



CHINA as HUMANIST EXEMPLUM

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ABSTRACT This essay addresses the “demand for humanism, with a nod toward Asia” (Spivak) within current theory and global intellectual political culture. I argue that using humanism as a way to understand China (a habit inside and especially outside the PRC) keeps us within the orientalist tradition; it is also at odds with China’s attempted/failed/ongoing revolution and trajectory since 1949. I offer an interdisciplinary analysis of area studies and other representations of China, especially in regard to Tiananmen and the Cultural Revolution. I then contrast this with current intellectual debates in China as well as with an older Maoist or revolutionary discourse. The resurgence or “demand” for humanism is rendered as part of an intellectual and political backlash or depoliticization.

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Today the backlash is on the rise. There is a demand for humanism, with a nod toward Asia; for universal-

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ism, however ambiguous; for quality control; to fight terrorism.

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*



This epigraph from Spivak takes us to the heart of the matter: the enduring presence if not resurgence of “humanism” within academe and the larger, global intellectual political culture of which it is a part. This “demand” is a sign of the times. Edward Said’s posthumous *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004) collected several pieces of his essaying the need for a “new” and critical humanism, though he conceptualizes this in largely philological, textualist terms that were always fully implicit to even the more radical and Foucauldian *Orientalism* (1979) (about which more later). Cynthia G. Franklin’s *Academic Lives* (2009) surveys the return to humanism in a host of recent academic memoirs that reflect on the rise of and limits to poststructuralist theory, especially its critiques of individualism and humanism. Within the humanities in particular, it is hard not to perceive a reaction not just against the readily admitted “excesses” or arthritic jargonizing of some types of cultural and literary studies but to theory in general, to “high” theory in the manner of the early French imports but also to more politically committed, philosophically driven, and radical—root-seeking—critique. Not only have most of those early, influential sources passed away literally (e.g., Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault), but there has been no next “wave” of note. This is to say that theory is not “dead” so much as fully incorporated and domesticated into already existing fields and practices. As Kenneth Surin has noted, French-inspired theory had an “inbuilt propensity to blur its constitutive genres” (2011: 4). What this meant was that it was not simply *inter-* but, more fatefully, *anti-* or at least *trans-*disciplinary and therefore not capable of genuinely challenging the disciplines or the production of knowledge (a goal that theory was thought to have demanded). Perhaps this is too tall an order for any intellectual phenomenon, but it may also be that theory’s—this type of theory’s—lack of what Timothy Brennan (2006: 147–68) has called an “organizational imaginary” and politics also had a role in its own domestication. Without such a reorganization of the disciplines, theory’s insights into, for example, the social construction of reality and knowledge or the “play” of power, interest, and politics in our basic orientations to the world could only run out of steam. It is not that humanism, universalism, the individual were defeated and now return. They were never quite displaced. The disciplines could and did get back to business as usual. One also has to note, crucially, the speeding up and corporatization of academic or intellectual labor such that quick and at times superficial applications of theory became the general rule. Humanism can easily reemerge under such conditions. Given all of this, as well as the simple exhaustion of the theoretical streams—for example, how many times can you

describe negotiated identities, deconstructive texts, and socially constructed facts?—it is not hard to see a restoration of the fallback and “natural” discursive position of the scholar-intellectual—that is, humanism.

These changes have also gone hand in hand with larger, global ones. The current conjuncture has been variously described as the new—and *humanitarian*—imperialism, as neoliberalism, the end of sovereignty (human, national, and otherwise), the rise of “human rights” movements and rhetoric, an age of biopolitics or biopower, the reduction to “bare life, and so on. For all their differences these terms show an at least implicit concern with the status of “the human” and humanism within the global scene. Even the Schmittian notion of depoliticization, recently deployed to rethink post-Mao China, among other places, can be understood as a historical transformation of the Aristotelian notion of man as a political animal. So what we have, within the academy and larger intellectual political culture as well as the “real world” of geopolitics, is a persistent and renewed focus on the human, the individual (who usually stands heroically, sentimentally against the State or is at least a victim of it), and some type of political or universal humanism. For my purposes, what is most striking in Spivak’s point is the connection to “Asia.” With the rise of China in particular, humanism seems to know a renewed lease on life. It is as if there is no other way to relate to the other than this (excluding overt forms of racism, exoticization, and so on). In what follows I seek to complicate this humanist comeback by delineating its roots—that is, some of its roots—within orientalism. My aim is not simply to dismiss humanism as lacking a critical edge and philosophical rigor but to examine its place within a larger discourse and a two-sided problem: the problem of how China is represented and the turn to the right or toward depoliticization today. My main focus is on the resurgent use of “humanism” to interpret Maoist and post-Mao China.

But at the outset let me further index the context of this essay’s intervention via a few quick examples: within China, the Olympic slogan “One World One Dream” (common humanity and the “spirit “ represented by the Games); a Harvard conference titled “Humanistic International: Humanism, China, Globalism” (2010) as well as a glowing report on that event in the *New York Times* (Tatlow 2010); the recent, pulpbiography *Mao: The Untold Story* (Chang and Halliday 2005) (in which Mao Tse-tungdupes and murders hundreds of millions of Chinese) as well as slightly more academic titles like *The Age of Openness: China before Mao* (Dikotter 2008) (Mao and the revolution are what blocked the flourishing of humanity and freedom in China); the portraits of ordinary Chinese since the late 1970s in the photographic exhibit titled *Humanism in China*, which was presented by the Guangdong Museum of Art and toured the United States–West (Open Democracy 2010b); and yearly remembrances in the Western and global media of the 1989 protests (and

subsequent bloody crackdown) in Tiananmen Square. Despite the admittedly wide variety of texts and signs here, the emphasis subtending all of them is a common humanity and natural or at least proper order of things lurking under the obvious differences between things (and people) Chinese and non-Chinese.

