

COPYRIGHT NOTICE
Gong/Uneven Modernity

is published by University of Hawai'i Press and copyrighted, © 2012, by University of Hawai'i Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Introduction

China, Uneven Development,
and Global Modernity

This project is concerned with literature, film, critical discourses, and intellectual formation in contemporary China. It investigates the cultural problematics of unevenness in China's pursuit of modernity in the postsocialist period.¹ I look at literary and cinematic practices in contemporary China from the paradigm of uneven modernity, and examine unevenness and its effects on literature and film from a dialectical perspective: on the one hand, the uneven social, economic, and cultural developments in contemporary China generate intellectual and existential problems for writers and directors; on the other hand, they also offer essential opportunities for their cultural interventions. Rather than attempting to map out a way in which this paradox can be resolved, I will be examining the relationships between the various social and cultural forces that shape the current cultural scene, and investigating the dynamics and problematics involved in the paradoxical unevenness that characterizes the postsocialist situation.

The next section explores uneven modernity and situates postsocialist China in the global condition. This investigation will be followed by several case studies that specifically address some of the key questions involved.

The Problem of Uneven Modernity in Contemporary China

The first questions that need to be asked are, Why is it important to examine the cultural political condition in contemporary China through the framework of uneven modernity, and How can we find a useful description of the uneven modernity so common in yet so rarely specified by current critical discourses?

For many years, concern for the question of unevenness has been one of the most prominent features in Chinese thought. From Deng Xiaoping's strategy of uneven developmentalism during the era of Reform and Opening-up, to President Hu Jintao's recent proposal to build up a Harmonious Society as a corrective to

the prevalent social inequality, contemporary Chinese political discourse is largely dominated by this theme.²

Seen from a global perspective, unevenness is also a major theme largely defining the whole course of the development of capitalism. The continuous criticisms of capitalism by early European proponents of socialism, by Marxists, and by contemporary leftists and post-Marxists around the world attest to this fact. Moreover, globalization today does not ease the trend of uneven development either on the national or on the transnational level; on the contrary, it makes the unevenness between different geographical parts, business sectors, and classes even more manifest. As China becomes increasingly involved in globalization, this unevenness affects China ever more powerfully.

But despite the centrality of this issue, its use as a critical framework for the study of contemporary Chinese culture remains largely unexplored. In the West, the paradigm of uneven modernity is, from a theoretical perspective, decidedly thin. Rather than addressing unevenness as a specifically modern *problematic*, critics tend to treat it, more simply, as a sociopolitical *problem* that happens to accompany modernity and thus as one that awaits a certain due resolution.³

In the handful of studies that directly address uneven modernity, the term is still not used to indicate an intrinsic *feature* of modernity. Instead, uneven modernity is more often than not referred to as a somewhat significant but, nonetheless, a more-or-less accidental by-product of modernity.⁴ One problem in such a formulation of uneven modernity is that it takes unevenness simply as a *descriptive* rather than as a *definitive* factor of modernity. At least in the case of contemporary China, unevenness is not simply an adjunctive and dispensable dimension. Rather, it defines, to various degrees and in disparate forms, almost every aspect of people's modern lives. Theorizing unevenness as an external feature of modernity may conceal some of the most important aspects of Chinese culture, and may render critics susceptible to a methodological binarism. Accordingly, my approach to uneven modernity is to investigate contemporary Chinese culture by examining how uneven development *structurally* models modernity in China, and to view unevenness as a dynamic *problematic* rather than as a dismissible *problem*. In other words, I seek to examine unevenness not as a mere *accidental* feature, but rather as a necessary, if painful, condition for modernity; I seek to show how the condition of unevenness shapes contemporary Chinese culture.

