

## Enlightenment as a “Romantic Science?”: Cultural Politics and Guo Moruo’s Rewritings of Ancient Chinese History

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All mystical union remains a deception, the impotently  
inward trace of the forfeited revolution.

—Horkheimer and Adorno

### 1. “Entanglement” of enlightenment with romanticism

In this paper, I argue that the dichotomy of “enlightenment vs. romanticism” does not necessarily mean an *external opposition* of enlightenment to romanticism, but it actually points to an internal tension within enlightenment itself. Underneath the repetitive operation of “de-mythologizing,” enlightenment always retains the impulse of “mythologizing” at its core. “Just as myths already entails enlightenment, with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology.”<sup>1</sup> As Horkheimer and Adorno show in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, both enlightenment’s valences and limitations spring from its dialectical energy of internalizing oppositions and repressing its own tensions. The liberating disenchantment then leads to the most horrible myth ever, i.e. late capitalism. Then, is the “determinate negation” (as an action of “driving out the evil spirit,” so to speak) a more radical enlightenment? Meanwhile, holding fast to the vision (or nostalgia, or utopia) of the “marriage” between the subject and

1. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 8.

the world, between the individual mobility and the universal liberation, romanticism—or at least the “revolutionary romanticism,” to use Micael Löwy’s terminology—sometimes performs the persistence of the “revolutionary reason;” as a result, it may serve the awakening from the “old” enlightenment and launch a renewed enlightenment. Needless to say, here, enlightenment should be understood in the broadest sense, and romanticism as a *Weltanschauung*, rather than simply a kind of sentimental ethos.

My approach to “enlightenment vs. romanticism,” furthermore, is meant to carry further, to reflect upon Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of enlightenment, and even Lukács’ critique of “bourgeois philosophy/science” in *History and Class Consciousness*, and, finally, to transfer their thoughts to another level or domain. The early Lukács demonstrated the self-limiting and reified nature of bourgeois thought (ranging from Kant to experimental sciences) with so much bolshevik-romantic-messianic energy that his theory was labeled “subjectivism” by Lenin.<sup>2</sup> Later, he nevertheless evolved to be a defender of the “Enlightenment tradition” and took romanticism to be “anti-capitalist humanism” at best. His wartime masterpiece *Destruction of Reason*, for instance, seemed to mark for him the Enlightenment “round two”—this time an enlightenment against Imperialist Unreason. The Frankfurt School, nevertheless, implicitly inherited the young Lukács’ demarcation of bourgeois thought. With their own wartime intervention, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno not only took over the young Lukács’ critical force, but also arguably developed, in a sophisticated manner, some themes rooted in the philosophical tradition of romanticism. “Enlightenment... has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”<sup>3</sup> The opening of this critical-theoretical magnum opus strikes an almost Rousseauian note, and this tone of “civilization critique” permeates many of the “fragments.” “Industrialism makes souls into things.”<sup>4</sup> Such sentences, which are not too far between, are reminiscent not only of the

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2. Cf. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971); especially the first half of the “Reification” Chapter.

3. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1

4. *Ibid.*, 21

Lukács’ idea of reification, but also of the whole tradition of romantic critique of capitalist modernity. This tendency has received more and more intellectual attention. For instance, Peter Murphy and David Roberts view Horkheimer and Adorno’s work as nothing more than a modernist replay of German Romanticism and its discontent with modern society. The two Australian scholars elaborately entitled their 2004 book (dedicated to Lukács’ later disciple, Agnes Heller) *Dialectic of Romanticism*, setting it against Horkheimer and Adorno. The book takes issue with both romanticism and enlightenment, and argues that, being the counterpart to each other, romanticism and enlightenment are “two fatal genies in modernity.”<sup>5</sup> The two authors try to reduce Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of enlightenment to yet another “mytho-logics,” which can be traced back to the “founding myth of romanticism” made by Rousseau and early German Romantics.<sup>6</sup> Opposing a critique of romanticism to the critique of enlightenment, however, leads to a highly simplistic understanding of both romanticism and enlightenment. Murphy and Roberts miss the point that, as Löwy’s studies show, romanticism is not only the longing for the archaic mythical origins, but also embodies revolutionary energies in its utopian aspirations or even in its melancholy. No less than that, they underestimate the enlightenment’s capacity for self-renewal. Their view of enlightenment and romanticism, as it seems to me, is so fatalistic that they fail to see the complexity of Horkheimer and Adorno’s sometimes pessimistic commentaries. If we still conceive of “Reason” and “Revolution” as open-ended horizons rather than dead-ended or failed “genies,” then we can see that enlightenment and romanticism are inextricably interconnected. At the heart of the cultural-political dynamics of modernity lies *the dialectic of enlightenment and romanticism*.

This idea is not merely a theoretical elaboration; rather it refers to the actual Enlightenment movement in modern history. Consider, for example, the French Enlightenment. As J-L. Lecercle points out in his commentary on J-J. Rousseau, the years from 1749 to 1759 witnessed the flowering of the enlightenment thought.<sup>7</sup> Montesquieu’s *L’Esprit des lois*,

5. Peter Murphy and David Roberts, *Dialectic of Romanticism* (London: Continuum, 2004), 2.

6. *Ibid.*, 12.

7. J-L. Lecercle, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” in *Discours sur L’Origine et les fondements de l’inégalité*

Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles*, and Buffon's first volume of *L'Histoire naturelle* all appeared in 1749; and then in 1750, Rousseau published his first work of importance, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. Yet the name of Rousseau is not only enshrined at the pantheon of the Enlightenment, it is also considered as the augury (or the rallying call) of romanticism. His *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* is a picture-perfect example of the intersection between the Enlightenment and European Romanticism; and the polemic it aroused among the Enlightenment intellectuals attested to the internal heterogeneity of the Enlightenment itself. Engels praised this work for the "scientificity" of its dialectic method, having no problem accepting its revolutionary sentimentality;<sup>8</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, as a matter of fact, shared with Rousseau such crucial motifs as self-preservation, mastery and enslavement, and they inherited at least a part of their critique of progress of enlightenment from this "enlightened romantic."