This sameness and universality is at the heart of the concept of humanism no matter where it is deployed. Let us take another far-flung example, from recent work published in a private, erstwhile “postmodern” journal of the US humanities. As a recent title indicates—“Confucianism, Humanism, and Human Rights”—the good, true humanism focused on the properly autonomous and free individual is crucial for understanding modern China as well as for curing its and the whole world’s cultural and political ills after the age of Mao and revolution. *That* type of humanism is what is needed, and it stands opposed to the “totalitarian,” bad humanism and despotism of either Mao or Confucius (Waters 2009). Moreover this “new” humanism is also clearly if implicitly posed *against* the type of leftist “antihumanist” theory and radical critique that poses difficult and uncomfortable questions not only about humanism but about capitalism, imperialism, Eurocentrism, orientalism, and so on—not to mention direct questions of race, gender, and sexuality. This intervention from the right, or, to put it more charitably, this depoliticization, is not announced as such. But for anyone familiar with the original political intent of the theoretical antihumanisms, or with the history of actually existing humanism in the West, it still rings loudly. Precisely zero mention is made of the political, philosophical, and historical challenges to this generic humanism. Another article in the same journal examines the Chinese conception of the properly selfless, exemplary human and finds it to be lacking (yet endangering) something that is assumed to be real—apparently, again, the value of individuality and the autonomous or independent self (Davies 2010).

All of my opening examples above are each separate events with their own local contexts, constituencies, and purposes.¹ My point is not to argue that they are *identical*: that would be the logic of humanism in the first place. At the same time, humanism’s denial of historical and contextual specificities should not preclude us from analyzing global, homologous phenomena. It is in this sense that these above examples index a renewed appeal of the concept or discursive “thing” called humanism—*both* in China (as the inclusion of the photographic/portraiture exhibit is meant to suggest) *and* in the West. More specifically, *there is a demand to use China as the site or proof of the universal validity of humanism*. That this can and does happen both in China and outside it does not mean that, say, Chinese Marxist- or neo-Confucian humanism and the old-fashioned, literary humanism of middlebrow American intellectuals are the same. But it does mean—I will insist—that there is a global trend and incitement to discourse worth examining here, not least in terms

of its politics. I will briefly examine recent, if faded, Chinese returns to humanism below. But my focus in this essay is much more on the Western or perhaps chiefly American context of this demand for humanism. I interrogate the deployment of humanism as a way of understanding modern China in general and the Mao era in particular.

This development has to be situated within and in part explained by the long history and enduring phenomenon of orientalism, a thing that is still too much with us even if it has taken different, “sinological,” and Cold War–inflected characteristics since the time of Said’s classic work (see Vukovich 2011; Hevia 2003; Chan 2009.).² Put another way, this turn to humanism is a backlash or a *return* to an essentially antitheoretical and, more important, an anti- or depoliticizing mode of discourse and cultural politics. It is neither a discovery nor an innovation; it seeks to take us back to the good old days before theory on the one hand and before postcolonial, anti-imperialist, or other forms of radical critique on the other.

HUMAN, ALL TOO MANY HUMANISMS

One has to emphasize that “humanism”—like its cognate terms “cosmopolitanism” and “liberalism”—is a slippery as well as contentious concept. It has a long history in China, for example, where one can speak of a “Confucian humanism” that long predates its more recent avatars. One can note as well the rise—and fall—of the “humanist spirit” and Marxist-humanist debates in the 1980s. Of course, there is the humanism of the early republican period, the New Culture Movement, and May Fourth intellectuals in particular. Part of the internationally celebrated, “New Leftist” Wang Hui aims in his scholarly work at recovering and reconstructing the discourse of humanism in early modern Chinese thought. (This does not make him a humanist *per se*, as he is sometimes represented to be.) There is also recent work in China that seeks to recover the humanistic Xue Heng school of the 1920s (the “reactionaries” opposed to the May Fourth progressives) and the influence of the American conservative Irving Babbitt. But to raise the contextual specificity of *Chinese* humanisms is to point to one of the insurmountable flaws in the concept: its universalist pretensions. For if there are Chinese humanisms, then either “humanism” is not actually universal even in geographic terms or, alternatively, there really is a common essence that unites all the humanisms and all their humans. It is the latter point that was, after all, the breaking point for the theoretical antihumanism of various Marxisms and poststructuralisms.

As in the past, I do not think that the “new” discourse of humanism in China or elsewhere can stand up to criticism. We have been there before. As Pal Ahluwalia notes, the many varieties of humanism “nevertheless signif[y] that there is something universal and given about human nature and that it can be determined in the language of rationality” (2010: 62). One might add the inescapable emphasis on the individual or the philosophy of consciousness and the auton-

omous subject. In sum, from Louis Althusser's accounts of ideology and of history as a "process without a subject," Chakrabarty's (and others') provincializing of Europe and History, Michèle Le Doeuff's critiques of masculinism in philosophy, to Foucault's "grid" of power and "end of man" as well as Karl Marx's, Friedrich Nietzsche's, and Sigmund Freud's earlier decenterings of the subject, there would seem to be no good, theoretical reason for the return to humanism. Politically, one would be hard pressed to make a case for the historical or future successes of humanism as a political doctrine or animating theory or desire. I do not believe such a debate has taken place. What has happened has been an end-run around the various political and epistemological critiques of and challenges to humanism.

