

The Twentieth Century, the Global South, and China's Historical Position

Foreword

Wang Hui (born in 1959) is a professor of Chinese language and literature at Tsinghua University as well as the director of the Tsinghua Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences. He is the author of a number of important books, including the four-volume study *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (现代中国思想的兴起), published in 2004, the first two volumes of which are now available from Harvard University Press in English. In an extensive review, Zhang Yongle, who teaches at Beijing University School of Law, wrote that ‘nothing comparable to Wang Hui’s work has appeared in China since the late Qing-early Republican period’ (at the turn of the twentieth century).¹

Wang Hui’s early work was on Lu Xun (1881–1936), often considered to be the founder of modern Chinese literature, in whom he detected a sympathetic character who wanted to dig deep into the well of Chinese thought and culture but who grasped their limitations in a world where technological progress had sped up the clock. Two points emerge from such a detection: first, that the gravity of European colonialism forced countries outside Europe to measure themselves against its standard – a measurement that was intended to leave them wanting – and, second, that human development is not linear, not even in Europe, nor is it territorially based, which means that countries and cultures learn from each other and enrich each other’s cultural resources. The Western binary opposition between tradition and modernity occludes, on the one hand, the immense weight of the old world on the new and, on the other, the mutual influence between Europe and the rest of the world. This orientation to the past allowed Wang Hui to accept both that there were ground-breaking revolutions in the twentieth century, from the 1905 Russian Revolution onward, and yet that these revolutionary breaks retained a continuity with the past and drew from it in ways both productive and unproductive. Careful theoretical reconstruction of the past provides far more than antiquarian interest: it reveals the way in which countries, such as China, develop through their complex relationship to both the immensity of their break with the past (the 1911 and 1949 Chinese Revolutions) and the roots of these breaks both with a history that predates them and with areas of the world (such as the Soviet Union) that influenced them. This enriched attitude toward the cultural world of China freed Wang Hui to produce an enormously important body of work on Chinese thought.

It is perhaps not surprising in this context that China has not been a frame of reference for scholarly work from colonial times onward. China, in the colonial mode of thought, was compared with the West or assessed using Western concepts and categories and always seen as lacking or inferior. Once more, the binaries of advanced versus backward halt serious intellectual thought. Europe is not advanced, nor is China backward, and these two regions are not immune from influencing one another. Yet, the arrogance of the colonial mode

of thought remains with us. Not only is there a general lack of knowledge of Chinese thought (although this is changing now), but there has been little interaction in the academies of the world outside China with Chinese intellectual debates and discussions. This is precisely why Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research partnered with the important Chinese journal *Wenhua Zongheng* (文化纵横) to produce an international edition, where Wang Hui sits on the editorial board.

From May 1996 to July 2007, Wang Hui was the editor of the influential Chinese magazine *Dushu* (读书, or *Reading*). The first issue of this magazine, in 1979, carried an essay by Li Honglin entitled ‘No Forbidden Zone in Reading’, which called for a ‘movement to liberate thought’. Before and after his time at *Dushu*, Wang Hui wrote a series of important essays on the need to revitalise politics in China. ‘Western democracy based on general elections is not the only model of democracy’, he wrote, ‘nor is democracy a merely formal practice. Democracy must be predicated on political dynamism. Once this momentum is lost, no form of democracy can survive’.² This dynamism, Wang Hui argued in a number of essays, had to come from the mass line, which Mao Zedong had described as ‘from the masses, to the masses’.

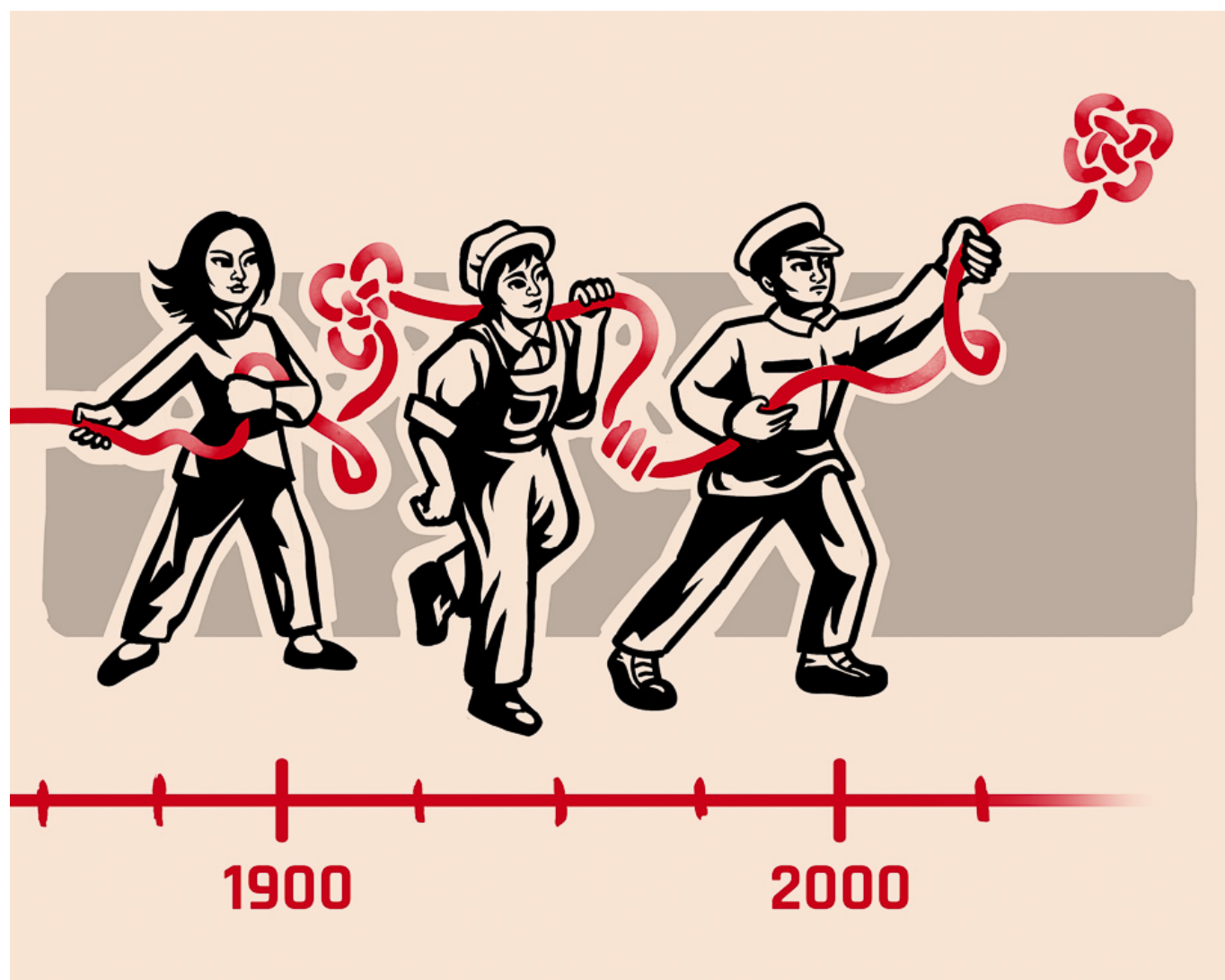
In April 2020, Wang Hui published a fascinating article in *Wenhua Zongheng* entitled ‘The Revolutionary Personality and the Philosophy of Victory: Commemorating Lenin’s 150th Birthday’ (汪晖, 《革命者人格与胜利的哲学——纪念列宁诞辰150周年》). In this essay, Wang Hui reflected on the emergence of a new dynamism and political revitalisation in the Chinese government and the Communist Party of China, particularly around the response to the COVID-19 pandemic: the mass line, revolutionary optimism, and the importance of a party with a leader who has a revolutionary personality. But this is a fragile combination, with any one element liable to change, that requires intellectual vigilance. That is precisely what Wang Hui has done in the substantial essays and books he has published over the past thirty years, and in this dossier. We are proud to feature Wang Hui’s essay as our October 2024 dossier, October for the Russian Revolution and 2024 for the centenary of Lenin’s death.

