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# Still Resisting Left Melancholy?

## Chinese New Leftist theatre's inheritance and resistance in *Che Guevara (Qie Gewala)* (2000–1)

CHAOMEI CHEN

As the *fin-de-siècle* New Leftist champions of revolution, Zhang Guangtian, Huang Jisu and Shen Lin struck a melancholic note with their collaborative play *Che Guevara (Qie Gewala)* (2000–1) on the postrevolutionary, depoliticized Chinese stage.<sup>1</sup> Why do these Chinese theatre-makers still carry on 'left melancholy' amid the worldwide postrevolutionary arena that has bid 'farewell to revolution'?<sup>2</sup> Whose memories and histories do these artists attempt to reclaim and retrieve through this melancholy? How do affective and Marxist theories of 'left melancholy' expand the perceptions of recurrent revolutionary pathos in post-revolutionary Chinese leftist theatre? How does the play's radical recuperation of leftist theatrical techniques, in turn, reinterpret 'left melancholy' and resist the marketized, depoliticized trends? This article attempts to depart from and expand the current academic focus on 'left melancholy', which has been largely confined to Western leftist theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Wendy Brown and Enzo Traverso, to the postrevolutionary Chinese context. Integrating Western theories with Chinese interpretations of the concept by New Left scholars such as Wang Hui, along with Judith Butler's theory of subjection (1997), I argue that *Che Guevara* extends the connotation of left melancholy as a 'performative paradox' between an existential, passive despair and a radical, active aesthetic agency of hope to counteract the depoliticized trend of commercial theatre, through an exploration of its affective, theatrical and ideological significance.

Postrevolutionary Chinese theatre has been dominated by the narrative of trauma, 'scars' and sadness in its representation of revolutionary memories and legacies, especially of the catastrophic Cultural Revolution (1966–76). However, this overwhelming sadness tends to pathologize socialist revolutionary memories as hysterical and maniac, such as the Shanghai

Workers' Culture Palace's production of *Listening to Thunder in Silence (Yu Wusheng Chu)* (1978) and the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre's production of *The Crowd (Wuhe zhi Zhong)* (2015). The therapeutic reading of revolutionary pathos that has generated a deep sense of failure for the left is generally subsumed, by Western scholars, under the umbrella term of 'left melancholy'. However, given the dramatically different social, cultural and historical contexts between China and the West, the connotations of 'left melancholy' can be divergent, which I will elucidate later in the next section.

While there have been a great number of Western academic enquiries on 'left melancholy', the perspective from China, especially in theatre studies, was far from enough.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, since the current theorization of 'left melancholy' has been almost exclusive to Western leftist scholarship, it would be impossible to analyse this notion in the Chinese context without delineating its Western origin and influences. However, the exploration of aesthetic and creative plays such as *Che Guevara* is a tentative endeavour to unravel the unique and imaginative logic that may help orient the scholarship of 'left melancholy' in Chinese theatre towards a more systematic and theoretical interpretation.

This article attempts to extend this notion to the postrevolutionary Chinese context. Inspired by Chinese New Left scholar Wang Hui's study of 'rebellion-and-despair' paradox in Lu Xun's works, Enzo Traverso's distinction of two types of 'left melancholy' and Judith Butler's notion of subjection where a resistant agency emerges from the subject's subordination (1997), I argue that *Che Guevara* and its theatre-makers reimagine 'left melancholy' as a 'performative paradox' between an existential, passive anguish and a radical, active aesthetic agency of hope, through an interweaving investigation of its affective, theatrical and ideological dimensions. This

<sup>1</sup> In terms of translation of names, all Chinese names here retain their standard format by alphabetizing the family name first, followed by the given name, unless the Western format is adopted in a specific name and widely accepted in the scholarship, such as 'Ban Wang'. In the References, these names will appear without a comma, such as 'Shen Lin', instead of 'Shen, Lin'. In terms of in-text quotations, they will appear in the form of full names to avoid confusion. In terms of performance analysis, my references are mostly based on the play's premiere script in 2000 in Beijing, which is included in Liu Zhifeng's edited volume, and performance reviews of subsequent revivals during 2000 and 2001 when the play garnered the greatest theatrical and social attention and impact (Liu 2001: 13–69). My citation of the premiere script comes from the English translation by Jonathan S. Noble in Xiaomei Chen's edited volume, *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama* (2014: 927–66). The play was further recorded in 2005 by Jiangsu Province Performing Arts Group (Jiangsusheng yanyi jituan) and revived in Beijing and in the Madang Theatre Festival in South Korea in 2005. However, the revival, directed by its previous actress Yang Ting, is different from the premiere's performing style, which is not the scope of this article.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'left melancholy' was coined by Walter Benjamin in 1931 and developed and echoed by other Western leftist scholars such as

Wendy Brown, Jodi Dean and Enzo Traverso, which I will illustrate later in the article. As a global cultural and political phenomenon, the idea of 'farewell to revolution' was primarily developed by Chinese scholars Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu in their coauthored book *Farewell to Revolution: Looking back at the China of the twentieth century* (Gaobie geming: huiwang ershi shiji Zhongguo) published in 1995.

<sup>3</sup> While there are a few investigations on 'left melancholy' in Chinese literature and culture (Wang Hui 2000a; Tu 2021), Chinese theatre studies have rarely touched upon this notion.