The case of Marxist humanism in 1980s China is instructive. After arising as a fairly sentimental but also earnest, passionate critique of alienation under the socialist state system (i.e., as part of de-Maoification among the intellectuals), it quickly disappeared from the scene. Partly this is because it wanted what it couldn't have in China or indeed anywhere else: an independent space and role for intellectuals, free of the state's demands and strictures but also from the rising market system in China. Of course, this was and remains a structural and "objective" dilemma for intellectuals everywhere. It is a fundamental problem of modernity as much as a romantic desire for self-determination and an arguably neo-Confucian desire to be the conscience of the nation. As it turns out, one of the problems with the Marxist humanists was something they shared with other partisans in the "humanist spirit" debates: much time was spent writing and debating the existence of such a thing as a human spirit and its alleged alienation or loss under Mao and feudalism (the two terms being conjoined in this line of thought). This may be seen as a detour from the more urgent and necessary task of analyzing, in historical and materialist terms, the actually existing function and place of intellectuals and the trajectories of the state in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Were intellectuals and artists merely state cadres, and why is this a good or bad thing? This might have allowed the self-professed humanists and Marxists to see the impending rise of the capitalist market and a consumer culture that spelled doom for intellectuals in general, state employed or otherwise. As Wang Hui himself has argued, these post-Mao-era humanists offered no critique of either the ideology or teleology of modernization and in that sense "accelerated the 'secularization' of society—the development of capitalist commodification" (2001: 169).³ It is for this same reason that Wang argues that this post-Mao "return" to humanism is very different from the humanism of the late Qing and May Fourth-eras in that some of these earlier intellectuals had a critique of both traditional Chinese politics and culture *and* the oncoming Western and modern onslaught. As an intellectual movement seeking in part to critique the control and subsumption during the revolutionary de-

acades of—in their view—properly “free” and “independent” intellectuals, the last wave of post-Mao Chinese humanism threw the baby of anticapitalist Marxist theory out with the bathwater of bureaucratic control.

Whatever the limits and problems of the Mao decades’ treatment of intellectuals—and this was a major failure of the party-state that came back to haunt Mao’s legacy among the intellectuals—the number done to this class fraction by post-Tiananmen capitalist expansion has been far more devastating in terms of their social power and cultural capital. If in the revolutionary period the aim was to proletarianize intellectuals, produce organic ones from the masses, and smash the fauxuniversalism of traditional intellectuals, artists, and culture, in the post-Mao era the traditional role of intellectuals and the possibility of universal, consensual truths and values have been brought to an end by the full-on commodification of Chinese culture and society. The latter point here is, at least, the razor-sharp argument of Shanghai University professor Cai Xiang.⁴ Thus those “humanist spirit” debates have more or less petered out: whether in terms of leftist, nationalist, populist, liberal, or neoliberal positions and debates (and note the variety of streams), the pressing questions are less about the loss of a certain “spirit” than about the contradictions of reform, the market, and party-state developmentalism under globalization.⁵ The current debates on “new leftism” and even neo-Confucianism in particular are important: they speak to political economy and historiography, on the one hand, and to at least the idea—however controversial—of Chinese specificity and tradition as against liberal/humanist universalism, on the other.⁶ For many New Left intellectuals this includes the Maoist or revolutionary/socialist past; as Gan Yang has put it, the radical egalitarianism of actually existing Maoism (1949–79) remains one of China’s three historical traditions (with Confucianism and an ambiguous enlightenment/Dengism/market economy) (Gan 2007; Bell 2008: 178). Others have queried if there might be a “China model” not for the rest of the world to follow but that might describe what the PRC has been doing and could do better in its breakneck pursuit of modernization and development.⁷ As for Chinese liberalism, it too is at its strongest and most political when it calls not for the restoration of a lost spirit but for the outright privatization of land and state-owned enterprises, greater marketization, and so on.⁸ All of this is post-Tiananmen and posthumanist despite any appearances to the contrary.

One problem with humanism as it has been theorized and practiced to date, then, is that it is not an enemy of capitalist modernization but an important, if silent, partner. This seems to be the case in China and globally. Therefore it is also worth recalling an earlier Saidian insight here: “Liberal humanism, of which Orientalism has historically been one department, retards the process of enlarged and enlarging meaning through which true understanding can be

attained” (Said 1979: 254). Said’s posthumous defense of critical philological humanism (2004), perhaps in part due to its simply being unfinished, does not resolve or even fully address this contradiction between humanism’s imperial legacy and his own call for a far more worldly one. What we are left with in regard to Said, then, is a tension between this final appeal to humanism largely, ultimately conducted as a matter of faith and, for example, the theoretical antihumanism of classical Marxism (including Mao) but also Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and others including the early to middle Foucault as well as Althusser. If we are no longer in the age of Mao et al., we are also clearly not in Erasmus’s or Erich Auerbach’s. Said remained keenly aware of what he saw as the abuses of humanism, and much of his final volume reads as an indictment of that tradition. But given that indictment and the enduring power of orientalism—the uneven and hierarchical production of knowledge in the world—it is hard to see how humanism is a concept worth trying to produce anew. And, as before, there is no necessary relation between Said’s great, critical, and textual practice and this same concept.

THE HUMANIST’S ORIENT, MAOISM AS INHUMANISM

The demand for humanism today must be about something else. Not the rediscovery of an essential discourse in tune with human nature, or the foundation of individuals speaking Truth to Power, but a shift—the demand or resurgence—within our intellectual-political culture. To begin with, we need to deal with that nod toward Asia, that is, China. It has not escaped anyone’s attention in recent years that China is not only irresistibly rising (even within the recent financial tsunami) but in some sense has already *arisen*. One answer to the question of why *China* and humanism, then, has to do with this. The use of humanism to interpret or even change China (from the outside or inside) may be a response—something like a denial or displacement—to the difference and dissonance that this rise of China poses. In the face of a powerful, booming, multitudinous China, one filled with a variety of official and popular, sometimes strident nationalisms as well as a resilient party-state with substantial legitimacy and an apparent resistance to (Western) liberal political reform, a universalist humanism reasserts itself. Underneath that difference, particularity, and/or antagonism—especially in regard to the Chinese political system and its apparent legitimacy despite being allegedly “despotic”—they must be the same as “us,” subjectively or existentially speaking.