Introduction

The twentieth century has passed. How do we understand the historical legacy of twentieth-century China and its position in world history? The preamble of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (1949) states, ‘In the twentieth century, momentous historical changes took place in China’.¹ The wars of imperialism and the Cold War profoundly shaped China, but the revolutions sparked by war and social crises, especially the founding of the People’s Republic of China within these revolutions, have had an indelible impact on the subsequent changes in China and the world: not only were national independence and industrialisation completed during the revolutions and construction processes, but social, human-nature, geopolitical, and other relationships all underwent unprecedented transformations. There is hardly an area that has not experienced profound changes, from spoken and written languages to political systems, from social organisations to labour and gender, from cultural fashions to everyday life, from urban-rural relations to regional relationships, from religious beliefs to social ethics. The ‘short twentieth century’ was shaped by a broad, complex, profound, and intense process with unprecedented density, depth, and breadth.² Today, it is difficult for people to imagine a life other than the one that has been transformed by the twentieth century. Without the explorations, innovation, and failures of revolutions, it is impossible to grasp the significance of

this era.

The birth of the century marks the emergence of global simultaneity in Chinese history and the struggles and explorations to transform the internal imbalance of simultaneous relations. Only from the dual perspectives of the Chinese historical context and historical upheavals in the world can we grasp the position of twentieth-century China.



Part One: The Birth of the Century

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, against the backdrop of significant changes, various forces formed their own assessments of the 'propensity of the times' (时势), leading to competing views on the concept of time itself. For instance, political thinker and reformer Kang Youwei proposed the 'Confucian Calendar' in *Preface to Notes on the Liyun Chapter of the Book of Rites* (《禮運注》叙, published in 1901 but written in 1884 according to his own record), while philosopher Liu Shipei put forward the 'Yellow Emperor calendar' in 1903. These perspectives on time were often in opposition to one another, yet they shared a new consciousness of progress regarding the unification of history and the historical timeline.

At midnight on 30 January 1900 – the Year of Gengzi³ and also the 26th year of the Qing Dynasty Emperor Guangxu's reign – Liang Qichao, a Chinese reformist, scholar, and journalist who was living in exile in Hawaii, was moved by the unfolding events and wrote 'A Song for the Pacific Ocean in the Twentieth Century' (《二十世紀太平洋歌》), in which he reflected: 'Suddenly, I wonder what night is tonight, and what place is this place, realising that it is the boundary between two centuries, and the centre of the eastern and western hemispheres'. Liang Qichao brought together two important new concepts: one representing time – the twentieth century – and the other representing space – the Pacific Ocean. This new spatio-temporal perspective, vastly different from previous expressions, later became more widespread, providing a new framework for exploring China's historical position in the twentieth century. Let's first look at the concept of time. The Gregorian calendar was established in 1582, initially used by overseas Catholic territories of Spain and then adopted by Britain in 1752, Japan in 1873, China in 1912, and Russia in 1918. For Liang Qichao, a century was not just a method of numbering years, but also a way of understanding and defining the historical propensity of the times, of judging the basis for action. All understandings of the past, present, and future were recombined within this intense shift in historical consciousness. Although the concept of the twentieth century emerged in the context of entanglement with Confucian narratives like the 'Gongyang Three Ages Theory',⁴ it was more so a product of the fact that these traditional narratives were unable to cope with the nature of the profound changes of the era.