<sup>4</sup> In Cuba, Mao's works and theories on guerrilla warfare were embraced by Cuban guerrillas. Inspired and impressed by Mao's works, Guevara was also an admirer of Mao and met Mao during his visit to China in 1960.

<sup>5</sup> The Chinese New Leftists, emerging in the early 1990s, did not become widely accepted until 1997–8 to 'indicate positions outside the consensus', especially against liberalism and capitalism (Wang Hui 2000b: 76). More investigations on this intellectual group can also be found in Wang Hui's article (71–7). Due to their identification with the poor and the downtrodden represented in the play and their personal experiences, the three major creators, Huang Jisu, Shen Lin and Zhang Guangtian, were categorized as 'the New Left' by some critics (Wang Xiaodong 2001: 269). See also Wang Xiaodong (2001).

<sup>6</sup> As a symbol of both the twentieth-century revolutions and all revolutions against oppression in human history, *Granma* is the boat that carried Guevara, Castro and another eighty guerrillas from Mexico to

paradoxical agency arising from the *Guevara Troupe's* left melancholy, especially the major creators, rests on three aspects: the theatrical practices of the collective creation approach and the Living Newspaper as both inheritance of leftist legacy and resistance to liberal capitalism with the audiences' responses in the post-performance discussions and the subsequent intellectual debates that undermine the liberal-dominated ideological topography.

The play represents Che Guevara's life against the backdrops of the 1960s Cuban revolution, in parallel with the turbulent social transformations of postrevolutionary, post-Mao Chinese society. Therefore, unpacking the intricate relationship between the two socialist countries serves to disentangle the complexities of the production.<sup>4</sup> As a 'socialist Other', the perception of Guevara and Cuba in Chinese culture and society mirrors 'China's own confusions and contradictions' against the 'challenges engendered by radical social changes' and the state's path towards 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (Cheng 2012: 216). After Castro's revolution in 1959, the Cuban Revolution emerged on China's cultural-political topography as a locus that validates the possibility of successful socialist revolution in the West. Guevara's remains, whose excavation in 1996 stimulated global news coverage, were reappropriated by the Chinese New Left and the international left to reclaim the legitimacy of socialist revolution in the twentieth century.

The Chinese New Left came on the scene since the mid-1990s, represented by intellectuals such as Wang Hui and Cui Zhiyuan.<sup>5</sup> This intellectual cohort 'share an intellectual consensus based on their fundamental concerns with social inequality, justice, and China's neoliberal model of developmentalism. They take a critical stance against global capitalism and search for a Chinese model of development' (Wang and Lu 2012: x). However, here I prefer to incorporate Ban Wang and Jie Lu's term of 'Left-spirited interventions', where they define China's New Left as 'a broad social movement that includes intellectuals, factory workers, migrant workers, peasants, volunteers, and artists' (xii). Departing from their intellectual counterpart, the New Left artists, such as the *Guevara Troupe*, reach out towards more practical engagement with social activities.

Though criticized as 'outmoded' with its leftist 'Living Newspaper' style, *Che Guevara*, premiering in 2000, was experimental in terms of disrupted temporal and spatial montage, creative collection, multimedia techniques and post-performance discussions. The play was composed of five acts, including 'the *Granma* Sets Sail', 'the Long Street of Life', 'Building the New Society', 'Farewell to Cuba' and 'the Battle in the Jungle', in addition to a prologue and an epilogue, both entitled as 'to Die as a Martyr' to pay tribute to Guevara's sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> Onstage were two groups of performers split by a consciously anti-naturalistic, simplistic characterization between the 'pros' (*zheng*) and the 'cons' (*fan*) who are both exchangeable symbols. The serious-looking positive male characters in worker's or soldier's garbs argue with the arrogant negative female characters in fashionable clothes.<sup>7</sup> While the 'pros' justify the revolutionary cause represented by Guevara, the 'cons' ridicule his revolutionary romanticism. However, the main character, Guevara, was an 'absent presence' on the stage, appearing merely as occasional voice-overs or projected images on a screen to navigate the debate and to comment on the performance.

In terms of the liberal-left and capitalism-socialism binaries, a plethora of investigations have been devoted to the reception of the play, including the failed efforts of the creators to speak for their own political ideas, the attack on their post-performance commercial activities in conflict with their political promotions and their rigid, unconvincing appropriation of the 'Living Newspaper', a leftist theatrical practice originated from Russia in the early twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> However, they fail to delve into the dynamics between the artists' affective agency and leftist practices.

The play's political debate was criticized as 'sentimental', emotional and nostalgic (Cheng 2003: 28; Xiao Qongqin 2002: 94). However, this 'depoliticized' strategy diminishes revolutionary passion and political activism to psychological and 'personal' sentiments, which dismisses 'the very public nature of emotions, and the emotive nature of publics' (Ahmed 2014 [2004]: 14). As Judith Butler argues, the "critical agency" of the melancholic is at once a social and psychic instrument' (1997: 190–1). The agency

produced by the subject's melancholia serves as an internal force that attempts to transform the external world. Therefore, to disentangle the complexities between melancholy and left cultural politics in postrevolutionary China is essential to understand the productive dynamics of emotions floating around the production and reception of *Che Guevara*. Rather than outdated and unconvincing, I would argue that the play's radical recovery of leftist theatrical tradition turns out to be a viable antidote to the postmodernist, postrevolutionary Chinese theatre, where historical and social meanings and values were deconstructed by a playfulness prevalent in commercial and avant-garde theatrical practices.

