THE MAGIC OF CONCEPTS

HISTORY AND THE ECONOMIC IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA

REBECCA E. KARL

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FOR DAVID.

WITH LOVE AND IN MEMORY.

YOU WILL ALWAYS BE MY PERSONAL CONCEPT OF MAGIC.

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CONTENTS

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS IX

INTRODUCTION Repetition and Magic 1

1 The Economic, China, World History: A Critique of Pure Ideology 19

2 The Economic and the State: The Asiatic Mode of Production 40

3 The Economic as Transhistory: Temporality, the Market, and the Austrian School 73

4 The Economic as Lived Experience: Semicolonialism and China 113

5 The Economic as Culture and the Culture of the Economic: Filming Shanghai 141

AFTERWORD 160

NOTES 167

BIBLIOGRAPHY 199

INDEX 213

CHAPTER 4

The Economic as Lived Experience

Semicolonialism and China

Contemporaneity is never "given" but must always be constructed to express what matters.
—ÉRIC ALLIEZ, "What Is—or What Is Not—Contemporary French Philosophy, Today?"

One of the more interesting analyses of semicolonialism in the pre-1949 period in China was by Wang Yanan, a non-Communist Marxist economist and sociologist.[1] For Wang, the point of specifying and analyzing semicolonialism was not for the purpose of creating a revolutionary social unity (as it was for Mao, for example); rather, it was intended to find a way to rejoin the abstractions of Marxism and capitalism as global systems of thought and practice to the specificities of China's current social formation. The current formation (of the late nineteenth century through the 1930s and 1940s) was what Wang (and others) called "the semicolonial socioeconomic formation." In Wang's view, and unlike other theorizations, this formation was characterized by the specific ways in which the commodity form as a material and ideological form had imposed itself upon and been articulated to China's preexisting social relations (themselves in flux and possessing their own logic).[2] In a manner more analytical than most of his contemporaries who also used the term *semicolonial*, Wang's emphasis on the commodity form in his theorization intended to link China's modern socioeconomic history to the global history of capitalism, thus to root conceptually the everyday lives of ordinary Chinese—in all their temporal and material unevenness and contradiction—in larger historico-philosophical apprehensions of economics and society.

Taking a cue from Wang's discussion, this essay explores the fraught question of semicolonialism as it appeared in the 1930s and reappeared in the 1980s and 1990s. I wish to consider the concept in its materialist historico-philosophical mode, as an analysis *not* of the exceptionalism (culturally hybrid or otherwise) but rather of the lived specificity of China's participation in the global capitalist economy. In this sense, the argument here is *not* that semicolonialism as a concept should be revived in either a descriptive or analytical mode. To the contrary, the argument is that, by re-embedding semicolonialism in its proper philosophical mode—as a global analysis from the perspective of a historically specific Chinese reality—it will be possible to see it as the name given to imperialist capitalism as lived in China in the 1930s: it is what some would call China's "colonial modernity" or what I would call just modernity (as all modernity is colonial).[3] When semicolonialism became codified as revolutionary strategy through the later 1930s and 1940s in Mao's historical and practical analytical usage and thence became the incantatory descriptive historical periodization of pre-revolutionary China, and then when it reemerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a description of a historical distortion or an embraceable Chinese (cultural) hybridity, this is when the analytical-conceptual purchase of semicolonialism as a lived experience of modernity in China was transformed into a pure ideology of (historical or cultural) exceptionalism and difference. It became a magic concept.

Temporality and Semicolonialism

As a primarily descriptive category of historicist stages, semicolonialism derives most clearly from V. I. Lenin's usage in his 1916 pamphlet, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*,[4] in which it indicates a way station to full colonization. This definition of the semicolonial foretells the modern passage or transition of all non-Western peoples either into complete colonization by capitalist imperialism (most likely) or, through revolution, into national sovereignty and independence (the path to be sought). Indeed, the Baku conference of September 1920 (the First Congress of the Peoples of the East), convened by the nascent internationalist wing of the new Soviet state (the Comintern), was informed by Lenin's formulation: at Baku, semicolonial countries were seated with colonial ones as part of the same global bloc and were made to speak to the same global problem of

national subjugation/national liberation. The support of the Comintern for national liberation projects in colonial and semicolonial countries just recently had been adopted in the course of the sharp debates between M. N. Roy and Lenin on the National and Colonial Questions during the Second Congress of the Communist International in summer 1920, to which Baku was a follow-up.[5] In this sense, at the time, this formulation was a global revolutionary imperative. However, it also was intended as a historico-philosophical analytic: as a way to think about the global and local nature of national liberation projects and the necessity of class coalitions among nonsovereign peoples in light of the projected Bolshevik victory in the Russian civil war (then ongoing) and the violent capitalist restorations in postwar Europe (also then ongoing).

Through the 1920s, as national and global social, political, cultural, and economic disintegrations became more acute, and hence, as the field of the social itself became more contested in political theory and practice, the concept of semicolonialism also underwent a transformation. New articulations and theorizations increasingly focused not only on the problem of national-state sovereignty in the global arena, nor merely on a descriptive condition of an inevitable historical transition from partial to full colonization, but on the historical-analytical problem of social formation and/or mode of production. These included uneven economic structures globally as articulated to unequal internal social relations of production, as well as the everyday cultural conditions produced in the micro- and macro-interactions of capitalism with received cultures in different localities. Thus, if Lenin's (and, after 1927, Stalin's) emphasis on modern colonialism/semicolonialism focused on the *nationally* constitutive role of uneven global power as a matter of the state, subsequent local rearticulations and reconceptualizations added a concurrent concern with uneven social relations at the local level that, while not separable from the global/nation-state arena, were nevertheless not reducible to it.[6] This refocusing helped contribute to widespread research on the specific socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes structuring life at the level of the lived quotidian. As discussed in previous essays in this volume, in China, these researches helped kick off the social history debate and the agrarian economy debate of the 1930s. Semicolonialism, transformed from being a merely descriptive concept of a historical transition to nation-statism, now became an analytical mode of specifying the temporal asymmetry of everyday life, or what Henri Lefebvre

called in a different context "desynchronization."[7] It provided an analytical optic on the problem of the incommensurate constitutive temporalities of modern social formations at global, regional, national, and local levels simultaneously.

As semicolonialism became a way to figure this simultaneity in temporal terms, it also became necessary to understand how temporal asymmetry was established historically.[8] For this, semifeudalism came to be most closely allied with semicolonialism in the specification of modern China's condition.[9] Also a heavily contested concept, feudalism and hence semifeudalism were used to refer to different things by different scholars/political factions. Guomindang (GMD, or Nationalist Party) theorists of the 1930s, such as Tao Xisheng, used the term *fengjian shili* (feudal forces) as a concept that revolved around the problem of the remnants (*canyu*) of feudalism in the *political* arena. In Tao's usage, this was meant as a uniquely Chinese politico-cultural asymmetry established between a putative advanced political economy of the urban/global in confrontation with the agrarian backwardness assumed to be still dominantly represented in the central state form (despotic or semidespotic). Here, "remnants" were a social-political problem to be rectified by superior social rationalization undertaken through the rationalization of the state. This rationalization would bring the asymmetries into alignment, it was suggested. Meanwhile, Communist theorists used the terms *feudalism* and *semifeudalism* to define the socioeconomic relations characterized by the overlapping and mutually reinforcing surpluses (*guosheng*; *shengyu*) demanded by the two types of socioeconomic and political exploitation then dominating Chinese social relations: the precapitalist/feudal (extra-economic) appropriation and the imperialist-capitalist (surplus value) appropriation of surplus.[10] In this sense, and taking into account differences in usage, the combination of semicolonialism and semifeudalism (the "two semis") was articulated around problems of residue, surplus, and excess as problems of the lived experience of ordinary Chinese in a global age of imperialist capitalism.

