

**Revolution, Forgery and The Failures of Historical Materialism:
Reconsidering Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”
through Mao Dun’s Early Fiction**

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Abstract:

The story “Stone Tablet” (1930), written by Chinese author Mao Dun (1896-1981), contains elements of a critique of Marxist historical materialism, as well as of pragmatist models of historiography that were influential in early twentieth century China. My analysis shows the way in which this story, based on Ming-dynasty classic of tales of anti-government outlaws, *Water Margin*, intersects with the work of Weimar German writer, and fellow Marxist intellectual, Walter Benjamin in questioning the possibility of modern popular revolution and thereby reopens an aporia surrounding the question of history in Marx’s writing prior to *Capital*. As opposed to a view of Mao Dun’s early work that sees these stories as part of a period of transition towards a mature style of socialist realism, this study proposes that at this stage in his work as a writer Mao Dun was developing the beginnings of an original philosophy of history that could contend with the failures of twentieth century communist political movements.

Keywords: history, fiction, Republican-era China, German philosophy, revolution, dialectic, Marxism

Introduction

The newly-released mainland Chinese mini-series *Autumn Harvest Uprising* (秋收起义) imagines the lives of the founding members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in the days following the Communist purge in Shanghai in April 1927 and dramatically depicts the widening schism between the Communists and Nationalists that divided the country. The show portrays the political conflict that occurred subsequent to the what is known in English as the “The Shanghai Massacre,” and in Chinese as the “April 12th Incident” (四一二事件), and it began airing on August 1, 2017, with a release date that memorialized the CPC military action in Jiangxi known Nanchang Uprising (南昌起义) – held to be the party’s first revolutionary action. Its release was also auspiciously timed for a year being celebrated by the party as the 90th anniversary of the founding of the CPC. For a story that risks being filed away as a stodgy government boilerplate history, in a savvy and high-tech Chinese society that has long since moved on to more exciting entertainments, the engrossing melodrama of *Autumn Harvest Uprising* – and the highly-polished quality of its screen images – attest to the inevitable return of history back into the present: not only to the fact that history is continually remade in the present, but also to the notion that the key to understanding the present may actually lie in the way that images of the past are reproduced for the present moment.

Since its premiere, the show has drawn an audience of more than 200 million in China, drawing viewers who seek a glimpse of the ruling party as it was when it was only partially formed and still its delicate infancy. Among other well-known communist cultural figures, the mini-series features a spry and youthful Mao Zedong, and a callow and rather curmudgeonly Chen Duxiu. The melodramatic allure of the show arises partly from private scenes in which powerful allies of the ruling Nationalist government, often meeting in closed offices, fall after their weakness and corruption is revealed. Likewise, the heroes of the story, future heads of the party like Mao, rise from the obscurity of everyday life in their kitchens or living rooms to attain the moral clarity that is their destiny. The dramatic force of the show also owes much to the slipperiness of the historical setting. Take, for example, the *mise-en-scène* of one shot featuring Chen Duxiu as secretary of the communist party in Wuhan, deliberating over whether or not the communists should break with their colleagues in the Nationalist government over the incident in Shanghai. Above him is a communist banner featuring Sun Yat Sen, surrounded by Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin, alongside the star that signifying Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist government – an image still present on the flag of Taiwan R.O.C (Figure 1). While historically accurate, the confusion of the banner – its linking of conflicting iconographies of nation, ideology and revolution – provides a visual parallel that amplifies Chen Duxiu’s feelings of incomprehension over how the party should respond to the Shanghai attacks. Out of such historical ambiguities, the show carves out a clear ideal of the 1927 Autumn Harvest Uprising as people’s revolution – clearer still because of the morass of messy partnerships and rivalries out of which the call to revolution emerges.



Figure 1: A scene from *Autumn Harvest Uprising*

As an event that displays the inevitability of historical change and confers an ultimate legitimacy through popular mandate, the moment of revolution is a matrix of meaning in a nation's collective imaginary. This presents a difficulty not only for representation of such an event, but also in terms of understanding the ways in which revolution creates a relationship between history and the present.

Portrayals of early events in CPC history have not always been drawn with such broad strokes and clear lines. Mao Dun was among the first Chinese writers to attempt to portray first-hand the effects of the events in Jiangxi on young revolutionaries. Although by the early years of the 1930s Mao Dun was to become China's foremost social realist fiction writer, as well as one of the most widely-read commentators on literature and politics, the first years of his career as a writer were dominated by grave anxiety over the early formation of the communist party as a political entity. Instead of the sustained moment of revolution that would coalesce into the worker's state that they had theorized, the many years of the consolidation of the party under the leadership of a small group was a period of frustrating uncertainty for Chinese communists who had already experienced numerous anti-climactic defeats and partial victories.