#### LEFT MELANCHOLY: FROM THE WEST TO POSTREVOLUTIONARY CHINA

*Che Guevara* provoked a series of intellectual and sociological debates over globalization, capitalism and nationalism, especially between the New Left and the liberals.<sup>9</sup> To illuminate the emergence of such a radical leftist performance and its overflowing left melancholy, I will briefly introduce the theorization of 'left melancholy' in the Chinese context of the intellectual debates between the New Left and the liberals since the 1990s. Departing from the Western scholarship that tends to treat this 'mournful' 'sadness' as political inaction due to the defeat of communist utopia and meanwhile continuing with its Chinese roots, I would argue that left melancholy can serve as an affective weapon that arms the leftist artists with an aesthetic agency in theatre-making.

The division between the liberals and the New Left mapped a prominent cultural landscape in the 1990s. Consumerism and neoliberalism took full swing after Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour, in which he advocated for a full-scale drive for market-led modernization of the economy. The liberals embraced the ensuing economic boom with a dreamy assertion that 'China has (finally, rightfully) joined tracks with (*jiegui*: 接轨) the so-called normative history of capitalist accumulation wedded to culturalist conservatism', a history 'that had been interrupted by the radicalism of the twentieth-century's revolutionary interregnum' (Karl 2018:

279). The New Left, however, staunchly defended the socialist revolutionary legacy and denounced global capitalism and neoliberalism.

Accordingly, the receptions of the play were roughly divided by this intellectual battle. The left-leaning critics acclaimed the play's bold artistic experimentation and thematic exposure of postrevolutionary social malaise brought by neoliberal globalization (Zhao Mu 2007: 108). In their view, the deprived made their comeback on the theatrical and socio-political arena following a long-term absence or 'absent presence'. However, the liberal-biased intellectuals questioned the creators' leftist legitimacy because they 'embellished' Guevara as a revolutionary communist fighter while ignoring Guevara's drawbacks (Cheng 2003: 8–13). In their neoliberal logic, the play reveals a 'populist and anti-intellectual tendency' and 'anti-Western and anticapitalist sentiment' bolstered by a 'bottom complex' (*diceng qingjie*), because many of the cast and creators 'either came from the lower classes or were frustrated' by 'unbearable' 'hardship of free competition' (Cheng 2003: 28; Xiao Gongqin 2002: 94). They not only presupposed Guevara as a stereotype of fanatic revolutionist and 'failed' politician, but also reduced the theatre artists' efforts to personalized and biased 'sentiments' partially arising from their lower-class status.

The liberalist interpretation of the *Guevara* Troupe's blind, maniacal passion for violent revolution and exaggeration of the rich-and-poor gap as a 'deeply personal' and 'anti-capitalist sentiment' (Cheng 2003: 28) seems no different from the therapeutic interpretation of 'left melancholy' by Western Marxists such as Walter Benjamin and Wendy Brown, which, however, dismisses the two different social-cultural contexts. The term 'melancholy' can be traced back to Sigmund Freud's distinction elaborated in 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1957 [1917]) and 'On Transience' (1957 [1916]). Different from 'mourning', in which an object-loss is successfully accepted by the subject, 'melancholia' suggests a pathological state with an essential misrecognition of the bereavement due to the subject's excessive adherence to the lost object and thus inability to sever from it.

Sigmund Freud's (1957 [1916, 1917]) psychoanalytical interpretation of 'melancholia'

Cuba in November 1956 to embark on the armed struggle against Fulgencio Batista (1901–73), the US-backed military dictator in Cuba.

<sup>7</sup> Such a binary opposition between negative female and positive male characters was problematic for gender concerns, though the creators maintain that such a division was dependent on the actors' own performing styles, instead of a conscious choice. However, gender issue is not the focus of this article, thus I will not delve into this problem here.

<sup>8</sup> See Yinghong Cheng (2003: 1–43); Li Ruru (2001: 129–44); Wei Zheyu (2017: 98–104); Xiao Gongqin (2002: 93–112); Zhao Mu (2007: 106–10).

<sup>9</sup> The play premiered in the little theatre of the Beijing People's Art Theatre in April and May 2000 for thirty-seven performances with 'an average 120% audience attendance', according to Xu Panwen and subsequently revived in such metropolises as Shanghai and Guangzhou as well as smaller cities such as Chengdu and Kaifeng (Liu 2001: 6). Several television stations (including Beijing's CCTV, the most influential one in China) broadcast performance clips and featured programmes on the play. These all established *Che Guevara* as one of the few plays that extended beyond theatre itself and stormed China's intellectual and cultural spheres.

was later expanded as a political-ideological term of 'left melancholy' by Western left intellectuals and theorists such as Walter Benjamin (1974 [1931]), Wendy Brown (1999), Jodi Dean (2012) and Enzo Traverso (2016). Moreover, the Freudian therapeutic connotation of 'melancholia' has later been significantly reinterpreted by Judith Butler (1997), with a rediscovery of an affective agency in her theorization of subjection.

'Left melancholy' is coined by Benjamin (1974 [1931]) in his critique of Erich Kästner (1899–1974), the left-wing poet from the Weimar Republic (1918–33), whose hollowed out 'petit bourgeoisie flavor' endorsed 'the status interests of the middle stratum' (29). In the post-cold-war era subsequent to the Thatcher-Reagan neoliberalism, Brown develops Benjamin's notion as a 'name for a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship' of the left and to their 'unavowed loss' of utopia (1999: 22). With a particular stress on feelings and sentiments, she states that they may incur 'potentially conservative and even self-destructive undersides of putatively progressive political aims' (27).

