CHAPTER 11

Mao’s China Abroad, and Its Homecoming:
A Comedy of Cross-culturing in Two Acts

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Prologue

“Cross-cultural” is a hot term in literary and cultural studies today. We adopt it because it best describes what happens in the world, especially now, and because it defines our characteristic approach, consciously or not, to things as literary scholars. But when the term is verbalized, as in “cross-culturing,” as I use here, we may begin to feel uncertain, uneasy, and funny about it because of the biological and agricultural associations the verb evokes: What sort of cultivars would come out of this, we wonder.

Well, it could be something wonderful, like Zen Buddhism that came out of Chinese pilgrims’ journeys to the west—that is, India, the Central Kingdom’s “near west”—and gave rise to Confucian metaphysics, The Dream of the Red Chamber (紅樓夢), not to mention a fabulous story about the Journey to the West (西遊記) itself; it greatly enriched and transformed Chinese culture. Or it could be something less certain (if only because it is still evolving) but with great potential, like Chinese intellectuals’ endeavor of the past century to domesticate Western Enlightenment legacy symbolized by the May Fourth figures of Mr. Democracy (德先生) and Mr. Science (賽先生). Or it could be something rather comical as we see in the Western left’s flirtation with Mao’s China, especially the China of the Cultural Revolution, in the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, followed by the Chinese neo-left’s flirtation with that flirtation after 1989. This last example is, of course, my topic today.

A note on “flirtation”: I don’t mean to dismiss the world 1960s. It was an era of decolonization, war protest, student revolt, counter-culture, and civil rights movements. It was indeed a progressive era by and large. If a false image of Mao’s China became an inspiration for the progressive forces of the world for the purpose of critiquing their own society, so be it; China was then isolated from the rest of the world, rumors abounding. But it became a problem when a number of the world’s leading intellectuals still chose to defend China’s disastrous Cultural Revolution in spite of their knowledge or because of their conviction in Maoist dogma, then and thereafter. This is what I mean by “flirtation.”
The same applies to the embrace of such a defense today by China’s neo-leftists who cannot but know the horror of the Cultural Revolution.

Perhaps, “flirtation” is too light a word: as the Chinese government is so successful in repressing the collective memory of the real China under Mao while ever-deepening corruption, inequality, and injustice are actually pushing the limits of popular anger in China, today the specter of the Cultural Revolution is looming larger than ever, and the tragedy of the bygone era might repeat itself. So, this ongoing drama of cross-culturing that I choose to talk about is not just comical and entertaining after all; it could end in nightmare, which says something about the gravity of the topic.

In contrast to these largely comical figures under Mao’s shadow then and now, I would like to introduce two heroes as well, or antiheroes, if you like: One is Jacques Lacan who parted company with Philippe Sollers and his Tel Quel associates right before their 1974 pilgrimage to China and defended Confucius at the height of China’s “Criticize Lin Biao and Criticize Confucius” (批林批孔) campaign.1 The other is none other than my colleague/friend Zhang Longxi, who is one of the earliest critical observers of Chinese neo-leftist theorizing that aimed to validate Mao by tracing a ghostly presence of Maoism in contemporary Western critical theory.2 In fact, it was Longxi who first called my attention in the early 1990s to the issue I am discussing today.

Act I, Scene I

Let me start with three French characters. First, Jean-Paul Sartre. The great philosopher was quite courageous in allowing his name to be used as a shield (as editor-in-chief) for the newspaper La Cause du Peuple in 1970.3 It was a Maoist newspaper, but no matter; against government censorship for the sake of free speech, Sartre’s action was noble. However, when it came to speaking the truth of which Sartre thought best not to be heard by the masses, he did not hesitate to play the role of a censor himself. In summer 1967, an interview with Peng Shuzhi was submitted to Les Temps Modernes, but Sartre turned it down despite Simone de Beauvoir’s endorsement and the editorial board’s decision to publish the piece. The reason: Sartre did not think it was time for the

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