Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, cofounders of the Chinese Communist Party, brought an iconoclastic nationalism characteristic of May Fourth China to their understanding of communist political organizing and the applicability of Marxism to China.\(^1\) During the May Fourth period, slogans of nineteenth-century reformers such as “Chinese knowledge for essence, Western knowledge for practical use” seemed to have reached a radical endpoint.\(^2\) The emphasis was not on supplementing a presumed preexisting Chinese essence but on taking up Western learning to create a new Chinese essence. As Chen Duxiu and other leading intellectuals turned to various Western political philosophies and practices for inspiration, the “West” appeared open for appropriation in the remaking of China as a modern nation-state.\(^3\) They envisioned the West as a counterpart to a Chinese past they considered to be outside history. In this intellectual and sociopolitical milieu, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded and a young Mao Zedong developed his own thoughts on revolution, nationalism, and socialism.\(^4\)

In the late 1910s, Mao Zedong deemed very little in the Chinese or Western past to be relevant to China’s present and future. He denounced the “total emptiness and rottenness of the mental universe of the entire Chinese people” and asserted that the problematic attitude of “praising the past and denying the present” was

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\(^3\) This process is characteristic of anticolonial and anti-imperial nationalism. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

found “not just in our nation but in the West as well.” This negative assessment continued to inform Mao’s thinking on the relationship between past and present as he moved from his pre-Marxist to his Marxist phase. However, as Mao engaged more substantively with historical materialism and materialist dialectics, the jettisoning of past for present and wholesale acceptance or rejection of “China” or the “West” was replaced by calls for interaction between past and present, the foreign and China, rooted in dialectics and a Marxist standpoint. In 1956, in an address to music workers, Mao summed up this approach in the phrase “gu wei jin yong, yang wei zhong yong” (“use the past to serve the present, the foreign to serve China.”) The complete phrase at this time primarily circulated in exchanges with cultural workers, historians, and philosophers, but during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution it entered mass circulation.

Scholars tend to present “use the past to serve the present, the foreign to serve China” as shorthand for CCP policies on “the suspect past and the corrupting foreign” or the ideological nature of writing history in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), particularly from 1949 to 1976. In this interpretation, the phrase “use the past to serve the present” connotes top-down control and a stifling of intellectual curiosity and analytic rigor. Yet this formulation elides the methodological debates surrounding historical materialism and materialist dialectics within China, and their connection to the phrase. This chapter, by contrast, considers how the theoretical opening up of Marxism-Leninism and its Stalinist form to include mass participation in

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7 For example, Brady, Making the Foreign Serve China; Jerome Ch’en, “Letter from Jerome Ch’en,” Modern China 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1979): 525.