Before coming to the specific investigation of uneven modernity in China, I will briefly examine the discourse of uneven development, which is a key to the issue in question. Uneven development by itself involves a huge body of scholarship in the discourse of modernity.⁵ The term "development" has become a catchword—an unexamined presupposition—of capitalism itself. As an essential feature of the contemporary world, that term has always been accepted as the

very essence of modernization. Thus the discourse of development, as many critics have pointed out, embeds in it the uneven relationships between countries, regions, classes, ethnicities, genders, and so on. Development, then, is often passed off as universal, an inherently uneven and specific discourse.⁶

Uneven development as a discourse has been most comprehensively studied in the field of political economics. One of the more radical claims is, “The law of uneven development, which some have wished to restrict to the history of capitalism alone, or even merely to the imperialist phase of capitalism, is . . . a universal law of human history.”⁷ Or, as Althusser has it, the law of uneven development absolutely concerns “everything in this world.” For him, uneven development is “not external to contradiction, but constitutes its most intimate essence.”⁸ Slovenian philosopher Žižek associates this unevenness more specifically with capitalism: “[F]rom the very beginning, capitalism ‘putrefies,’ it is branded by a crippling contradiction, discord, by an imminent want of balance: this is exactly why it changes, develops incessantly—incessant development is the only way for it to resolve again and again, come to terms with, its own fundamental constitutive imbalance, ‘contradiction.’”⁹

One of the most comprehensive theorizations of uneven development is Neil Smith’s monograph *Uneven Development*. In this book, Smith challenges the universality of uneven development and limits his discussion of it to the specific scope of capitalism. Within this framework, he maps out the seesaw movements of capital and the trends of simultaneous differentiation and equalization as inherent features of capitalism.¹⁰ David Harvey is another significant contributor to the theories of uneven development. He writes profusely on how uneven development under capitalism shapes the world’s geography. His works will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.¹¹

Both Smith and Harvey focus mainly on geography as a specific aspect in which uneven development expresses its impact. However, as their works show, uneven development has a much wider application in and greater effects on other aspects in people’s lives. For instance, as Smith argues, the theory of uneven development can be traced back to Marx’s political economic studies and is specifically associated with the political polemic between Trotsky and Stalin.¹² Mao Zedong’s *On Contradiction (Maodun lun)* can be regarded as a new development of the theory of uneven development. This political line of the tradition of the theory of uneven development originates in economics, but extends to politics; it also affects sociological, demographical, cultural, and ethical studies.

In contemporary China, unevenness is first and foremost manifested in the field of economic development, but inevitably extends to all other aspects of the society. Geographical differentiation as the most immediate result of uneven development has already become a part of the state discourse of developmentalism:

China has been divided into several economic zones (the Coastal Region in the east, the Western Region, Special Economic Zones in the south, and so on), and each zone carries differentiated state policies. This differentiation is analogous to the divides on the global scale: the divides of the East and the West, the South and the North, the Three Worlds, developed and developing countries, and so on. These divides are originally derived from the uneven practices of economic development, but they indicate further cultural differentiations and confrontations—not only between different geographical areas, but also between various classes and communities.

Uneven modernity in China is an integral part of uneven modernity in the global system. However, it must be remembered that China's particular historical and social conditions establish that modernity in China is always in tension with modernity in the West. Critical investigations of modernity in China need to pay special attention to this particularity and tension, which usually becomes a dynamic space for critical intervention.¹³ The critical paradigm of uneven modernity I propose here is one among the many dynamic paradigms in studies of contemporary China. To briefly comb through these paradigms will provide a better sense of where my own paradigm is situated.

Three critical paradigms are quite dominant in Chinese studies: "alternative modernities," "Chinese postmodernity," and "Postsocialism." First, "alternative modernities" investigates modernity in China in relation to global modernity and globalization. It seeks to illustrate how China simultaneously gets involved in global capitalist modernity and offers an alternative form as a variation of and resistance to the latter.¹⁴ Second, "Chinese postmodernity" situates the Chinese condition within the global trend of postmodernity and examines how contemporary Chinese culture participates in postmodern discourse and reshapes global postmodernity with its own particular contribution.¹⁵ "Postsocialism" focuses on a contemporary China that appears to have got over its socialist tradition and entered a new stage of development. However, despite these theoretical efforts, the fact is that global capitalism has not totally engulfed China, and Chinese socialism, conceived either as an historical heritage or as an ideological antidote, can still inspire, both substantially and imaginatively, an active critical discourse.¹⁶

My investigation of contemporary Chinese culture draws on all these critical paradigms and engages in their dynamics. In addition, though, I examine the contemporary culture in China with respect to unevenness and explore how cultural productions are modeled by and respond to this unevenness. My critical engagement is not only to arouse an awareness of this important dimension in the distinctive modernity of China, but also to help fashion a new dialectical perspective, one that I hope can enrich the study of contemporary China.