More recently, Jodi Dean (2012) made a critique of Brown's emphasis on leftist conservatism and sentiments with a reinterpretation of Benjamin's text. Rather than cling to 'anachronistic' left ideals and values, the leftists 'compromised revolutionary ideals by reducing them to consumer products' in Benjamin's critique (Dean 2012: 161). Benjamin thus indicates the left's betrayal of proletariat and revolutionary ideals in service of the capitalist market. Relocating 'left melancholy' in a different contemporary context from Brown's, Dean states that '[in] our present of undeniable inequality, class war, and ongoing capitalist crisis, the necessity of unified movements and class-based analysis is undeniable in a way it perhaps was not when Brown was writing at the end of nineties' (163). Therefore, the current crises demand a rethinking of specific communist histories and struggles that can inspire our present differently. Thus, left praxis and desire for collectivism and communism have re-emerged amid the (post-)capitalist crises of the present.

Similar to Dean's optimism in the left, Enzo Traverso also contends that 'left culture [occults]

melancholy behind its messianic hopes', which indicates a paradox between failure and hope (2016: 38). From the Paris Commune to the foundation of the Communist International to the Spartacist uprising in Berlin, the defeat of the left is paradoxical in that it always contains an optimistic vision of hope and promise of redemption. 'Instead of destroying its ideas and aspirations, these traumatic, tragic, often bloody defeats consolidated and legitimated them' (Traverso 2016: 22). Although Traverso admits that the defeat in 1989 was a fatal one for the global left and ended the revolutionary era, he still endorses 'left-wing melancholy' through a reassurance of the left resistance to the betrayal of communist and socialist ideals.

However, both Traverso and Dean failed to include Chinese revolution and its socialist history in their exploration of 'left melancholy'. The perceptions and experiences of left paradigms and projects are quite different between Western and Chinese leftists. In view of Western leftists, socialist revolution had been merely an imagined utopia and a distant mirage constructed in response to the deteriorating capitalist actuality of Western societies.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, for their Chinese counterparts, socialism and communism appear simultaneously real and imaginary, emancipatory and oppressive. Perhaps a more convincing comparison of socialist ideals between Western and Chinese contexts is the one between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and China. Investigating former GDR residents after the German unification, Charity Scribner describes their loss of socialism as 'the possible past [they] never really had' (2003: 300). For them, 'fidelity to this legacy can easily degenerate into infatuation with an idealized past, morbid fascination with failure itself, or the knowing melancholia of disavowal' (316). In contrast, the socialist legacy had been an ideal for the Chinese New Left and the disavowed loss renders the melancholic left a spectral agency to resist the cultural amnesia of that history. *Che Guevara's* major creators, Shen, Huang and Zhang, have also experienced the realization and fiasco of China's socialist utopia. In this sense, these artists' 'left melancholy' is a response to and reaction against this socialist country's overflowing ambience of neoliberal capitalism permeating the mainstream

<sup>10</sup> In fact, Wendy Brown also yearns to 'invigorate' the left melancholic through 'a spirit that embraces the notion of a deep and indeed unsettling transformation of society' (1999: 26). However, without lived experiences of socialist ideals, she questions, '[How] might we draw creative sustenance from socialist ideals of dignity, equality, and freedom, while recognizing that these ideals were conjured from historical conditions and prospects that are not those of the present?', which is different from the perspective of Chinese New Left (26–7).

Chinese theatre until the present.

Unfortunately, the Chinese theorization of ‘left melancholy’ was not as systematic as its Western equivalent, which requires more theoretical exploration, especially in theatre studies. Therefore, I will continue to borrow Western theories to formulate a more systematic but different interpretation of the term. The Chinese leftist practice has its modern precedents in the melancholic intellectual emerging from the literature of the May Fourth Movement (1919), when the crisis of traditional Chinese culture, incurred by Western influences, reactivated the classical Confucian ‘melancholy’ (*youhuan*). However, the aesthetics and ethics of Confucian melancholy have been displaced by the therapeutic interpretation of ‘melancholia’ since the introduction of Western psychological studies in the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, leftist writers such as Lu Xun (1881–1936) and Qu Qiubai (1899–1935) demonstrated an ‘acting-thinking’ dilemma ‘through a melancholic narrative that turned out to be more creative, more sophisticated, and more illuminating than their putative political beliefs’ to ‘overcome the ailment of melancholia’ represented by Yu Dafu (1896–1945) (Tu 2021: 130). Consequently, the same melancholy has swept the left following the failure of revolutions in post-1927, post-1976 or post-1989 Chinese society.

Notably, in his exploration of Lu Xun’s literary corpus, specifically *Call to Arms (Nahan)* (1922) and *Wandering (Panghuang)* (1925), the New Left intellectual Wang Hui posits that these pieces transcend the enduring thematic binary of ‘hope and despair’, a recurring motif in modern Chinese literature (2000a: 190). The affective paradox of hope and despair, rebellion and resignation is a remarkable feature in Lu Xun’s deft employment of irony. The emotion of despair does not steer the human psyche towards decadence and trepidation; rather, it propels individuals towards tenacity and creative impulse. This idea thus resonates with the contemporary Chinese New Leftists who attempt to create an agency out of the melancholy caused by the loss of socialist utopia.