There can be no better illustration for this humanist drive and logic of sameness underneath Chinese difference than the legendary Tank Man and the larger Tiananmen protests of 1989 with which he is linked. The Tank Man, it will be recalled, is the unknown figure who seemingly held off a row of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) tanks on the morning of June 5; plastic shopping bag in hand, he stood in front of a line of tanks, zigzagging with their movement until some bystand-

ers pulled him aside. Virtually nothing is known of the man except for this fuzzy footage, but he is one of the most immediately recognizable images of the past fifty years (see Gordon 1999). The Tank Man is also one of *Time* magazine's top one hundred people of the twentieth century and is also the subject of an American PBS documentary. He is indeed fascinating, especially in his afterlife: a number of people have claimed to be him (most recently, a Taiwanese émigré), and in that same summer of 1989 the Chinese state—cleverly, it must be said—used the very same footage of him as an example of the restraint, perhaps even the humanity, of the military forces during the same events. (They did not run him over but repeatedly tried to move out of his way.) But my interest here is in the appeal of the paradoxically singular yet everyman status of the figure. The following passage expresses what many others, or at least many Americans, seem to have felt: “I had been trying to hitch a ride to China ever since the events at Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. While those events made most Americans certain they did not want to know anything about such a violent, repressive nation, I saw signs of hope in the symbols that emerged from those events—Lady Liberty was tantalizing; Tank Man, the individual who defied a column of tanks, was unforgettable” (Waters 2009: 217). This extract and its longer essay assume the momentousness of the 1989 events (something not at all obvious for people within the PRC) and the usual antiregime perspective of Western intellectuals. This reading is understandable in the context of Tiananmen. But, more important, it speaks to the universality of the—undefined—meaning or *feeling* of what the Tank Man and 1989 represent (“hope,” freedom, civil society, the triumph of the human spirit, and so forth). As much as one has to be impressed by the actions of the Tank Man, this is nonetheless a problematic interpretation and more a cathexis than anything else. As the misrecognition of the Goddess of Democracy indicates (it was never called “Lady Liberty”), there is something very American about this reading of the meaning of the Tank Man, to say nothing of the faith in the unalloyed goodness of individualism that this essay also asserts.⁹

A writer in the *Asia Times* opines: “I was never more proud to be an American than when the Goddess of Democracy statue, with its stunning resemblance to Lady Liberty... made its way through Tiananmen Square. That... made it all the more frustrating to see and hear the protest leaders bungle the principles for which they presumably stood” (LaMoshi 2003). This too is an assimilation of the other through nonrecognition. We can recall as well CBS news anchor Dan Rather during the same protests: while entirely unsure of what the protestors were actually saying, he pointed to the Goddess and, regarding what the protestors wanted, stated that the statue “said it all.” This is ideology at work (imposing obviousnesses as obviousnesses). It also unites with the other two examples in reinscribing the demands of the actual protestors into two other orders of things: the

“confines” of liberal democratic capitalism on the one hand (as Slavoj Žižek [1998] notes) and liberal humanism on the other.

Indeed, the standard criticism of the student leaders, as articulated, for example, by the makers of the famous/infamous area-studies documentary *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (which also features the Tank Man of course) is that they were not quite liberal-humanist enough. The students—who were only a part of the movement by its end and greatly outnumbered by workers and others—were tragically too radical and stuck in the Maoist past despite their apparent desire for “democracy” and freedom. Beholden to their (Chinese) revolutionary political culture, the students did not realize that “when people abandon hope for a perfect future and faith in great leaders, they are returned to the common dilemmas of humanity. And there—in personal responsibility, in civility, in making sacred the duties of ordinary life—a path may be found.”¹⁰ As a politics, as opposed to a New-Age-Buddhist-cum-humanist ethos, this is pretty weak tea. It depoliticizes Tiananmen and the PRC. It offers a humanist spin and a Cold War orientalist narrative about totalitarianism in the East. As others have argued, the screening of Tiananmen and therefore China is intimately bound up with the problematic of orientalism and the writing of the other (see Chow 1991; Vukovich 2009). Nineteen eighty-nine not only defines the PRC more than any other event but constructs it as being in a world-historical process of becoming-the-same as the United States–West: normal, full of individuals and not subjects/slaves, and forming a bourgeois civil society. Or as failing to meet that norm. Today Tiananmen remains something one cannot publish on easily in China, and this helps explain its relative nonimportance to PRC residents *and* the circulation of trite, humanist interpretations of the events.

And yet the basic event of that spring—the massive protests, the killings in the aftermath—are also far from unknown within China. They are less a secret and more a victory of propaganda (including the example of Russia after 1991) and the waves of depoliticization that have swept the PRC and much of the world since. But it is also the great “success” of the Chinese economy and the massive changes within the PRC that further explain the “nonimportance” of 1989 within Chinese political culture—the same changes that have in effect nullified the humanist spirit debates. And we have to turn to a nonhumanist and effectively anti-orientalist interpretation of 1989 to better understand its significance and potentials. Wang Hui (2003: 117) has argued that ultimately the repression was about restoring the “links among market mechanisms that had begun to fail” in the late 1980s and that created the social dislocations and discontent behind the protests. In the event, 1989 marked the coming onslaught of neoliberalism and the eventual *weakening* or capture of the state by capital. So, too, there is now enough work available in English to see that Tiananmen 1989 was also very much a *workers* movement and that this—a de facto general strike

in Beijing—was the real threat (see Lu 1990; Walder and Gong 1993).