The proclamation of the Jiangxi Soviet as the first Chinese Soviet Republic (中华苏维埃共和国) in 1931 would initiate the process of the establishment of a party hierarchy that would begin with naming Mao Zedong as leader of the Soviet Republic. However, for communist-affiliated writers this initial campaign would offer little material for particularly dramatic storytelling: rather than a revolution that launched a new nation by mobilizing the working classes into fighting for one common cause, a communist government had formed as the result of a slow, methodical and piecemeal process.

Mao Dun's decisive statement on the theme of revolution in the aftermath of this period finally came after three years of reflecting on the events of what came to be called The Autumn Uprising, as part of a series of stories in which he moved beyond the style of literary naturalism that he attempted in his earliest fiction and drew upon the Ming-dynasty classic *Water Margin* (水浒传). In the most provocative of the *Water Margin* stories, "Stone Tablet" (石碣, 1930), Mao Dun stages a dialogue between two characters from the original novel in a narrative that ends with a representation of the impossibility of taking a revolutionary step that alters the course of history.

David Der-wei Wang (1992) has concluded that the story's underlying message of history as preordained fabrication has grave implications for understandings of modern Chinese history embraced by Chinese communists in that it:

has the potential to reduce the absolute mandate of communist revolution, as [Mao Dun] and his fellow leftists believed it to be, to merely one of the more efficient lies in history ... [and thus it] threatens to tear apart from the inside the total historical discourse on which Mao Dun's works are based (p. 49).

This statement rightly sees the story as a departure from a viewpoint that accords with Marxist theories of history, however, Wang's evaluation fails to give full consideration of the story as an expression of Mao Dun's own original viewpoint on the problems of history considered philosophically and arrived at through Mao Dun's close study of Marx. Mao Dun wrote the story after a period of doubt in communism, but it also nonetheless arose from ideas drawn from the theoretical framework of Marxism, with which Mao Dun was deeply engaged. Reading the story alongside the work of Walter Benjamin shows the ways in which the concerns of Mao Dun's fiction intersect with the contemporary work of other Marxist-influenced intellectuals of the time, revealing a common commitment to forging an alternative set of philosophical considerations for understanding history as a modern object of knowledge.

Marxist Intellectuals Questioning Revolution: The Aporia of History and the Dialectical Approach

For the communist intellectual of the 1920s and 1930s, mass revolt could not only be looked to to usher in a new worker's state, but revolution also affirmed an outlook of historical development based in practices of materialist historiography. In early twentieth-century Republican China more specifically, the concept of revolution was accepted as the engine of future-oriented change not only by the public, but also for the Chinese historians who were Mao Dun's contemporaries and interlocutors. The country had, after all, begun its existence as a modern state with the Xinhai Revolution (1911) and the nation's founding figure, Sun Yat Sen, had established a Chinese Revolutionary Party (中华革命党) in an early period of conflict when the country had plunged back into disorder. Several major historians of the time even viewed the country's modern history as one long period of revolution. Jiang Tingfu (1895–1965), for example, a scholar who is considered a founding figure of modern Chinese historiography, fully acknowledged the emergence of modernity in China as a process of revolution. In a 1934 essay he reiterated this viewpoint, while at the same time wondering what this revolution would produce:

after our autonomy was lost, we were divided; division leads to revolution ... Doubtless, we have experienced more than thirty years of revolution, and the consciousness of our people has greatly advanced I am not saying that

revolution can not be at all successful ... but can a spirit of the people form? (p. 123)¹

Mao Dun's story "Stone Tablet" intervenes in this general acceptance of revolution as a historical process by engaging modern modes of historical knowledge through a representation of the event of revolution as concept fraught with paradox, perhaps to the limit of its very impossibility. Although most commonly associated in Marxist thought with the action of the founding of a worker's state, early on, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx himself had commented on the tautological conditions of political revolutions in modernity in observing that tragic events inevitably return as farce. Writers like Mao Dun and Walter Benjamin, both heavily influenced by Marx and Marxist politics, had long been students of the political economy lessons of *Capital*, but each respectively returned to the lines of thought inquiring into the grasp that history holds over present social reality, and the doubts over revolution that Marx had expressed in texts like *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in the years before the completion of *Capital*. Their writings reflected a shared anxiety over the fundamental negation of human will in any model of temporality that attempts to link history with progress. Marx had famously outlined the puzzling tautology involved in understanding the limits of human consciousness within historical change further on in the essay: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." (p.5).