Having lived through the real-existing and collapse of communism and the post-revolutionary neoliberalism, the Taiwanese

leftist intellectual Chen Yingzhen’s (1937–2016) writings and theatrical activities further crystallized this complex dynamic and hidden insight in left melancholy. In Wang Hui and Dai Jinhua’s conversation on Chen Yingzhen’s literary legacy, Wang argues that instead of being ‘paralyzed in a melancholy [incurred by his incapability to take immediate action], Chen committed himself to social and theoretical thinking’ to solve social malaise (cited in Li Jing 2020).<sup>12</sup> Chen’s leftist activities, especially those initiated by his magazine *Renjian* 人間 (founded in 1985), attracted a cluster of leftist intellectuals and artists, including Wang Molin (1949–) who was the precursor to the Taiwanese leftist theatre movement, which finally gave rise to the establishment of the Taiwanese ‘left-wing frontline league’ (*zuoyi zhanxian lianmeng*) in the 1980s (Han Jialing 2018: 3–28).<sup>13</sup> In other words, his left revolutionary ideal is effectively materialized in theatre and activism.

This discrepancy of left melancholy between literature and theatre evokes Benjamin’s article again. As a counterexample of such leftists as Kästner’s betrayal of left ideals, the leftist theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht’s poems were applauded by Benjamin as a paragon of ‘political lyricism’ with an ‘authentic humanity’ (1974 [1931]: 31). The ‘political lyricism’ and ‘authenticity’ conjures up Brecht’s epic theatre that counteracts ‘illusion’ in commercial theatre by addressing directly to the audience with argument, analysis, comment and documentation, among others. His left practices also influenced the *Guevara Troupe* who also called their production ‘epic theatre’, which I will explain in detail in the next section (*Guevara Troupe* 2001: 97). The anachronistic Brechtian practices were here rejuvenated with new political meanings of revolt in the postrevolutionary Chinese context.

Considering Brecht’s influence upon Benjamin’s philosophy, Benjamin’s idea of ‘left melancholy’ can be further unpacked to interpret postrevolutionary Chinese leftist theatre.<sup>14</sup> Traverso’s distinction of two forms of ‘left melancholy’ becomes quite informative and relatable here, based on his analysis of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s discrepancy in ‘the birth of an art without aura in modern capitalism’: ‘the former in favor of radical agency, the latter resigned and

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed investigation of the transmission of psychology in twentieth-century China, see Larson (2009); Xiao (2017: 11–14).

<sup>12</sup> Chen Yingzhen’s left melancholy in his novels has been further unpacked and compared with another Chinese novelist Wang Anyi’s writings by Tu Hang (2021: 122–60).

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed investigation of Taiwan’s leftist theatre practices influenced by Chen Yingzhen and the magazine *Renjian*, see Han Jialing (2018: 1–45).

<sup>14</sup> The friendship with Brecht greatly influenced Benjamin’s conceptualization of politics and aesthetics. See Wizisla (2016).

passive' (Traverso 2016: 199–200). To expand this differentiation, if the left that Benjamin denounced betrayed the communist ideal and resigned to capitalism, the leftist artists such as Brecht and the Chinese leftist writers and artists in the 1920s and 1930s revolted against the status quo with a radical aesthetic agency. Furthermore, while left melancholy in literature may have restrictions in 'action', for the act of writing is more private and introspective, in political theatre, by contrast, it tends to be more public and interactive.<sup>15</sup>

What belongs to the New Left theatre-makers who collectively created *Che Guevara*, at the turn of the twenty-first century, is a 'left melancholy', similar to that of Lu Xun and Chen Yingzhen, caught in a despair-and-vision paradox. It is once again manifested in the offstage voice of Guevara before his death in the play's epilogue. Taking the boat *Granma* as a metaphor for communist revolution, Guevara's vision to resume revolution also reflect the artists' active determination despite a postrevolutionary amnesia of socialist utopia. Overwhelmed by 'melancholy' (*youhuan*), which means sadness and anxiety about the future in a traditional Chinese sense, they realized that the new ruling class will constantly recur in the new-born communist society for which the 'slaves' have fought for a lifetime. However, this melancholy also contains a vision for a different future, as 'the stars in the distance shimmer in the eyes of the slaves like before' (Huang Jisu *et al.* 2014: 947). The play's inheritance of leftist theatrical legacies, rather than 'outdated' residue of 'revolutionary romanticism', is both sorrowful and powerful, both desperate and promising. It is an endeavour to resist the increasingly commercialized mode of production engendered by China's irresistible neoliberal globalization.

#### LEFT VISION: CRYSTALLIZING A THEATRE 'COLLECTIVE' AGAINST CAPITALIST MODES OF PRODUCTION

Both the performance and the creators' artistic statements are pervaded by profound feelings of 'left melancholy', epitomized by its pathetic denouncement of a postrevolutionary betrayal of utopian ideals and its artistic resistance. This section will delineate the play's aesthetic

inheritance of the notion of the 'collective' in leftist theatrical tradition with its collective creation modes of production and distribution. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1997) theorization of the psychic power of melancholia in subjection, I argue that this inheritance is not simply passive acceptance, but an active resistance to the therapeutic reading of leftist legacy as the melancholic's reluctance to sever its attachment to the communist, socialist ideal.