It is precisely the cathexis and articulation of China and humanism—via the Tank Man, Tiananmen, victims of Mao, dissidents in the media, or whatever else is ready-to-hand—that is the problem here. It is powerfully ahistorical and occludes a production of knowledge, even within the academy, that is better rooted in sociohistorical reality and more useful for understanding Chinese politics. Whatever political problems exist in China and between China and the world, they are not helped by the assumption of a common humanity, human nature, and so on that underlies Chinese difference. It prevents us from taking seriously Chinese political cultures and histories and the self-understanding of Chinese subjects, today as well as in earlier decades.

One fundamental aspect of this history and political culture has to do with the one era that is perhaps the most maligned of all: the actually existing Chinese revolution and Mao decades. Much of the new orientalism about China turns upon the demonization of this period and the former chairman himself. It is this that Tiananmen was supposed to—and for much of the global audience, symbolically *did*—make a break from: from communist/oriental despotism to common humanity, making the everyday and the individual sacred and so forth. Hence the existence of so many currently in-print Mao biographies (nearly all of them negative or in the form of pulp “exposés”)—despite the party’s own, strenuous efforts to disavow its Maoist past, aside from preserving Mao as nationalist Father of course.¹¹ In short, whereas Tank Man represents universal humanity, Mao and Maoism represent *inhumanism*. This much is fully implicit in the following pronouncement by Andrew J. Nathan. Immediately preceding his reference to the “unworthiness” and blind faith of “Mao’s people” he remarks:

[The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)] built a system that tied the peasants to the land, kept consumption to a minimum, fixed each person permanently in place in a work unit dominated by a single party secretary against whom there was no appeal, classified each individual as a member of a good or bad class, and called on each citizen to show that he or she was progressive by demonstrating enthusiasm for disciplining himself and persecuting others. Mao’s people complied out of patriotism, a sense of unworthiness, faith in a despot’s wisdom, and because they preferred to be among the victimizers than among the victims. (Nathan 1990: 215).

The “facts” mentioned here are certainly tendentious; the above is a generic stereotype that has the burden of standing in for the whole era, from the land reform of the 1940s up through Tiananmen and that “unforgettable *individual*,” the Tank Man. But the connection to

an implicit humanism is crucial. Not just Mao but several hundred million Chinese were effectively inhuman. In addition to being of bad character, the Chinese have (or had) no agency and are entirely statemanipulated, willfully carrying out repressive policy. They were doing the opposite of what they were supposed to do: to be “free” from all control and social determination, or at least to possess the negative freedom of not determining or being determined by any other person or thing. It’s that old liberal-humanist dream of a world without power and where actual power is only repressive, never productive or inevitable in a complex society. In keeping with the *Gate* documentary.

The discourse of universal humanism is what is fully assumed here—as is, again, the reinscription of the post-1949 “continuous revolution” into the terms of liberal democratic capitalism. This is all predicated on the denial of Maoist or Chinese-revolutionary discourse. By that I mean the affective and passionate yet rational-practical framework by which the Chinese made sense of and acted in the world at that time. That the majority of Chinese participants, even today, do not see that era and their own activity in the “humanist” way proffered by Nathan, matters not. I will return to self-understanding and Maoist discourse shortly. But for now it must be said that Nathan and others beg a number of questions about the remarkable mass mobilizations and “mass democracy” of the Mao years. Those campaigns, from the land reform onward (excluding the late, esoteric “Criticize Lin Piao and Confucius Campaign”)⁰⁰ were remarkable not just for their intensity and violence but for their popularity and grass-rootedness: *those* forms of participatory legitimacy elided by procedural notions of democracy and negative liberty.

[Q1] Please check footnote citation for ⁰⁰.

MAOISM AS INHUMANISM, 2: ON FUNDAMENTALISM AND EXTREMISM

Anti-Maoist rhetoric should seem familiar in the years following the “war against terror,” as anyone following recent political developments in Nepal and rural India can attest. We should remind ourselves that it is not only Islam-centered area studies that are in the business of studying, documenting, and ferreting out “fundamentalists” real and imagined. In an essay on Australia-China relations, for example, Geremie R. Barmé (2002) makes a flippant but striking reference to the days of “Mao bin Laden—or is it Osama Zedong?” Earlier, Edward Friedman summed up the four decades of Maoist governance thusly: “The Chinese people, who fell a humiliating half-century behind their East Asian neighbours, are still paying the heavy price for the crimes and errors of Mao’s fundamentalist ways” (1987: 154). The assumption of poor economic performance in the Mao era has always been misleading, just as many recent studies argue for its past success and present indispensability for the post-Mao takeoff (Bramall 1993; Kueh 2008).¹² To say that China is backward and behind is to deny it contemporaneity (coevalness).

But what is remarkable is the figure of “fundamentalism”—an anti-thesis of “humanism”—appearing in China-focused texts. This goes beyond the Kremlinological shibboleths of totalitarianism and police states to racialize Mao and “Mao’s people” (as they used to be called) as benighted others. The “fundamentalist” connection I am drawing may seem merely metaphorical, but there is a long history of lumping all of the Orient together, even before Maoism ever had the opportunity to be demonized. This imaginary link between Maoism and (Islamic) fundamentalism can be further seen in the American novel *Mao II*. There Don DeLillo equates Maoism with the “cult” of the Korean “Moonies” and a Lebanese “terrorist” group in war-torn Beirut in a global, oriental chain of equivalence (1991: 16, 163, 235). All these representations turn upon the threat to the autonomy and “individuality” of the liberal subject and the dream of a life free of social determinants. So strong is the demonization of Maoism as akin to a retrograde Islamic fundamentalism that it appears in quite different fields of scholarship. Take for instance Dennis Klass and Robert Goss’s article in *Death Studies* that equates Maoism with Wahhabi Islam. Both movements represent societies that “brutally” “police” death and mourning rituals in the name of new, statist cultural “grief narratives” that aim to destroy family identity (Klass and Goss 2003: 794, 807).

