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**Peter Button. *Configuration of the real in Chinese literary and aesthetic modernity.*  
Collection Ideas, History and Modern China. Leiden: Brill Press. 2009.**

In the introduction to *Configuration of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, Peter Button is quick to reveal that the ambitious and fascinating intention of his work is to examine the fate of the modern concept of literature in 20th century China. As Button puts it in the first pages of his book, investigating the “assimilation and formation” of this concept in modern China necessarily implies redefining and historicizing the concept of “literature” within global capitalist modernity. Following the “romantico-modern” period, described by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, the genealogy of the modern concept of literature goes back to the birth of aesthetics in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the way in which the new discourse of aesthetics was taken up as a central political project by German romanticism at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the philosophical fragments produced by Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) between 1797 and 1804. Helped by Nicholas Brown’s *Utopian Generation: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-century Literature*, Button’s work claims that the “romantico-modern” notion of literature is intimately linked not only to philosophy but also to literary criticism/theory.

Through the relationship established between this genealogy and the global postcolonial context of 20<sup>th</sup> century China, the author manages to rethink the historical and theoretical issues related to the introduction of modern (Western) texts, theories, and concepts in China. In his introduction, Button vigorously contests as “false and a-historical” the Eurocentric dichotomy involving, on one hand, Western theory, and, on the other hand, modern Chinese literary texts. His approach goes well beyond the storied “ambivalence” employed by classical postcolonial criticism, putting into question the very notions of “origin” and “influence” that have caused most histories of modern Chinese literature to be read as “derivative discourse.” Rejecting the recurrent use of terms such as the “West” and “Western” to refer to the origin of cultural texts and practices, Button offers readers the highly provocative assertion that “there is nothing remarkably ‘foreign’ [or] ‘Western’ and, hence, ‘extraneous’ to contemporary literary theory when it comes to 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese literature and criticism” (p. 8).

Button brilliantly shows that the essential link between philosophy, literature, and theory, as described by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy to be the trademark of the modern concept of literature, which is as present in modern Chinese literature and literary criticism (especially in Chinese Marxist aesthetics—the principal but not exclusive subject of this book) as it is in the so-called classical theoretical current in the West, as described in New Criticism or Poststructuralism. To demonstrate this thesis, Button discusses selected texts and authors from classical May Fourth writers like Lu Xun (1881-1936) and Mao Dun (1896-1981) to the literary and theoretical works written following the establishment of the Popular Republic of China, including works of Marxist aesthetic philosophy, like that of Cai Yi (1906-1992); socialist literary production, like that of Yang Mo, particularly his *Song of Youth*; and that of contemporary Chinese thinkers on continental philosophy (of Kant or Hegel, for instance), like that of Li Zehou (1930- ). As Buttons puts it, “The complex relationship between literature, theory/criticism, and modern philosophy was one that Chinese writers and critics [have] been negotiating in an astonishing variety of different forms from the beginning of the century.” (p. 28) From Button’s perspective, Chinese and Western texts share the same temporal location. As a consequence of this synchronicity, which insists on the inscription of China within modernity since the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, China has been, in Button’s estimation, just like the West, a producer as well as a consumer

of theory, a subject as well as an object of history. This transcolonial perspective brings him to question the traditional position of subalternity and secondarity attributed to Chinese texts in relation to Western theory. In his book, Button offers equal analytical treatment of both primary and secondary texts, which is to say, of both modern Chinese literary texts and North American Chinese studies texts dedicated to critical interpretation of the former.

Button's fine and accurate critique of North American institutions of knowledge portraying China, and especially Chinese literature, as an object of study does not lament the absence of theory within Chinese studies. Rather, in his critique, Button worries about the inability of North American Sinology to perceive that "the role of theory was a given at the outset of the emergence of modern Chinese literature" (p. 24) and to recognize the importance of modern philosophical thought in China. Significantly, Button argues that this blindness is intimately related to the absence of continental philosophy within the North American Academy. For the author, this disappearance of continental philosophy in the late 1940s played a leading role in the impossibility for American Critics to perceive the presence of this complex relationship between literature, theory criticism and modern philosophy within twentieth century Chinese literature.