Semicolonialism and Incompletion

Substantially following Lenin, many Chinese in the 1930s saw semicolonialism as a temporary political condition marked by the partial autonomy of the national state, circumscribed by unequal treaties and territorially

constrained by "concessions" to imperialist powers. For example, in 1937 Chen Hongjin, summarizing the most commonsensical view, specified the parameters and special characteristics of semicolonialism in a popular pamphlet:

> In general, semicolonial countries have a colonial character. Precapitalist social relations are dominant [*zhan youshi*] in their social formations, and imperialism is in the leading position [*zhan tongzhi diwei*] in their national politics, economics, and societies. Yet, aside from these general characteristics, semicolonial countries also have their particularities. . . . These can be encapsulated in the following six points:
>
> 1. The transitional nature of semicolonialism;
> 2. Formal political sovereignty;
> 3. The importance for imperialism of capital export;
> 4. The demand for national unification and the establishment of state capitalism;
> 5. The vacillation between dictatorial and democratic politics;
> 6. The role played by the rejection of global capitalism by semicolonial revolutions.[11]

In further explanation, Chen clarified that the transitional nature (*guoduxing*) of semicolonialism was attributable to semicolonial spaces being a remnant of the imperialist struggle to partition the globe. Here, he named Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Siam, the South American nations, Egypt, and Mexico as the major semicolonial countries of the time, each characterized by a different albeit cognate form of remainder.[12] This globally remnant character, according to Chen, informs not only the international situation of the named *national peoples* (as semisovereign) but also the future of the global sphere itself, as transitional either to a world of national-state equivalence or to imperialist consolidation (as far as Chen was concerned, both of these outcomes were plausible). In this sense, the resolution to semicolonial situations would decide whether semicolonies would become full colonies—thus allowing imperialist capitalism to extend its temporal and spatial dominion completely over the globe—or whether semicolonial peoples would become independent within sovereign nation-states, thus contributing to the further differentiation of global space and time at the level of the national state (with or without capitalism as the socioeconomic

form). Whatever the outcome, still in the balance in 1937, Chen insisted that a semicolony was not and could not be an enduring or autonomous formation; rather, it was a temporary or transitional one, constituted by and a remnant of modern imperialism's contemporary inability to complete or spatially consolidate itself, as it were.[13]

Chen's commonsensical version of incompleteness—the one most common in China at the time—was not the only possible one. Indeed, it is possible to see incompletion through what Slavoj Žižek calls "the logic of systemic or structural totalities."[14] It is in this idiom that Wang Yanan designated not political sovereignty as the most important aspect of the semicolonial condition but the social relations of production he, and others in that era, named comprador-bureaucratic capitalism. As discussed in the third essay, the major constituent historical marker of this social formation for Wang was the violent intrusion of the commodity form as material and ideological effectivity and its restructuring of Chinese socioeconomic and ideological relations. Conceiving of imperialist capitalism as an extended global historical moment of tendential unity necessarily characterized by the constant reproduction of incompletion (unevenness) at any given level, Wang saw semicolonialism not as a "transitional" form of incompletion (although he did see semifeudalism as transitional between the landlord economy and an economy more fully saturated by capitalist social relations), nor as an exceptional form of Chinese socioeconomics (that is, it was Chinese but not exceptional). Rather, for him, semicolonialism was a form of ongoing global primitive capital accumulation carried out in the context of an overall crisis in global capitalism.[15] In other words, for Wang, semicolonialism was not a problem of remnants in an already constituted global realm of imperialist capitalism emanating from a Euro-American/Japanese center, as with Chen Hongjin's and cognate conceptualizations. To the contrary, semicolonialism was a problem of a locally instantiated global formation characterized by a surplus (*shengyu*) exceeding or escaping the tendential move toward capitalist totalization and real capitalist subsumption.

In this idiom, Wang commented upon the relationship of China's feudal form to other versions of feudalism in world history: "Other feudal formations were erected upon the basis of feudal land relations, where land was not alienable and where labor's relationship to the land rendered it unfree. The foundations of Chinese feudalism, however, were built upon a landlord economy, where land was generally alienable and where labor

was generally free to move. Where there is free exchange between land and labor or labor power, there is the basic premise for the development of a capitalist commodity economy" (40). In this light, Wang continues, the Trotskyites and bourgeois economists, who emphasized that China's semifeudal, semicolonial economy was a commodity economy built atop an incipiently indigenous capitalist economy, were partially correct, even if one had to disregard what he called "the reactionary services they have rendered on behalf of imperialism, compradors, and feudal landlords" (40). Bracketing for the moment the political implications of such a position in the fraught political context of the time, and looking at the situation from the perspective of alienable land, free labor, and a well-developed market, Wang conceded that China's economy from the Song dynasty onward could indeed appear to be an incipiently capitalist economy, whose sprouts somehow were blocked. And yet, he argues,

> the kind of freedom that emerged from this not only is quite distant from the kind of freedom demanded by capitalism. In its very essence [*zai benzhi shang*], one could even say that it was not the kind of freedom demanded by capitalism at all. For this reason, its progressiveness is contained within feudalism at best, and cannot be encapsulated within capitalism. It is thus progressive only within feudalism and remains feudal; under that external appearance of freedom are hidden all sorts of obstacles to the development of the reality of capitalism. (41–42)

It is thus beneath the appearance of "free land and labor"—which, in any case, he notes, have been fetishized in bourgeois economics as atomized attributes rather than structural aspects of a total socioeconomic formation—that Wang seeks the affinities and structural correspondences between China's historical feudalism and its semicolonial, semifeudal instantiation.

The key to these affinities resides in the "comprador-bureaucratic class" (*maiban guanliao jieji*), which he (unlike his compatriots of the time or since) designates as a *structurally necessary element* of China's interactions with and articulation to global capitalism.[16] This structural necessity did not vitiate for Wang the utmost importance of struggles over political ideologies and state power. However, his recognition of such a structural element did prevent him from displacing the historicized and politicized products of China's particular situation completely unto the global sphere of imperialism, even while it also prevented him from mischaracterizing China's

preimperialist economy as bearing the sprouts of capitalism. Hence, while recognizing the integral role of capitalist imperialism in producing China's modern socioeconomic formation, Wang insisted that this formation could not be reduced either to its global or its local aspects.[17] It is for this reason that Wang, unlike many 1930s CCP theorists or GMD economists, rejected the notion that there were neatly demarcated foreign and Chinese economic sectors in spatially distinct realms. He also did not accept the Trotskyite position that there was no point in distinguishing between foreign and Chinese economic sectors at all. Wang Yanan—as ever, unconcerned with CCP, GMD, or Trotskyite orthodoxies instrumentalized as revolutionary or counterrevolutionary practices—argued instead that the particular historical formation of capitalism in its semicolonial form had demanded structural revisions *in capitalism itself* at the same time as it forced structural revisions in China's relations of production/social formation. That is, refusing to hold "capitalism" stable, Wang outlined a complex dialectic between the global capitalist system and its encounter with the geographically uneven indigenous economies in China. With this complex dialectic and historical incommensurability, Wang argued, "capitalist economics can assist only to a certain degree in the understanding of China's economy" (43).

Indeed, as he specified:

> With the deepening of the semicolonial situation, even our "comprador" economists have progressively lost the vitality of the reformist wealth and power [*fuqiang*] economics of several decades ago; like fanning dying embers in the current situation, they occasionally spout a few phrases about [economic] construction that have nothing to do with the real situation in order to animate the scene. This explains how deeply we have fallen into the poison of consumer economic theory [i.e., Austrian economics], which has continuously submerged our understanding of our own economy in a dense fog of magic. (44)

That is, according to Wang, the "consumer economic theory" pioneered by the Austrians and taken up by Chinese economists (as discussed in the third essay in this volume) failed to comprehend the particular structural totality of a local economy in a determinate global historical context. In such a light, neither the "mechanical instrumentalism" of Stalinist economics nor the "opportunism" of what Wang called "vulgar mainstream econo-

mists" was sufficient to produce a real understanding of China's semicolonial situation. This is because China's economy could not be "managed as if it were a capitalist commodity economy," a position perversely arrived at by mainstream economists through their dismissal of the historical particularity of the modern situation and through their use of "citations from the classics to explain that China has already been a commodified society [for a long time]" (46). As Wang Yanan earlier lamented in the latter vein: "During the May Fourth Movement, I recall there was some national essence journal that published some major essay praising Confucius. In this essay, they took the several phrases from the Analects—e.g., 'Let the producers be many and the consumers few'—. . . to indicate a Confucian concept of the economy and thus to produce Confucius as a 'major economic thinker.' Even though this type of argument is on the wane, nevertheless . . . it can be seen to persist."[18]

According to Wang, instead of this kind of faux analogizing through citationalism, "a method that merely succeeded in concealing China's current situation in a purported historical continuity," and instead of this attempt to build commensurability between China's past and its present, when there was none to be built—the culturally essentialist position he so deplored (see my discussion in the third essay)—it was necessary to recognize that "feudal relations have been compradorized [*maiban hua le*], and [that] the activities of comprador capital also exhibit the special characteristics of feudal exploitation" (48). This recognition, in turn, required a recognition that not only is "China's economy constantly under the influence of the . . . situation of the global capitalist economy; . . . but, by the same token, the global economy is also directly or indirectly influenced by the Chinese economic situation" (50). Only with such a dual recognition would it be possible "to expose the real mutual relations between economies" (50).