What strikes one is less the ideas or facts that are marshaled than the positing of the equivalence. They yoke together different cultures, political programs, and moments in history, all in the name of scoring points against an unholy trinity of Maoism, “backwardness,” and fundamentalism. The problem is less comparison than reification. There is a failure to take seriously the contextual specificity and difference of the texts/problems at hand or to provide some measure of methodological self-reflexivity. In such equations of Maoism with fundamentalism the only—and unacknowledged—material, concrete link is that the subjects are *not white*. They are also *inhuman*. This type of thinking is of a piece with classical, liberal humanist orientalism.

A further sign of the articulation between Maoism and fundamentalist “extremism” is the often-repeated equation of Maoism with the Nazi holocaust and fascism. The referent here is that great obsession of the memoir industry and of the China-watching mind in general: the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Thus Vera Schwarcz (1996) and Tu Wei-ming (1996) draw a straight line from Hitler, the Storm Troopers, and Auschwitz to the decades of Maoist rule and the Cultural Revolution in particular. Here the link is not argued so much as asserted as an obviousness; it rests entirely on the “fact” that in both cases there were mass (aka popular) mobilizations, violence, and suffering. And yet under this same criterion it is hard to imagine any significant historical period of change that would not fit the bill, from the US labor movement between the world wars to all the modern revolutions and decolonizations from 1776 onward.

Note, too, that the death toll of the Cultural Revolution decade apparently lies somewhere between thirty-four thousand and as much as four hundred thousand (Meisner 1996: 47; 1986: 371–73). A terrible toll either way but simply of a lesser order than the Holocaust. A. James Gregor (2000) has also argued forcefully against that stream in historiography that wants to equate Maoism (and/or the Guomindang) with European fascism.

Gao Mobo has further addressed the Cultural Revolution–Holocaust link, arguing that the violence in China was not planned by the state but was committed by various groups at different times and for different reasons. These cases range from personal revenge to revolutionary zeal (classstruggle in violent friend/enemy forms) as well as actual armed fighting akin to civil war (the latter caused the great majority of deaths) (Gao 2002). Nonetheless, the Cultural Revolution did bring important benefits to some people—namely, in terms of improving human welfare and the great increases in rural education and healthcare and in establishing (or continuing) a radically egalitarian “right to rebel” within Chinese political culture. It is highly misleading to see it as a cultural wasteland in which no other activity other than fighting and “struggle sessions” and “rusticated labor” took place. For one thing, as Wang Zheng has noted, the population increased rapidly during the era, and this tells us something about the limits of alleged sexual puritanism during the Cultural Revolution.¹³ In addition to high economic growth from 1969 through 1976 and beyond, there were a number of other advances—from the model operas and local, “amateur” theater to the explosion of unofficial presses and some significant if short-lived changes in worker management in factories. While such a relatively positive or nuanced view of the Cultural Revolution remains controversial in China and abroad, many people working inside and outside the PRC have tried to make a case for its complexities or benefits and its potentialities for the present. Indeed, “revisionist” and affirmative works on the Cultural Revolution that take that upheaval seriously—in empirical and theoretically nonhumanist ways—have slowly but surely begun to emerge in English-language scholarship as well as e-media within China.¹⁴ It is because enough people are alive to recall the era differently, as well as for more existential and so-called nostalgic reasons, the Cultural Revolution and Maoism—as signs of revolution and streams of intense political affect—remain part of the political and ideological reservoir of meanings and images in China (see, e.g., Zhou and Liu 2010). It is this, and not condescending, orientalist notions of brainwashing and political underdevelopment, that explains why Maoist images, icons, and slogans appeared in Tiananmen Square in 1989 as well as in more recent strikes and protests. It is not the case that the Chinese and their political culture are inhuman or malformed because of their (some of their) attachments to Mao and the revolution and its discourse.

MAOIST DISCOURSE AND THE CRITIQUE OF HUMANISM

I lack the space to “cover” the Cultural Revolution and its complicated causes, events, and aftermaths. What I have hoped to establish is that there is room for argument and further study here—that one can argue that the decade was either something more or something other than a nightmare of human rights abuses, an assault on humanism, a despotic power play by Mao, and so on. Of course there *were* appalling instances of unjust persecution and violence. This is not in question. What is in question is the humanist coding of them and moreover of the entire era at the expense of the other, positive or meaningful dimensions. Such a multiperspectival approach is rendered virtually impossible by the enormous weight and influence of the universal/Western humanist template in coding what Chinese Maoism is and was. So what we have is, in short, a nondebate between the great majority of writers on China (scholarly and otherwise) and those few with alternative and non- or even theoretically antihumanist perspectives. Recall, again, the dominant images of political China: the Tank Man, something from the “scar literature” memoir industry, a “human tragedy” from a natural disaster among the uncountable masses, or the prototypical cinematic image of a beautiful or haggard face, suffering (be it actress Gong Li from days gone by or whoever the more contemporary analogue might be).

This all flows together with the properly sinological analyses of, say, Nathan or Friedman as invoked above or the standard analyses contained in the works of Roderick MacFarquhar (see MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006) or the *Cambridge History of China* (1986, 1987, 1992). What all these texts, images, and narratives presuppose is a humanism in at least two senses. One, “the” human subject, applies as well to China and the Chinese as anywhere else. Chinese difference, whatever and howsoever that signifies, must ultimately give way to its human sameness. And, two, the politics of humanism, applies equally well to China as to anywhere else: in short, what is needed there, and where it is inevitably headed in the march of sameness/progress, is political liberalism and capitalist democracy. Difference, in short, is still the problem for humanism. The “China difference” is I would insist both real and virtually powerless in the face of the humanist campaign. There is a powerful, discursive drive to code China and the Chinese as either already the-same or as inevitably caught up in the process of becoming-the-same as the normative United States–West (liberal capitalist democracy). It is this logic of sameness or general equivalence, with its parallels to the logic of capital or exchange value as well as modernization discourse, that subtends the new, sinological-orientalism.¹⁵ The other is not, as it was in Said’s *Orientalism*, essentially different but becoming-the-same. Sinological-orientalism has gone fully economic.

