

Introduction

Two “Unrelated” Questions

The present study is intended to explore two seemingly unrelated questions: *Was ist Aufklärung?* and What is Chinese enlightenment?

The first question was posed by the editor of a Berlin newspaper, *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, in 1784. It has since drawn various responses from prominent thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Moses Mendelssohn, Max Weber, Max Horkheimer, and others. This eighteenth-century question continued to capture the imagination of twentieth-century philosophers. In fact, according to Michel Foucault, attempts to address the question and to reappropriate Kant’s critique of enlightenment have constituted “modern philosophy.”¹ Perceiving a need to open up a debate on “various interpretations of modernity,” Foucault proposed to his German and American colleagues in the mid-1980s that they hold a private conference to reexamine the question of enlightenment and Kant’s response. Jürgen Habermas responded to Foucault by commending him for initiating such a critically important dialogue, and for his novel interpretation of Kant’s position on enlightenment. For Habermas, Foucault reignited the “critical impulse” of reason that was occasionally dimmed by “German obscurity.”² If we view Kant’s response to the question and Foucault’s to Kant and Habermas’s to Foucault as a sequence or one coherent text, we can see clearly the emergence

of a thematic continuity in modern philosophy of knowledge concerning human emancipation from tradition and dogma, as well as a clear methodological departure endorsed by Kant and further pursued by his postmodern respondents.

The second question, “What is Chinese enlightenment?” emerged from the literature dedicated to the study of the May Fourth cultural movement of 1919, the official signifier of Chinese cultural, political, and intellectual modernity. The inception of the May Fourth movement was marked by massive student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919, protesting the relinquishment of Chinese jurisdiction of Shandong Province to Japan, previously under German jurisdiction since the Paris Peace Conference at the end of World War I. The original student movement soon spread to other major Chinese cities, triggering large-scale protests in all walks of society. The nationwide revolt against foreign imperialism and domestic political corruption promoted a strong sense of modern nationalism, as well as a cultural iconoclasm, directed toward the traditional values and cultural institutions that were then held responsible for China’s diplomatic failure and internal crisis and perceived to threaten the survival of China as a new nation. Marking the awakening of a new China and a turning point in modern Chinese cultural and intellectual history, the May Fourth cultural movement thus assumed the name “Chinese enlightenment.”³

The two questions entertained herein became related when modern China was invited to answer the question “What is enlightenment?” and a conceptual and dialogical relation between modern China and Europe was established. Whereas enlightenment was characterized by Kant as Europe’s emergence from a “self-imposed immaturity,” the May Fourth cultural movement was defined as modern China’s emancipation from its own feudal past.⁴ The European enlightenment and the Chinese May Fourth cultural movement appear to be two different historical and intellectual events, yet, in an emerging context of globalization, cross-cultural encounter, and multidisciplinary study of third-world histories and societies, the invitation for modern China to address the question of enlightenment seems to be an intellectually meaningful exercise. According to the estimation

of some historians of modern China, China's answer to the question "What is enlightenment" not only allows the nation to articulate its own particular exegetical history of modernity, but also enables modern Europe to reflect on its own "cultural issues that are overlooked in the course of political revolution in its modern history."⁵ A mutually beneficial relationship between European and Chinese modernity was thus anticipated.

However, the dialogue itself did not yield any anticipated results. Almost at the outset, an important difference between the two enlightenment events was identified that seems to disqualify modern China for the name of enlightenment. According to Vera Schwarcz, author of *The Chinese Enlightenment*, the European Enlightenment evolved from a "philosophical debate" in the relatively peaceful centuries *prior* to the French Revolution. Accordingly, Kant's reflection on "What is enlightenment?" *correlates* to his contemporaries' quest for truth. Contrary to its European counterpart, China's enlightenment, though starting out as a cultural and intellectual reform movement intended to facilitate changes in the thinking of the Chinese people, was soon interrupted by social and political revolution and thus became politically signified. The political signification of an intellectual and cultural event hence disqualified the Chinese May Fourth movement from being defined as "enlightenment"; in fact, it was "never quite synonymous" with it.⁶ Thus, the aforementioned dialogue between modern China and Europe on the question of enlightenment was prematurely closed.