The universalisation of the concept of the 'century' is a result of the new propensity of the times. From a spatial perspective, the Pacific era has been closely related to the rise of the United States since the late nineteenth century. The global capitalist centre began to shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific: in this vast space, beyond the old empires of the nineteenth century, two new political-economic entities, or in politician Yang Du's words 'economic warfare nations', emerged, namely the United States and Japan, which drastically changed the world situation. Twentieth-century China and its fate were closely linked to this transformation. Liang Qichao had already begun to use the term 'national imperialism' in his long poems, and in 1903 he discussed the characteristics of the twentieth century from an economic perspective. That year, while touring the United States, Liang Qichao closely examined this 'economic warfare nation' and published the lengthy article 'Trust, the Giant of the Twentieth Century' (《二十世紀之巨靈托拉斯》), which analysed the new features of twentieth-century capitalism such as economic monopolies, overproduction, and capital control. He proposed that 'Trust is the imperialism of the economic realm; the political realm's inevitable trend towards imperialism, and the economic realm's inevitable trend towards trust, are both inevitable outcomes of natural selection'.⁵ This supplemented his interpretation in 'A Song for the Pacific Ocean in the Twentieth Century' of the real driving force behind the US expansion into the Pacific after the Spanish-American War (1898).

Twentieth-century China was the first era in the country's history to define itself by the concept of the 'century', and judgments about the characteristics of this era were closely linked to observations of the entire world pattern. Liang Qichao's 'A Song for the Pacific Ocean in the Twentieth Century' (1900) and 'Trust, the Giant of the Twentieth Century' (1903); Kōtoku Shūsui's *Monster of the Twentieth Century: Imperialism* (1901); J.A. Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study* (1902); Paul Lafargue's 'American Trust and Its Economic, Social, and Political Significance' (1903); Rudolf Hilferding's *Finance Capital* (1910); Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913); Karl Kautsky's *Ultra-Imperialism* (1914); and Vladimir I. Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) are part of a lengthy sequence that contemplates the nature of the twentieth century. Imperialism is not only an expansive economic and military system, but also an ideological

and value spectrum, with the latter intervening in various narratives about others and oneself through an expansive knowledge system. The consciousness of the 'century' is both an awareness of and strong resistance to this process.

The advent of the 'century' is an event: the adoption of this concept of time was precisely to terminate the old concepts of time, such that the twentieth century could not naturally derive or evolve from these previous concepts – neither from dynastic chronologies, the Yellow Emperor calendar, or the Confucian calendar, nor could it be grasped through the sequential concepts of time of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. However, all other concepts of time would be reconstructed as the prehistory of the twentieth century. The concept of the 'century' provides an epistemological framework that integrates diverse spaces and times into a universal history of simultaneity, thus sparking reflections on the internal imbalances, contradictions, and conflicts of this universal history. The distinction of the twentieth century from all past eras is not just a temporal distinction, but a grasp of the propensity of the times. At this unique historical moment, in order for the Chinese people to create their own prehistory for modern China and distinguish China's unique position in the world, they also had to think about the issues in Europe and across the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even earlier periods.

Therefore, the historical narrative of the twentieth century must be understood in a reversed manner: the twentieth century is not the result of its prehistory, but its creator.



Part Two: Revolutions in Peripheral Areas

Nineteenth-century Europe is the central axis of modern historical narration. Many historical and theoretical discussions, whether about the classical period, the Middle Ages, the early modern period, or the twentieth century and postmodern eras, are mostly reconstructed according to the historical view and problem consciousness of Europe's nineteenth century. The nineteenth century and the concept of modernity almost completely overlap: rooted in the dual revolution (the French Revolution and the British Industrial Revolution) and the narrative of capitalist modernity, with Europe's revolutions, capital, empires, and their fluctuations forming the central story. Changes in other regions of the world are subordinate to this central story.

Compared to the 'long nineteenth century', the twentieth century remains a brief 'age of extremes': World War I, World War II, ethnic cleansing, the Cold War, tyranny, etc., are all social experiments that ended in failure.⁶ Eric Hobsbawm once lamented that the twentieth century is intimately linked with the fate of a single country: the Soviet Union. In such narratives, what position do China and other non-Western worlds occupy?

The rise of imperialism, the pattern of the great powers both competing and collaborating to divide up colonial territories, and the shift of the global power centre to the Pacific constitute the historical conditions needed to understand the fundamental issues of the twentieth century. From China's perspective, if we speak only of the phenomenon of imperialism, it is difficult to draw a boundary today as clear as that drawn by many classic writers on imperialism between 1840 and 1870.

