A recent spate of exposés about Mao Zedong’s China, in English and Chinese, announces a finality to the tendency towards the temporal-spatial conflation of twentieth-century Chinese and global history. This sense was confirmed when the *New York Times* reported in late January 2006 that George W. Bush’s recent bedtime reading had been Jung Chang & Jon Halliday’s *Mao: The Unknown Story*, or when, later in 2006, according to a column in the British paper, *The Guardian*, “the Council of Europe’s parliamentary assembly voted to condemn the ‘crimes of totalitarian communist regimes,’ linking them with Nazism….” Hence, the temporal-spatial conflation is, on the one hand, of the long history of the Chinese revolution with the ten years of the Cultural Revolution; and, on the other hand, equating Mao Zedong with every one of the most despicable of the twentieth-century’s many tyrants and despots, most clearly with Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. In these conflations, general twentieth-century evil has been reduced to a complicit right-wing/ left-wing madness, while China’s specific century-long history of revolution and crisis has been concentrated into a wholesale condemnation of the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, during which the supposed principle of madness operated most fully as revolutionary tyranny. In this way, albeit through the back door, China becomes one central node through which the trends of
the twentieth century as a global era are channeled and magnified: China is global history by becoming a particular universalizable analytic principle of totalitarianism. Additionally, this universality is brought to its apogee in the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, in a recent publication in Chinese (Nanfang zhoumo’s web version of 7 July 2009), Roderick McFarquhar, the Harvard professor known for his Cold Warrior sensibilities, has gone one step further, by openly voicing the whispered conviction of many these days: in a full page spread, he lauds 1979 as the year of China’s “liberation,” consigning all that went before to the dustbin of history and affirming the Dengist turn as the only moment that qualifies as real history.

On first glance, it would seem that the conflationary principle represents just one more version of an “obsession with China” as an autonomous but refracted discipline of inquiry, albeit in ever more rarified forms of self-negation. Here, the totality that is presumed to be “twentieth-century China” and its now-universalized negative principle of madness—“totalitarianism,” Cultural Revolution, socialism, and revolutionary history, tout court—can only be constituted by negating historicity. In another sense, the self-negating principle represents an ideological appropriation of the historicity of the global twentieth century more generally for the inevitability of the triumph of neoliberalism and American-defined normativity, called the triumph of capitalist modernizationist common sense over madness. The comments that follow attempt to resist the overwhelming temptation towards this or any other common sense, lest the significance of the troubled history of China’s and the world’s twentieth century be erased in the triumphalist and compensatory gesture of conflation and consequent dismissal. By the same token, my attempt is precisely to situate China globally, albeit not by conflation and thus not through erasure but by differentiation in a historical-philosophical method of reflection.

This paper presents a tentative discussion of what I call the flight to rights in China, a flight that bespeaks the desired atomization of the potential totality of social life into a legalistic framework. Indeed, a major

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6 This phrase is borrowed and adapted from Peter Osborne’s reflections on the state of philosophy in the post-Kantian world. See Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 2000), 3.

7 The above two paragraphs are adapted from Rebecca E. Karl, “Culture, Revolution, and the Times of History: Mao Zedong and 20th Century China,” *China Quarterly* 187 (Fall 2006): 693–699.