And yet he cautioned that China's economic history could not be understood through the narrativization of stages leading to capitalism through the mechanical use of "critical economic categories." (Here, he was essentially refuting the utility of the social history debates in clarifying economic historical matters, even though he acknowledged that the "critical economists" who had participated in the debates were more progressive than mainstream academic or state economists [46–47].) As he noted, that type of narrativization started from the premise of "what the development of capitalism would be, rather than explicate where capitalism came from" (46).

That is, it was far too teleological. By contrast, to understand a semicolonial society such as China's, it was particularly important, Wang thought, to research capitalism's derivation and not its deviant or distorted path of nondevelopment. In this regard, Wang wrote, "evidently, the residual elements of the traditional economy are being restructured by the capitalist commodity economy, and at the same time, they constantly act as a series of constraints upon the elements of the capitalist economy, either by contesting or adapting to them" (52–53). This dialectic of interaction led Wang to see semicolonialism in China not as a spatially or temporally (exceptionally) *Chinese* transitional moment but as a distinct historical moment of primitive capital accumulation on a global and local scale simultaneously (what David Harvey might call a moment in the intensification of capital accumulation[19]). This was an accumulation effected not under the direction of an independently constituted or constitutive Chinese national bourgeoisie, but rather under the constituted and constitutive class of "comprador-capitalists," a class that corresponded to and was created by the structurally necessary alteration of global capitalism in its semicolonial form.

In this sense, semicolonialism as primitive capital accumulation at a particular moment in global capitalist expansion could not be understood through a chronologically conceived confrontation expressed as a transition from "primitive accumulation" (*yuanshi jilei*) to capital accumulation (*ziben jilei*) proper, as if these were separable temporalities or spatialities of activity that mutually excluded one another. Rather, in keeping with Marx's concept of primitive capital accumulation understood as the basic condition of possibility for the continuous movement of capital around the globe,[20] Wang's concept of primitive capital accumulation articulated the excess of feudal exploitation (its extra-economic dimension) to the surplus value demanded by capitalism as the historical socioeconomic form of the semicolonial social relations of China's current situation. And China was not the sole constituent of these global relations of articulated excess/surplus. Rather, China's social relations, while obviously shaped by and lived through China's unique history and situation, were part of a larger global trend of primitive capital accumulation, which constrained while informing the particular possible directions of social transformation, in China as elsewhere.

In short, Wang's conceptualization of the semicolonial did not reduce the so-called feudal elements of the Chinese economy to a past temporal-

ity that corresponded to an endlessly reproduced spatial/territorial locatedness and boundedness comprised of archaic residues. Nor was the semifeudal and semicolonial a uniquely Chinese form of national incompletion (whether understood as political or economic incompletion or as the global incompletion of imperialist capitalism). Even less did Wang reduce the urban/global to a concept of the modern that corresponded to either an ahistorical cultural essence ("Western genius") or a historicist standard of scientificity divorced from a structural totality or constrained by a presumed universal and historicist unidirectionality to historical development. Rather, he recognized these spheres of local and global space-time as mutually productive of the unevenness of a historical moment understood as a simultaneously local and global formation dominantly characterized by the restructuration of *both* capitalism and China through the never-ending and ongoing process of primitive capital accumulation at all available scales simultaneously. In this sense, for Wang and with regard to contemporary global social relations, capitalism and feudalism were co-temporal and mutually productive of one another, thus yielding the semicolonial economic formation. Indeed, it was precisely this structural totality that characterized modernity as a lived everyday of imperialist capitalism exceeding the constraints of its local and global instantiations. In this sense, semicolonialism (just as modernity) was understood as a global necessity, as a regime of formal (not real) subsumption.[21]

Clearly, Wang's concept of incompletion (where "completion" does not exist) is far different from the incompletion that connotes a fundamental lag or lack, a "backwardness" to be filled with an inevitable content waiting to arrive. (In other words, his is not a form of modernization convergence theory as universal history or as a pure ideology.) Rather, for him, incompletion was the never-ending condition of primitive capital accumulation on a world scale that would, if possible, be locked into place by imperialist capitalism so as to retain China (and other locations) as an open field of continuous surplus exploitation and appropriation in the process of unequal exchange and capital accumulation on a global scale.

Semicolonialism and Revolutionary Necessity

In 1932 Zhang Wentian, at the time recently returned from Moscow and an important member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as its

propaganda minister, wrote a scathing rebuttal to Ren Shu (aka Ren Xu), a Sichuan-based Trotskyite who had previously worked with the Central Peasant Bureau prior to the 1927 GMD counterrevolution.[22] Ren had argued—in keeping with Trotskyist positions at the time—that China should be considered a fully capitalist society whose feudal relations were no longer relevant because of the domination of its economy through the invasion of commodities from abroad. In rebuttal, Zhang, upholding the CCP orthodoxy of the time, argued that

> in China, imperialists use political and economic indebtedness as well as the indemnities paid by China after military defeats in order to monopolize China's economic resources, achieve their spheres of influence, and render the regional landlords and warlords, as well as capitalists, into their own tools. In order to monopolize and control China's economic resources, they must establish their banks, factories, tools of communication, and commercial mechanisms. They rely upon these (we won't even mention here the extra-economic methods) to sell their commodities, extract China's natural resources, and enslave China's industrial and peasant masses.[23]

This form of "enslavement," Zhang continued, was designed not to transform China into a sovereign economic entity but rather to "destroy the productive forces of the colonies and semicolonies, not develop these forces."[24] In this sense, the rapid growth of the commodity economy in the rural areas was a symbol not of Chinese economic productivity and the transformation of feudal relations into capitalist ones but rather of "the strengthening of landlords', merchants', and usurers' exploitation of the Chinese masses, [which] has created a huge amount of bankruptcy and unemployment as well as unprecedented famine and starvation."[25] In this orthodox party view, semicolonialism and semifeudalism were forms of the failure of Chinese social and political relations to be transformed from a traditional to a more fully modern type.

Subsequent to Zhang's and other party members' specifications through the social history debates of the historical parameters of the two semis, the CCP came to accept the two semis as their basic historical narrative of the current situation. In addition, at approximately the same time as Wang Yanan, and yet unwilling to settle philosophically on unevenness and incompletion as an insoluble analytic, Mao Zedong, who was responsible

both for the further theorization of semicolonialism and its codification as revolutionary strategy, wrote in December 1935: "One of the main political and economic characteristics of a semicolonial country is the weakness of its national bourgeoisie." This weakness, he pointed out, was a major manifestation of "China's uneven political and economic development [that] has given rise to the uneven development of the revolution." In Mao's view, it would be the task of revolutionary strategy and activity to change the revolutionary situation "from a state of unevenness to a certain degree of evenness . . . [and from] a localized one into a nationwide one."[26]

In other words, for Mao, semicolonialism was a type of specific nationally contained multiclass formation to which a united front form of revolutionary tactics (*cilüe*) could broadly correspond; moreover, semicolonialism was the temporally uneven dimension of the current situation, understood as a tendentially unified but dispersed social and historical struggle narrativized as "revolutionary." That is, the semicolonial was a tactical and ever-changing temporalized spatial conflict in a revolutionary mode, whose contemporary historical-tactical object was the seizure of state power and its imposition over a particular territory (China) in the strategic pursuit of socialism (global). In this sense, this conflict was part not only of a struggle for the state and its rearticulated relationship to the nation but also a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, whose dimensions were always-already global. As an effort to specify a socialist revolutionary praxis in an uneven national and global terrain, Mao's theory of semicolonialism was of crucial analytical importance.

At the same time, semicolonialism for Mao pertained to a national historical narrative periodization, whose temporal transcendence was to be the object of the Chinese people's revolutionary practice. In this historicist idiom—more widely recognized, perhaps, from the famous 1939 textbook titled "The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party"[27]—Mao deployed the concept of semicolonialism to indicate the parameters of China's specific current situation in revolutionary terms; this was a condition to be overcome through revolutionary activity led by the CCP. That is, for Mao, it was absolutely necessary to grasp fully the current moment, along with its past, in order to grasp the possibilities for action in the present.[28] His particular invocation of semicolonialism in this text comes with his comment that "it is certainly not the purpose of the imperialist powers invading China to transform feudal China into capitalist China. On the

contrary, their purpose is to transform China into their own semicolony or colony."[29] (We can see how he mobilizes here Zhang Wentian's prior theorization.) The remainder of the work deploys the concept in the specific sense just indicated: that the object of all genuine revolutionary practice—and particularly that led by the CCP—would need to take on the dual task of toppling feudalism and imperialist capitalism simultaneously. In other words, for Mao semicolonialism was a logic of revolutionary necessity in the idiom of a historical imperative actualized through a united front of progressive social classes. The historical imperative was informed both by a global situation—the antifascist war, of which China's war of resistance against Japan was one component—and a local situation of capitalist collusion with feudal forces (landlords, etc.). It was a historical stage to be overcome.

