literacy rates and coalescing national identity through a partly imagined narrative of a New China (Xinhua). It is surprising that Wang should brush over Mao's extraordinary nation-building project without explicitly discussing the nature of what went on during the period, and specifying how a softer civilizational framework could have replaced the well-trodden Western pathway to modern nationhood. While Wang's reflections on the Mao era sometimes tend toward the sentimental (see for instance p. 48, pp. 58-60), they are partly based on credible foundations, with the exception of the glowing portrayal of the early 1950s prior to the Great Leap Forward. In focusing on the 'strong sense of political consciousness' and 'enthusiastic spirit of initiative' generated by land reforms and structural adjustments in the countryside (p. xxi), Wang seems to neglect research on how painful and destructive to social cohesion land collectivisation proved to be.⁵

Neoliberal narratives of China's pre-war economy imply that Mao's land reforms were redundant. Wang rightly rejects these claims but his rendition of Mao's land reforms fails to acknowledge that most farmers were at the time freeholders and that the distribution of land had already been more equitable in North China. There are even claims, admittedly controversial, that Mao prevented peasants from moving into bigger cities in order to subsidize heavy industry and the atomic-bomb project

⁵ See, for instance, Zhang (2009).

(Dikötter 2013). In that sense, the peasants who brought the CCP to power were ultimately strongly disadvantaged vis-à-vis city dwellers, and as Wang acknowledges, it was only in 1978 that the rural-urban gap began to close somewhat (pp. 23-24, p. 26).

A further contradiction arises in the sense that the vague civilizational alternative to the nation-state straitjacket Wang advocates, itself appears to be an antidote to the politicised society characteristic of the Mao era which Wang often seems to pine for. Wang's rather enigmatic summation is that 'all universalisms are actually part of particular phenomenon, rather than simply existing within the dichotomy of particular universalisms' (p. 116). He then adds that the question of whether China is a nation-state or an Empire is unanswerable (p.132).

In Matters of History, History Matters

Wang's self-described 'difficult' prose is not as significant an obstacle to understanding his thought as the historical grounding of his arguments. To put it tactfully, Wang is not preoccupied with footnotes, chronology, argumentative sequence and the other formalisms common to academic writing. The construction of his essay on 'Modern Chinese Thought' (p. 105) is symptomatic. Following a long and highly abstract introduction, readers are promised a 'concrete' discussion of empire and nation-state, which does not go beyond generalities.

Drawing on André Frank's controversial work (1998), Wang casually speculates that 'without links to the East, the Industrial Revolution probably could not have occurred' (p. xxxx). If such transformative 'links' did indeed exist, one would expect them to be concisely spelled out and grounded in referenced sources. Wang similarly invokes Frank in his discussion of pre-modern Chinese economic history. He describes 'the use of silver and copper currency in the competing polities of the Five Dynasties era [CE 907-979]' as an indicator that 'foreign trade was beginning to occur' (p. 28). However, economic historians might actually balk at the suggestion that the currency at the time of the Five Dynasties was mostly silver-based, or date the take-off of foreign trade to that moment.⁶

⁶ For a discussion of the monetary setting in the Five Dynasties era in the larger scheme of Chinese history, see for example Elvin (1973).

Another historical lacuna emerges in Wang's discussion of 'the first generation of Chinese who sought constitutional democracy [that] arose in the 1920s' (p. 103). It is not clear why someone as well versed in early twentieth Century Chinese history as Wang would omit mention of China's earlier experiment with democratically-elected provincial assemblies as of 1905 (Elvin 1996). Yet, even in the 1920s, Chinese liberals were more 'statist' in their outlook than their Western counterparts, as Edmund Fung (2010) has shown. Fung also shows how even during the iconoclastic 1920s, a few leading Chinese intellectuals still wished to restore the tenets of Confucian statecraft, and how these intellectuals presaged, in a sense, the contemporary semi-official Confucian revival in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Wang's insistence on the historicity of Chinese meritocracy is consistent with proponents of the 'China Model' and 'New Confucianism' across numerous disciplines, who highlight the remarkable longevity and uniqueness of China's imperial system. Here too though, there are questions of historical accuracy and grounding. Wang writes that 'in fact, there are now many studies showing that England's civil service system was inspired to a degree by China's civil service tradition' (p. 135). Typically none of these 'many studies' is cited, and a closer historical analysis shows that the empirical basis for this argument is tenuous. Albeit uncited by Wang, we hasten to add that an authoritative study claiming Chinese inspiration for British civil-service meritocracy does exist. Yet, it was penned by Teng Ssu-yu (1943), and was based on circumstantial rather than archival sources.