Within such a view of temporality and human action, social change based in popular revolution becomes an impossibility insofar as all volunteerism is negated. History proceeds according to the confluence of pre-existing circumstances and even violent or radical changes in the mode of production, or in class relations, arise directly out of a material precedent. Thus, revolutionary actions based on the expressed will of an individual or group are always ultimately linked causally to past political formations and social hierarchies based on these material conditions, and a seemingly new era would merely be the repetition of a historical precedent with an altered outward form. A new consciousness or spirit – a new era of the people, of the workers, and so forth – could only form following a break with history, but the nature of such a break in the chain of materiality is unthinkable beyond the realm of the hypothetical.² Mao Dun and Walter Benjamin both contend with Marx's early dilemma that all historical change must proceed according to vast material revolutions at the level of the mode of production. The result was an aporia for philosophers aiming to understand modern revolution, as the inescapable and implacable reach of the past into the present would seem to preclude actual or direct revolutionary agency, individual, class or otherwise.

Mao Dun and Benjamin's shared preoccupation with questions of the return of the past speaks to the fact that among Marxists in the 1930s there was a strong sense of the looming difficulty of the philosophical aporia that history presented the Marxist intellectual theorizing revolution. Their writings look back to Marx at a period in which he had begun to articulate a broader philosophical project inspired by his engagement with Hegel. In doing so, they reopen

¹ All translations from Chinese texts are my own, unless otherwise noted.

² The hypothetical contradiction presented by revolution as a sudden break that is also in continuity with history is present throughout Marx's writing, for example, in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in which Marx famously describes a proletariat that propels itself into a course of revolutionary historical change: "compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organise itself as a class [and which] ... by means of a revolution... [the proletariat] makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production" Marx, K. (1972). *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. The Marx-Engels Reader. New York: Norton, p. 491.

questions of history that were left incompletely resolved in Marx's writings on political economy. For Marxist intellectuals facing the uncertainty of the future of communism, their queries followed from serious doubts in Marxist historical materialism as a method of understanding the past. However, while the historian-protagonist of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" strives at every turn for a more and more committed materialism that nonetheless escapes his reach, Mao Dun's fictional stonecutter exemplifies a figure who hands work directly upon the very material of history.

These writers raise the possibility that rather than asserting revolution as a guiding principle of historic change that will eventually lead to a greater understanding of the present, the failure of revolutions to materialize in reality instead indicates that the totality of the past might be unavailable to philosophy as a discrete, or separate, object of knowledge. History, thus regarded, could only be understood through its influence upon present reality. As the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" describe, such irresolvable questions led Benjamin to reorient the work of the historian, or what he comes to call the "materialist historiographer," towards the study of the present and away from a past reconstructed through linear chronology and causality. Benjamin's account still provides for a revolutionary Marxist dialectic that would constitute a "leap in the open air of history" and provides an example of such a break in the period of the French Revolution (p. 261). In evoking the ways in which revolutionary events enact such a "leap," Benjamin gives examples of anachronism whereby the signs of the past became "charged with the time of the now" and "blasted out of the continuum of history" (p. 261). In Mao Dun's case, however, the problematic coincidence of history and the present led to a deeper scrutiny of the role of the hidden laborer engaged in the invention of events that later appear as revolutions. Through this figure, a modern propagandist as master craftsman that is neither political leader, storyteller nor intellectual, Mao Dun's story depicts revolution as a cultural construct, in which history is a fiction constructed from the materials of anachronism. In agreement with the basic Benjaminian premise that the present can never escape history, Mao Dun's view nonetheless departs from Benjamin in seeing all revolutions as narratives of deception based in a manipulation of temporality. The suspension, and preservation, of anachronism means that the business of making history is still dialectical but based in the canceling out of truth. Moreover, far from constituting the "leap in the open air," that Benjamin describes, such narratives are at their most effective carefully planned by those in power to most effectively use the influence of the past to make history.