The integrated inheritance and revolt in the troupe's revival of collective creation evokes Judith Butler's notion of 'subjection'. Departing from Althusser's theorization of 'interpellation' and Foucault's notion of 'discursive productivity', Butler argues that '[s]ubjection signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject' (1997: 2). In other words, it is precisely 'this fundamental dependency on a discourse' that paradoxically 'initiates and sustains our agency' (2). Likewise, the leftist melancholic in *Che Guevara* paradoxically reclaims an active, visionary agency through its 'subordination' both to the leftist theatre tradition, presumably too 'outmoded' and 'sentimental', and to the neoliberal capitalist mechanism. The production at once 'cancels' and 'appropriates' capitalist modes of theatrical production and distribution through leftist theatrical traditions of egalitarianism and collective interaction among all troupe members. This paradoxical mode of theatrical production is rooted in the complicated social and economic paradox of a socialist country plagued by a market economy.

The *Guevara Troupe* reclaims the left's emancipatory vision through an egalitarian theatrical 'collective' crystallized in the troupe's modes of production, distribution and reception. This vision had long been revoked by contemporary neoliberal theatre mechanism in China. The mainstream theatre's betrayal of the communist ideal, or what Jodi Dean describes as the 'communist desire for collectivity' (2012: 158), has been a pressing issue in Chinese theatre until the present. As a reactionary gesture, the play was collectively created by the '*Guevara Troupe*' (as they call themselves), independent from any institutional patronage or government funding as an anti-commercial, anti-bourgeois pose. Unable

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin also preferred the 'more public and political phase' of literary expressionism that extends the subject-matter to a 'political messianism', according to the translator's note in Benjamin's article 'Left-wing melancholy' (Benjamin 1974 [1931]: 32).

to negotiate with the capitalized market economy, these leftist melancholics attempted to reclaim the nation's leftist revolutionary legacy and to retrieve agency through artistic creation, despite their incapability to actually 'transform' the world as Marxists or Maoists would do.

The troupe's egalitarian and emancipatory vision inherits the Chinese leftist theatrical tradition, which can be traced back to the Shanghai Artistic Drama Society (Shanghai yishu jushu) (1929–30), the first modern theatre group advocating for 'proletarian theatre' and the forerunner of the Chinese Leftist Theatre Movement (1930–6) and the mass theatre movements during Shanghai's 'Orphan Island' (*gudao*) period (1937–41), among others.<sup>16</sup> The wedding between aesthetics and politics was castigated after the perilous political experiments and calamity during the Cultural Revolution. However, in the postmodernist, post-revolutionary Chinese theatre, a radical resumption of left tradition counterbalances the dissolved historicity through the playfulness prevailing in commercial avant-garde theatre.

The play also bears a strong imprint of the Western leftist theatrical tradition. Shen Lin credited Vsevolod Meyerhold, Erwin Piscator, Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht and Ariane Mnouchkine, but particularly ascribed the leftist theatrical experimentation to Joan Littlewood (2001: 76). Discarding the formula of the well-made play, the narrative structure of the script draws on leftist theatre practitioners such as Piscator and Brecht. Shen Lin also mentioned his admiration for Soviet leftist film artist Sergei Eisenstein's montage techniques (82).<sup>17</sup> Through juxtapositions of the 'pros' and 'cons' penetrating arguments and poignant narrations onstage and Guevara's voice offstage, the performance achieves a montage effect to expose dramatic conflicts and clashes among the three, thus activating the audiences' emotions and critical thinking.

The approach of collective creation is particularly inspired by Joan Littlewood, a radical leftist British director active from the 1920s to the 1950s, who subverted 'old modes of social production' and 'incorporated her socialist belief into artistic creation through transforming the operating system of capitalist

troupes and implementing socialist practices to modes of production and distribution and to relationships of production' (Shen Lin 2001: 76–7). Both her socialist belief and her radical, revolutionary dramatic practices left traces in *Che Guevara's* collective creating process. The process is specified in their artistic statements: based on the reproduction of Guevara's life, every section of the collective (script, image and film, composition, singing and body) will initiate an independent plan and draft the script through discussion, negotiation and argument; every performer should learn the spirit of Guevara through the reading of his biography to avoid artificial performance (*Guevara Troupe* 2001: 101–2).<sup>18</sup> As a resistance to a commercial and director-centred capitalist system, the troupe also rejuvenates the leftist egalitarian mode of collaboration and distribution of performance incomes and later publishes their income distribution.

Collective creation is also coordinated by the organizers and even audiences in other cities during their tours. Due to a huge lack of financial support, they had difficulty in constructing the Piscator-style scaffolding during their tours to other cities. For instance, in Kaifeng, the students and teachers from Henan University helped them to obtain scaffolding, bricks and wooden stumps for their stage design in construction sites and a garage (Yuan Hong 2001: 92). In Guangzhou, the scaffolding was built overnight by several construction workers, together with the producers who borrowed stumps from volunteers and some Guangzhou troupes. The collective creation between the troupe and external collaborators further visualizes the left ideal of a classless, leaderless collective.

In a postrevolutionary theatrical context, [the] conflation of collective creation with sixties counter culture and New Left politics has resulted in a tendency to read present devising practices (frequently cited as less politically motivated than their predecessors) as a rejection of – or failure in terms of – the theatrical politics of the sixties. (Syssoyeva and Proudfit 2013: 2)

However, as more Western theatre artists are inclined to adopt an alternative 'devising' approach that disrupts and even disclaims its communist origin and vision, the Chinese

<sup>16</sup> For more information about the origin and development of leftist theatre in China, see Song Jianlin (2007); Zhu Weibing (2006).