It might be of some use, then, to further analyze the rise and triumph of this “humanism” in regard to the production of knowledge about China. My aim here is not to debunk it further but to situate it within the context of recent changes within China and the world. I want to conclude by examining a key part of this rise, which is not simply the popularity of crypto-orientalist, anticommunist rhetoric but the negation of actually existing Maoist discourse. The demand for humanism within and in regard to China takes as one of its conditions of possibility this same historical and discursive negation. Briefly mapping this shift enables us to see that the turn to humanism and the concomitant demonization of the Mao era and political China reflects not the Truth of the revolution being finally, at long last revealed from the “bamboo curtain” of oriental deception and propaganda. It is rather a shift in the very terms and ways of seeing the China of the revolutionary period—and of seeing the postwar era of national liberations and revolutions. Put another way, this represents the present outcome of what Stuart Hall, drawing on Raymond Williams’s notion of the dominant, emergent, and residual in cultural formations, has theorized as the fundamental mode of politics: the struggle over the legitimation or delegitimation of discourse as part of the work of hegemony (Hall 1988). While explicitly Maoist, postliberation politics in China are residual, we can nonetheless reconstruct in broad terms what Maoist discourse was like. This in turn can allow us to restore some of the complexity and specificity to China’s recent past and to circumvent the negation of all of that through recourse to the standard notions of totalitarianism (“brainwashing” and oriental despotism), the proper individual, and so forth.

The revolution itself was a theoretical antihumanism. Recall, for example, Mao’s eminently Marxist-Leninist, class-based critique of humanism and human nature in the famous “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Art and Literature.” At that birthplace of the Maoist regroupment, “humanism” was in the air among the urban artists who had gone to join up:

But human nature only exists in the concrete; in a class society human nature has a class character, and human nature in the abstract, going beyond class, doesn’t exist. We uphold the human nature of the proletariat, while the bourgeoisie... uphold the human nature of their own class, although they don’t talk about it as such but make it out to be the only kind there is; in their eyes, therefore, proletarian human nature is incompatible with human nature. (Mao 1980: 79)

This calls to mind Leon ’s 1938 classic *Their Morals and Ours* in its insistence on the class division and analytical principle, even if it departs from Trotsky’s own refusal of *proletcult*. In the event, there simply was no place for a “humanist” aesthetic and the putatively

natural right of individual artists to write for whom and how they pleased. There was, though, and for at least the decades before the Cultural Revolution, a place for the folk-art and locally rooted *yangge* theater as well as for that great example of “revolutionary romanticism and realism,” the fiction of Zhao Shuli. In short, even at Yan’an in the late 1930s, it was class all the way down. For four decades the search was for a new, Marxist form of the state and an agitprop and cultural revolution that would fit the new China. The humanists and writers of their ilk were, as Mao memorably put it, “heroes without a battlefield, remote and uncomprehending” (1980: 85). The emphasis on class or, in short, Marxism was quite consistent throughout the Maoist period; the Cultural Revolution then took class—like everything else political—to its extremes. There radical, impassioned, and contradictory notions of class identity and politics were paramount.¹⁶ The point is not that it was dangerous to be a “humanist” or “individualist” (whatever this means) at such a time but that it was as likely as being, say, a hippie in the 1860s’ United States. Revolutionary discourse was positioned against both liberalism and humanism in quite emphatic and obvious ways, and this means that to use the latter as the standard by which to measure and read Maoist China is starkly anachronistic. One can of course still bring theories of liberal individualism, humanism, and the like to bear on China if one wishes (and not a few in China do this too). But I do think one needs to acknowledge that the self-understanding of Chinese subjects—and of the transformative revolution—during the Red decades at least is very much at odds with such notions. So is much of the current political culture (as defined by nationalism) and mainstream ordinary culture (as defined by “Confucianism” or traditional mores and values). At the very least this presents a problem for analysis.

I take the anthropological category of self-understanding to be important for characterizing Maoist (or any) discourse and for seeing the difference between this and the liberal/individualist humanism of our present time. To briefly flesh this out, let me turn to a recent essay by feminist historian Wang Zheng, who writes: “Everyone who was talking, including the once victimizing Red Guards, was a victim scarred by the Maoist dictatorship. But I could not think of any example in my life to present myself as a victim or a victimizer. I did not know how to feel about my many happy memories and cherished experiences of [that] time” (2001: 35). My point is not that Wang’s account here is representative of *all* former Cultural Revolution participants. That is too tall an order and not finally her point. But on the basis not just of numerous personal conversations with former participants but also texts like Jiang Wen’s 1994 film *In the Heat of the Sun* as well as several scholarly works, I cannot help but think that Wang’s comments apply to very many people.¹⁷ The key point here is that liberal notions of human rights (and their implicit humanism) were simply not in circulation during the highly politicized and revolutionary con-

text of the immediate Chinese past, and the Cultural Revolution period in particular (Gao 1994).¹⁸ For those within the revolution or mainstream of Chinese society at the time (a very large crowd indeed), the chief public and national-cultural subject positions available to be taken up were much more like what Wang Zheng (2001: 51) characterizes in her analysis of the Cultural Revolution period: one could be a “revolutionary youth,” a “communist successor” (or just a communist), or a “socialist constructor.” Politics and political identity took intense, binary, dyadic forms not unlike those theorized by Carl Schmitt in his friend/enemy distinction (Dutton 2008).