In this sense if, for Lenin, for example, semicolonialism as a concept was the unstable product of his pre-1914 concentration on the analysis of capitalism in Russia as confronted with his wartime (Great War) and postwar focus on the problem of global imperialism,[30] then for Mao, semicolonialism as a concept was already a consolidated historicist stage of history. It was an established historical period for certain non-Western countries, such as China, which, in the midst of the extended global capitalist and political moment of crisis, whose death throes were signaled by the rise of fascism and the global spread of antifascist war, were also beset by local contradictions demanding revolutionary solutions. This historical period was characterized by the growth and development of national and global unevenness simultaneously, a simultaneity that yielded not only revolutionary necessity but also national and global unevenness in revolutionary consciousness. In this sense, semicolonialism for Mao was a historical argument about the necessary tactical revolutionary overcoming of unevenness as a strategy first of national revolution and, next, of global revolution.

However, in Maoist circles and in Maoist China, semicolonialism soon became an incantation. It was dogmatized in Chinese scholarly production during the Maoist years as an all-purpose descriptive term of blocked transitions (to capitalism/socialism). Its specific revolutionary purchase was blunted by being turned into a cliché, and its potential analytical problematizations of history as simultaneously global and national were dropped. It is in relation to this dogmatization that contemporary debates on semicolonialism were joined by academic historians in the 1980s and 1990s.

They were joined, however, not to complicate or resuscitate the analytical utility of the concept, nor to better understand to what these concepts pertained as they came into being historically, but rather in the service of the repudiation of revolution and its naming as a historical aberration so as to reassert China's national historical and cultural uniqueness.

Semicolonialism and the Scientifically Displaced Temporality of Transition

In recent decades, the problem of contradictory temporalities of historical experience has been reconceived as a problem of national historical obstacles to be eliminated and radical cultural particularities to be burnished and exported rather than as the very stuff and process of historical struggle and of historicity themselves. That is, while contradictions famously were instrumentalized by Mao and the Maoist CCP as revolutionary strategy, nevertheless, philosophically and often also as a matter of practice, never-ending and yet always-changing contradictions were seen as the site of the very historical itself. These days history seems to happen elsewhere and is supposed to proceed more harmoniously. Indeed, on a dominant contemporary academic and media view, China has emerged from the now-condemned anachronism of revolution and socialism, which can be cast out of historical and national time and recast as remnants of a particularistic time informed by the persistence of feudalism in the political sphere (the version much touted by those such as Qin Hui and Roderick MacFarquhar, albeit differently).[31] In this perspective, China of the 1990s can thence be figured as returning to an originary modern transition to capitalism felicitously located as immanent in the 1930s semicolonial (hybrid cultural) formation, subsequently blocked as China was hijacked first by the Japanese and then by socialist revolution. Here, the Maoist period is seen as an aberration, or to use François Furet's destructive notion, as a dérapage, or brief parenthesis opened in an otherwise inertial trend of history that goes toward a predetermined end.[32]

In this incipient climate of revolutionary ambivalence and soon repudiation, by the late 1980s and 1990s, after a half century of appearing as talismanic incantation, the semicolonial and semifeudal characterization that had authorized and analytically underpinned the revolution and its major historical tasks and agents since the 1930s was not immune to interrogation.[33]

The initial moments of the debate on the two semis emerged just prior to and then coterminous with the theory of the "primary stage of socialism" promoted at the 1987 Thirteenth Party Congress by then-Party Secretary, Zhao Ziyang. The "primary stage" was essentially a backtracking theory of Chinese history; it promoted not a leap into socialism but an era characterized by a slower accumulation of national wealth that would endure potentially for a century or more before another assault on socialism could be made. First in newspapers and later in academic journals, this new theory spawned controversy over China's choice in the 1940s to take a socialist rather than (quasi-)capitalist path. Specifically, the aborted path through the "new democratic stage" of the revolution—embarked upon in 1950 and then summarily abandoned by the middle of that decade—was condemned as voluntaristic and historically ungrounded. Soon enough, the "choice" problem led to a questioning of the whole "two semis" designation.

The first to reopen the question of the semis formulation in academic circles was historian Wang Jinglu, in an essay published in 1986 in the venerable *Lishi yanjiu* [Researches on history]—a journal that had recently been rehabilitated after being shut down during the Cultural Revolution.[34] Wang construed "semifeudalism" as a progressive stage beyond feudalism, thus not as an appropriate target of revolution but rather an appropriate place for China to have developed its own unique economic path—neither socialist nor capitalist. A rejoinder to Wang was published by historian Li Shiyue in the same journal in 1988—after the "primary stage" theory debate had been joined.[35] Li's text took Wang to task for his notion that semifeudalism indicated progress. That is, according to Li, semifeudalism had to be considered not uniquely (culturally) Chinese and progressive but exceptionally (historically) Chinese and stagnant. Subsequently, from 1989 through 1998, the debate proceeded in various other journals, including *Jindaishi yanjiu* [Researches in modern Chinese history], *Xueshu yanjiu* [Scholarly researches], and *Makesi zhuyi yanjiu* [Researches in Marxism], all major scholarly journals rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution and publishing scholarly works again in the fields of history and philosophy. In the wake of the events of 1989, the link between the semis and the "primary stage" theory became less overtly the point of departure, although a repudiation of revolutionary necessity and the history of revolution became commonplace.[36] In place of abstract theorization, historian Chen Jinlong pedantically traced the origins of the terms *semi-*

colonialism and *semifeudalism*, so as to demonstrate that they were foreign imports and thus not necessarily suited to the Chinese situation.[37] A response was published by Zhang Qinghai, who disputed whether "semicolonial" indicated the problem of social formation (Chen believed it did; Zhang maintained it did not) or whether it is only "semifeudal" that had that significance.[38]

Whatever the technicalities of the case, Zhang's comment at the end of his essay summarily undermined the semis as history: "This author believes that 'semi' [*ban*] is merely an empty word and has no real meaning; it is not like a method that would make the colonial question into a problem of social formation. Thus, in historiography, it is perhaps more scientific to not use the 'semi' prefix. . . . But this author also believes that whether or not one uses 'semi' is not a question of principle and that it is not necessary to seek unanimity on the issue."[39] Thus effacing a half century of historical practice and discourse on revolutionary necessity—precisely as a problem of principle—the use of "semi" was dismissed, reduced to an individual choice rather than a potent historical analytic or party-approved incantation, perhaps subject to refinement and further specification.

These and cognate interrogations authorized historians if not to repudiate outright the "two semis" formulation in its minimal aspect as nominalism then at least to evacuate the concept;[40] it became, by virtue of this evacuation, reconstrued through the lens of a different form of transitional time: to argue for an essential historicist continuity between the 1930s and the 1990s, with the revolutionary period dropped out of the equation or put into the Furet-like brief parenthesis. In this vein, one participant in the decade's debates, historian Ma Min, called China's "two semis" society of the 1930s a "lopsided" structural totality that resulted from "the confrontation between the universalization of modern capitalism and the narrow tracks of feudal society." For Ma, therefore, "semi" was most properly understood as a "special transitional social formation" (*yizhong tesu de guodu xingtai shehui*) that accounts for "the bizarre contradictions that arose and developed from the structure and movement of modern Chinese society [and that] all revolve around the combination of its continuous transition to capitalism and its ultimate inability to complete this transition." Ma goes on to explain that transition must be understood as a historical process that "leads from the partial to the complete qualitative transformation of society."[41] And, whereas some transitions have been "spontaneous" (the

Euro-American variety), others have been "coerced."[42] Japan and Russia are examples of those that completed the latter (coerced) process, while China and India are examples of those that have yet to complete any process. Japan and Russia, Ma concludes, powerfully demonstrate that "if one can correctly take up the challenge, without losing time and wasting the opportunity, and if one relies upon the power of the state to promote reform and to boldly transplant capitalist modes of production, then less advanced nations are completely capable of realizing social transformation and leaping into the ranks of advanced industrialized nations."[43] Needless to say, those who did not take up the challenge correctly remained mired in transition, or worse, stagnated and regressed. On this account, China failed the historical test because of its inability to complete either a spontaneous or coerced transition to capitalism.