Mao Dun's set of stories based on *Water Margin* are a remarkable departure from the rest of the writer's oeuvre, most of which were set in contemporary times with everyday people as protagonists, reflecting his tireless advocacy for forms of literary realism.³ The story "Stone Tablet" uses the anachronism of the novel's Song-dynasty setting to play with assumptions about history as discourse and to put the theme of revolution under scrutiny. Anachronism and, more generally, the deliberate manipulation of historical facts to alter the present, is produced most clearly in a narratological way in the story's conception: the invented scene comes just after the seventieth chapter of the original text and the forged, buried, and then unearthed tablet will change the course of the rest of the original novel, as the writing on the stone will putatively establish the hierarchy and legitimacy of the group of warrior-protagonists. The short story is thus fundamentally structured by the notion that history is always already written beforehand: that undisclosed actors construct historical narratives in ways that long precede, and are even imperceptible to, general understanding.

³ In the 1958 essay "Occasional Reflections on Nighttime Reading" ("夜读偶记") Mao Dun elaborates theoretical views that stress the importance of realism to Chinese literary culture.

The central plot device of the burial and rediscovery of the tablet in “Stone Tablet,” succinctly captures Mao Dun’s pessimism regarding the revolutionary breaks in history. Although the past – the field of historical accounts through which the totality of social relations might be understood and interpreted – might contain buried evidence of great historical change, these buried monuments of history might also all be forgeries. “Stone Tablet” was written by Mao Dun during a momentary lapse in his participation in the CPC and, like Benjamin’s theses on history, it examines temporal paradox as an intellectual approach in an attempt to evoke the ways in which those in power retroactively recreate their own versions of past – versions of the past that thereby become the predicate and prehistory of a present moment that they seek to control. Unlike Benjamin’s more detached meditations, Mao Dun thus sought to take up a dialectical practice of writing – with a tale that required a simultaneous thinking of the past within the present – to represent the flaws that the perennial failures of popular revolution exposed in Marxist modes of historical materialism.

Reasoning through the Failed Promise of Revolution: Mao Dun’s Early Fiction

The tales of gallant and heroic men embittered by the corruption of ruling power in *Water Margin* served Mao Dun well as a vehicle for representing the nascent problems that Chinese communism faced as a political and cultural movement in the 1920s. The depictions of the fraternity of legendary heroes of the story resonated with principles of socialist politics of class warfare and redistribution of wealth for readers who sympathized with Mao Dun’s communist viewpoints. More specifically, when the story was published in 1930, as one in a series of three stories of speculative fiction by Mao Dun – two of which were drawn from *Water Margin* – there would have been strong parallels between these exiled heroes and communist militants fighting in the rural provinces and moving towards becoming a coherent political party with a strong leader.

Three years prior, in the summer of 1927, Mao Dun was in Jiangxi near Mount Lu (庐山), staying with a group of communist intellectuals that had left Shanghai after the Nationalist-dominated government had begun to target communist agitators. These intellectuals considered the push in Jiangxi as the culmination of their activism in communist politics; a moment that they hoped would culminate in what they called “The Big Revolution” (大革命). In the months to follow, and after Mao Dun and many other intellectuals in his group ended their sojourn in Jiangxi, a final campaign was launched by the communist military leadership that had stayed behind, which would later be known as the Autumn Harvest Uprising. Although a full military campaign in Jiangxi against the Nationalist government was ultimately impossible, the events in Jiangxi would go on in CPC history as the first serious action of the communist People’s Liberation Army. Nevertheless, at the time these were considered largely unsuccessful campaigns and tactical defeats.

With keen anguish, Mao Dun later recalled the failure of the push in Jiangxi to produce the revolution of which he dreamed. A study of Mao Dun’s diaries and memoirs by Zhang Guanghai (2012) describes the way in which the events in Jiangxi led to a formative experience of disappointment in the writer in the face of what he saw as the failure of “The Big Revolution.” Closely following his day-to-day life, but unable to pinpoint the precise cause for his break with the party, Zhang quotes Mao Dun’s later recollections in which the author describes how his strong feelings of dismay stemmed from the fact that over the course of the revolution he encountered an array of people supporting incongruous revolutionary goals – from non-believers posing as far-leftists to determined fanatics – all driven to action, with either

blind passion or in their own self-interest. Throughout, he was most deeply troubled by what he saw as the “opportunism” of the revolutionary militants who had traveled to engage in activism. Additionally, Mao Dun also relates that at this point he had begun to question whether the theories espoused by the representatives of international Marxist-Leninism within the group of Chinese communists could effectively grasp the complexity of the Chinese social and economic situation (p. 20).

