To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself.

—KARL MARX, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right

Proletarian Class Consciousness

In the early 1920s, in response to the Chinese revolution, the intellectuals of the Creation Society saw themselves deeply embroiled in a series of struggles. They had to first come to terms with and resolve the exact nature and form of theoretical class construction. They also had to formulate their response to challenges posed by other intellectuals who, although they shared in the common aspiration of Chinese national salvation, sought different means to achieve this end. For example, when people like Yu Dafu and Cheng Fangwu referred to themselves as the “proletariat,” it was a sentimental self-portrait that bore little meaning outside of the perception of being the oppressed. Throughout the history of the Creation Society, there were continuous attempts to keep up with a rapidly changing society.1 Such an attempt was often associated with the re-evaluation of the “missions” of literature and art, which eventually constituted the literary theory of the Creation Society.

From the period when Guo Moruo and other members of the Creation Society endorsed emotion and self-expression as the ultimate justification for literary and artistic creations (in 1921), to the time when they proposed that the literati should be a voice for revolutionary thought (in 1928), the ultimate desire of these individuals was identity recognition. The fact that towards the end of 1928 the majority of the Creation Society members had decided to join the CCP should also be understood in the dynamic context of this self-recognition. The established allegiance between the Society members and the

CCP provided a new possibility for participating in socio-political revolution. The arena of culture also became a place where political power was earned or lost, and most importantly, a platform on which the dialectic relation between radical theory and revolutionary praxis could be exercised.

The transition of class identity and the establishment of the proletariat as the new historical subject required theoretical support. The early CCP members and members of the Creation Society had already expressed their theoretical concerns regarding the paradoxical Marxist class identification by the intellectuals. This was also a commonly shared conundrum for Marxist intellectuals around the world. Theory is essential to guiding social transformation, yet “theorists may not be trusted” due to their inevitable bourgeois origin. We risk oversimplifying this paradox if we only take the “distrust of intellectuals” for its literal meaning. This dilemma demonstrates the dialectic relationship between intellectual enlightenment and proletarian revolutionary praxis in constituting the Marxist historical progress leading to the emancipation of mankind. To Karl Marx, this dialectic connection meant that “philosophy finds its material weapon in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its spiritual weapon in philosophy.”

The political representation of this awkward theoretical predicament was portrayed by the acquisition of proletarian class-consciousness in the European social democratic movement of the early twentieth century. Class struggle was considered by both György Lukács and Vladimir Lenin as an organizational and tactical approach for the proletariat to take on class-consciousness. The political role of intellectuals in this struggle, however, remained ambiguous. To Lenin, intellectuals could potentially be a part of the “vanguard party.” The vanguard could also be an instrument for intellectuals’ class transformation. This ambivalent relationship is mechanically understood by some scholars as the intellectuals’ subordination to the party, particularly when investigating the so-called party-intellectuals in China.

3 Ibid., 13–14.
6 Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism, 11–13.
7 Gouldner, Against Fragmentation: The Origins of Marxism and the Sociology of Intellectuals, 15.
8 Wenfang Tang, Party Intellectuals’ Demands for Reform in Contemporary China (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1999), 6–12.