Now let us move to a national context, i.e., that of the Chinese Revolution. Chinese contemporary thinker Li Zehou (李泽厚) famously summarized the Chinese Enlightenment as the "variations of enlightenment and national salvation" (启蒙与救亡的双重变奏).<sup>9</sup> In this phrase which helped set the tone for the so-called "New Enlightenment" of 1980s China, the term "national salvation" carried slightly negation meaning in its euphorist reference to the Communist Revolution; what Li Zehou meant by "enlightenment" referred ultimately to the May Fourth Movement, which is recognizable as the major legacy of Chinese Enlightenment. While intellectual trends as diverse as Chinese communism of the revolutionary period, the modernization consensus of the 1980s, and the contemporary neo-liberalism and new left, all claim to be the "official" inheritor of the May Fourth, there was never a roundtable of Enlightenment agreement in the Movement. The internal divisions of Chinese Enlightenment went even far beyond the dilemma of enlightenment and national salvation. Hu Shi (胡适) probably represented the pragmatic liberal wing of the May Fourth, whereas Lu Xun (鲁迅) compulsively exposed the dark side of a simple-minded enlightenment. Li

*parmi les homes* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1961), 8.

8. See later discussions.

9. 李泽厚,《启蒙与救亡的双重变奏》,见《现代思想史论》(北京:三联,2008)。

Dazhao (李大钊) became one of the first communist martyrs, Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) a Trotskyist, Zhou Zuoren (周作人) a collaborator with Japanese militarism. Furthermore, what seems (at least to me) missing in our conventional mapping of the May Fourth Enlightenment is the Creation Society’s “surprising emergence from outside” (异军突起)—with Guo Moruo (郭沫若, 1892–1978) as their representative. Some critics believe that the Creationists, who were all Japan-based overseas Chinese students at the time, interrupted the “natural course” of the Enlightenment, as they forced their way into the literary scene with their unduly romantic ego, exaggerated sexual fantasy and frustration, aestheticism and youthful sentimentalism. However, it is interesting to note that almost all of them—with the exception of Yu Dafu (郁达夫)—were majored in sciences in higher education, and, by “creative spirit,” they meant to include the spirit of modern scholarship. While the Beijing headquarter of enlightenment fell short at sustaining their vision in the early 1920s, the romantic-minded Creationists engaged themselves in the building of the collective consciousness of progressive ideas such as liberation of personality, individuality, and freedom. Later, against the eclipse of the May Fourth, the Creationists launched the “revolutionary culture” movement and claimed it to be the reinforcement and continuation of a failed enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> And indeed, their radicalism heralded a Marxist enlightenment for Chinese in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Therefore, the romantic school was no less than a vital component of the “united front” of enlightenment against China’s “backwardness.”

Hence, within the dialectic of enlightenment and romanticism, there arise a wide array of questions—that of science and myth, that of society and nature, and that of reason and revolution, to name a few—that we need to address. Yet, on this occasion, I want to emphasize in particular the issue of the concept of history. The enlightenment thought seems to be the final resolution to the *querelle des anciens et modernes*. Taking as the main themes the autonomy of man and mastery over nature, enlightenment constantly yields positivist knowledge of “world history” along the linear time of homogenized “progress.” Romanticism, in contrast, repeatedly and vainly seeks to redeem humanity by reuniting modernity with

10. Cf. 郭沫若, 《我们的文学新运动》(1923), 《革命与文学》(1926), 《文学革命之回顾》(1930); 成仿吾, 《从文学革命到革命文学》。

antiquity, futuristic utopia with mythic origins. Just as Horkheimer and Adorno convincingly illustrate the myth of origin as the return of the repressed in the enlightenment's disenchantment of the past, so the true or "objective" knowledge of history has been a field of ideological contestations for various political visions in modernity. Here, of critical importance is also the Marxist concept of world history, along with the practice of "scientific Marxist" historiography. Does Marxist stagism (based either on division of labor or on modes of production) contain the ultimate science of history stripped of ideology, as Althusser and Balibar once tried hard to demonstrate?<sup>11</sup> Does Engels' "scientific" reconstruction of "primitive communism" conceal a deep-seated romantic ideology, similar to the utopian idea of restoring the origins of humanity on a higher level? The paradox of enlightenment and myth now becomes the Marxian dilemma of *science and ideology*. And all these issues come into yet another combination or constellation of cultural-political situations related to the case of Guo's conceptions of Chinese antiquity, on which the following pages will focus.

## 2. Guo Moruo, Rousseau, and Engels

A towering figure of central importance to the making of the "creative mind" and revolutionary-romantic subjectivity in modern China, Guo Moruo (1892–1978) made his literary debut as a lyric poet and evolved into the inaugural president of the People's Republic. As a "scientist," he revolutionized the scholarship of ancient Chinese history with his path-breaking historical and archeological works from the 1930s to the 1950s, thereby making a significant contribution to the emergence of Marxist historiography in China. His first major work in applying "historical materialism" was *A Study in Chinese Ancient Society* 中国古代社会研究, finished in 1929 and published in 1930. His conception of universal stagism largely derived from his translation of Marx's *Preface to A Contribution to Critique of Political Economy*. But far more important influence on Guo's

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11. Althusser *et al.*, *Lire le Capital* (Nouvelle edition revue, Paris: PUF, 2008); especially the Balibar part.

reinvention of the prehistory and antiquity of Chinese society was from Engels' *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. This connection, to which we will come back soon, is particularly significant, for it distinguishes Guo Moruo from the other Marxist intellectuals of that generation. As Arif Dirlik has aptly indicated in his study of Chinese Marxist historiography, Guo's pioneering works remained a singular development outside the “debates concerning the social characteristics of China” and the controversy of “Asiatic Mode of Production” closely connected with the internal debates of Comintern in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> I need to mention this in passing because this fact explains why it is justifiable to situate Guo's conception of Chinese history in a broader context than that of the intellectual-political history of Chinese Marxism.

