CHAPTER FOUR

TRANSFIGURING MODERN TEMPORALITY: ZHANG TAIYAN’S CRITIQUE OF EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY

For the past twenty years or so, the idea of history as progress has been the subject of a sometimes bitter debate. While so-called modernization theorists have extolled a uniform model of development around the globe, postcolonial theorists have vehemently attacked pretentions to universality as masking Eurocentrism and imperialist domination. Ideas of history and time have been at the center of this debate and this has also been the case in China and Japan. The concept of history—especially history as evolution—entered both China and Japan in the process of their confrontation with Western imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chinese and Japanese intellectuals often translated their perceived sense that their countries were backward into temporal categories based on a framework of evolutionary history. Moreover, they combined their conceptions of evolutionary history with various non-Western religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Many intellectuals attempted to construct theories of history using Buddhist categories in order to understand and clear the path for their nation-states’ march towards modernity and development. Zhang Taiyan’s effort to draw on a specific form of Buddhism to formulate a theory of history is particularly noteworthy because unlike most of his contemporaries, who accepted an evolutionary view of history, Zhang critiqued the idea of progress in history in a way that reflects a larger global trend critical of capitalist modernity, a trend that continues among twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers.

As I suggested in the Introduction, the literature on Zhang Taiyan is vast. Chang Hao provides an overview of Zhang Taiyan’s thought and a description of his “Buddhist worldview.” Two representative full-length manuscripts on Zhang Taiyan in English are Wong Young-tsu, The Search for Modern Nationalism, and Kauko Laitinen, Chinese Nationalism in the Late Qing Dynasty. Wong focuses on Zhang’s modernity and

1 See Chang Hao, Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis, chap. 4, 105–45.
nationalism and does not delve deeply into his Buddhist ideas. Laitinen shares Wong’s modernist interpretation of Zhang, but focuses on his anti-Manchu ideas. Nishi Junzō was one of the first to interpret Zhang Taiyan as a critic of modernity. Kondō Kuniyasu builds on this interpretation at length in a chapter on Zhang Taiyan. Wang Hui develops this line of argument and links it to a general critique of modernity in his chapter on Zhang Taiyan in his Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi (The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought). Kobayashi Takeshi discusses Zhang Taiyan’s Buddhist thought in relation to Meiji intellectual trends, particularly romanticism.

The above scholars have described Zhang’s critique of evolution as a response to modernity, but have rarely examined in detail how Zhang used Buddhist concepts and categories in order both to explain and to negate the emergence of modern linear time and a progressive view of history. Consequently, they have failed to grasp the significance of Zhang’s writings in a global context. By focusing on Zhang’s critical use of Buddhism and his original reading of the Zhuang Zi through a Buddhist lens, we shall see that in Zhang’s texts, Buddhism plays the dual role of both enabling modern objectivity as he explicitly admits and challenging a linear model of history associated with capitalist modernity. Moreover his challenge of the linear model is again twofold. On the one hand, he counterposes a relativistic or pluralistic model to a unilinear model, and on the other hand, he attempts to ground models of history as progress in the play of karmic forces. I suggest that we can see Zhang’s Buddhist critique of evolution in relation to a global circulation of philosophical discourses, which were responses to the logic of capitalism. This in turn can be a step towards placing late Qing intellectual history in a more encompassing global trajectory.

In what follows, I begin by invoking G. F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Moishe Postone to describe the parameters of a global emergence of a crisis of modernity, focusing specifically on the consequences of this crisis for visions of history and time. Then I will briefly comment on the general shift towards morally progressive visions of time and history in late Qing China, since Zhang would place himself both politically and theoretically against proponents of evolutionary thinking. However,

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2 See his “Chūgoku shisō no naka no jinmin gainen.”
3 See Kondō Kuniyasu, “Shō Heirin no kakumei shisō no keisei.”
4 See Kobayashi Takeshi, Shō Heirin to Meiji shichō mō hitotsu no kindai.