Towards a Dialectical Understanding of Unevenness in Contemporary China

The problematic of unevenness in postsocialist China can be more fruitfully understood in a dialectical way.¹⁷ Dialectically contemplated, unevenness as a *problematic* is not to be conveniently accorded with a simple axiological judgment. On the contrary, it should be taken as *necessary impossibility*—a self-contradictory dynamism that exhibits its logic in the very process of its unfolding. By the term “impossibility,” I mean that unevenness in China is a self-canceling process, precisely because it is drafted as an expedient practice with the aim of accomplishing a harmonious evenness. However, at the same time this expedient practice is *necessary* not simply because, as expected, it helps expedite the process of coming to the final end, but, contrarily, in *not* yet reaching the end, it puts itself forward and offers, within the process of signification itself, much prominence and visibility.

Apparently, a contradiction in the uneven developmentalism in China is that, on the one hand, this unevenness has provided tremendous dynamics for China’s unprecedented development; on the other hand, though, it has generated enormous problems in Chinese society. This leads to the rise of various—sometimes antagonistic—powers, confronting and negotiating with each other. It is against this background that I unfold my critical exploration of literature and film in contemporary China.

However, behind this apparent contradiction lies a deeper paradox: though the ultimate end of uneven developmentalism in postsocialist China is common prosperity, in order to accomplish this goal more rapidly, the Chinese government deliberately resorts to and vigorously implements uneven practices. In other words, the evenness as the *end* of the unevenness should be understood on two levels: it simultaneously refers both to the *goal* of the state of fullness and equilibrium and to the *cancellation* of unevenness. That is to say, the accomplishment of the goal of evenness means canceling the dynamism involved in the self-assertive uneven developmentalism; at the same time, deferral of the utopian fullness and equilibrium helps sustain the vitality of eventfulness and visibility of the imperfect process of unevenness.¹⁸

This dialectic accounts for the contradictions mentioned above. A driving force in China’s uneven developmentalism in the past three decades was a strong sense of libidinal impulse pushing the country to assert its subjectivity and long-delayed prominence as a nation-state, especially under the pressure of globalization. Similar to the mechanism with which the “lure of the modern” (Shu-mei Shih’s term) attracted semifeudalist and semicolonial China in the early twentieth century into its tortuous and dramatic search for modernity, the lure of

globalization also turns out to have had such an enormous attraction and urgency that contemporary China seems unable to wait, eagerly inserting itself into the globalizing process.¹⁹ Slogans such as “Getting on track with the world” (*yu guoji jiegui*) and “To actively participate in the new round of the international division of labor” (*jiji canyu guoji fengong*) exhibit not only the eagerness of contemporary China to become part of the capitalist machine and to share some of its profits, but also its fear of being left out of the all-encompassing process of (capitalist) globalization and thus of losing the chance of fulfilling the national dream forever. Decades ago, the May Fourth intellectuals expressed their deep concerns about the danger of feudalist China being abandoned by the ever-unifying modern world; the contemporary worries are nothing less than the continuation of that anxiety of the early modernists.

As an immediate result of such a libidinal impetus, the breaking of equilibrium and balance—that is, uneven developmentalism—was adopted to speed up the accomplishment of a common prosperity. The Communist government’s strategic policy of Reform and Opening-up was problematic, with man-made unevenness as its essence. It promoted partial prosperity and thus differentiation in the hope of creating both effective and efficient competition and a stimulation mechanism. What inevitably came along was a restructuring of social relations and a newly created inequality. Social and economic achievements and problems alike brought about by this uneven developmentalism became ever more manifest. Understandably, compliments and acclaims were accompanied by criticisms and denunciations. What is more important for critics to be aware of is that, on the one hand, this uneven strategy has its due reasons to come onstage in the first place, and that this strategy is still functioning at the particular historical-geographical conjuncture of contemporary China. For better or worse, it has proved to be a necessary agent for China to achieve the visibility, prominence, and new subjectivity it now enjoys. At the same time, and on the other hand, this unevenness is not only expedient but also self-canceling. For the ultimate goal of collective balance, the very purpose of accelerating its coming via uneven maneuvers is by its nature self-eradicating. In other words, to understand this paradox, we need to see dialectically the simultaneous *necessity* and effectiveness of such disequilibrium and its ultimate *impossibility*.