Guo Moruo used the opening of his first chapter to argue that we owed our knowledge of the “primitive society” to Lewis Morgan's *Ancient Society* and Engels' famous interpretation of that historic work.<sup>13</sup> So, the term “Chinese ancient society” in Guo's title does not refer generally to ancient China, but, as with Morgan, means the specific transition from the primitive gens (prehistory) to the civilized (political) society. Guo's project, in other words, was to inquire the origins of human civilization in the case of China, while these origins—he believed—had long been shrouded in the superstitious darkness. Thus, he characterized his mission as “a sequel to Engels' *Origins*,”<sup>14</sup> and took Engels to be his own methodological guide. Emphasizing the urgency of this scientific “liquidation of Chinese society,” his “Preface” then took on a particularly strong rhetoric of enlightenment:

We, trained and bound by the feudal thought for more than two thousand years, are all short-sighted. Some of us even suffer cataract, having eyes but blind.

For the blind, of course, the sight can not be retrieved. But for those who are short-sighted, we need to treat them with scientific methods.

In this age of developed science, why do you still resort to magicians and sorcerers from remote villages when you have eye diseases?

12. Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China*, 1919–1937 (Berkeley: U. of California Press), 137–179.

13. 郭沫若, 《中国古代社会研究》(北京: 科学出版社, 1964), 3 页。

14. *Ibid.*, x.

In this age of developed science, why do you still imprison yourself in the thought of the feudal society?<sup>15</sup>

With such metaphors as sight/blindness and liberation/prison, Guo opposed science to magic, and modern enlightenment to feudal thought.

Partly because of this stance of scientism Guo took at the very beginning of his historical studies, today's scholars more often than not seek to isolate Guo "the scientist" from Guo "the poet" (or the other way round) and try to locate the decisive moment—something similar to "epistemological break"—of his "conversion" to scientific Marxism in his intellectual chronology. But I want to propose a more holistic perspective from which we can trace his conception of Chinese antiquity back to his early romantic period, since, as we will see, his enlightened "liquidation" of the past actually originated from his earlier romantic re-imagination of Chinese antiquity.

Back in 1921, Guo published "A Pompeii City in the Intellectual History of Our Nation." One of his first discourses on ancient China, this unfinished essay exhibits in a vivid way Guo's romantic propensity. Using City Pompeii's glory and burial as a historical metaphor, he adopted to Chinese history an alternation of "golden ages" and "dark ages" (very likely borrowed from modern Western thought). According to this point of view, the age of "sage kings" (圣王) was an age of freedom and equality, and then the emerging state politics (early dynasties, starting from 21st century BC) was the first dark age; later, the age of one hundred school (the age of great thinkers such as Confucius) was the Renaissance, not to be buried again by the second dark age, the unification of whole China by the First Emperor of Qin (秦始皇).

Periodization is characteristic of enlightened knowledge of history; this long-neglected essay marked the starting point of Guo's lifelong obsession with periodization of Chinese history, which later became his central piece (and central weakness) of his Marxist historiography. For the early Guo, the task of enlightenment was to unearth, to liberate and to revive the buried "light" of freedom and creativity.

But what was the intrinsic logic for this innate periodization? The essay

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15. *Ibid.*, vii–viii.



contained an allegory about the origin of “political society,” centered on two themes, communal social life and private property:

The state of our nation originated in a social contract, and the inherent thought of our nation was egalitarian idealism; so all individuals are equal, and the land of the state was communally owned by all. The *jingtian* 井田 system (“nine square system”) began with Huang Di (黄帝), and that was the earliest history of communism practiced in our nation.<sup>16</sup>

At the time of writing, Guo knew very little about Marx and Marxism. And we do not know how familiar he was with Rousseau. But the term “social contract” definitely came from the influence of Rousseau’s work. Just as for Horkheimer and Adorno the story of Odysseus constitutes the prototype of the entwining of myth and enlightenment, so the (partly mythical and partly historical) *jingtian* system amounts to a founding myth for Chinese intellectual traditions both ancient and modern. Guo’s boldness lied in his redefinition of this system as a communal social form and even communism.

Guo’s egalitarian view was evidently in dialogue with Rousseau’s *Discourses on Inequality* (the second part in particular). According to Rousseau, there indeed existed a golden age for human society, a “nascent society” when humans “lived free, healthy, good and happy... and continued to enjoy the gentleness of independent dealings with one another.”<sup>17</sup> But more and more intense social interactions or exchanges brought about the birth of private property; hence the downfall of equality and human happiness. In this regard, a citation of the most celebrated sentence from the Second Part of Rousseau’s *Discours* will suffice:

As soon as it was found to be useful for one to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property appeared, work became necessary, and the vast forests changed into smiling fields that had to be watered with the sweat of men, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and

16. 郭沫若,《我国思想史上之澎湃城》,见郭沫若著,王锦厚等编,《郭沫若佚文集(1906-1949)》(成都:四川大学出版社,1988),上,77页。

17. Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 167.

grow together with the harvest.<sup>18</sup>

Guo implied nostalgia for China's own golden age on the order of the Rousseauist tradition; yet the difference is that Rousseau never claimed that the happy "nascent society" was a political one based on a social contract and he reserved the idea of "social contract" for the solution to inequality. This is probably because the double nature of the nascent society (as being the "good old days" pregnant with the sins of inequality) that Rousseau laid out is largely a theoretical setup, whereas the "age of sage kings" and the *jingtian* system are persisting images and motifs in Chinese entwinement of myth and historiography. On the one hand, the *jingtian* system stands for an ideal of communal society, whose absence has led to endless melancholy for generations of Confucians; on the other hand, however, it already signifies certain kind of political organization, or even state politics. In Horkheimer and Adorno's language, even if it is a myth, it is "always already" a myth of power, rationality and enlightenment.