Here, transition is not a contingent historical situation without a telos—as in Wang's account—but rather unidirectional and teleologically indicated: anything other than the correct path (capitalism) toward so-called completion is deviant and historically aberrant. In Ma's estimation, the "semi" condition yielded neither historical regression nor progress, a stagnant situation from which the socialist state was born and which it, too, failed to overcome, thus sending China into a further half century of fruitless searching, not for the correctly mandated transition to capitalism but rather for a historically anachronistic and ultimately futile transition to socialism. For Ma, the failure to complete the capitalist transition either before or out of the semi condition confirms the correctness of the post–Mao Deng/Zhao theory of the "primary stage of socialism," which assigns China to a special stage of transitional development intended to get the nation off its distorted historical track back onto a normal (*zhengchang*) path of development.[44]

Partially refuting the logic, although joining in Ma's assessment of the significance of semi as a blocked transitional formation newly invigorated by the primary stage theory, Nie Xiwen rejoined that both "semis" had their advanced and regressive aspects, as any transitional social formation would have. Indeed, as Nie points out, the very definition of a "transitional formation" presupposes both residues of older (outmoded) formations and sprouts of newer (progressive) ones.[45] As Nie recounts, it was in fact precisely out of the recognition of the combined unity of regression and progress ("transition") that the historic Third Plenum of the Thirteenth Party

Congress (November 1987) fashioned the "primary stage" theory. As Nie cites the conclusion on this question adopted by the Congress: "Because our socialism emerged from the womb of a semicolonial, semifeudal society, the level of our productive forces greatly lagged behind that of advanced capitalist countries. This determined that we have to go through a relatively lengthy primary stage period in order to realize what many other countries have achieved under capitalism in industrialization: commodification, socialization of production, and modernization."[46]

A strong displacement of contingent historicity unto a scientific teleology of stages characterized by universal processes of transition from one to the next marks both Ma's and Nie's commentaries. Indeed, both rely for intelligibility upon a normalization of the concept of transition as a universal, unilinear, and necessary normative transition to capitalism, where the revolution and Maoism can only appear as aberrations. This normalization rejects transition as a socially immanent process or historically contingent one. For, the state, whose form and function comprised an important object of revolutionary struggle during Mao's time, turns out not to have been the appropriate object of struggle at all; rather, the state was apparently sufficient unto itself to secure China's needs, if only Mao and the revolutionaries had left it to its proper technocratic devices. In this reinstalling of the state at the center of history—rather than as the object of historical struggle—these theories of transition are utterly unlike Mao's earlier theory of new democracy (despite their occasional rhetorical bows toward a lamented aborted path of new democratic politics).

Indeed, Mao's new democracy, as articulated in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was an attempt to deal with the problem of China's devastated domestic economic and relatively isolated global situation with a theory of the immanence of social conflict in the historical determination of state form and the directionality of historical development themselves. That is, "new democracy" in Mao's version was a contingency mandating not pure capital accumulation (by the state) but rather conflicting and contradictory struggles inherited from the immediate past (the war, the GMD period, etc.). Hence, through the early to mid-1950s, "transition" in Mao's sense was certainly acknowledged as a temporal-spatial necessity to consolidate some version of the socialist project through the aegis of an unstable state intent on shaping history rather than merely presiding over it; however, it was not a taken-for-granted unidirectional dynamic of history whose form

could be known in advance. By contrast, more contemporary theories of transition assume an untheorized transhistorical state that is not a product of the historical process but rather resides above it. While this state bears a superficial resemblance to the Leninist revolutionary state, Lenin's version, philosophically and historically, was the product of class struggle, historical conflict, and a philosophy based in principles of contradiction. These days, the Chinese state is no doubt a form of Leninist bureaucratic state, yet it more closely resembles not the philosophical theorization of the state in Lenin but rather the actual Soviet state under Stalin. During Mao's time, the state *was* one of the primary arenas of transitionary struggle—it was what the transition was about! Today, the state is taken as the sine qua non of a wished-for and never completed process of transition that stands ahistorically above the stuff of struggle itself.[47] One could almost venture the suggestion that the current version of the state, as an ideology of historical centrality, bears a strong resemblance to that state posited in the once-discredited Asiatic mode of production theory, as discussed in the second essay in this book. This becomes an even stronger linkage with the more recent subsequent mutations of party-state theory into the "Three Represents" and the newest theory of "Harmonious Society," where the state is said to be one with the people and not the product or representation of social struggle at all.

It is upon the premise of a transhistorical state unitary with society that the "primary stage of socialism" theory (which scientifically secures history through the state), in its link via a transitional formation to the "semi" formulation, provides the historico-ideological bridge over which the 1930s and the 1990s can be spatio-temporally reconnected as an apparently continuous historical process. That is, by purposefully dropping the socialist period out of historical consideration, the proper tasks of the Chinese nation-state can be said to be the accumulation of capital and wealth rather than the revolutionary upending of social exploitation and domination. Meanwhile, the CCP can be seen to embody that state, not as a matter of historical contingency but as the rightful essence of China qua enduring cultural entity. In this vein, current appeals to transition produce a mode of global and intranational historical comparability based upon the well-known Weberian method that secures comparability between two (or more) already constituted commensurate entities. Just as the state (and the nation-state) is central to the theories of "primary stage" and of

"transition," while remaining untheorized in their historicist teleological implications, the category of the modern (*jindai* or *xiandai*) is also central to these articulations but reduced to a straightforward acceptance of historicist capitalist-style modernization (*jindaihua* or *xiandaihua*) as its exhaustive content. Thus are contemporaneity—in Éric Alliez's sense, which forms the epigraph to this essay—and historicity displaced. This displacement serves to reaffirm national-global continuity as temporal universality through the recuperative gesture of science secured by and to the state. As discussed in the first essay, this type of approach merely helps affirm a supposed universal transhistorical and comparable desire named modernization/capitalism, while reducing the historically contingent concept of "transition" to a magic concept of historicist teleology and naturalized transhistorical temporality.

Semicolonialism as Comparison

In his introduction to a book about 1990s China, Shanghai cultural theorist Wang Xiaoming observed that current paradigms are wholly inadequate to an investigation of contemporary Chinese society. He writes:

> How can we state anything clearly about contemporary China by using mechanical binary concepts alone? It [China] is clearly not a capitalist nation, but it is also quite clear that it is no longer the socialist nation it was previously; it is just in the process of forming a "market" that is not "planned," but this really has little to do with a capitalist market of "free competition"; it is in the process of importing Western technology, management systems, cultural products, and values systems, but it would be quite difficult for it to "transform" itself into some type of "modern" Western nation in any foreseeable future.

From this series of negative determinations, Wang observes that "it is really impossible to know how to define today's China, as it conforms in not one respect to any theoretical model, whether one already well known to us, or a newer one imported from Euro-America."[48]

Wang's observation echoes left-Guomindang theorist Tao Xisheng's question of late 1928 that was at the heart of the social history controversy of the ensuing years. Tao queried at that time: "What kind of society is China's anyway [*zhongguo daodi shi shenma shehui*]?"[49] As Arif Dirlik has

noted in his discussion of the controversy, the investigations into Chinese history undertaken by Tao, among many others, in an attempt to answer this question "resulted in the rather unfortunate description of a major portion of Chinese history as transitional"[50]—transitional, that is, from an imperfect model of feudalism to an unfulfilled model of capitalism. While Wang Xiaoming resists the temptation to exceptionalize contemporary China or to scientifically displace China's contemporary situation unto a ready-made concept of "transition," the question he raises, in its resonance with Tao's, is indicative of how the 1990s can sometimes appear as if it were a repetition of the 1930s. Indeed, seemingly similar experiences of historical and social dislocation in the 1990s have led to a seemingly repetitive posing of the same questions as those of the 1930s. Repetitiveness poses problems in thinking about comparisons between the 1930s decade and the 1990s.

As we have seen, many scholars simply conceal the problem of repetition or comparison under the pseudo-answer provided by transition as a narrative of national continuity. With this answer, scholars have found themselves in the peculiar conundrum of revisiting the problem of social specification first opened in the 1930s while simultaneously upholding the designation of China as transitional in the current period. This depressingly endless transitionism is upheld by eliding the very revolutionary years that supposedly did nothing to correctly bring the social formation and mode of production into a harmonious correspondence. Indeed, the Maoist period is usually now seen as having precipitated an untenable *noncorrespondence* between social relations and productive forces and, equally importantly, a *noncorrespondence* between China and the global capitalist economy. Because of the Maoist emphasis on transforming the relations of production ahead of developing the productive forces, the "primary stage of socialism" is now required to modernize the forces, it is said.[51] This apprehension of the problem leads to the denegation and even repudiation of the self-understanding of the revolutionary period as a historical attempt to come to terms with contradictions within and between the Chinese social and global formations of the 1930s–1940s in the context of crisis, whether financial panic or total war. That is, the very point of the revolution in its own terms was to challenge the primacy of forces of production through the insistent transformation of productive relations so as to place the leading classes (the peasant-proletariat alliance) in charge of the productive forces

themselves. The current apprehension thus displaces the revolutionary period and the whole project of socialism, treating it as an Other to Chinese history proper.