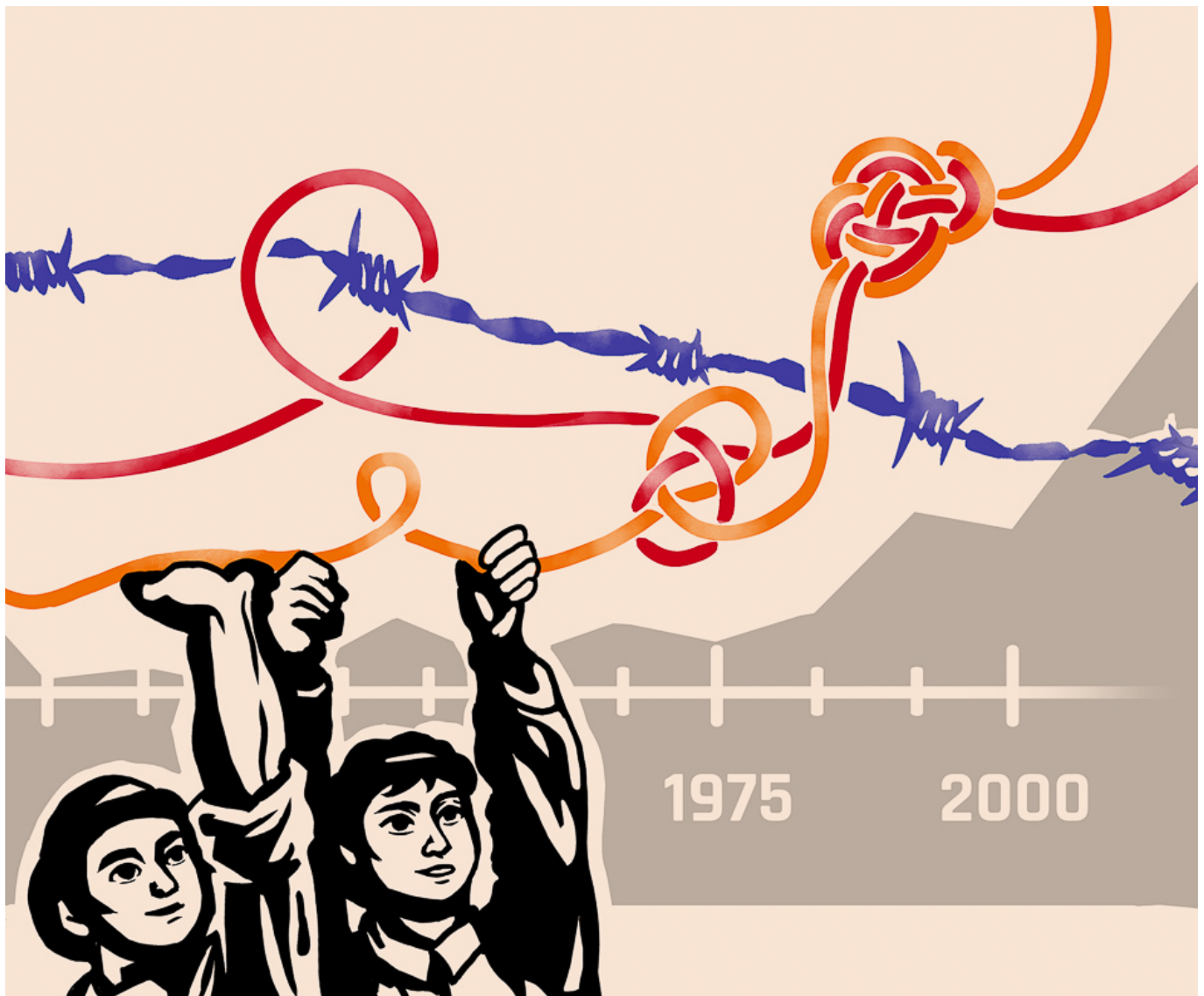
Alongside the shift of the world capitalist centre, the birth of the twentieth century was accompanied by a series of revolutions in peripheral areas. Imperialism is not only an international system, but also a military, economic, political, social, and cultural system that infiltrates societies internally. What clearly distinguishes the twentieth century from the nineteenth century are the revolutions in non-Western areas, which were nurtured by the internal and external conditions of the imperialist era. The novelty of this new period is not merely defined by the developmentalist story that capitalism spread from the central areas to the global stage. Rather, it was also shaped, on the one hand, by the colonies' and semi-colonies' continued resistance against the imperialist hegemony of economic development as well as their struggle for political independence and cultural survival and, on the other hand, by the transformations of the internal social relations that obstructed both the goals and the exploration of new social forms in this process of resistance and transformation. For example, in the age of war and revolution, to understand the transformations of twentieth-century China through the war itself, it is necessary to ask what the characteristics of the warfare of this era in China were. The Northern Expedition (1926–1928), the Agrarian Revolutionary War (1927–1937), the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1937–1945), the Liberation War (1946–1949), and the wars before the twentieth century, such as the Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860), the Sino-French War (1884–1885), and the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), have significant differences: these are conflicts of revolutionary organisations mobilised in warfare, conflicts of revolution waged through warfare, fights to build a revolutionary country during warfare, struggles to create a new political subject of 'the people' through warfare, wars that combined the national liberation war with the international anti-fascist war, and wars that achieved the goal of national liberation through domestic revolutionary wars and resonated with the international socialist movement.

Twentieth-century China was born within this context. Because of this, the twentieth century is likely not, as Eric Hobsbawm suggested, solely defined by a single country (the Soviet Union), but, rather, is linked to revolutions in peripheral areas and their sequential consequences. To discuss the starting and ending points of the twentieth century is thus to explore the multiple origins, convoluted processes, and declining forms of this era's revolutionary waves. An analysis of this issue must begin with an analysis of the non-uniformity of the imperialist system. If the non-uniformity of the imperialist world system creates the 'weak link' of this international system, then domestic divisions caused by competition among major powers also provide the 'weak link' for domestic revolutions. Thus, in the era of imperialism, there are two types of weak links. One type of 'weak link', as Lenin said, is 'uneven economic and political development' as 'an absolute law of capitalism', leading to the conclusion that 'the victory of socialism is possible first in several or even in one capitalist country alone'. Another 'weak link' arises from uneven political and economic development domestically as well as the contradictions among imperialist agents within oppressed nations. This second 'weak link' provided the conditions for Chinese revolutionary forces to survive and develop in the vast countryside, along provincial borders, and in peripheral areas.⁷

I perceive the 'short twentieth century' as the century of revolutions. This revolutionary century did not originate from the establishment of economic and military hegemony in Europe or the United States, but

from the new ‘non-uniformity’ caused by the process of establishing such hegemony – or, more precisely, from the revolutionary opportunities created by this ‘non-uniformity’ – which consists of a series of interconnected major events: national, political, and social revolutions. The Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) directly triggered the 1905 Russian Revolution, which inspired the massive strike by the Polish Socialist Party and the Lodz insurrection the same year, affecting the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and the Turkish Revolution (1908–1909). These revolutions, together with the 1911 Chinese Revolution, formed a revolutionary sequence in Asia (and Eastern Europe).⁸ The October Revolution of 1917 in Russia and the 1924 Nationalist Revolution in China under the First United Front, which can also be placed within this revolutionary sequence, provided the premise for the land revolution movement led by the Chinese communists. The October Revolution is usually understood in the context of European warfare, but this overlooks the continuity between this revolution and the Asian revolutionary sequence. Closely related to this sequence are the decolonisation and national independence movements that developed in different forms in different countries and regions, such as the Indian independence movement. Though all of these revolutions and movements took place in different historical and cultural contexts, constituting different modern paths, their interconnections and mutual inspirations are apparent. Years later, these revolutions and movements were part of the historical foundation of the Bandung Conference (1955) and the Non-Aligned Movement (1961 to present). Therefore, the birth of the ‘short twentieth century’ had to begin with an exploration of ‘weak links’, which can only be identified within the search for opportunities for revolution and change. From the vantagepoint of seeking opportunities for revolution and change, it is not the old Eurasian geopolitical competition, but the revolutionary situation caused by the new structure in Asia after the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, not the imperialist wars, but the ‘awakening of Asia’ triggered by these wars and shaped by the aforementioned series of revolutions, that marked the multiple beginnings of the ‘short twentieth century’.