The present study argues that the aborted conversation was largely due to a double misreading of not only the question "*Was ist Aufklärung?*" but also the question "What is Chinese enlightenment?" In an attempt to rectify this double misreading, the present study develops and outlines an alternative conceptual framework for a cross-cultural exposition of the question "What is enlightenment?" hence resuming the prematurely closed but potentially productive conversation.

Chapter 1 provides a reading of Kant's newspaper article intended to answer the question "What is enlightenment?" followed by a discussion of the comments of two of Kant's postmodern respondents, Foucault and Habermas. We demon-

strate that while defining enlightenment as “man’s emergence from self-imposed immaturity,” Kant *simultaneously* requires the maturity of a political culture that guarantees the public use of reason for all citizens on all matters. The ambiguity of how freedom to exercise critical reason can *coexist* with a well-disciplined army highlights a central paradox inherent in Kant’s enlightenment thinking, which, according to some postmodern interpreters, has promoted a freedom of hermeneutic interpretation. About two centuries later, both Foucault and Habermas realized that Kant, in discussing what enlightenment was, had actually introduced an “ontology of contemporary reality.” In order to continue to pursue Kant’s line of inquiry incorporating the temporal and spatial events of the present in addressing the philosophical issues of enlightenment, Foucault introduced a literary modernity represented by Baudelaire’s fictional characters, those who personally embrace the “heroic aspects of the present moment.”⁷ Elsewhere, Foucault advocated a “boundary transgression” experience aimed at going beyond Kant’s dialectic of “enlightenment and revolution” and “private and public culture.” I analyze the ways in which Foucault ventured to gain access to the other side of reason, the side of unreason and madness, to map out the advent of enlightenment and modernity that had excluded and silenced the voices of the latter. In his response to Foucault, Habermas praised Foucault’s boundary transgression as a culturally significant event. However, he cautioned that there was a philosophical danger lurking beneath such an experiment of transgression. Foucault’s experiment had reduced the enlightenment project and modernity to a mere network of power in which a human subject becomes trapped in the various disguises of the dual play of emancipation and enslavement. To counter such a perceived philosophical danger, Habermas proposed an alternative route to return to the “original” Kant, hence to the “unfinished” project of enlightenment. To accomplish such an objective, Habermas suggested ways of transforming enlightenment reason to an intersubjectivity or communicative rationality represented by a sociolinguistic model, the ideal speech situation. The latter is intended as both a hermeneutic model for reaching a mutual understanding among interested

groups and a practical paradigm for living an enlightened life in a given society. Reading Kant, Foucault, and Habermas in sequence or as a coherent text, we can clearly see that for Kant and his postmodern respondents, the reflection of the eighteenth century's enlightenment project was never intended to recover and sustain a metaphysical presence in the name of philosophy, nor was it to identify an epistemological certainty for articulating knowledge and representing truth as an independent reality outside of everyday temporalities.