Cultural Intervention and Negotiation in Unevenness

How do cultural practices in contemporary China reflect, respond to, and interact with social unevenness? To answer this question is to address the cultural politics

in China; the way in which this question is answered also registers the dialectics of unevenness with respect to contemporary culture.

If the cultural always functioned as a reversed realm of the economic in Pierre Bourdieu's paradigm, then the cultural's oppositional and critical characteristics would be exhibited in cultural interventions in a transparent fashion. In this case, social unevenness and ruptures offered opportunities and resources for cultural interventions.²⁰ In a way, contemporary China is indeed anything but stagnant. Incidents and happenings are abundant and provide "culture workers" with inspiring and stimulating materials of criticism. Indeed, cultural representations of these uneven events make up a significant part of critical interventions.

However, the position of the cultural in relation to the socioeconomic in China has never been self-explanatory. The relatively clear-cut oppositional relationship between the cultural and the economic found under Western conditions, is less clear when applied to China. For one thing, the tension between traditional literati and modern intellectuals still in one way or another shapes the particular identity of contemporary "culture workers." Under the specific conditions shaped by China's disparate cultural-political traditions—be it premodern or revolutionary—and more importantly the conditions shaped by the uneven reality, these "culture workers" position themselves in various relationships with the "worldly" rather than simply standing in opposition to the latter. In contemporary China, the relationship between the cultural and the economic is thus registered in various forms and characterized by a mixture of tension, conflict, cooperation, incorporation, conspiracy, and negotiation.

Current debates distinguish among Chinese intellectuals the New Leftists from the Liberals in their attitudes towards uneven developmentalism. The former group claims to stand for the marginalized and those living in the periphery, and calls for social equality and justice through collective maneuvers. The latter group believes that the breaking of categorical equality brings about destruction of stagnant and inefficient economic and social mechanisms and liberates the agency of individuals from social constraints. In other words, New Leftists continue to exhibit their critical edge against any form of inequality and unevenness, while Liberals are still hopeful of the coming of a civil society that will come about through practices of differentiation.

There have been some efforts to reconcile these two factions and make sense of this paradoxical unevenness. For instance, the then U.S.-based Chinese scholar Wang Shaoguang, who is an influential figure to the think-tank of Chinese government, together with Hu Angang, a scholar from Mainland China, offer a compromise in which excessive expressions of either the right or the left are strategically restricted and the government's role is to balance equality and efficiency.²¹ This pragmatic fashion tries to tightrope walk between the two extremes. However,

what is really accounted for in this resolution is a *quantitative* consolidation but not a *qualitative* resolution.

The U.K.-based sociologist Lin Chun writes in her recent work on the Chinese socialist tradition in this neoliberal age as follows: “[W]e must delve into the Chinese model of socialism as well as the Chinese model of reform. Both models synthesize contradictions; and Chinese alternative modernity is conceptually based on the continuities and discontinuities between the two.”²² This “synthetic” method is more a redemptive effort in retrieving the socialist tradition in face of rampant neo-liberalism. This view corresponds to what the critic Cui Zhiyuan calls for, a “Second Liberation of Thought”: if the first liberation is to break the shackles of orthodox Marxism and ultraleftism in the 1980s, then the second is emancipation from the prevalent neoliberalism in the 1990s through reassertion of the unique socialist tradition and experience in China.²³

Faced with these pronged attitudes, the critic Qin Hui claims that the debate between the left and the right has missed the real problem in China. The real question for Qin Hui is not whether we should ask for looser state control on the market or whether we should expect greater state interventions to guarantee the common welfare, but instead is how can we build up a constitutional polity in order to get rid of the problem of the unevenness between power and obligations, the fundamental problem that has led to other social unevenness?²⁴

Interestingly, these differentiations in intellectuals’ reactions to Chinese uneven modernity are also manifested in other aspects, such as differentiations in a geographical sense—(while the more commercialized city Shanghai was the center for intellectual debates on the “humanist spirits” [*renwen jingshen*],²⁵ the political capital Beijing became the headquarters of newly introduced “postmodernism”)²⁶ in a demographical sense (as Sheldon Lu points out, “Although the humanist, liberal attitude toward China is more widely accepted by the general populace, the Marxist, leftist tradition has had far more influence in academic, theoretical circles”),²⁷ and so on. All these differentiations indicate a nebulous condition in people’s understanding of the era. It is against this highly complex background of sociopolitical unevenness that I examine how contemporary Chinese culture manages to negotiate its way in this world of paradoxes.