Therefore, temporally speaking, the ‘short twentieth century’ did not begin in 1914, but rather between 1905 and 1911; spatially, it did not start at a single point but from a set of beginnings; and in terms of opportunity, it arose not from destructive wars but from the dual exploration that sought to break through the imperialist system and old regimes. Geopolitically, the twentieth century was not just a post-colonial era but also a post-metropolitan era,⁹ during which revolutions and reforms in peripheral areas not only transformed their own regions, but also the central-peripheral relations of the world, significantly affecting the central regions and the transformations they experienced. It is only recently, at a time when countries of the Global South account for nearly 60 percent of the global GDP and BRICS countries over 30 percent, that people have begun to understand the features of the ‘post-metropolitan era’, though this is a prolonged process.¹⁰ The widely used trans-geopolitical concepts ‘tricontinentalism’ (亚非拉), the surge of national independence movements and the Non-Aligned Movement, and the emergence of the Global South along this trajectory all stem from this sequential revolutionary process. What is the Global South? The South is not just a region or merely a ‘backward’ or impoverished area; in the tradition of the Bandung Conference, it resonates with the East, forming unity through differences. China and the Global South are no longer merely peripheral areas totally dominated by the colonial metropolises of the colonial era; they are the epochal forces that propelled the transition from the metropolitan era to the post-metropolitan era. This process began a century ago and is one of the premises for understanding the twenty-first century.



Part Three: The Politics of Displacement and the Creation of Continuity

The birth of the century signifies the transformation of multiple worlds under different timeframes into unevenness within a world of synchronicity, thus creating an absolute need to observe history along a horizontal axis. This temporal transformation is actually conditioned by the so-called ‘spatial revolution’. Under the premise of the spatial revolution, temporal relationships increasingly take on a lateral nature, and contemporary changes – as well as the discourses describing these changes – cannot be narrated along a longitudinal axis of diachronic relations. Rather, they must be explained across multiple timeframes. I summarise this phenomenon as conceptual lateral movement, whose function is to transform historical contents from different timelines into realities that can be expressed by the same set of discourses within a framework of synchronicity.

In this context, how does politics take place? Without a series of entirely new concepts or categories, the politics of the twentieth century and its historical significance seem impossible to represent; yet, at the same time, if these concepts, which have been translated or transcreated, are used as foundational categories to

construct and explain historical scenarios, the misalignment between discourse systems and social conditions is often quite apparent. In this era, concepts such as the individual, citizen, state, nation, class, people, political party, sovereignty, culture, and society become central in the new politics; production, modes of production, social formations, and their associated concepts become foundational categories for describing Chinese and other societies; concepts of ‘weak links’, friend-enemy relations, ‘border areas’, ‘middle ground’, ‘Three Worlds’, united front, and so on all arise from assessments of and strategic and tactical thinking about the global and domestic realities under imperialist conditions.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, a leading Indian scholar of subaltern studies, found that the efforts to seek revolutionary subjects in India and other non-Western worlds have produced a series of substitutes for the Western category of proletariat, such as peasants, the masses, subalterns, and so on.¹¹ However, the phenomenon of repetition and displacement does not only occur with categories such as the proletariat, but also with almost all the categories mentioned above. Both revolution and counter-revolution embody the logic of this displacement.

These categories can neither be explained simply by nineteenth-century logic, nor by their classical roots. The majority of these key concepts, categories, and propositions (with the exception of a few that emerged from specific struggles, such as ‘border areas’ and ‘middle ground’) originate from translations and appropriations of nineteenth-century European concepts and propositions. However, the political content of these terms or concepts – such as state, sovereignty, people, class, citizen, political party, etc. – cannot be defined solely by their European origins. Twentieth-century revolutionaries and reformers swiftly utilised these concepts, categories, and propositions for specific political practices, causing much distress for historians of the new era. For example, if ‘feudal’ was originally a misused term, then what basis is there to describe societal forms before and after? Similarly, as European capitalism and colonialism developed in the nineteenth century, socialists invented the concept of the ‘proletariat’, which was seen as the true, future-oriented revolutionary subject. In twentieth-century China, the search for the proletariat as a revolutionary subject was an ongoing political process. However, in a society with such weak industrialisation, there were few groups of workers in terms of number, scale, and organisational level, and it is questionable whether or not the capitalist group, as its counterpart, constituted a class. Does this imply that the Chinese Revolution itself was the product of a ‘misunderstanding’?

Many categories and themes of twentieth-century China are repetitions of nineteenth-century Europe, but each repetition is also a displacement – not merely a product of different contexts, but also a political displacement. Therefore, it is necessary to inquire about the formation and meaning of categories such as the state, nation, sovereignty, political party, people, class, etc., under specific historical conditions; to inquire about how people’s wars transformed and created new political organisations (although with the same names) and state forms (like the soviet) that were different from previous political parties; to inquire about how, through organisation and mobilisation, peasants became a driving force or political class in the revolution; and to inquire about how to understand sovereignty and sovereign disputes within the League of Nations and the warfare amongst these nations. In this sense, none of these categories can be explained simply according to nineteenth-century logic, nor can they be based on the classical roots of the terms. These concepts reorganised historical narratives and broke the dominance of old narratives, thus paving the way for new politics to unfold. This is not to say that the discursive practices of this era did not involve the misplacement of concepts or categories, but rather that without analysing the political unfolding of these concepts or categories, we cannot understand their true meaning, strength, and limitations, and thus cannot use them to understand the

uniqueness of twentieth-century China. When these unfamiliar concepts were used under historical conditions vastly different from those that gave birth to them, they not only fostered new consciousness, values, and actions, but also produced a new political logic. Therefore, without the internal perspective of the Chinese Revolution, it is difficult to explain the significance of twentieth-century China.