Tao Xisheng's along with the contemporary insistence on a transitional formation—of 2,000 years' or 100–150 years' duration, respectively—could remind us of French theorist Étienne Balibar's attempt to argue for the necessity to conceive a social formation in transition as governed by a transitional mode of production, where the formation and mode in "normal" circumstances would be conceived as mutually reproductive internal effectivities of a single expressive structure.[52] Balibar elucidates that in a transitional social formation, relations of production and productive forces do not correspond. Theories of China's endless transition could be said to conform to Balibar's formulation. Yet, as Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst elaborate in their critique of Balibar, in *any* mode of production (properly so called), the relations and forces of production must be related in the mode of *noncorrespondence*, because "each moment of reproduction is also a moment of dissolution of the structure of the mode of production; the concept of a transitional mode of production is also the concept of its suppression."[53] In other words, *all* modes of production, if one is to take the theory seriously, are "transitional" insofar as there are always elements of the past and the future in the present formation, which will inform the direction of the next mode. Thus, "transition" actually names nothing at all other than a banal truism of all historical moments.

The point here is twofold: by insisting on the necessity of endless "transition," the specificities and unevennesses of the lived experiences of any contemporary moment can be politically justified as the historically necessary cost to be paid for social/national completion (the full arrival, as it were, at some other mode). This is precisely what some contemporary theorists and policy wonks in and outside China maintain: that the sacrifices of, for example, the peasantry and the old working classes must be tolerated and endured to enable the nation to progress in the proper direction. (This is the Chinese liberal/neoliberal intellectual position, *tout court*.) Secondly, then, in the contemporary case, the resort to "transition" under the "primary stage" theory as a phony state–Marxist alibi for capitalism constitutes both a political and a quasi-theoretical effort to turn the "irrational" preoccupation and policy of the Mao years on transforming relations of production before the productive forces were fully developed

into a more "rational" policy of building the productive forces in a context defined by the supposedly exceptional *noncorrespondence* of the two. This theory closely mirrors the formal-idealist conception of the structure of the economy, which is exactly one of the most problematic aspects of Balibar's theory, or of any theory of a transitional mode of production or transitional time. That is, if the directionality of "transition" is assumed (i.e., to be considered "normal," all transitions must move toward capitalism, or at least toward the development of the productive forces), there is no room for contingent human activity (e.g., revolution), as all activity must be properly geared toward the developmentalist goal. This is capitalist and vulgar Marxist modernization as pure ideology, with "transition" as its bloody handmaiden. For this, the supraclass state is essential as a theoretical as well as practical bulwark against the crushing social conflicts that such transitional normativity requires.

By contrast to these contemporary evocations of "transitionism," as we have seen, among at least some 1930s theorists of semicolonialism there was an explicit commitment to a dialectical understanding of national/social becoming and global transformation that endowed those theories with an expansive concept of history: Chinese history as a particular problematic embedded in a global theory of capitalist crisis. Semicolonialism appeared as an extended conjunctural moment during which the commodification of labor power was achieved through the violence of the primitive accumulation of capital in its imperialist form and its partial collusion with the state as well as with the comprador-bourgeoisie. As Wu Qingyou wrote in 1937 with regard to distinguishing semicolonialism from Kautskian theories of ultra-imperialism (and by extension, from Sun Yatsen's concept of hypocolonialism [*ci zhimindi*][54]):

> The points of departure for theories of organized capitalism and of ultra-imperialism are logically connected. They both consider that it is possible to draw a boundary around the nation and to develop capitalism within those boundaries. When they analyze developmental trends within capitalism, they isolate particular key aspects of it. They do not understand that within the developmental process of capitalism itself are expressed interlocking contradictions, which are the result of uneven development. Unevenness itself, as a process of capitalism, thus includes the sum total of the mode of production and its anarchic char-

acter. This type of unevenness does not weaken in the imperialist era, but rather strengthens.[55]

Here, then, *noncorrespondence* in global terms—that is, unevenness—is precisely the condition of possibility for capitalism's ongoing strength, *not* an obstacle to its development.

In short, the thorny issue dealt with in many semicolonialism theories in the 1930s was the question of the role played by imperialism in the dissolution of China's old relations of production (whether those were called "feudal" or not) in their relationship to the state and in the articulation of China's productive capacity to the global economy.[56] It was, hence, precisely the issue of the relations of production—*not* the enhancement of the productive forces—that was of primary concern at the time. It is no coincidence that it was precisely this issue that was taken up by Mao Zedong, for, as Mao clearly recognized, it was *not* the purpose of capitalism to transform relations and forces of production; rather, it was the purpose of capitalism to lock relations in place, to further the extractive and exploitative capacity of capitalist accumulation. On this Mao and Wang Yanan agreed fully. Moreover, it was the problem of the relations of production—specifically Chinese, but only when globally contextualized and understood—that provided the basis of an analysis of historical experience that could yield concepts adequate to reality. It was in this context that Wang, for his part, and Mao, for his, came to determine the analytical ambit of semicolonialism as a lived experience of socioeconomic life in China from the late nineteenth century to the revolutionary years. For Mao, this recognition was the premise for the fomenting of a revolutionary unity; for Wang, it was an analytical point of departure for the reconnecting of Chinese reality to the abstractions of global capitalism as a system of thought and lived experience.

Conversely, today's reduction of the concept of semicolonialism to the status of aborted transition to capitalism proposes that the rectification of the imbalance in Chinese socioeconomic life requires a commitment to a normative tipping of history toward a sociopolitical elite that allies itself with the state and with forces of global capitalism in the restructuring of the Chinese nation as a fully commodified labor force and consumer society. In the 1930s, this social element was called, accurately, the "comprador-bureaucratic class"; today, much less antagonistically, it could

be called, in Wang Xiaoming's ironic terms, the stratum of "successful personages" (*chenggong renshi*).[57] "China-in-transition" hence is offered in the 1990s as a seemingly commensurate comparative object, in formal terms, to "semicolonial China" in the 1930s, of course with the major difference that now, China has a fully sovereign national state. By contrast, my argument is that China in the 1930s and China in the 1990s should more appropriately be seen as incommensurabilities that are at best a packaging device for a comparative practice that conceals the ongoing production and reproduction of global and domestic unevennesses consequent upon accelerating transformations within capitalism both inside and outside China. The current re/production of capitalism at a global scale mystifies the internal social consequences of the commodification of labor power through violent state-sanctioned primitive accumulation of capital that, among other things, has led to the categorization of a large portion of the (rural and urban) Chinese population as either "redundant" (people) or "surplus" (labor). Wang Yanan long ago commented with regard to this kind of categorization: surplus labor can only be considered "surplus" when social distribution is unequal and ill conceived; otherwise, it is just the reserve army of labor needed by capital to depress wages and control workers.[58]

Conclusion

Many versions of the theory of "semi" in the 1930s at the very least recognized the temporal disjunctures consequent upon the shared embeddedness of all within a global capitalism, itself in the process of being reoriented around new forms of class structures and new modes of capital accumulation occasioned by and through the global expansion and collapse of the financial system and its attendant crises, including the rise of fascism globally. As Wang Yanan wrote of this process in his book on economic principles, only by considering the historicity and specificity of the commodity form as a combined ideological, material, and sociopolitical formation could one understand, for example, the historical nature of commercial capital under the conditions of war (which brings commerce into a prominence and social effectivity it perhaps hitherto had not possessed) or, for another example, could one grasp the particular nature of rural economics through the process of the gap between rural and urban processes of valorization.[59] In other words, for Wang, counting quantities of things produced (as empiricist

practice would have it) was simply insufficient to address the more pressing historical question of the specific and variable forms that value takes at particular times or that the valorization process takes at various moments. In his view, by the 1930s and 1940s, the uneven process of valorization—through which the value of rural commodities was being subordinated to both the global and the urban economies and the value of rural labor power was being depressed by the collapse of industrial and financial capital, thus provoking an agrarian crisis—required historically rooted research into the commodity form and its attendant social relations, not merely into specific commodities and their quantities in circulation, consumption, or distribution. This was the kind of research, Wang noted, that would allow social scientists and economists not only to define China's social formation as semicolonial and semifeudal but, far more important than the category designation, such research would enable them to find solutions to the precise modes of the uneven articulation of rural and urban economies in a specific national and global historical context. This approach would, perforce, require a thorough understanding of the varying geographically uneven conditions for the selling of labor power, the reproduction of labor, as well as the dominant, rising, and residual ideological premises for the production of socioeconomic value and cultural values.[60]