Faced with disappointment in orthodox communism, Mao Dun would venture into fiction as a mode through which he could negotiate the internal conflicts of emotion brought on by the failure of his ideal of revolution. Zhang Guanghai observes that in the writer’s early attempts at fiction in the novellas collected in the volume *Shi* (《蚀》) expressed Mao Dun’s “doubts about communism’s policies on revolution through the form of the novel and literary criticism not long after he left the [communist] party.” Zhang continues by stating that the “stories became a powerful tool for Mao Dun to deal his innermost contradictions” and that, through the creation of stories, he rendered his own reactions to the revolutionary period into narrative, thereby “establishing his own form of reasoning” (p. 21).

The characters of this fiction are rough and mimetic depictions of youth undergoing dilemmas over the misconceptions and relativism that lies behind the ideal of revolution. Despite the fact that in *Shi* Mao Dun’s reinvention of fiction as its own mode of reasoning was in an incipient form the text still contains an urge towards an alternative way of capturing history. As Lan Dazhi (1998) has written on Mao Dun’s work in this period, Mao Dun meant for these stories to act as conduits for the totality of the lived experience of revolution among the young people of China in the 1920s and 1930s in a way that could not be conveyed through the accounts of historians:

A historian of revolutions must properly narrate the affairs of history strictly according to revolutionary ideas, but when an author writes about revolutions it permits him to freely describe the personal experiences and impressions of a literary work in his [portrayal of] historical processes, it permits him to unconsciously permeate the [character’s] confusion and doubts, it permits an entirely different voice to emerge. (p. 25)

With his first attempts at narrative in *Shi*, Mao Dun summoned mind and body to reproduce the sensation of historical events through fiction. This pursuit would continue to occupy him for the next half-decade as he explored other ways that fiction could supersede historical writing.

History as Forgery: Representing Historical Paradox and Confronting Modern Chinese Historiography in “Stone Tablet”

The characters that Mao Dun selects from *Water Margin* for “Stone Tablet” are Xiao Rang, a scholar and calligrapher, and Jin Dajian, sealmaker and craftsman carver. In these contrasting figures, he portrays an underlying opposition between intellect and labor that double as representations of the internal conflicts within revolutionary political movements. The basic narrative conflict that opens the story stems from the scholar’s annoyance as he observes the stonecutter carving the tablet and laughing under his breath – a mirthful laughter, as he is carried away with his work, and a chuckling over the secrets that they are privy to in carrying out the plot of forgery. The laughter occurs at an intersection of labor and affect and represents a release of the undirected revolutionary energy of the proletariat that Bakhtin (1984) called

“the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation” (p. 4). However, this energy remains in its potential state, as it has no place in the plot organized by the outlaw leaders.

Xiao Rang takes it upon himself to admonish Jin Dajian for his irreverent laughter, but he also has deep reservations over their plan and its outcome. He launches upon an internal diatribe that not only describes his misgivings, but also allegorizes the dilemmas that an intellectual like Mao Dun faced moving from the initial euphoria of communist theory into a practical association with communist activists:

Drinking wine from the big bowl ... schemes in which they divided up the loot on the big scale, originally asking for everyone's approval only depended on the word 'fairness'; they just would not suffer injustice and that was why they took to the wild to become outlaws. To be without 'fairness' just does not suit the hero of the wood (绿林好汉). All as one take the lead, all as one trade-off upon the lion-skin seat in the hall of the loyal and righteous. Of course there is also the ordering of number one and number two, but this is just purely for the record! There is no outlaw group that doesn't keep this kind of 'record,' and anyway this 'main seat' ('主座') must be given by common acclamation, there should be no hidden motive or deception. Unfortunately, General Wu Yong's 'plan' looks a bit too much like craftiness. (p. 203)

Xiao Rang is dubious of the plan for the forgery that was devised by the sorcerer-outlaw Wu Yong. He ruefully ponders the loss of the “all for one and one for all” principles of the outlaws in their initial years – the preceding half of *Water Margin* – in which they lived as a communal brotherhood.

The faint laughter of the Jin Dajian continues on until Xiao Rang decides to rebuff the stonecutter's impudence by explaining the seriousness of the quandary involved in their task. He starts by asking Jin Dajian how he would compare two of the leading heroes of the group – Lu Junyi, who was formerly a wealthy landowner, and Song Jiang, who had been a farmer's son and deputy of a local court before becoming an outlaw. Jin Dajian responds heartily that “both are famed heroes throughout the land” (p. 204). Somewhat stymied by the enthusiasm, but not to be misunderstood, Xiao Rang rephrases “hmm...Brother Jin, good and bad, these are always there, just rank who is superior” (p. 204). Asked to create distinctions in a group whose guiding principle is equality, the stonecutter again responds with complete credulity with the simple conviction that “men become have always become fellows just by joining the group” (p. 204).