In fact, the Northcote-Trevelyan Report on the British civil service (1853) led to the replacement of political patronage in favour of life-long appointment of apolitical mandarins with broad liberal educations, and advanced the notion that recruitment of British civil servants should be based on a generalist examination system (Chapman and Greenaway 1980). To our knowledge there are no studies based on in-house archival material that show Northcote and Trevelyan in actual fact specifically modelled their proposed examinations on China's generalist (i.e. Confucian) imperial examinations,⁷ although the op-ed pages of the London Times that year contain sarcastic attacks on Northcote and Trevelyan for introducing

⁷ It is more likely they were inspired by the Prussian and French bureaucratic reforms at the time. See for instance, Greenaway (2004).

backward ‘Chinese’ ideas into Britain.⁸ That aside, Wang’s celebration of Chinese meritocracy runs contrary to one of the most authoritative archive-based studies of China’s imperial examination system, by Benjamin A. Elman (2000), which casts doubt on the extent to which the pre-modern examination system could be seen as meritocratic.

In other places too, historical events are sacrificed for theorizing. Dissecting the Global Financial Crisis that began in 2008, Wang argues that ‘[it] has shown that crises arise precisely from shifts in the autonomies of societies’ and that such crises are resistant to the reassertion of the ‘old ideals of sovereignty’ (p. xxvii). While Wang’s critique of market dominance is effective, it is necessary to point out that China was able to withstand the Global Financial Crisis better than the West precisely because it did re-assert ‘the old ideals of sovereignty’ by insisting on a managed currency and an insular banking system, which protected its economy from major damage. Wang could be easily mistaken here for describing the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, where Southeast Asian economies were badly hit rather than China. Southeast Asia teetered on the brink of collapse due in part to the flight of hot money overseas, and following the opening up of their financial systems in line with advice from Washington. In 1997, China emerged relatively unscathed precisely because the CCP refused to surrender to neo-liberal conventional wisdom.

Conclusion

Wang Hui is a significant contemporary Chinese thinker and, as a key representative of New Left thought, deserves to be studied more widely by Western observers interested in understanding the intellectual and political landscape of the PRC. The publication of *The End of Revolution* thus represents an important opportunity for non-Chinese readers to engage with Wang’s work through a compilation of shorter articles that are emblematic of his wider oeuvre. *The End of Revolution* reveals the foundations of a fascinating dissenting public intellectual, and one who is quite unique in his breadth of knowledge and familiarity with Western theory. Wang’s intimate understanding of the latest trends in Western humanities is formidable. Indeed, he appears equally at ease with post-colonial theoretical constructs like the

⁸ See for instance an anonymous letter to the Times Editor published on page 9 on 17th March 1854 entitled ‘The Organization of the Civil Service’.

‘subaltern’ and pre-modern Confucian cosmological ideas such as the ‘heavenly principle’ (tianli). As much as it concerns contemporary China, *The End of Revolution* is replete with references to prominent European New Left theoreticians such as Louis Althusser (p. 14), Antonio Gramsci (p. 15) and Michel Foucault (p. 70, 165), although Wang diverges from these generally Eurocentric thinkers in his insistence on Chinese historic distinctness.

The great socio-economic structural adjustments that China has encountered in the past thirty years have created abundant contradictions and ambiguities, and it is perhaps not surprising that these are also evident in *The End of Revolution*. Wang is arguably the most ardent critic of the ‘neoliberal’ streak in Chinese intellectual debates. On the other hand, Wang is by no means alone in grappling with, for instance, the epistemological problem of accurately diagnosing what constitutes the ‘Chinese model’ following the past three decades of economic reform. Wang’s historical interpretations and theoretical arguments are distinct and he is not afraid to go against conventional wisdom. His broad-stroke identification of the 1989 student movement in China with much later anti-globalization protests in the West, for instance, is very thought-provoking and highly original.

In sum, Wang’s sharply expressed non-conformism is a valuable counterpoint to prevailing trends in the PRC intellectual scene. However, the historical accuracy, and interpretations of historical events underpinning *The End of Revolution* are, at times, questionable at times, and Wang’s light footnoting also detract from what is otherwise a very impressive intellectual accomplishment.

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