All of this combined—taken not as a question of the "nationalization" of economic studies in a culturalist vein nor as a pure reproduction of endless transition but rather as a question of the real conditions of possibility for socioeconomic transformation in a capitalist world system at war and in economic crisis[61]—had to form the basic approach to economic study and the study of the economy in China. In other words, a theoretical emphasis on the commodity form, value/valorization, and the social relations of production, Wang believed, would give a far better material and conceptual grounding for empirical work and hence a far better sense of possible future directions, without either meekly surrendering to a capitalist inevitability or blindly leaping into a socialist utopia. Indeed, as he wrote scathingly in late 1949, on the eve of Communist victory, about the Guomindang's proposed economic plans, their emphasis on a "national economy" was no different in form from the nineteenth-century *yangwu* (Westernization) movement. Both used the centralized bureaucracy to retain feudal relations while building modern industry on top; both intended to sacrifice the rural areas in favor of the cities while using the cities to suppress rural areas as a way

to preserve the rural as a site for the primitive accumulation of capital, reproduction of labor power, and labor exploitation on a national scale; and both preserved imperialist-capitalist relations and the comprador class to prop up their own economic and political power.[62] For Wang, the promise of the defeat of the GMD—already on the horizon by the time of the publication of his critique—was the promise that the process of value-creation and value-production would take center stage in economic policy and research, and along with these foci, there would come the necessary emphasis on the social relations of production. Some of this was attempted in the post-1949 era (only to be undone after Mao's death); and some of this remained an entirely failed experiment in social transformation. In 1949 Wang believed the experiment worth undertaking.

By contrast, in the 1990s, the wide and implicit acceptance of the inevitability of capitalism, as discussed here through the analytical mutation of semicolonialism into a theory of perpetual transition and blocked forms of enhancing productive forces, presents little in the way of a critique of either capitalism or contemporary globalization. It is, rather, a form of conceptual recolonization. The type of global and intranational comparison articulated in this recolonized form is precisely that secured through the social-scientific certainties discussed in the first and third essays of this volume. It reanimates the ideas of "backwardness" and "catching up" as the ultimate goals of economic growth and development, while reinscribing the premises of modernization theory back into the heart of economic theory and practice. It was precisely against this form of comparative practice and theory that many in the 1930s wrote their critiques.

Finally, then, the 1990s names the 1930s as its originary moment and organizes that era as its historical point of departure even as the contemporary resort to transition as a national narrative conceit locates its inevitability and necessity within the failure of the Chinese socialist project. By contrast, my endeavor in presenting the 1930s and 1990s raising and reanimation of semicolonialism through the problematic of comparability based upon the principle of *incommensurability* rather than on claims to continuity can help elucidate how the open-ended futural historical immanence that was the basis of 1930s theorizing came to be absolutized in the 1990s as a historicism designated the transition to capitalism.

was Zhu's incoherent mixing and matching that was most dangerous. Little could he have predicted that all three versions of culturalism have returned with a vengeance, mixing and matching with one another as well as developing in their own philosophical and historical worlds.

110 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last*, completed after the author's death by Paul Oskar Kristeller (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1995), 163.

111 For a discussion of this aspect of Benjamin's concept of temporality, see Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 99–105. I am also indebted to discussions with Manu Goswami on this issue.

112 By the mid-1940s and prior to the victory of the CCP in the civil war, Wang's target shifted to caution about "bourgeois economists" and Trotskyists' fascination with the commodity economy, and also about the attachment of "critical economists" (that is, CCP Marxists) to economic stage theories and the prospect of skipping stages altogether. See Wang Yanan, *Zhongguo banfengjian banzhimindi jingji xingtai yanjiu* [Researches on China's semifeudal, semicolonial economic formation] [1943] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1957), 43–53.

113 Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 10–13.

114 Wang, "Yanjiu shehui kexue yingyou de jige jiben renshi," 17.

115 Wang, "Yanjiu shehui kexue yingyou de jige jiben renshi," 19.

116 "Sociological calm" is a phrase borrowed from Schwarz, *Master on the Periphery*, 22.

117 Wang, "Yanjiu shehui kexue yingyou de jige jiben renshi," 13.

118 Wang, "Yanjiu shehui kexue yingyou de jige jiben renshi," 21.

119 Wang, "Yanjiu shehui kexue yingyou de jige jiben renshi," 21–22.

120 Wang Yanan, "Shehui kexue de yingyong" [The utility of social science], in *Shehui kexue xinlun*, 36.

121 As mentioned in the introduction to this volume, I am currently at work on a more fully researched monograph on Wang Yanan and his worlds of economic thinking. This will include a consideration of his very important work on bureaucracy, land relations, demography, and many other arenas. For a preliminary discussion of bureaucracy, see Karl, "Compradors.

Chapter 4. The Economic as Lived Experience

1 See introduction and the third essay in this book for more on Wang's biography.

2 Wang, "Zhongguo shehui jingjishi gang," 18–19. One could also consult here Wang's important *Zhongguo de dizhu fengjian jingji lungang* [Outline

of China's feudal landlord economy]. I am writing on the latter work in my monograph in progress.

3 As Tani Barlow has reminded me, her and Donald Lowe's promotion of "colonial modernity" for China studies in the early 1990s programmatic launch of the journal *positions* was a strategic move to try to force the China field in the United States to come to terms with the problem of the colonial in China's modern history. I acknowledge and am grateful for this necessary strategic intervention and yet wish to move beyond it.

4 V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1985).

5 See the proceedings and documents of the Second Congress published under the title *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!*, 2 vols., ed. John Riddell (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991).

6 At a slightly earlier time, in Peru, Marxist activist José Mariátegui was theorizing in a similar vein. See his 1928 work *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, trans. Jorge Basadre (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

7 Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 206.

8 One of the only English-language theorizations of semicolonialism as an economic form is Jürgen Osterhammel, "Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China: Towards a Framework of Analysis," in *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 290–314. Osterhammel's theorization is hobbled by his assimilation of semicolonialism to the notion of "informal empire," thus containing it to a category of the political. More recently, semicolonialism has been reactivated in a postcolonial mode, as a form of hybrid cultural condition. For discussion in the latter idiom, see Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

9 Each of the semis had emerged in the 1920s; in February 1929 they were combined by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee in its twenty-eighth directive ("Strategies for the Peasant Revolution"). The formulation was codified in Su Hua's (1933) and Zhang Wentian's usage (1932), and by Mao Zedong starting in December 1936. Su Hua, "Zhongguo ziben zhuyi jingji de fazhan" [Development in China's capitalist economy], *Zhongguo jingji* [Chinese economics] 1, no. 6 (September 1933): 1–19; Zhang Wentian, "Zhongguo jingji zhi xingzhi wenti de yanjiu—Ping Ren Shu jun de 'Zhongguo jingji yanjiu' " [Research on the question of the nature of China's economy—An evaluation of Mr. Ren Shu's *Research on China's Economy*], *Dushu zazhi* [Readings journal] 1, nos. 4/5 (1932): 4–8; Mao Zedong, "Zhongguo geming zhanzheng de zhanlüe wenti" [Strategy of the Chinese revolutionary war], in *Mao Zedong Xuanji* [Selected works of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1991), 1:154–225.

10 See Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, 96–97.
11 Chen, *Zhimindi yu banzhimindi* [Colonialism and semicolonialism] (Shanghai: Heibai congshu, 1937), 44–45.
12 Chen, *Zhimindi yu banzhimindi,* 45–64.
13 Chen, *Zhimindi yu banzhimindi,* 46–48.
14 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, chap. 1.
15 Wang Yanan, *Zhongguo jingji yuanlun* [Elements of the Chinese economy], 2nd ed. (Shanghai: Shenghuo shudian, 1947), chaps. 1–2. This book was later republished in 1955 and again in 1957, both under the new title: *Zhongguo banfengjian banzhimindi jingji xingtai yanjiu* [Researches on China's semifeudal, semicolonial economic formation] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1955). In the 1955 preface, Wang notes that, in response to critiques of and suggestions about the preliberation edition, in the revised edition he (1) provides an overall account of semifeudalism and semicolonialism; (2) clearly links the social history controversy to revolutionary and antirevolutionary thought, even as he features Mao more prominently in his accounts; (3) corrects the inadequate critique of the comprador economy and gives a better account of Sun Yatsen's subjective socialism; and (4) retains, despite the critique of his book by Marxists and Maoists, the analysis of the commodity and the commodity form as key. The book carries several more prefaces, for the Japanese and Russian translated editions, that address specific areas of concern to Marxists in those countries. Page citations hereafter in the text are to the 1947 edition, unless otherwise noted.
16 For more on Wang's theory of the comprador-bureaucratic class, see my forthcoming essay, "Compradors."
17 For a comment on Wang that downplays his politics, see Osterhammel, "Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire," 296–97.
18 Wang, "Zhengzhi jingjixue zai zhongguo," 118.
19 David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (New York: Verso, 2007).
20 For the centrality of primitive accumulation to Marx, see Perelman, *Invention of Capitalism*, 30–31.
21 For a thorough discussion of formal and real subsumption, see Harry Harootunian, *Marx after Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), introduction and chap. 1.
22 Zhang, "Zhongguo jingji zhi xingzhi wenti de yanjiu," 4.
23 Zhang, "Zhongguo jingji zhi xingzhi wenti de yanjiu," 4.
24 Zhang Wentian, "Zhongguo jingji zhi xingzhi wenti de yanjiu," 4.
25 Zhang Wentian, "Zhongguo jingji zhi xingzhi wenti de yanjiu," 6.
26 Mao Zedong, "Lun fandui riben diguo zhuyi de cilüe" [On tactics against Japanese imperialism], in *Mao Zedong Xuanji* [Selected works of Mao Zedong], 133, 137, 138.