Back to the early Guo: his Rousseauian narrative projecting "social contract" to the origins of Chinese antiquity, first of all, involved a romantic rewriting of the Confucian ideal of *datong* 大同 (great unity or harmony) in relation to "sage kings" and *jingtian*. In the Confucian classic *Book of Rites* 礼记, one can find the famous passages on two modes of social formation, one is *datong*, the other *xiaokang* (well-off society). Now for Guo, the former came to represent the communal society, the latter the system of private property: "Confucius words (about *datong* and *xiaokang*) most clearly suggest the transition from the system of communal ownership to the system of private property, and point out that private property is the origin of all kinds of conflicts."<sup>19</sup> He then called the age of sage kings as "politics of philosophers" (哲人政治). Before that, China had already been a primitive society of "democracy;" yet the "volcano of human sins" destroyed China's ancient glory, and that volcano was nothing but the initial action of "taking the world as a private property," which gave birth to the earliest dynasty of patriarchic inheritance of political power. Akin to Rousseau, Guo argued that politics does not begin with arbitrary pow-

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18. *Ibid.*, 167.

19. 郭沫若著, 王锦厚等编, 《郭沫若佚文集 (1906-1949)》(成都: 四川大学出版社, 1988), 上, 78 页。

er, but arbitrary power is the alienation of the “politics of philosophers/sage kings.” Evoking the traditional Chinese term “family ownership of the world” (家天下, which means the state politics initiated by Xia Dynasty), Guo combined the economic origin (property) and the political origin (state power)—quite unlike Rousseau’s division of the two. “Arbitrary power” equaled private property—this was the first thesis in Guo’s powerful yet simplified conception of ancient history, according to which the violence involved in the emergence of private property was repressed by the “official historical records.

This motif of historical transition also found its expression in Guo’s poetic drama, *Two Sons of Guzhu King* 孤竹君之二子. This play was based on the legendary princes, Bo Yi 伯夷 and Shu Qi 叔齐, whom both refused to take over the kingdom and inherited the shrine. In Guo’s rewriting of this myth/history, they were no longer the “role models” for Confucian morality as they had been honored traditionally; rather they became the mouthpieces of Guo’s nostalgia for the primitive society fitting human nature as well as his indignation to inequality:

Humans before the age of sage kings, how free, how pure, and how heroic they were! They didn’t make division between object and ego, they didn’t draw the borderlines for nations... what about now? Humanity decayed into a group of greed. ... All sins and misery germinated in the system of “family ownership of the world,” which polluted we humans!<sup>20</sup>

Later, in another passage, one of the princes continues this condemnation of private property and extends it to the whole civilized society:

From private property,...  
come so many customs and so many laws, which plant immeasurable misery.  
Ah, thanks to the system of private property!<sup>21</sup>

A Rousseauian note is, to be sure, obvious here, yet entirely romanticized

20. 郭沫若,《孤竹君之二子》,见《创造季刊》一卷四期(上海,1923),11页。

21. *Ibid.*, 12.

in a new light on Chinese antiquity.

Along with their critical reception of other Enlightenment thinkers (mainly political economists), Marx and Engels also found Rousseau inspiring and inherited from him a wide array of themes ranging from division of labor to the importance of instrument or tool. In *Anti-Dühring* (first published in 1878), Engels applauded Rousseau's *Discours* for its dialectical vigor. It comes as no surprise that it is precisely in his appraisal of the scientific nature of Rousseau's dialectics that Engels affirmatively generalized the whole romantic narrative of civilization critique: humanity's downfall/progress into inequality and its redemption (either by social contract or by revolution.) Here I quote Engels quoting Rousseau:

Rousseau therefore regards the rise of inequality as progress. But this progress contained an antagonism: it was at the same time retrogression... Each new advance of civilization is at the same time a new advance of inequality.... "here we have the most extreme degree of inequality, the final point which completes the circle and meets the point from which we set out..." And so inequality is once more transformed into equality; not, however, into the former natural equality of speechless primeval man, butt into the higher equality of the social contract...<sup>22</sup>

Scholars of romanticism like Meyer Abrams would recognize this "circle" as a typical "romantic dialectics" of redemption, revolution and second coming. But for Engels, Rousseau's sequence of ideas "corresponds exactly with" Marxist methodology.

This Rousseauian framework was implicitly reinforced in Engels' *Origins of the Family*. Engels' confidence of scientism came from the fact that, with Morgan's Ancient Society, he could fulfill the scientific methodology of which Rousseau had fallen short. As is well known, Rousseau voyaged to Saint Germain and isolated himself in the forest for seven or eight days in order to "meditate on the great subject-matter" of primeval humanity;<sup>23</sup> and this submersion into nature and solitude inaugurated a "trademarked" symbolic act for European romantics. Relying on very lim-

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22. Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 152–3.

