CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Embroidering a Tapestry of Hope

The Phantom’s Smile

The claim that the Cultural Revolution is a watershed catastrophe in twentieth-century China remains an empty utterance. The official historiography of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has in great haste integrated this dark era—its disorder, violence, excess and moral tragedy—into a closed chapter in history. In China, public consciousness and understanding of the Cultural Revolution have yet to be adequately fostered. Paralleling the premature closure of this period in the official historiography, there appears a disconcerting propensity in the Western academy to move beyond seeing the Cultural Revolution as catastrophic. The surprising truth is that while personal accounts of the Cultural Revolution are numerous,1 existing scholarly work that fully explores the Cultural Revolution as catastrophic, although influential and important, is scant.2 Moreover, these accounts are largely limited to historical inquiries. There has been an academic void in terms of systematic reflection on the psychological, moral, and social aftermath of the Cultural Revolution as a landmark catastrophe.3 Meanwhile, the critical desire to complicate this picture

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of the Cultural Revolution as catastrophic grows more dominant. Two opposing discourses are immediately evident: (1) aesthetic reconsiderations of the Cultural Revolution as vigorous and creative. Paul Clark, for instance, refutes those who depict the Cultural Revolution art scene as a wasteland and painstakingly delineates the creative aspects of the art and culture from 1966 to 1976. (2) theoretical and political reconsiderations of the Cultural Revolution as a true revolution, which protected China from sinking into capitalism and continues to be a source of emancipatory politics. In both discourses, the totalitarian shape of Mao’s ruling regime is neutralized in the interests of aesthetic and political investments.

Responding to the ills of the present state of global capitalism, a camp of leftist sensibilities has emerged in which scholars continue to breed enthusiasm for the Mao era. This enthusiasm can be traced back to the starry-eyed Maoist Western intelligentsia from the affluent and yet unsettled 1960s and the early 1970s. Emblematic of these intellectuals who identified with Mao’s China in confronting their own political ossification is the French philosopher Alain Badiou. A student of Louis Althusser, Badiou affectionately recalls the Cultural Revolution as “part of our political history: I can say ‘our,’ for I was part of it and in a certain sense…. ‘I am there, I am still there.’” Speaking of politics and aesthetics in the same breath, Badiou explicates the cult of Mao in the following way: “If politics is … a procedure of truth, just as poetry indeed can be, then it is neither more nor less to sacralize political creators than it is to sacralize artistic creators.” Badiou’s “philosophical fidelity” to the Cultural Revolution finds an echo in the writings of many leftist cultural critics. In his essay “Poeticizing Revolution, Žižek’s Misreading of Mao and China,” Liu Kang maintains that descriptions of Mao’s atrocities are “unreliable accounts” and “popular demonization.” Taking these “tabloid histories of Mao’s alleged atrocities” as the foundation for “serious theoretical inquiry” runs the risk of rendering it “frivolous.” Liu shows his concern over the transmission of knowledge to the next generation. He laments that the Cultural Revolution has been

6 Ibid., p. 39.
7 Ibid., p. xi.