Chapter 2 questions the (mis)judgment concerning the nature of incompleteness of Chinese May Fourth or Chinese enlightenment. The misjudgment was largely due to a perceived inherent incapability on the part of modern China to discriminate its cultural and intellectual discourse from the contemporary sociopolitical praxis. We argue that such a misjudgment is based on assumptions that European enlightenment is purely a theoretical discourse and that Kant's response to "What is enlightenment?" is the correlate to the quest for truth. Such misassumptions betray an oversight of the important paradigm shift initiated by Kant in his address on "What is enlightenment?" further pursued by his postmodern interpreters. That is, among other things, the quest for enlightenment, understood as humanity's emergence from self-inflicted ignorance, necessarily requires everyday temporality as a complementary space for theoretical speculation. However based on these assumptions and oversights, the May Fourth movement was required to split into two mutually exclusive discourses and praxis or the internal prerequisites of cultural enlightenment and the external imperative of political salvation. Failure to do so would reduce Chinese enlightenment to a counterstatement of reason or a belated modernity. Consequently, modern China is left with no choice but to convey its history of modernity to a philosophical discourse and a cooperative institution for elaborating the conceptual framework and theoretical language of its European counterpart. Yet, as we will demonstrate, modern China may never be able to complete its modernization agenda, since the intellectual horizons of modern Europe and its understanding of enlightenment are constantly shifting, hence always preceding the

Chinese understanding of what enlightenment *is* and what it *ought* to be. Separated by a time lag that not only signifies a temporal passage but a displaced relation with a universal enlightenment, modern China may never succeed in emerging from its feudal past, as Kant's definition of enlightenment required.

The theoretical interest underlines the second part of the present study, comprised of chapters 3 and 4, which outlines a new conceptual framework to reorient and resume cross-cultural exposition of the questions of enlightenment and May Fourth. Among other things, I propose that humanity's emancipation from the restraint of dogmas by striving for an ever higher level of self-consciousness is by nature an ongoing process of self-understanding and self-interpretation. As such, enlightenment is a continuing hermeneutic project that is not preoccupied with a conceptual and practical "closure," but constantly engages the ever-changing context of the present, where the interest of self-liberation is intimately intertwined with social, political, and cultural discourses and praxis. The dialectical tensions of hermeneutics and politics, inherent in multiple enlightenment projects, do not require a higher synthesis to transcend or reach a final resolution or victory. I argue, to a great extent, that enlightenment events are indeed hermeneutic projects searching for ways to sustain these dialectical tensions, since it is the latter that have enabled a renewed self-understanding and self-growth in the changing dynamic of everyday temporality.

Chapter 3 focuses on the May Fourth event of Hu Shi's attempt to institute a modern intellectual and political paradigm through transforming and transcribing a classical Confucian model of ritual enlightenment. I suggest that the way in which Hu Shi sought to facilitate a new liberal and democratic enlightenment was through a hermeneutical engagement with classical Confucian teaching of rites and virtues aiming at a *simultaneous* realization of individual growth and cultural enrichment, as well as an ongoing commitment to the social and political progress of the era. Thus, May Fourth enlightenment thinkers did not break free from their Confucian predecessors, but continued to appropriate the creative tension inherent in Confucian enlightenment traditions, tensions such as public and private culture,

social and political responsibility, and individual cultural and intellectual growth, such that enlightenment *is* hermeneutical and hermeneutics *becomes* politics.

Chapter 4 examines another instance of May Fourth revisionism, characterized by ways in which May Fourth historians collaborated with political philosophers in transforming and reinterpreting the classical canon of knowledge in the rapidly changing sociopolitical context of the twentieth century. I investigate a critical historical reconstruction project, represented by Gu Jiegang's *Critiques of Ancient Historiography* (*Gushi Bian*), and highlight a persistent concern that has informed both traditional and May Fourth historical thinkers, that is, how history can be effectively located in the contemporary sociopolitical context in which it acquires meaning and signification. The attempt in Chinese historiography to problematize history's relation with its unfolding process in present temporal and spatial dynamics brings out interesting parallels in the postmodern historical mode of thinking articulated by Foucault and his followers. For both Confucian and Foucaultian historians, if contemporary political and institutional realities are necessary and complementary space for the discursive formation of a historical statement of "What is enlightenment?" historians must be writing history for the present, or rather, writing the "history of the present." To conclude, as an important metaphor for humanity's progress and liberation, enlightenment must never exhaust its meaning in a single historical realization: humanity's self-understanding is constantly renewing itself in relation to the ever-changing context of the present.