<sup>17</sup> Eisenstein's montage approach, by juxtaposing different images of, for instance, factory workers' protests, policymakers and capitalists, elicits ideological meanings and strong emotional responses from the audiences, which evidently inspires *Guevara's* staging.

<sup>18</sup> The troupe's approach of collective creation also resembles Ariane Mnouchkine and her company *le Théâtre du Soleil's* creative method. For more details, see Singleton (2020: 39–60).

<sup>19</sup> With a summary of the research on the functions and effects of the Living Newspaper in three waves from 1930s to the present, Jordana Cox emphasized the previous ignorance of and recent attention to the spectator in Living Newspaper (2017: 305–6).

New Left melancholic artists are still reluctant to sever from the left practice of ‘collective creation’ in terms of its socio-political legacy and significance. Ultimately, the troupe’s appropriation of this ‘outmoded’ leftist practice resists the global ‘de-politicization’ tendency.

#### LEFT RESISTANCE: CONJURING UP A THEATRICAL PUBLIC THROUGH LIVING NEWSPAPER

Apart from collective creation, the play also has strong hallmarks of the Living Newspaper (also known as *huobao ju* in Chinese theatre), another leftist theatrical practice ‘rooted in the twentieth-century tradition of agitational theatre based on the important events of current social and political history’ in the West (McDermott 1965: 85), which also exerted remarkable impact on Chinese leftist theatre. For instance, the play’s adoption of images and videos is influenced by Piscator’s employment of theme-provoking projection-slides in the Living Newspaper (Shen Lin 2001: 81). Some critics interpret the troupe’s rigid imitation of an agit-prop leftist tradition through ‘political tit for tat’ (Cheng 2003: 8–9) and the performers’ ‘energy and enthusiasm’ as ‘a frenzy ... reminiscent of the variety shows of the Cultural Revolution’ (Li Ruru 2001: 139). However, I would argue that the creators’ innovative appropriation of the Living Newspaper reflects the potential for a visionary agency to conjure up a theatrical public.

Recent theatre scholarship on Living Newspaper has coalesced its leftist lineages with the spectators and their identities that were previously ignored (Cox 2017: 305–6).<sup>19</sup> The idea that ‘production and reception should no longer be separated’ is also shared by Brecht and Benjamin in their discussions of ‘the democratization of art’ in a leftist lineage (Wizisla 2016: 115). The very lexicons of ‘Living’ and ‘Newspaper’ recall a corporeal disparity between vitality and fossilization. The emergence of the Living Newspaper in the 1920s and 1930s was once the ultimate unification between artistic and political radicalism against the background of international workers’ movements. The method does not lose its political and artistic force simply ‘because it is no longer used’, but ‘remains an

exciting attempt to utilize the total context of the theatrical occasion as a means of expression and communication’ (McDermott 1965: 94). As one of the most active leftist practices, this radical theatrical reform ‘conjured a “phantom public” of their own: a public that was ghostly not by virtue of obsolescence ... but by virtue of being in between the animate and the inanimate’ (Cox 2017: 317). Therefore, the *Guevara* Troupe’s radical employment of the Living Newspaper and ‘exaggerated way’ of ‘recit[ing]’ and ‘shout[ing] out’ (Li Ruru 2001: 139) should not be treated simply as a maniac inheritance of ‘the legacy of the oppressive Ultraleftism’ (Wei 2017: 99). Instead, the theatrical re-enactments of Guevara’s life ‘rekindle’ the audience’s ‘extinguished’ beliefs in the revolutionary ideal. In this regard, the appropriation of leftist theatrical tradition is the Troupe’s performative vision to reimagine the utopian ideal of revolutionary China.

One significant way the Living Newspaper addresses spectators is to adapt current news. This approach permeates *Che Guevara* in various forms by referencing, directly or ironically, current domestic and international news. The whole performance imitates the debate between the liberals and the New Left in current social issues incurred by global capitalism, neoliberalism and loss of socialist utopia, among others. More specifically, in one Living Newspaper episode, adapted from a piece of news from the *Beijing Youth Daily* Newspaper, a college student from the ‘pros’ was about to rescue a girl falling in the water but was prevented by the ‘cons’, with the latter carrying abacuses in their hands. The ‘cons’ began to count points for the two people, with an abacus, to convince the student not to rescue the girl with their conclusion that the ‘output’ (the girl) was worth 7 points while the ‘input’ (the student) was worth 180 points (Huang Jisu *et al.* 2014: 955–6). As a scathing criticism of a capitalist neoliberalism that measures everything, including human life, with money and statistics, this ‘dead’ social issue came to ‘life’ through corporeal performance to provoke the spectators to reconsider their own values and perceptions in the market system.