Although he feels trusting of the man's innocence, Xiao Rang feels compelled to cut down Jin Dajian's naive sincerity and convey the significance of the hierarchy that must be established through their act of forging this stone. Instead of accepting the answer that just by joining the group the men all become equal as fellows, Xiao Rang insistently states that the men do not all have the same “background.” To clarify, Xiao Rang lists the former occupations of the outlaws (including sons of wealthy households in decline, former Daoist priests and men who ran brigand's inns) and makes distinctions between those who were and were not members of the imperial court. The opacity of this word for “background” stands out as a critical discrepancy at this moment in the story: “background” (出身), a word implying where or how one's self was produced, becomes a sign that stands out in its arbitrariness – in its shifting relation to history. Having connotations of both class, identity and even possibly the body, and indicating a

completely different range of social positions based on the historical context in which it is read, this term reveals traces of Marxist historiography at the core of the story.

The word for “background” that Mao Dun employs through Xiao Rang is a shifting semiotic unit that marks the absolute historical difference between different social conditions in different eras. The given significance of the term must be linked to a specific temporal context and the term only has meaning within the larger order of social relations of that context. Thus, what follows from the distinction that Xiao Rang is naming with the word “background” is that plot, characters, settings, and even the language of the story itself must be read and deciphered differently depending on the historical context tied to the word. For the critical theorist of literature, this word is a juncture in the story at which the reader has to decide whether the story should be read as a subversive critique of modern politics, or simply as a yarn that imagines a historical moment that is long past. In the former reading, fluctuating with regard to the political economy of society, the invocation of this term for “background” can bring capital into focus as the dominant force in modern society. As such, in modern times this word’s usage frequently becomes linked to economic class and would stand clearly juxtaposed against the feudal relations of landed property-owners of the Song Dynasty setting of the story. Rather than allowing for a generalized and transhistorical social reality, the term brings to light changes separating the premodern and modern contexts of the story.

The splitting of the story that occurs with this term correlates with key elements in Marxist thought on history. In the notes he prepared previous to composing *Capital* and collected in the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973) attempts to understand the knotty relation between the social and the historic in a passage that establishes a way of reading history along the lines of Marxist thought. He writes that “in all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others.” A key to all other social designations, and thus crucial to reading these relations in history, Marx calls this “form of production” “a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity” (pp. 106–107). Behind the seemingly simple task of ranking the men and assigning hierarchy, Mao Dun’s word for “background” catches the illumination of capital, as Marx describes it, and thus becomes a figure of speech that reflects the order of the modern (or premodern) political economy.

Upon being asked to rank the men, the Jin Dajian detects unfairness and he begins to discern the way that the men are being singled out from the fraternity. He refers to this as the influence of “private affairs” (私事), with the connotation that these are plottings between individuals not decided by the entire group. To this, Xiao Rang responds with confident trust in following the plan of these individuals as it unfolds into the group’s common destiny. The reference to “private,” signals related ideas of individual motives, and refers back not only to the very early concerns that Mao Dun had over the opportunism of revolutionaries, it carries overtones of the new forms of Chinese historiography that had emerged with Liang Qichao, which promoted individual moral and educational improvement as a historical praxis. As Jiang Mei (2017) summarizes Liang’s ideas – which were highly influential among historians in the early years of the twentieth century in China – individuals are the focus of the study of history in that they are seen as “members of an ethnic group [that] ... develop mass consciousness ... [who will then] realize that they are masters of the nation and subjects of history”(p. 79).⁴ As a representative voice of such a view in the story, Xiao Rang is confident that the objectives of the individual will inevitably benefit the group, as well as society, as a whole. The text thus

⁴ Translated by Carissa Fletcher

involves not only Marxist historical materialism, but also strains of Chinese pragmatist philosophy of history, with the greater aim of disrupting both of these intellectual traditions.

As Xiao Rang attempts to finally assuage Jin Dajian of his reservations in this manner, he suggests that the ultimate ingenuity of the plan that they are carrying out is that, with their momentous actions, the group's destiny will achieve an objective even beyond that of the will of "heaven" itself. He refers here to "heaven" as it is an element in a phrase that is ubiquitous throughout *Water Margin* – and immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the text: "to deliver justice on heaven's behalf" (替天行道). In place of this, he says, they will assert the "will of heaven" (天意). To this, the stonecutter strongly protests by saying that "the will of heaven is vague and unclear" (p. 205) and he questions Xiao Rang with regards to how this should be brought about.