Following this discussion, his incisive evaluation of the now classical *History of Modern Chinese Fiction* by Chih-ting (C.T.) Hsia brings back complex theoretical and historical questions about the difference and similarity between Hsia's New Criticism-orientation and modern Chinese literature. Button ironically observes how Hsia's *History*, while showing unmatched knowledge of modern Chinese literature, tends to delegitimize these texts and exclude them from the canon of World literature. The inability of these texts to match up to the criterion of "disinterestedness" leads to an inevitable and instrumental dimension that Hsia condemned. In spite of Hsia's ostensible rejection of modern Chinese (and especially socialist) literary realism, Button convincingly demonstrates the existence of strong philosophical links between Hsia's New Criticism and modern Chinese Marxist aesthetics that make impossible simple opposition between the two. He notes not only the separation between science and literature/art but also the emphasis upon universality and faith in an onto-theological conception of literary art, saying, "[B]oth share a similar origin in what each understood as a modern cultural crisis brought on by the rampant cultural predations of positivist science, which threatened the fundamental integrity of human being" (p. 26).

Under the title of "The Trials of Chinese Literary Realism," chapter one engages a complex discussion of Tang Xiaobing, Marston Anderson, and David Wang's authoritative studies on Chinese modern literature, especially realist literature. By investigating the theoretical foundation of these contemporary critics, and by criticizing the anachronistic use of postmodern/structuralist conceptions of language in their commentaries on Lu Xun's earliest work, Button proceeds to re-evaluate Chinese realist literature. He argues that the critiques of Xiaobing, Anderson, and Wang reflect a far-too-simplistic reading of realist theory; he also questions these authors' presumption that realist literature necessarily represents the Real, leading them, Button believes, not only to miss the *eidaesthetic* dimension of Chinese realism already ingrained in Lu Xun's earliest work but also to obscure the complex filiation between Lu Xun's literary works and later Chinese realist philosophical aesthetics. Through an analysis of Lu Xun's "True Story of Ah Q" and its philosophical relation to Nietzsche's philosophy, Button advances his argument in the next chapter by demonstrating Lu Xun's inscription into the realm of what Nicholas Brown has called the "eidaesthetic itinerary," or literature-as-theory camp. In this chapter, Button also focuses on the emergence (with the work of "True Story of Ah Q") of the crucial philosophical and literary concept of the "type." In showing that "Ah Q," like Zarathustra, is the perfect example of "type," (a literary figure embodying a philosophical idea about human being),

Button shows how the notion of “type” and the concept of typology not only saturates Nietzsche’s work but also Lu Xun’s writing. Button goes further in his analysis by linking the creation of “Ah Q” as a “type” of what Nietzsche called a “gruesome hybrid” (full of both rebellion and resentment) and the construction of the discourse of Chinese national character. Supported by Lydia Liu’s illuminating work on Lu Xun, Button is convincing when he contests the position which insists on the subordinated relation of Lu Xun to American missionary Arthur Smith’s racist and essentialist book on the so-called “Chinese character.” Button notes the gap between Smith’s (and also Chiang Kai-shek’s) conception of the “Chinese character,” grounded in Christian faith, and the notion of the active construction of the “Chinese” or of “Chinese-in-becoming” in the discourse of national character, attributed to Lu Xun. Button argues that “Lu Xun would choose to fashion a literary retort to Smith in the form of a quasi-Nietzschean, and hence, (post-)metaphysical type, taking the very first step in the process of China’s assimilation of modern eidaesthetics” (p. 115). Lu Xun effectively transformed Smith’s faith in a Christian god, Button argues, into an “onto-typological investment in the human.” In chapter four, Button pushes this line of discussion further by arguing that “what marks the postcolonial moment in China is the appropriation of the very aspiration to realize the completion of metaphysics by means of the figure of the human” (p. 169). The affirmation of the “type” in Lu Xun and other modern Chinese writers can thus be construed as a critical response to the onto-theological discourse (e.g. Hegelian or Smithian) deployed by European imperialism—a critique whose critical force is accomplished by virtue of a displacement toward onto-typology.