As Wang goes on to argue, the discursive formation of the time was especially salutary in terms of the state’s emphasis on gender neutrality. The strategy was

to situate citizens in a new kind of social relationship, to pull both men and women out of the web of Confucian kinship obligations and to redirect their ethical duties from their kin to the party and the nation. Scholars of Communist societies may call this statist scheme manipulation or domination, but few have noticed that the enforcement of this scheme disrupted conventional gender norms and created new discursive space that allowed a cohort of young women to grow up without being always conscious of their gender. (Zheng Wang 2001: 52)

Here we come to a pressing issue in regard to the interpretation of China and our current theoretical dominant in the US-Western, if not global, intellectual political culture: antistatism. For what now counts as political liberalism in the world, not least within the United States—West, the antistate, antigovernment, and ultimately antipolitical viewpoint has become axiomatic. In terms of theory, many have argued that the general political thrust of most postmodern theory is an antistate libertarianism or crypto-anarchism (recall as well Jürgen Habermas’s argument for all of this being “conservative”) (Brennan 2006). In terms of China this antistatism becomes still more problematic, given the long tradition of orientalist thought about despotism and authoritarianism being natural to the Chinese. Hence Mao, and hence the persistence of Confucianism—according to the liberal standpoint. And the general point of much of the Chinese New Left, as well as more Marxist and Maoist leftists, is that in an important sense China suffers from too *little* state (in regard to market failures, national sovereignty, the importance of state-owned enterprises and the jobs therein, as well as local corruption and abuses).¹⁹ But what I take to be the lesson from Wang Zheng and much of the Chinese New Left is twofold: one, the Maoist state indeed did some good, even beyond achievements in economics and class leveling, and this runs counter to standard, liberal/humanist denunciations of the whole period, and, two, more broadly,

your humanism may have constitutive political blindnesses that leave you remote and uncomprehending.

Let us end in another place that stands opposed to humanism: the “battlefield” Mao metaphorizes above. Where, today, in China or the West would one find such a political battlefield, a place of commitment politics, the radical imagination, and revolutionary intensities? Where instead of the status quo and *depoliticization* there is a *repoliticization* of not only everyday life but also the public sphere and intellectual culture? If Alain Badiou (2007) is correct that the twentieth century was in part defined by a passion of, and for, the Real, then at least two things emerge from this. One, under Mao China was—for better and for worse—the site of this passion and politicization and will remain important for this reason alone. And, two, our great distance from this historical moment represents not the final triumph of and return to liberal humanism but an intellectual as well as political backlash.

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NOTES

1. And China and humanism (as seen from the West) is a very old tradition dating back to the early Jesuit missionaries who saw the Chinese in a “positive” light, proof of the universality of Christianity.
2. The complicated relationship between China, China studies, and colonialism and orientalism has been aptly diagnosed in Barlow, 2005 and 1997.
3. For discussion of early post-Mao humanists, see Misra, 1998.
4. See the discussion (and translation) of Cai in Jason McGrath’s superb analysis of the humanist spirit debates (2008: 46–48). I am indebted to McGrath, though I am drawing harsher conclusions.
5. For discussion of the rise of the New Left versus liberalism in the 1990s, see Zhang, 2008.
6. The best English anthologies collecting the Left/liberal debates in China are C. Wang, 2003, Davies, 2001, and Cao, 2005. A case for a progressive neo-Confucianism can be found in Bell, 2008. A popularized guide is Leonard, 2008, which also partially translates Gan, 2007 and others. For further discussion see Ban Wang and Lu Jie, 2012.
7. See the recent “A Hundred Years of Tsinghua, A Hundred Years of Rising China” forum at www.huanqiu.com/www/1871/index.html. For an overview, see Freeman and Wen 2011. For the

- Chongqing “model” in particular, see a recent issue of *Modern China* edited by Philip Huang (2011).
8. Chinese liberalism too is not monolithic, but its strongest expression can be found in the “Charter 08” principally authored by the imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo. For a partisan-liberal overview, see Feng 2010. See as well the business magazine *Caijing*. The charter itself can be found in English at Open Democracy, 2010a. The adamant universality of its political rhetoric is belied by its very particular neoliberal economics.
 9. “Some will say my emphasis on the individual is ‘liberal,’ based in capitalist presupposition of the value of the ‘possessive individual.’ . . . So what!” (Waters, 2009: 228).
 10. This voice-over occurs near the very end of Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon’s film and serves as the resolution. For a transcript of the film, see *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, 1995.
 11. The opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics is a telling example of persistent de-Maoification, just as the recent World Expo in Shanghai begins China’s story of prosperity in Deng Xiaoping’s year of triumph, 1979.
 12. Lin Piao, former successor-designate to Mao Zedong in 1969, was killed in a plane crash in 1972 after an apparent failed coup attempt.
 12. See also Meisner, 1996, Bramall 2007, and the discussion and bibliography in Gao, 2008.
 13. Wang Zheng makes this comment in the course of her interview in Lee Feigon’s important documentary film, *The Passion of the Mao* (2006).
 14. For mainland e-media debates, see Gao, 2008 and the Utopia website in China (2011), though note that “Utopia” is occasionally unavailable due to state censorship. See also Andreas, 2009; Wu, 2007; Xing, 2001, Han, 2003; Law, 2003. The post-Mao CCP depends on demonizing the Cultural Revolution as radical chaos.
 15. For an explication of this capital logic, see Jameson, 1990. For more on the connection to orientalism, see Vukovich, 2011.
 16. See Wu, 2007, in addition to others already cited.
 17. In addition to Wang’s essay and the others collected in Zhong, Wang, and Bai 2001, see David Davies, 2002.
 18. For more on Maoist discourse, see Vukovich, 2011 and Dutton, 2008.
 19. This is a consistent theme in the work of Wang Hui, Wang Shao-guang, and Cui Zhiyuan, who are perhaps the best known of the New Left scholars.

[Q2] Footnote 12 has been repeated. Please check and advise.

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