23. Cf. Lecerle, "J.-J. Rousseau," *op. cit.*

ited information from Latin classics and some early colonialist travelogues, Rousseau resorted to the method of speculative abstraction in an age when ethnology and anthropology were not fully developed. His idea of “state of nature,” then, was a product of the Enlightenment’s meditative reason and a dose of imagination.

Engels, in contrast, built his theoretical innovations on Morgan’s anthropological researches. Morgan is a controversial figure in the history of anthropology in the first place. In Claude Lévi-Strauss’ eyes, he was a forerunner of social-structural studies, especially acclaimed for his study of marriage, family and kinship; but, Morgan is also criticized for his evolutionist tendency, and he praised the Aryan race’s superiority.<sup>24</sup> *Ancient Society* follows a positivist historical narrative of “progress,” exhibiting a prototypical enlightenment’s view of mankind: “mankind commenced their career at the bottom of the scale and worked their way up from savagery to civilization though the slow accumulations of experimental knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> Its scientific confidence was based on the anthropology’s trick of temporality: taking the synchronic as the diachronic, taking the actually existing “savages” as the specimens of our primitive past. He argued for a universal history: “as it is undeniable that portions of the human family have existed in a savagery, other portions in a state of barbarism, and still other portions in a state of civilization, it seems equally so that these three distinct conditions are connected with each other in a natural as well as necessary sequence of progress.”<sup>26</sup>

With the support of the “scientific data” he obtained from Morgan, Engels was able to give more effusive word in his eulogy for the primitive communism exemplified in the native-American Iroquois Tribe, than Rousseau could afford to the primeval times:

And a wonderful constitution it is, this gentile constitution, in all its childlike simplicity! No soldiers, no gendarmes, or police, no nobles, kings, regents prefects, or judges, no prisons, or prisons, or lawsuits—and

24. For a Marxist reexamination of Morgan’s relevance, see Emmanuel Terray, “Morgan and Contemporary Anthropology,” in *Marxism and “Primitive” Society*, trans. M. Klopfer (New York: Monthly Review, 1972).

25. Morgan, *Ancient Society* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company), 3.

26. *Ibid.*

everything takes its orderly course.<sup>27</sup>

The hymn, of course, was soon transformed into an elegy of the loss of this innocent state:

The power of this primitive community had to be broken.... But it was broken by influences which from the very start appear as a degradation.... And the new society itself during all the 2500 years of its existence has never been anything else but the development of the small minority at the expense of the great exploited and oppressed majority.<sup>28</sup>

To these passages where science changes into poetry, Michael Löwy draws our attention, so as to prove that there persists a “revolutionary romanticism” at the core of Marxism.<sup>29</sup> And we can add that one of its motifs —“progress of civilization is also degradation of humanity”—corresponds to the tradition of Rousseau. This Rousseauian tone also propelled Engels to join Morgan in celebrating a partly progressivist and partly utopian restoration of the primitive happiness: “*it will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the ancient gentes.*” (Engels’ own emphasis)<sup>30</sup>

On this large-scaled picture of human society, Engels’ radical insight lied with the issue of gender he singled out as the key factor in the transition from primitive communism to civilized society. As Kevin Anderson tells us in *Marxism at the Margins*, Engels’ combination of the Rousseauian note and the new data led to the conclusion that “what was called civilization, with its hierarchies of class, property and gender, was an atypical ... way of ordering human affairs,” but with Morgan’s inquiry into kinship, Engels placed the issue of gender “at the center of his concerns.”<sup>31</sup> Engels famously held that “the overthrow of mother right

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27. Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State: In the Light of the Research of Lewis H. Morgan* (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 159.

28. *Ibid.*, 161.

29. Löwy, *Marxisme et Romantisme Révolutionnaire*, 24.

30. Engels, *Origins of the Family*, 237.

31. Cf. Kevin Anderson, *Marxism at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2010), 199-200.

was the world historical defeat of the female sex.”<sup>32</sup> This revolution was “one of the most decisive ever experienced by humanity,” but, Engels admitted, “as to how and when this revolution took place ... we have no knowledge.”<sup>33</sup> To translate it into Horkheimer and Adorno’s language: the violence involved in this process is shrouded in darkness by the patriarchic order (class and property). Or, our knowledge is “always already” imprisoned in a patriarchic, civilized world.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, the natural-historical accounts of Rousseau, of Engels and even of Horkheimer and Adorno all point to the missing links in the transition of mankind to civilized society (read: private property, inequality, class, power...). For Rousseau, the missing link is the seemingly accidental emergence of private property; for Engels, the matriarchic communal life; for Horkheimer and Adorno, the no longer accessible origins of language, myth, domination over nature and habituation.

As for Guo Moruo of 1930, his “sequel to Engels’ work” was a re-arrangement of his early Rousseauism, his acceptance of Morgan and Engels, his rewriting of Confucian ideas as well as radical readings of ancient texts. He provided his generalization of Chinese civilization and its origins:

It was manifested on the social level as the rise of patriarchic power, the establishment of private property, the use of slave labor, the class division, and the appearance of kings and states. This is the beginning of civilization, but also the beginning of the tragedy of man’s exploitation of man.<sup>35</sup>

But Guo’s scientific endeavor was more of a response to a situation of cultural-political urgency. At the turn of the 1930s, Guo’s ideological task was to test the applicability of Marxism in the case of China, to incorporate Chinese history into the universal “world history” pointing toward

32. Engels, *Origins of the Family*, 120.

33. *Ibid.*, 120.

34. Kevin Anderson and other “Marxologists” found in the Archive Marx’s ethnological notebooks. According to these scholars, Marx’s view on gender is even more radical than Engels’. And this is just another example that Marx and Engels were not merely concerned with scientific knowledge, but more with new visions of humanity and human history. Cf. Anderson, *Marxism at the Margins*.