The wordplay in their interaction revolves around the phrase "to deliver justice on heaven's behalf." As the recognizable slogan associated with the acts of heroism of its protagonists, altering the phrase is a sign of a radical break in the ethos of the group of outlaws. Changing this phrase implies that the outlaws will no longer be representatives of just action that accords with the ideal of the way that things are done in heaven. To this, Jin Dajian queries in utter shock, "are we called upon to replace heaven itself?" (p. 205). In effect, this is a syntactical lapse that stands in for a revolutionary break. Of course, these passages in Mao Dun's text also most likely deliberately echo Marx's famous statement in "Theses on Feuerbach," that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (p. 571), yet Mao Dun's characters do not embrace the idea that such a universal standard of justice can be a reality. As such, in disbelief and disapproval the stonecutter carves a message that will be included with the forgery on the stone and thus be transmitted to posterity: "It seems that even the fiercest fellows among us are still defined by personal relationship – you must name them individually according to their background: On the behalf of 'heaven' this will be the way" (p. 207).

As a cultural artifact, *Water Margin* indeed fulfills his words: in the chapter that follows each hero is singled out according to their rank and nickname and, indeed, each enters popular lore known individually by his own fame and reputation. In this way, they are not unlike the familiar cast of CPC characters in the television show depicting the founding myth of revolution discussed at the beginning of this essay.

In the story's conclusion, through Jin Dajian's protests, Mao Dun conjures up the force of historical difference within capitalism: read in a capitalist society, with each character fetishized as a heroic individual and subject to the inescapable pull of "background," even a centuries-old classic of insurrection like *Water Margin* stands to lose much of its power of subversion. Even more ominously, the story depicts the loss of the power of collectivity, so that even classical heroes are no longer able to act on behalf of "heaven." Even though they have gained autonomy and a freedom from idealism, they are left unmoored from a common purpose and reason for being. This final word on representations of modern revolutions rejects the naive positivism of historiographers like Liang Qichao, and the ostensibly scientific formula of a combination of individual, race, and nation as destiny that they embrace.

The ending also brings a negation of simplistic hopes for a Marxist worker's revolution imagined within a historical materialist point of view, with the conclusion that even "heaven" has become a powerful forgery and a theological conceit. Although "heaven" substantiates the heroes claims to individual fame, the idea of heaven has been converted from an omnipotent

force into a human-made fiction that serves the short-sighted purposes of the outlaw leadership. In other words, rather than constituting an integral part of a narrative based on an ethos in which the heroes act on behalf of heaven, heaven has become monolithic, monumentalized, and only meaningful in direct reference to the heroes whose rise it has authorized. To put this outcome in terms of what Mao Dun saw in the creation of a narrative of modern communist revolution: in creating the hierarchy that is necessary to lead the people, and thereby fabricating an inviolable order to give legitimacy to this hierarchy, the very essence of communism, the immanent principle of equality of a people involved in mass politics, is lost. The problem of provoking historical transformation through revolutionary praxis is thus instead portrayed in terms that overlap with Walter Benjamin's writings on history in their attention to the insurmountable paradox that consumed Marx in his writings on revolution previous to *Capital*, during the period in which Marx probed the irresolvable dilemmas presented by Hegel's concept of the "Spirit" of history.

Haunted by the Spirit of Hegel: Theology, the Failure of Revolution and the Messianic in Mao Dun and Walter Benjamin

Mao Dun expresses an outright denial of revolutionary possibility in "Stone Tablet" by portraying the fabrication of a new order of heroes and hierarchies upon the collapsed ideal of an egalitarian, communal revolution. Mao Dun indicates that this false image of revolution is seamless because it is accompanied by a theological ploy to create a new form of "heaven" as the guarantor of revolution – a heaven that will be secular, ideological and materialist to match the conditions of a putatively new era. In the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin recounts the very same trick – played in order give an audience an impression that the grounds of historical change can be fully known – through the figure of the chess automaton, which he describes as "a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which ... is wizened and has to keep out of sight." He continues on to say that such a device is comparable to the "puppet," which he states stands in for "historical materialism" in modern philosophy (p. 253). Both writers thus agree that Marxist materialist accounts had failed to fully foresee the clandestine return of theology in the modern political state, which would dilute the terms of a worker's revolution by replacing belief in the ultimate authority of the people with a belief in the omnipotence of the progression of modern historical change.