As a ‘Living Newspaper’-style epic theatre, the play does not emulate leftist theatrical techniques mechanically, but reworks them innovatively

to achieve its political and affective purposes. The play's intensive use of Living Newspaper to move the spectators also resonates with Brecht's political theatre to 'move the masses ... [and] [penetrate] their consciousness by means of slogans, quotations, books, newspapers, public meanings' (cited in Wizisla 2016: 101). The words from slogans, references and newspapers were ingeniously orchestrated by the playwright Huang Jisu. Through live reports and commentaries of current socio-political issues, the Living Newspaper magnetizes the audiences to vigorously participate in the performance. Zhang Guangtian also views their Living Newspaper style swarmed with propaganda as the 'exact forms of people's theatre' to realize their artistic purpose (2001: 149). For instance, the propaganda-like refrain, recited by the 'pros', envisions how *Granma* will resume its journey towards the place of suffering and oppression:

Set sail! Set sail!  
 Head toward the peasant rebellion led by Chen Sheng  
 and Wu Guang in Daze Village!  
 ...  
 Head toward the place where Negro slaves were  
 kidnapped and detained.  
 Head toward the place where indigenous peoples  
 were banished and murdered.  
 ...  
 Head toward the place that needs fire, needs light,  
 and needs my voice!  
 Head toward the place that needs daggers, needs  
 swords, and needs my fighting blows!  
 (Huang Jisu *et al.* 2014: 933, 960)

The radical refrain envisions an international communist utopia through revolution by reviewing the histories of imperialism, capitalism, colonialism and of worldwide rebellions. The slogan-like recitations provoked the spectators' revolutionary enthusiasm so that one of them even ran to the stage to wave the red flag together with the actors.

The troupe at once deconstructs commercial theatre, dominated under the aegis of capitalism, and renovates the Living Newspaper through post-performance discussions and social debates. Through forceful questioning on 'the legacies of socialism, authoritarianism, and the transition to capitalism', the play sought to create a theatrical space of 'dialogism, discussion, and social interrogation' (Connery 2020:

138). The spectators' and critics' participation within and beyond the auditorium, similar to the functioning of audiences in the Living Newspaper, further revokes what Jill Dolan calls 'utopia performatives' that place the distinctive political potential within the theatrical action in its 'present-tenseness', which '[probes] the possibilities of utopia as a hopeful process that continually writes a different, better future' (2005: 13). According to the troupe's performance diaries, the audiences fervently engaged in the post-performance discussions to embrace or denounce the play's aesthetics and political tendencies with the cast and the creators. Some grieved over the loss of revolutionary ideals or for their own youths while others criticized the creators as too emotional or didactic (Liu Zhifeng 2001: 180–227). Some would even follow the Troupe to a bar or restaurant to resume their post-performance discussions and arguments. This manner of interaction between spectators and creators renders the former 'concrete' in the form of mutual witnessing and corporeal gathering (Warner 2005: 66). Those comments and debates generate a performative, emotive agency that triggers the spectators' inner desire to change realities.

Apart from post-performance activities, the play further forms a 'theatrical public ... in between the bounded, "concrete" audience and the more dispersed and "abstract" public sphere' (Cox 2017: 301). Cox argues that the wider theatrical public beyond the auditorium is crucial to the effectiveness of the Living Newspaper in her analysis of the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspaper production of *The Events of 1935* (1936) in New York. Similarly, for *Che Guevara*, a book entitled *Che Guevara: Repercussions and controversy: A red storm engulfing China's intellectual circles*, was published in 2001 by Liu Zhifeng, collecting the premiere script, the articles and dramatic practices inspiring the play's creators, ideological and artistic statements and manifestos of the collective troupe, critical performance reviews and post-performance audience discussions with both the most applauded voices of and the most searing criticism against the play. The creators' conscious desire for the play to be so openly critiqued stands out in the topography of Chinese

theatre during the early 2000s. Ultimately, an open public space gradually took shape during the play's production and post-production processes, thus allowing the rise of a visionary agency to reclaim the utopian ideal.

#### CONCLUSION

As a continuity and innovation of Western and Chinese leftist theatrical tradition, *Che Guevara* stands out in Chinese theatrical topography of the early 2000s due to an agency arising from the theatre-makers' seemingly 'passive' left melancholy. Instead of 'potentially conservative and even self-destructive undersides of putatively progressive political aims', the Chinese New Left artists' stubborn 'attachments to left analyses and left projects', in Brown's words, was reinvigorated with new agency through left theatrical practices of collective creation and the Living Newspaper (1999: 27). 'Theatre may not be able to change anything directly, given its elitist bourgeois form, its place in wider social practices and its very narrow demographic attraction', as Singleton contends in his exploration of French leftist director Ariane Mnouchkine and *le Théâtre du Soleil's* collective creation since May 1968, 'but it still retained for her an agency in germinating and nurturing political consciousness' (2020: 43). The post-1968 Western leftist disillusionment resembles the postrevolutionary Chinese New Left not only in their shared sense of failure and despair, but also in the agency they endeavoured to resume through their rethinking and recreation of revolution, if not through reality.

Melancholy, like sadness, 'sticks' and 'circulates' because it has social and cultural historicity (Ahmed 2014 [2004]: 90). My investigation of the visionary potential of left melancholy in Chinese New Leftist theatre tentatively 'de-pathologizes' affective aesthetics in performance studies, especially in postrevolutionary China. As the China-based leftist American scholar Christopher Connery contends, '[*Che Guevara's*] references to revolution-era forms and rhetoric were simultaneously serious and ironic – an affective combination that would recur in Chinese social theatre' (2020: 138). The play's irony of neoliberal, capitalist globalization

in postrevolutionary China is not simply a therapeutic, paralyzing personalized emotion, but a sober collective revolt against the 'end-of-utopia' socio-cultural narrative, which engenders a performative agency in the New Left artists to reclaim revolutionary, socialist historicity and utopia.

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