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 is a critical investigation of uneven modernity in China. In this chapter, I build up a critical framework of a dialectical understanding of unevenness through navigations among different theoretical schools. I expound how dialectical thinking embedded in different critical schools usually points to a metaphysical paradox in capitalism and modernity: the inevitable tension between constant pursuit of an infinite fullness and the break of fullness (or unevenness) as the means of this pursuit. In the Chinese context, this

paradox is fashioned in the uneven developmentalism that most manifestly characterizes the postsocialist period. This uneven developmentalism not only dictates contemporary economic development but also defines the relationships between the economic, the political, and the cultural. Moreover, it shapes our (lack of) understanding of the function of institutional construction sandwiched between economic fanaticism and cultural idealism.²⁸ Because of its all-round effects on contemporary China, this unevenness can offer an effective structural perspective, among many other perspectives, from which to investigate literary and cultural productions in this period. I hope to make it apparent by the end of this chapter that this uneven modernity as a historical existence functions dialectically: while it makes developments in contemporary China more dynamic and vital, it simultaneously renders these developments highly problematic.

The following four chapters are investigations of manifestations of these dialectics of unevenness in specific cultural events. It consists of four case studies, addressing respectively, but not exclusively, the issues of highbrow literature, popular fiction, commercial filmmaking, and art-house cinema. Together, they show how different aspects of dialectics of unevenness are unfolded, mediated, and reflected in different contexts and in different fashions.

Chapter 2 investigates the Yu Qiuyu Phenomenon that has attracted much attention in recent years. I take Yu Qiuyu's prose writing as an example of how contemporary intellectuals and scholars negotiate their way in this uneven condition in which the cultural is under assault from the economic. Yu represents a successful cultural figure who repositions himself as a popular serious writer in this increasingly stratified yet flattened and homogenized society.

Chapter 3 focuses on a Wuhan-based writer, Chi Li, whose writings are known for their fashionable neorealist style. I argue that neorealism, a product of the ideological reconsolidation in postsocialist China, which is in tension with the preceding (revolutionary or socialist) realism and avant-gardism, functions as an eloquent example of the literature of unevenness. By examining neorealism's relationships with the realist heritage and the avant-gardist impulse, I reveal how neorealist writings negotiate the social conflict between remnant intellectual idealism and the burgeoning market.

Chapter 4 moves on to the studies of entertainment film culture by examining one of the most popular directors in China today, Feng Xiaogang. I will demonstrate that the trajectory of Feng's filmography shows that the best received of his films are more than just products of the entertainment industry. Rather, they exhibit a possible and effective form of cultural intervention in the age of popular culture. They embed the director's critique of social problems in this uneven condition, while taking advantage of all-encompassing commercialization. This reveals a cultural paradox of postsocialist China.

Chapter 5 is an investigation of the productions of a representative of the Sixth Generation director, Wang Xiaoshuai. Wang's filmmaking is symptomatic of art film productions in contemporary China in many ways. Through a critical examination of a fashionable but problematic reading of these films—what I call geopolitical reading—a reading that is exclusively concerned with political interpretations, I examine how Wang's art film productions negotiate with the international art-house circle and commercial temptations. This effort exemplifies not only an alternative to the uneven power relationship between China and the West in cultural production, but also an effective attempt to reposition art filmmaking under the new postsocialist condition.

The purpose of this project is to offer an alternative perspective and critical paradigm in studying contemporary literature and film in China. Unevenness provides a special framework through which I examine the paradoxes embedded in literature and film. As China modernizes, will unevenness be gradually eliminated, or will it be further strengthened as the vortex of global capitalism encompasses all? Then what will Chinese literary and filmic productions be like and how will Chinese intellectuals further reposition themselves? These questions are, of course, yet to be answered by further studies to come.