27 Mao Zedong, "The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: People's Publishing House, 1967), 2:305–34.

28 For more on this version of Maoist politics, see Rebecca E. Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World: A Concise History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), chaps. 3–4.

29 Mao, "Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," 310.

30 For this periodization of Lenin's thought, see Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic Socialist Movement*, 2 vols. (London: Haymarket Press, 2009).

31 For more critical discussion of anachronism, see Dai Jinhua, "After the post-Cold War," trans. Li Jie, in *Works of Dai Jinhua*, ed. Lisa Rofel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

32 See François Furet and Denis Richet, *La Révolution française* (Paris: Hachette, 1986).

33 Yan Sun, *The Chinese Reassessment of Socialism, 1976–1992* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), chaps. 7 and 8.

34 Wang Jinglu "Zhongguo jindai shehui, jindai zichan jieji he zichan jieji geming" [China's modern society, modern bourgeoisie, and the bourgeois revolution]. *Lishi yanjiu* [Researches on history] 6 (1986): 51–61.

35 Li Shiyue, "Guanyu 'banzhimindi banfengjian' de jidian sixiang" [A few thoughts on 'semi-colonialism semi-feudalism']. *Lishi yanjiu* [Researches on history] 1 (1988): 52–60.

36 For the trend toward "rethinking radicalism" in Chinese academic discussion from the early 1990s onward, see Wang Hui, "The Year 1989 and the Historical Roots of Neoliberalism in China," trans. Rebecca E. Karl, *positions* 12, no. 1 (spring 2004): 37–40. I should mention here that my version of the academic debates through this period is quite idiosyncratic and not meant to be all-inclusive or comprehensive. For a more complete assessment of trends in recent PRC historiography, see Li Huaiyin, *Reinventing Modern China: Imagination and Authenticity in Chinese Historical Writing* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012).

37 Chen Jinlong, "Ban zhimindi banfengjian gainian xingcheng guocheng kaoxi" [Considerations and analysis of the formation of the concept of semi-colonial semifeudal], *Jindaishi yanjiu* 4 (1996): 227–331.

38 Zhang Qinghai, "Lun dui banfengjian banzhimindi liangge gainian de lilun jieding" [On the theoretical specification of the two concepts *semifeudal* and *semicolonial*], *Jindaishi yanjiu* 6 (1998):226–34.

39 Zhang, "Lun dui banfengjian banzhimindi liangge gainian de lilun jieding," 233. At the time, the question of principle was still quite relevant as a question of political correctness and thus of party approval.

40 See Rancière, *Names of History*, where he argues that historical nominalism is inextricably related to political ideologies of class. See also Jim Chandler,

England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 53–59.

41 Ma Min, "Guodu tezheng yu zhongguo jindai shehui xingtai" [Special characteristics of transition and early modern China's social formation], *Lishi yanjiu* [Researches on history] 1 (1989): 47, 51.

42 "Spontaneity" refers to the assumed smooth internalist transition in "normal" capitalism from merchant to industrial capital.

43 Ma Min, "Guodu tezheng," 48–49. Ma's essay was written prior to the USSR's dissolution.

44 Ma Min, "Guodu tezheng," 58.

45 The dispute over the progressive and regressive nature of imperialism/capitalism/feudalism in China echoes the 1930s debate, although in the latter case the debate shaped up between the CCP and Trotskyists. See Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, chapter 3.

46 Nie Xiwen, "Dui Zhongguo banzhimindi banfengjian shehui de xin renshi" [A new understanding of semicolonial, semifeudal society], *Xueshu yanjiu* [Scholarly researches] 1 (1992): 69, 66.

47 The point here is not that the contemporary Chinese state is monolithic; there are evidently many fractions and factions struggling for ascendance. This is clear in Xi Jinping's ongoing attempts to consolidate his power. My point is that in much academic theorizing about the relations of the state to social formations, the state is seen as standing above the social struggle itself.

48 Wang Xiaoming, *Zai xin yishi xingtai de longzhao xia: 90 niandai de wenhua yu wenxue fenxi* [Under the glare of the new ideology: Culture and literature in the 1990s] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2000), 15.

49 Tao Xisheng, "Zhongguo shehui daodi shi shenma shehui?" [What kind of society is China's anyway?], *Xin shengming* [New life] 1, no. 10 (October 1928): 2–14.

50 Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, 119.

51 For this analysis of Maoist developmental theory, see Karl, *Mao Zedong*, chapter 7.

52 Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital,* 273ff.

53 Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge, 1975), 264–65.

54 Hypocolonialism asserts that China is the common colony of all imperialists and is thus in a more subordinated and more complex situation than full colonies.

55 Wu Qingyou, *Ziben zhuyi fazhan de bu pinghenglü* [Uneven rates of capitalist development] (Shanghai: Shenghuo shudian, 1937), 8. Wu is following Nikolai Bukharin relatively closely.

56 See Su, "Zhongguo ziben zhuyi jingji de fazhan."

57 As of July 2001, capitalists began to be formally accepted as members of the Communist Party.

58 See Wang's general discussion in the essay "Zhengzhi jingjishang de ren." Wang later reiterated and elaborated on this point in 1956 and 1957, during the dispute over population policy that led to Ma Yinchu's disgrace and political exile.

59 Wang, *Zhongguo jingji yuanlun*, chapter 2. For the comment about commerce in wartime, see Wang Yanan, "Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu de xian jieduan" [The current phase of research on the economy in China], *Jingji kexue* [The science of economics] 5 (April 1943), reprinted in *Wang Yanan Wenji*, 4:40. The issue is linked, for Wang, to the inadequacies of the social history debate, for which he notes that arguing about historical stages before doing research commits the error of "putting theory before practice" (40). We can recall from Arif Dirlik's discussion that commercial capital was one of the more fraught questions dealt with at the time. See also my discussion in the third essay of this volume.

60 Wang, *Zhongguo jingji yuanlun*, 61–64.

61 Wang makes this distinction in a number of essays; for example, see "Guanyu zhongguo jingjixue jianli zhi keneng yu biyao de wenti" [On the possibility and necessity of establishing economics in China], *Dongnan ribao* [Southeast daily], November 14, 15, 18, 1944, reprinted in *Wang Yanan Wenji*, 1:126–37.

62 Wang Yanan, "You banfengjian banzhimindi jingji dao xin minzhu zhuyi jingji" [From semifeudal semicolonial economy to a new democratic economy], *Xin Zhonghua* [New China], 12, no. 15, reprinted in *Wang Yanan Wenji*, 3:484.

Chapter 5. The Economic as Culture and the Culture of the Economic

1 Yingjin Zhang, "Introduction," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 22.

2 Rancière, *Names of History*, 39.

3 Osborne, *Politics of Time*, 44.

4 Rancière, *Names of History,* 24–41, 58–59, 66.

5 Rancière, *Names of History,* 67.

6 For a recent (more sophisticated) example of a project like Zhang's, see Luo Gang and Lin Yun, "Zuowei 'shehui zhuyi chengshi' de 'shanghai' yu kongjian de zai shengcan: 'Chengshi wenben' yu 'Meijie wenben' de 'hudu' " [The socialist city of Shanghai and the reproduction of space: The conflations of urban text and media text], *Refeng xueshu* 4 (August 2010): 57–96.

7 The 1930s could be dated 1928–37, from the violent dissolution of the first United Front to the Japanese invasion; and the 1990s could begin with the 1987 "primary stage of socialism" theory, or the 1989 Tiananmen events, or Deng Xiaoping's 1992 "Southern Tour."