The results of this displacement and its aftermath have yet to be accounted for. Indeed, the problem of accounting for this displacement—already enormously complex in itself—has been magnified immensely by the general trend of intellectual life since the 1970s, namely, the abandonment in China of a universalizing critique of modernity in favor of a particularistic one combined with the turn, in the West, toward postmodern philosophies of difference without passing through a critique of colonial ontologies. In the context of this new historical mis-match, Button’s discussion in the last three chapters of the book is paradigmatic. Here, Button proposes an extensive (and difficult to summarize) discussion of the oft-ignored Chinese Marxist aesthetic theoretician Cai Yi, dialed-in on questions surrounding the concept of the “type” and Cai Yi’s sophisticated dialectical materialist aesthetic critique of capitalist instrumental modernity. He points out, in particular, Cai Yi’s sharp critique of positivist science and the abstract mode of thinking of “enlightenment rationality.” Here, Button provides a comprehensive re-evaluation of Chinese realist literary criticism by offering an extensive explanation of Cai’s concepts like “type” and “image thought.” He shows how the Marxist theoretician adopted the position that literature/art (differing here from the abstract knowledge of science), is able to produce knowledge of reality through the realization of the “concrete universal”—which is, precisely, the artistic type.

Button also examines the aesthetic critique of modernity in Chinese Marxism through a clever comparative perspective, which brings together, synchronically, Chinese aesthetic Marxism and Western cultural critique concerning the instrumental dimension of capitalist modernity such as New Criticism, the Frankfurt School (represented by Adorno), and Heidegger. The author proposes again, as he does in chapter one, a judicious comparative methodology which enables him, in the very same text, to evaluate the interpretation made by Western critics of Chinese texts on the one hand, and to enact the common theoretical approach shared by Chinese realist literary criticism and those secondary sources on the other hand. Again, Button points out that “what Lukacs terms ‘isolating abstraction’ in modern thought animates the project of New Criticism no less powerfully than Chinese Marxist aesthetics” (p. 137).

In the last two chapters, Button proposes a close reading of two realist socialist popular novels of the 1950s: Yang Mo's *Song of Youth* and Lin Guangbin/Yang Yiyang's *Red Crag*. He assesses these texts using Cai Yi's Marxist aesthetic theory, especially the concept of "image thought" and "type." Button proposes also to read these novels by taking into account their philosophical dimensions. He examines, for example in *Song of Youth*, the way in which the novel stages the passage from a Kantian-bourgeois aesthetic understanding of the relation between art and life to a Hegelian-revolutionary one through the principal protagonist Lin Daojing. What is particularly striking is Button's ability to avoid the lure of the normative, allowing him to reveal the ways in which *Song of Youth* challenges many elements in both the Party-State appropriation and the Western sinological repudiation of the eidaesthetic elements in the Chinese revolution. *Red Crag* deals with political revolutionary struggles in the concentration camp run by the Sino-American Cooperation Organization (SACO) in Chongqing at the end of the 1940s. Through a new reading of these famous but underestimated novels, Button proposes a reflection on modern Chinese revolutionary subjectivity, dealing with the question of Freedom (i.e. being free to believe in—or not believe in—communism) and the possibility for the heroes, Lin Daojing or Li Siyang, to overcome their class origin. Button's primary goal is evidently not to rehabilitate Chinese socialist realist literature, since the evaluation of the "quality" of artistic production is always coined by political and historical limitations. However, his reading of these novels demonstrates that these texts are far more open-minded and complex than they appear when evaluated by the criteria used in the past or by the dominant critique of this so-called "literary propaganda."

This extremely stimulating and richly complex book offers a wide range of global and transhistorical theoretical and literary references, making it an invaluable working tool for students and scholars of comparative literature, philosophy or Chinese studies aiming to familiarize themselves with aesthetic theory in China's twentieth century, and particularly Chinese modern Marxist literature and criticism. Button's fascinating and ambitious work offers a completely new reading of China's modern literary history by proposing to read Chinese literary and theoretical texts, like those of Lu Xun, Yang Mo, or Cai Yi, from the geohistorical perspective of a capitalist modernity that is thoroughly global.

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