This political displacement provides a methodological premise for understanding two unique aspects of twentieth-century China, namely that it was not a simple transplantation, but a displacement under specific historical conditions and traditional contexts that established a dialectical relationship between revolution and continuity. We might reexamine two unique aspects of twentieth-century China from this perspective.

The first centres on the beginning of the ‘short century’, specifically the issue of continuity between the old dynasty and the new state during the revolutionary state-building process. The twentieth century began with Asian national revolutions and constitutional democracy, and we can regard the Russian Revolution of 1905, the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, the Turkish Revolution of 1908–1909, and the Chinese Revolution of 1911 as the inaugural events of the ‘Awakening of Asia’. The 1911 Revolution quickly led to the founding of Asia’s first republic, endowing the revolution with the significance of a true beginning. I also place the 1905 Russian Revolution within the sequence of Asian revolutions, not only because its direct trigger was the Russo-Japanese War and Russia’s defeat within the territory of the Qing Dynasty, but also because this war and revolution catalysed the process of the Chinese national revolution (Tongmenghui of China, or China’s Revolutionary Alliance, was founded in the same year), triggering fierce debates between republicans and constitutionalists, and inspired the subsequent revolutions in Iran and Turkey.

We can associate the ‘Awakening of Asia’ with World War I as an age of the collapse of empires. Though the 1905 Russian Revolution failed, it revealed symptoms of decay in the huge and multiethnic Russian empire, which ultimately collapsed amidst the smoke of revolutions and wars. The Russian Revolution and nationalist forces marched forward together, and the principle of national self-determination prevailed in Russian border regions like Poland and Ukraine. Although the border nations later joined the Soviet Union as ‘federated republics’, the 1991 dissolution revealed that the Soviet structure was profoundly connected to the national principle. In 1918, the Austro-Hungarian Empire established in 1867 collapsed, and Austria and Hungary each established their own republic while the smaller nations that were formerly part of the empire acquired the status of independent nations. The Social Democratic Party of Austria’s nationalist concept of revolution and reform within the Austro-Hungarian Empire – consistent with Otto Bauer’s theory – resulted in utter failure. The Ottoman Empire had a wide territory and large population spanning Europe and Asia; its rise was an internationally significant world historical event that had prompted the age of European naval exploration. In the smoke of World War I, that empire, a survivor of previous revolutions, limped toward collapse, and the newborn Turkey relinquished its institutional pluralism for a smaller territory and a less complex structure. In the successive collapses of these three great empires, nationalism, constitutional reform, and the disintegration of complex institutional pluralism were different facets of the same event. In 1918, Woodrow Wilson’s ‘fourteen points’ placed the national principle above imperial interests in the name of national self-determination; nation, nationalism, and the nation-state as antitheses to empire dominated the political logic of the entire twentieth century.

At first, the Qing Dynasty seemed very similar to other empires: a regional uprising in 1911 triggered the breakdown of the entire imperial system, and winds of separatism and independence spread throughout the empire. On a philosophical level, ethnic nationalism resonated in areas with Han, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Uyghur peoples. Zhang Taiyan, an intellectual revolutionary leader, compared the Qing with the Austro-

Hungarian and Ottoman empires.¹² Surprisingly, however, in spite of violent turmoil, fragmentation, and foreign invasions, the precarious republic ultimately managed to remain unified, maintaining the territory and population of the previous empire. How can we explain the unique continuity between the unified multiethnic empire and a unified multiethnic sovereign state?

Modern China's second unique characteristic is the continuity between the revolutionary and the post-revolutionary periods at the end of the 'short twentieth century'. In the 'short twentieth century' in Asia, beginning with the Russian Revolution of 1917, national revolutionary movements were no longer simply allied with bourgeois constitutional democracy, but also with social revolutions and certain kinds of state-building movements with a socialist orientation. The October Revolution in Russia was a product of the European wars, but it echoed the spirit of Asian revolutions because it continued the path established by the 1911 Chinese Revolution, which combined national revolution with a socialist economic programme and state-building project.¹³ On the other hand, a socialist state and programme of action needed to be established in order to develop capitalism in a backward agrarian country (capitalism without a bourgeoisie).¹⁴ The key feature that distinguished the 1911 Chinese Revolution from the 1905 Russian Revolution, the 1905–1911 Persian Constitutional Revolution, and the 1908–1909 Turkish Revolution was that it linked national movements with socialist nation-building movements and international revolutions. This feature presaged the radical difference between the twentieth-century revolutions and those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as exemplified by the American and French Revolutions. Therefore, the 1911 Chinese Revolution was a significant turning point for the sequence of revolutions following 1905; in other words, it was the 1911 Revolution – not the 1905 Russian Revolution – that marked the true beginning of this 'short century' (which extends further back than the 'age of extremes'). The short-lived 1911 Revolution was a clarion call for the long Chinese Revolution. The 1911 Chinese Revolution, the 1917 Russian Revolution, and the establishment of the global socialist camp remade the global landscape, which had been dominated by the one-way expansion of capitalism since the nineteenth century. We cannot understand the overall world order after the late nineteenth century, therefore, without the perspective of 'revolution'.

After the Cold War ended, the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist countries disintegrated one after another, and the national principle and market-democracy capitalist system gained a double victory. In the West, this change was compared to the disintegration of earlier empires and viewed as a moment of liberation for nations and peoples from the 'despotic' Soviet empire and a step toward constitutional democracy. In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the rupture between the ages of revolution and post-revolution was readily apparent. But since the end of the 'age of extremes' described by Eric Hobsbawm, China itself has not only maintained the integrity of its political structure, population composition, and size, but has also completed, or is on its way to completing, a market-oriented economic transformation directed by its socialist state system. Why is that?