Troubled by doubts that materialist explanations of historical reality might only result in a chain of further contradictions, both writers concentrate on moments in which material reality gives way to ephemerality. Seen in this light, the failure of the working-class revolutions that Marx predicts as eventualities which will gradually lead to the transformation of global societies – and, more generally, the failure of modern history to produce the lasting popular revolutions that Marx foresaw – becomes a consequence of the unresolved problems of philosophical idealism. Through their speculations on theology, both writers suggest the need for theories of historical change to return to a focus on Marx's early encounters with Hegelian philosophy of history.

As an object of knowledge that he could only describe as "Spirit," Hegel (1988) refers to the predetermined nature of history as having a quality of "self-consciousness ... [in which] subject and object—coincide" (p. 20). He concisely expresses the paradoxes involved in such an object of knowledge – that is, history as it can be engaged by philosophy – with a comparison to the work of his philosophical predecessor Gottfried Leibniz, namely, with his use of the term "theodicy." He writes:

To that extent our approach is a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God. Leibniz attempted a theodicy in metaphysical terms ... so that when once the evil in the world was comprehended in this way, the thinking mind was supposed to be reconciled to it. Nowhere, in fact, is there a greater challenge to such intellectual reconciliation than in world history. (p. 18)

Carrying the term from a metaphysical into a philosophical register, Hegel thus indicates that concept of theodicy is an apt figure for imagining history as a closed system within which knowledge and reality are mutually intertwined. For Hegel, however, knowledge must come to a “reconciliation” with the reality that it has a hand in creating, not to achieve this would be to lapse into an illusion that the question of history is a superficially metaphysical one – namely, one in which human agency would be surrendered as part of an eschatological worldview (and an essentially theological one) featuring only a figure of God (or good) and evil.

In the premodern narratives of deception and intrigue in *Water Margin*, Mao Dun found human agency irrecoverably lost in an endless current of repeated historical precedent, in which those who make, or rewrite, history deploy theology to their own ends. Benjamin, on the other hand, sought in premodern theology an opportunity to recover the dialectical resources of philosophy that would provide “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past”(p. 263). Benjamin extracts his concept of “messianism” from the anachronistic theological worldview that traps modern societies in the illusion of a heaven-ordained forward movement through the storm of progress. In other words, Benjamin salvages this concept as a mode of self-consciousness out of the abyss of the metaphysics of modern history as theology. On this point, the disillusioned pessimism of Mao Dun and the melancholic optimism of Walter Benjamin actually converge in a figurative language for thinking historical paradox that reconciles knowledge and belief: both writers use a premodern scenes of a sacred ideal materialized on earth (for Benjamin, the figure of the messiah and for Mao Dun the heaven-sent tablet) to seize upon the ways in which theological constructs continue to compromise materialist accounts of history by offering illusions of progress in lieu of knowledge of history. In short, the writer revisits an instance of historical return to find a key to understanding epochal change embedded in premodern cultural forms. Mao Dun’s story thus amplifies Walter Benjamin’s call for critical that will throw aside myths of forward progress and instead focus the energies of the intellectual on the sites of history’s return. In other words, to understand historical change, one must not look for a revolutionary break that initiates an unprecedented future, but rather learn to interpret the disguises that the departed forms of the past take up upon their return to the present.

By exploring the conjuncture of the present through characters facing the corruption of an earlier dynasty, Mao Dun's story opens up a poetic space in which to newly read the present through its relationship with the past. Although the two writer’s views of historical materialism have much in common, in many ways, Mao Dun’s historical poetics made the initial discovery of the “messianism” that will forever be tied to Benjamin’s intellectual legacy. Benjamin would begin to formulate his own theses on history not long after Mao Dun’s story was written, having reached a similar impasse with materialist theories of history, and he establishes the concept as a theoretical intervention that cuts across both materialist and idealist accounts of history. Benjamin extends the theological usage of “messianism” in order to describe the powerful philosophical force of reconciliation that the study of history can have to liberate knowledge of the present from the grip with which history seems to hold it. As Benjamin writes, such a viewpoint has the power to “to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears... singled out by history at the moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of tradition and its receivers ... of becoming a tool of the ruling classes” (p. 255). Mao Dun, for his part,

was doubtless struck by such a “messianic” image when he was reading the passage in the original text of *Water Margin* that most likely inspired his story: a strange section of the tale in which “heaven’s eye,” (天眼), opens in the sky above the heroes as an omen that a sacred stone tablet has been buried below.

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