35. 《中国古代社会研究》, 6.

communism, and in doing so, to produce the enlightened self-knowledge of history for the vision of Chinese Revolution. This leads us to a cultural-political analysis of Guo's changeful conceptions of Chinese history.

### 3. The Ambiguity of *gong* and *si*

“The aspiration to the future society forces us to demand a liquidation of the past.”<sup>36</sup> This verdict is not restricted to his Marxist historiography, but indicates something fundamental about Guo's attitude towards history. Just as Rousseau's petit-bourgeois sentimentality and uncompromising critical force could not be contained within the proper borders of the French Enlightenment,<sup>37</sup> so Guo's aesthetic and political outpouring represented a very uncertain and even indefinable radicalism in May Fourth and immediately post-May-Fourth years. In his “Preface” to “Two Sons of Guzhu King,” he proposed an aesthetic principle about the relation between modernity and antiquity, the “mutual correspondence between the ancient and the present.”<sup>38</sup> When initiating the Marxist historiography, as we can see, that became the “mutual illumination/correspondence” between “scientific Marxism” and the universal-historical positing of Chinese Revolution. If we take this “correspondence” model as a mode of Guo's “romantic enlightenment,” then in what follows, we will trace the constant changes or modifications in his historical consciousness, and the confusions they caused, from the 1920s to the 1940s.

On the one hand, the ambiguity and vicissitude in Guo's conception of Chinese “ancient society” were over-determined by the ever-changing social, cultural and political conditions in modern China. Yet on the other hand, the ambiguity also attested to the political-activist nature of his praxis, and recorded his dynamic interventions at different historical conjunctures. The immediately politicizing effect of his re-imagination of antiquity sprang directly from his creative re-readings of ancient texts and concepts. Of particular significance are the concepts of *gong* and *si*, which, as is mentioned above, are rooted in the social ideals of *datong* and *xiao-*

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36. 《中国古代社会研究》, vii.

37. J.-L. Lecerle, “Introduction,” in Rousseau, *Discours, op. cit.*, 29–42.

38. 《幕前序话》, 见《创造季刊》一卷四期（上海, 1923）, 4页。



*kang* of Confucianism. *Gong* 公 can be translated as public, communal, commonality, commonwealth and so on, while *si* 私 is closely associated with “private property.” The coupling of *gong* and *si* had been crucial to many Confucian thinkers in ancient China. And the two concepts were transformed into key elements of the revolutionary thought from Dr. Sun Yat-sen to Chairman Mao Zedong. Guo’s ambiguity, I argue, mainly came from his constant re-theorization of these two concepts.

Amid various intellectual schools of New Culture in the early 1920s, Guo was more concerned to breathe new life into ancient texts in order to revive a national culture of creativity in confrontation to the dark reality of a failing republic tortured by warlords. In his “Preface” to “Two Sons of Guzhu King,” he re-discovered the “*gong*” with a new light on the age of sage kings: “the political leaders of that age were simply public servants...; for the people in that kind of society, political history is not something necessary, political posts are random.”<sup>39</sup> He arrived, purely with his poetic mind, at a similar conclusion to Rousseau’s and Engels’, a conclusion that in the primeval world politics is random and spontaneous rather than institutionalized. But he directly related his idea of a pre-political age to the contemporary social thought of pacifism and anarchism, and in this sense, his re-definition of “*gong*/commonality” as “communism” suggested a strong anti-political outlook of human society.

In 1926, however, he gave another argument regarding “*gong*/commonality,” communism and Confucian *datong*. In his heated debate with the emerging statist school, he contended a very bizarre thesis: communal statism equals communism/Marxism.<sup>40</sup> While Guo’s relationship with statism as a topic goes far beyond the scope of this paper, at least we can say that to this point, his anti-feudal, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist consciousness surpassed the anarchist ideal and was now concerned with some political solution.<sup>41</sup> He felt sympathetic to the anti-colonial statist principle for national strength and wealth, but he put into doubt the idea of private property underlying statism. So right before joining the

39.《幕前序话》，见《创造季刊》一卷四期（上海，1923），3页。

40.郭沫若，《我的回复》，见《洪水》1卷9期，328页。

41. In fact, he emphasized that the way of *datong* is different from the anarchist outlook. 王道与无政府主义与无抵抗主义不同，这一点是要认清楚的。郭沫若，《我的回复》，见《洪水》1卷9期，328页。

National Revolution (1926–1927), he entered into such unstable political unconscious of combining Marx’s communism, Confucius’ *gong*/commonality and the more urgent mission of national independence.

His apprenticeship in Marxist historiography then marked the lowest point both for his personal life and for the communist revolution he was devoted to. In 1928 he was forced into exile in Japan due to the split of KMT with CCP. At the time the KMT-led re-unification of China plainly betrayed the communist cause of the revolution, with communists being massacred across the country. Even the hope for the CCP’s survival seemed dim. Guo’s Marxist historiography was thus an intellectual response to this situation so as to foster revolutionary consciousness by “scientific knowledge” about human society and to sustain the revolutionary vision when direct political interventions or actions were simply impossible. On the intellectual front, one of his “domestic enemies” remained the positivist school of Hu Shi, which, according to Guo, only produced depoliticized, seemingly neutral but actually dead knowledge. For Guo, the scientific spirit and the energy for critique made dialectical materialism an enlightenment not only on our knowledge of the past, but against Hu Shi’s self-deceiving positivism of “national legacy studies” 整理国故.