The first consideration in answering this question has to do with the relations between the Qing Dynasty and the modern Chinese nation, on the one hand, and between the imperial and republican systems, on the other. The second consideration has to do with the relations between socialism and the market economy. After 1989, no one expected that China would develop its economy as quickly as it did while still maintaining its political structure. Similarly, in the turbulent years following 1911, no one had any idea where the social upheaval of the times would lead. Modern China's political structure is the product of the revolutionary nation-building that began in 1949; its size and sovereign relations, however, date back to the continuity

established between the Qing Dynasty and the newly born republic after the 1911 Revolution. In other words, the creation of revolution, transformation, and continuity – inevitably also expressed as ruptures of continuity – encapsulates the crucial secrets of China’s ‘short twentieth century’. If this unique political process is also viewed through the lens of the ‘continuity of sovereignty’, it becomes apparent that the emergence, renewal, and completion of the ‘sovereign continuity’ in the course of the Chinese revolutionary and state-building process was accompanied by the birth of a new political subject and its ever-increasing capacity for political integration.

Unlike the French and Russian Revolutions, the Chinese Revolution cannot be marked by a single event; rather, it is a long process of mobilising and transforming society in all fields – political, economic, cultural, military, etc. – a process of creating continuity through continuous self-transformation, even self-negation, and a process that not only established its position in global relations but also changed global inequality. The revolution is shaped not only by tangible characters and events, but also by invisible forces such as ideas, values, customs, and traditions that are part of instigating events and coalesce in their eruption. The political subjectivity of the ‘Chinese people’ was born and strengthened through this long process. The historical continuity of modern China was born in specific historical events, produced by its participants under various historical forces. The energy and capacity of twentieth-century China to create its own continuity through revolution and transformation lays the foundation for facing contemporary and future challenges.

Interpreting the history of twentieth-century China or discussing contemporary China and its future hinges on the fundamental assessment of the issue of continuity, which can neither be seen as a natural extension of traditional China and its civilisation nor as a fabrication from modern revolutions and transformations. The discussion on continuity would not exist without the revolutions and transformations of twentieth-century China: both the practical experiences of Chinese revolution and reform and the relationship between modern China and classical civilisation must be understood within this framework.



Part Four: Crisis and Opportunity in the Post-Metropolitan Era

If one of the global characteristics of the twentieth century was the revolutions emerging in the peripheral regions outside the centre of global capitalism, then this series of revolutions also signified the emergence of new political subjects in global relations, successively called oppressed nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Third World, and the Global South based on different historical conditions. The nations and peoples under these designations differ tremendously across various historical conditions and cultural backgrounds. As Indonesian President Sukarno stated at the opening ceremony of the Bandung Conference in 1955, the participating nations ‘have not gathered together in a world of peace and unity and cooperation. Great chasms yawn between nations and groups of nations. Our unhappy world is torn and tortured, and the peoples of all countries walk in fear lest, through no fault of theirs, the dogs of war are unchained once again’.¹⁵ Decades later, contradictions still abound across nations, religions, ethnic groups, classes, genders, and between humanity and nature, forming a chain of crises.

The historical foundation of neoliberal globalisation lies in the multiple monopolies formed during the era of

imperialism and the Cold War, including finance, technology, natural resources, weapons of mass destruction, and communications. From the industrial and electrical revolutions to the biotechnological and digital revolutions, this global order and its inherent inequalities increasingly fail to meet the development needs of China and the Asian region, provide support for further development in African and Latin American countries, or offer a new framework for fair global development and overcoming ecological crises. If the oppressed nations, the Third World, and the Non-Aligned Movement were responses to imperialism and hegemonic politics, the Global South today must address the chain of crises brought about by neoliberal globalisation and advocate for a new political, economic, and cultural relationship and a new international order that accommodates the rise of peripheral regions.

Comparing the international conjuncture during the Bandung era with that of today, the most significant difference or development is the rise of China and other peripheral regions, which, through revolution and transformation, has partially changed the hegemonic structure of the global order. From the Bandung era onward, hegemony persisted but was loosening in a way that was difficult to restrain. If the crisis of war in the colonial era stemmed from conflicts among imperialist nations vying for colonies, spheres of influence, and the so-called balance of power, today's greatest threats to peace arise from efforts to suppress the rise of peripheral regions as hegemonic structures have begun to loosen. Following World War II, countries in the Global South, including the East, gained the basic conditions for modernisation through national liberation and socialist movements. With this foundation, some countries and regions have made significant progress through independent and cooperative development and continuously seek a fairer order in global processes. Accompanied by internal and external crises, Global North countries have shifted from neoliberal globalisation to more overt containment and monopoly, and regional war crises have the potential to escalate into larger-scale global conflicts. The financial, trade, and technological restrictions and sanctions repeatedly imposed by the United States and the European Union are manifestations of a hegemonic crisis. Global North countries can no longer monopolise natural resources as in the colonial era. Even in terms of weapons of mass destruction and media, the monopoly of hegemonic nations is in decline. The issue of defending peace that was raised at the Bandung Conference presents a new urgency and different implications in the context of a new era. Today, the more intense contemporary conflicts are closely related to internal changes within five monopoly structures: finance, technology, natural resources, weapons of mass destruction, and communications.

First, let's look at the financial system, where hegemony still exists but has clearly begun to loosen. The internationalisation of the renminbi is already underway as China uses its own currency in trade settlements with several countries. The financial sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union during the Russia-Ukraine war have acted like a double-edged sword; while harming other countries, they have also exposed the evident weaknesses of the dollar system. The system of financial hegemony has not ended, but the struggle surrounding it is becoming increasingly intense.

Second, in the current situation, the crisis in technological monopolies is even more severe than in the financial sector. The US Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors (CHIPS) and Science Act (2022) is a typical example of this; as soon as non-Western countries make technological breakthroughs and strengthen their autonomy, Global North countries resort to any means necessary to suppress, sanction, limit, or divide Global South countries. The process of disorder imposed by neoliberal globalisation is evolving into a process of intense conflicts.

Third, a crisis has also emerged in the Global North's monopoly over natural resources as Global South

countries gain independence and increasing economic autonomy. The hostility and resistance of Europe and the US towards the Belt and Road Initiative reflect the unprecedented challenges to the resource monopoly that has been established since the colonial era. Therefore, how China develops a model distinct from European hegemony and clearly articulates its development strategy on a global scale is also a crucial issue for Global South countries.

Fourth, when it comes to weapons of mass destruction, a monopoly still exists, though it is not all-encompassing. This has led to a new danger of a global nuclear crisis and arms race. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) trilateral agreement are designed to maintain the monopoly on weapons of mass destruction and establish new strategic frameworks globally that further this objective.

Fifth, the communications monopoly remains strong. Following the collapse of the socialist system, the monopoly of large Western media outlets not only persists but has become even stronger. The emergence of social media platforms like TikTok and the hearings in the US Congress prove that the US and Europe will use all means to suppress any technology that can partially break through the media monopoly, whether it is a large national media outlet or a social media platform. However, the new restrictive digital policies being formed and established by the US and Europe also reveal these regions' increasingly strained situation.

What has not stopped amidst these changes is the continuous rise of Asia's position in the global economy, the new possibilities for economic development in African countries, the long-term trend of Latin American countries increasingly seeking independent development, and waves of twenty-first century socialism. Thirty years ago, Samir Amin said that globalisation is not order but disorder, and today this disorder is accelerating into conflicts through a chain of multiple crises, posing a significant threat to global peace and development. As a broad global movement, the goal of the Global South is not merely to pursue unilateral development but to work towards a more just, peaceful, and eco-friendly world order. To this end, it is crucial to dismantle the monopolies on finance, technology, media, natural resources, and weapons of mass destruction and to organise global disarmament to defend peace. In this sense, the movement of the Global South is not simply a movement in the South but a global movement promoting changes in global relations and seeking a new universality for the survival and development of human civilisation.



Notes

Foreword

¹ Zhang Yongle, 'The Future of the Past', *New Left Review*, no. 62 (1 April 2010): 47–83.

² Wang Hui, *China's Twentieth Century: Revolution, Retreat, and the Road to Equality*, ed. Saul Thomas (London: Verso, 2016), 160.

¹ Constitution of the People's Republic of China, preamble, accessed 20 August 2024, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Constitution/node_2825.htm.

² 'The short century' is a term coined by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm referring to the period from the

beginning of World War I in 1914 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1995).

³ The Year of the Gengzi (庚子年) refers to a year in the traditional Chinese sixty-year cycle of time. 1900 was the most well-known Year of the Gengzi because of the anti-colonial and anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion, supported by the Qing Dynasty under the Guangxu Emperor (光绪帝), and the subsequent invasion by the Eight-Nation Alliance, which included forces from Japan, Russia, Britain, France, the United States, Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary. This year represents the national humiliation and crisis at the time.

⁴ Attributed to Confucian scholar Gongyang Gao during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), the ‘Gongyang Three Ages Theory’ (公羊三世说) presents a Confucian view of time in which history progresses through distinct ‘ages’, each representing a different level of moral and political development.

⁵ Liang Qichao 梁启超, ‘Ershi shiji zhi juling tuolasi 二十世纪之巨灵托辣斯’ [Trust, the Giant of the 20th Century], *Xinmin Congbao* 新民丛报 [New Citizen Journal], no. 40–43 (2 November to 4 December 1903).

⁶ The ‘long nineteenth century’, as theorised by Eric Hobsbawm, refers to the historical period between the French Revolution in 1789 and the start of World War I in 1914, a period characterised by the rise of industrial capitalism, the spread of nationalism, and the expansion of European empires, among other significant changes.

⁷ V. I. Lenin, ‘On the Slogan for a United States of Europe’, *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 2, 709.

⁸ The 1911 Chinese Revolution, also known as the Xinhai Revolution, ended China’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing Dynasty, and led to the establishment of the Republic of China.

⁹ ‘Metropolitan’ refers to the Western colonial powers represented by metropolises, such as London and New York, and their associated relationship of domination of colonies, semi-colonies, and post-colonies. Therefore, the so-called ‘post-metropolitan era’ corresponds to ‘post-colonialism’. Today, with the economic rise of China and East Asia and the changes in the world order, the ‘post-(Western) centre’ era has begun, a process which began with the revolutions and changes that took place in the peripheral areas in the twentieth century. The influence of these areas on central areas has increased such that Western society today must face its own ‘post-centre’ or ‘post-metropolitan’ reality.

¹⁰ Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *Hyper-Imperialism: A Dangerous Decadent New Stage*, Studies on Contemporary Dilemmas no. 4, 23 January 2024, <https://dev.thetricontinental.org/studies-on-contemporary-dilemmas-4-hyper-imperialism/#toc-section-6-1>.

¹¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Belatedness as Possibility: Subaltern Histories, Once Again’, *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader*, vol. 1, eds. Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri (London: Routledge, 2011), 163–76.

¹² Zhang Taiyan, ‘Zheng chou Man lun’ [Correct Discourse on Hatred of Manchus], *Xinhai geming qian*

shinianjian shilun xuanji [Selected Essays From the Ten Years Preceding the 1911 Revolution], vol. 1, ed. Zhang Nan and Wang Renzhi (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1963), 98.

¹³ Lenin first took notice of the distinctive characteristics of the Chinese Revolution in 1912–1913. In 1919, he argued that the socialist revolution ‘will be a struggle of all the imperialist-oppressed colonies and countries, of all dependent countries, against international imperialism’. See Vladimir Lenin, *Collected Works of Lenin*, vol. 30 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1957), 137. For Lenin’s ‘discovery’ of the 1911 Revolution, see Wang Hui, ‘The Politics of Imagining Asia’, in *Depoliticised Politics* (Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2008).

¹⁴ The socialist aspect of the 1911 Chinese Revolution was embodied by the fact that the state-building programme of Sun Yat-sen, the ‘father of modern China’ and first president of the republic, entailed not only a national political revolution, but also a social revolution that aimed to overcome the weakness of capitalism. Its main tactics to accomplish this were to equalise land ownership and tax increases in land value, a policy influenced by Henry George’s theories.

¹⁵ Asian-African Conference Bandung, Indonesia 1955, *Asia-Africa Speaks from Bandung* (Jakarta: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Indonesia, 1955).