With such scientific vigor, Guo denounced as a political myth the Confucian record of “*datong*” and *gong*/commonality and the *jingtian* 井田 system. Following the suit of Morgan and Engels, he then discerned some matriarchic residue in some archeological records of Shang Dynasty (from around the 17th century to 11th century BC). Thus he declared that Shang Dynasty was at the last stage of the primitive tribal society. Like Rousseau and Engels, he took the use of iron instruments to the signal of private property, class society and state politics.<sup>42</sup> According to this schema, however, China entered into slavery society as late as Zhou Dynasty (beginning from 1027 BC). Then, it became unclear whether Shang Dynasty was “primitive communal society,” or the beginning of class society, or the transition, whereas the “communism” of sages and *jingtian* to which he had once paid poetic homage now receded into the unknowable domain of myth.

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42.《中国古代社会研究》，5。

To this point, Guo’s conception of commonality and private property already caused a great deal of ambiguity. His (mis)reading of “*gong*” originally took an anti-political anarchist gesture, but *gong* was later recognized as a political arrangement of “communal statism;” tested to the Marxist historical outlook, the transition from *gong* to *si* was considered a myth, but still vaguely corresponded to Guo’s schema of the transition from primitive communal society to private ownership, which, nevertheless, was not clearly demarcated in Guo’s works in the 1930s.

This ambiguity was further complicated, in a surprising way, in Guo’s intellectual-historical works during the Pacific War. Starting from 1943, Guo wrote a series of essays—to be collected in *Ten Critiques* (1945) and developed into *Study of Slavery Society* (1952)—, carrying out an almost upside-down subversion of the previously held outlook. In these works, Guo abandoned his view that *jingtian* system was a myth rather than political-economic reality in ancient China. Instead he combined the issue of *jingtian* with that of *gong*/commonality, arguing that *jingtian* was the state-owned “common land / *gongtian*” in Chinese slavery society. All of a sudden, “*gong*” was changed from a myth of primitive communism to a dark history of state-owned slavery. “The destruction of common land began with the rise of private land.”<sup>43</sup> Corresponding to this modification, Guo now came to view “private land” as an advance mode of production (i.e. feudalism) in opposition to slavery, and therefore he believed that the emerging class of “private landlords” in “Springs and Autumns Period” and “Warring States Period” (春秋战国时代, 770–221 BC) was a revolutionary social force. In their struggle against the slave owning state, this revolutionary class then brought out their own Enlightenment which turned out to be the famous “One Hundred School” Period.

The iron instruments increased the productive force, accelerating the collapse of *jingtian* system; this collapse, in turn, led to the downfall of slavery. The private owners were lower yet more productive class, and they were bound to supersede (超克) the upper class (the slave-owning state aristocracy).<sup>44</sup>

43. 郭沫若,《古代研究的自我批判》,见《十批判书》(北京:人民出版社,1954),28页。

44. 郭沫若,《奴隶制社会》,见《郭沫若全集·历史编》三卷,32页。

Even more interestingly, Guo claimed that, though *jingtian*/common land system was the Confucian ideal, almost all the original Confucians in that period sided politically with the “private landlords,” and were active in the revolutions against slavery. Therefore, original Confucianism had actually performed as a revolutionary ideology though it was misused by the ruling classes in later periods.

Though Guo sought to bolster all these modifications with new readings of textual and archeological evidence, the change of perspective was no less than drastic. In particular, the value judgment about *gong*/commonality and *si*/private property was turned up side down, to a certain degree. Moreover, this subversion resulted in further confusion; for, if the common land system represented the state political economy of slavery, then how to characterize the Confucian idea of *datong*, which, on the one hand, was closely related to the ideal of common land system, and on the other hand, still served for Guo as a metaphor of communism.

If we situate Guo’s revisions in the cultural-political conditions of wartime China, then they become much more comprehensible. When Horkheimer and Adorno found themselves surrounded by “cultural industry” during their exile on the eastern side of the Pacific, on the western side of the Pacific, Guo was insulated in China’s wartime capital, Chongqing, under daily surveillance of the KMT nationalist government. The political imprisonment and intellectual suffocation were common feelings for many Chinese leftists who lived in the KMT-rule region in the first half of the 1940s. Both these intellectuals and the CCP were engaged in building a national culture of enlightenment in resistance to both Japanese imperialist invasion and KMT’s statist rule backed more and more by the US. Guo’s revisions of Marxist rewriting of ancient China was part and parcel of this Chongqing Renaissance which involved a great number of left-leaning scholars and concentrated on the rediscoveries and reinterpretations of national traditions. In this sense, then, Guo’s new narrative about “common land” and “private land” concealed a political allegory about the revolutionary transition from KMT-styled statism or even fascism to the People’s Republic. This point of view, once again, left the issue of primitive society to pure ambiguity, either receding to an even earlier, unknown past, or remaining a myth; for every piece of evidence or record—even the last stage of the matriarchic rule—was “always already”

an account of class society. But this mythic ambiguity made possible a form of politicized knowledge: the downfall of “common land,” at an unconscious level, seemed to correspond to Guo’s discontent with the KMT regime, whereas the joint force of “private landlords” and revolutionary Confucians in the age of “Springs and Autumns” was reconstructed in his remote salute to Mao’s revolutionary proposal of “people’s democracy.”

Finally, Guo’s ambiguity concerning the historical transitions or stages seems to correspond to the ambiguity in Engels’ *Origins of the Family*. For example, in his study of Roman civilization, Engels admitted the long duration of common land from tribal society to slavery, showing uncertainty in deciding on its political-economic nature which might be changing over time. For Guo, similarly, the common land system was sometimes a myth (reusable for communism), and yet sometimes a part of history (open to different characterizations); sometimes an indicator of primitive communism, and yet sometimes a reminder of state slavery. In addition, Guo evoked Engels’ study of Roman slavery in his 1940s studies of *jingtian* system. Such phenomena point to the (epistemologically) irreducible ambiguity of socio-economic stagism and all its seemingly scientific interpretative elements (mode, period, transition, revolution...). Historical materialism, as Benjamin warns us, has the danger of becoming a puppet, and it can be “used,” like other idealist concepts of universal history, as an organizational power or self-deception. But on the other hand, we need to pay attention to the historical situations in which historical materialism is forged and shaped as historical consciousness in social praxis. Guo’s ambiguity was part and parcel of a cultural-political dynamics for revolutionary China and its self-interpretation. Guo’s historiography, as a whole, was a “sequel” to Engels, not in the sense of producing more scientific knowledge about Chinese “ancient society,” but in the sense of producing historical consciousness of sociopolitical change. The political ambiguity of *gong* and *si* now returns to today’s China under fast transformation, signaling some uncanny (or impertinent) relevance of Guo to current cultural politics.

#### 4. Conclusion: the perspective of cultural politics

Even in his lifetime, Guo was infamous for the vicissitude of his views as well as for his romantic ethos. Nowadays his illuminations on Chinese history have by and large been consigned to the trash bin of history itself. After all, his early poetic rewriting of Chinese antiquity was little more than myth-making, and his Marxist historiography is more and more considered as dogmatic application of Marxist historical outlook, obsessive with periodization.

However, even though Guo as a former cultural hero is now marginalized in modern intellectual history and contemporary thought, I argue for the relevance of his historical imagination to our reflection upon enlightenment as a theoretical problematic of modernity. Of course, I can not avoid confronting again the issue with which I set off this inquiry: the entwinement of enlightenment and romanticism. How can you define Guo's "romantic science" as something crucial to Chinese Enlightenment and its theoretical meanings? Yet instead of trying vainly to separate, in the works of thinkers like Guo, enlightenment from romanticism, or science from ideology, we should propose a perspective of cultural politics. This perspective not only points to the actual connections between culture and politics, but also offers the lens through which we can see every cultural creation contains a political dynamics and every truly political engagement entails the creative transformation of values or intellectual reorientation.

From this perspective, then, the visions of ancient China Guo offered from the 1920s to 1940s form a genealogy of his historical imagination, and more importantly, this genealogy also testifies to a series of cultural political struggles at different conjunctures along the history of Chinese Revolution. Against this backdrop I want to redefine enlightenment as a cultural-political praxis; at its core is precisely this *paradoxical action of simultaneously de-mythologizing and re-mythologizing*. In the May Fourth period, Guo's historical imagination demystified the "feudal bondages" and the decaying system of traditional learning, but also re-mystified the creativity and freedom of pre-historical China. Following the ebb of National Revolution, his Marxist historiography de-mystified the traditionalist, positivist and nationalist knowledge about the "particularity" of

China, and yet re-mystified China's fate into the “myth” of Universal History. Then during the wartime, his revisions further re-mystified, with even more advanced scientific knowledge, the revolutionary energy dormant in original Confucians, lower social classes, and ultimately, the *people*. The cases of Rousseau, of Engels and even of Horkheimer and Adorno also attest to this mode of cultural political praxis. Rousseau's demystification/re-mystification of the “state of nature” served to anchor the revolutionary sentimentality that went beyond the French Enlightenment; Engels' demystification/re-mystification of primitive communism and “gender revolution” aimed to open up some alternative visions of humanity in the age of looming imperialism or monopoly capitalism. Even Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of enlightenment performed an “anti-enlightenment enlightenment” with the advent of “total society” or late capitalism, precisely because the critique of the myth of enlightenment seems itself to become a myth.<sup>45</sup> After all, though every myth is always already a form of enlightenment (and vice versa), Horkheimer and Adorno was not interested in proposing any retreat into the myth-free zone, just as Rousseau never proposed any return to nature; as Fredric Jameson rightly points out, Horkheimer and Adorno instead envisioned the “determinate negation” and the “true revolutionary praxis.”<sup>46</sup> Now we can come to this brilliant sentence by the two Frankfurt School thinkers: “All mystical union remains a deception, the impotently inward trace of the forfeited revolution.”<sup>47</sup>

To relate all this back to the case of Guo Moruo, I want to close this essay with a salient aspect of the “entwinement” of enlightenment and myth (or romanticism, or ideology) that we can discern in Guo's conception of Chinese antiquity, and that is his constant re-reading of Confucianism. Leaving aside his vicissitude, what remained unchanged seemed to be Guo's sympathy towards the original Confucian school, while his “anti-feudal” mission entailed a negation of Confucianism as the official ideology of “old China.” This symptom reminds us that, for revolutionary intellectuals like Guo, Confucianism was always already an old

45. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2007), 99–111.

46. *Ibid.*, 102.

47. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

yet original “enlightenment myth” in ancient history. As a centuries-long form of deception, Confucianism was surely the target for enlightenment intellectuals. But Guo’s historical imagination became a form of enlightenment precisely when he was anxious, almost unconsciously, to redeem or revive the “forfeited revolution” buried within the Confucian deception. Cultural-political struggles always involve subversions or “creative transformations” of traditional values and historical legacies. But a “creative misreading” of the ancient does not merely mean the uses and abuses of history. Rather, it demands an action of negating the “impotence” or inwardness and liberating the “trace of forfeited revolution,” even though shedding new “light” on such traces will lead to new deceptions. In this sense, a permanent enlightenment means nothing but the self-knowledge of “truly revolutionary praxis.” Guo’s “romantic science,” however problematic it may be, leaves us a local yet rich record of the knowledge-production as cultural-political struggles. While it now recedes fast into the farthest horizon, its traces of the “forfeited revolution” call for the next enlightenment.