



East  
Asian  
History

NUMBER 4 · DECEMBER 1992 THE CONTINUATION OF *Papers on Far Eastern History*

Institute of Advanced Studies  
Australian National University

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This is the fourth issue of *East Asian History* in the series previously entitled *Papers on Far Eastern History*. The journal is published twice a year.

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Subscription Enquiries Subscription Manager, *East Asian History*, at the above address  
Annual Subscription Rates Australia A\$45 Overseas US\$45 (for two issues)

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Cover calligraphy Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover photograph Portrait of Hedda Morrison by Adolph Lazi, Stuttgart, 1931–32  
(reproduced courtesy of Franz Lazi)

The Editorial Board would like to express  
their most appreciative thanks to Mr Alastair Morrison  
for his generous help with the production costs of this issue.

## TOWARDS TRANSCENDENTAL KNOWLEDGE: THE MAPPING OF MAY FOURTH MODERNITY/SPIRIT

 Gloria Davies

This essay traces Chinese modernity through its representation in May Fourth writings and in writings on the May Fourth movement, in both cases, writings which are, to a greater or lesser extent, historiographical, since the idea of modernity is imbedded in a network of associations having to do with 'now': 'the present' as opposed to 'the past', or the 'new' as opposed to the 'old'. In short, the idea of modernity entails historicity.<sup>1</sup> This is nowhere more evident than in the usage of the term 'May Fourth' as a virtual synonym for 'Chinese modernity'. May Fourth, *wusi* 五四, the abbreviated Chinese translation of a date in the Gregorian calendar, *literally* marks a temporal moment, 'a point in time' from which a certain epistemological relationship between the 'old' and the 'new' is called into being. And the importance of this chronologically-marked division in the staking out of a field of knowledge called 'modern Chinese history' is such that one simply cannot speak of Chinese modernity without being already implicated, by virtue of this epistemological relationship, in speaking of May Fourth and vice versa.<sup>2</sup>

May Fourth features in twentieth-century Chinese discourse, in the language of this epistemological relationship, in two distinct but often conflated forms: as the *objective* historical event of 1919 which sparked off China's first modern intellectual movement of the early 1920s, on the one hand, and as the *subjective* experience of modernity, on the other. In conceptualizing modern China and historicizing its beginnings, historians of the May Fourth Movement have, by and large, echoed the enthusiasm and optimism of May Fourth writers by investing the event and the intellectual movement it spawned with the status of the unprecedented and hence, the 'truly historic'. What this entails is the assumption that there is something like a May Fourth consciousness which emerged sometime during the late 1910s,

<sup>1</sup> As Nietzsche puts it, "... It becomes impossible to overcome history in the name of life or forget the past in the name of modernity, because both are linked by a temporal chain that gives them a common destiny" (—as quoted in Paul de Man, "Literary history and literary modernity," *Blindness and insight: essays in the rhetoric of contemporary criticism*, 2nd ed. [London: Methuen & Co., 1983], p.150). I deal with the problematic notion of modernity in May Fourth writings in an earlier article, "Chinese literary studies and post-structuralist positions: what next?" in *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 28 (July 1992): 73–6.

<sup>2</sup> In other words, the chronological marker 'May Fourth' puts into effect the *concept* of a historical time structured in the form of a decisive break between the 'old' and the 'new', from which the suggestion of a 'historical present' (the modern moment) emerges. That is to say, 'May Fourth' functions strategically, as Robert Young (citing Althusser) puts it, as "the conceptual nexus of the history in question." (See Young's reading of Althusser's comments on Hegelian historical time in his *White mythologies: writing history and the West* [New York & London: Routledge, 1990], pp.55–7). As a nexus, May Fourth enables the writing of a Chinese history in which a certain totality of social being is suggested; a structural /OVER

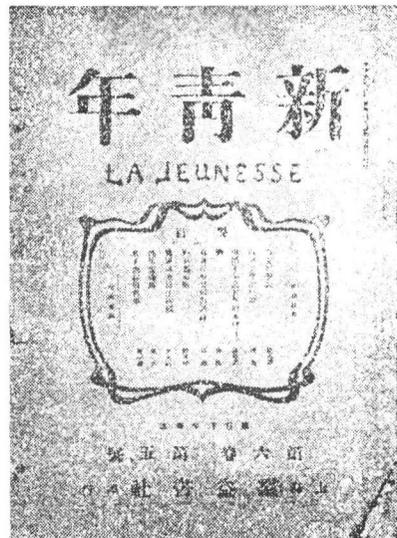
/unity facilitated by the insertion of 'May Fourth' as a privileged historical moment, as it were, as the moment 'now' from which one is ('at last') able to articulate a network of relations between the 'past' and the 'present'. The signifying force of 'May Fourth' is apparent when compared to other chronological markers such as 'May Thirtieth' (*wusa 五卅*) or 'August Eighteenth' (*jiuyiba 九一八*) which do not suggest quite the same 'fullness' of associations with the idea of 'modern China' as 'May Fourth' does. It should also be noted, however, that Li Helin, one of the most, if not the most, influential Marxist-Leninist historian on modern Chinese literature from the 1930s onwards, marked these three dates (May Fourth, May Thirtieth and August Eighteenth) equally as 'watersheds' in his analysis of 'literary trends in modern China'. See Li Helin, *Jin ershi nian Zhongguo wenyi sichao lun* [Literary trends in China of the last twenty years] (1939; reprint ed., Chongqing: Shenghuo Shudian, 1947), p.2.

accelerated rapidly into a collective movement, and became the motor of China's first thoroughgoing encounter with modernity by the early 1920s.

This assumption underlies much of what has been written about twentieth-century China and guides discourses associated with the May Fourth movement, both May Fourth writings and writings on May Fourth, towards a form of historical narration in which the idea of 'modern historical development' is simultaneously the idea of the 'development of modern Chinese consciousness'. For reasons which will be suggested in the course of this essay, this form of narration becomes highly problematic when it is treated as *history* and not as *narrative*. Furthermore, when historiography is structured to demonstrate or 'unfold' a parallel movement of 'objective events' and 'subjective experience', it presupposes the existence of a certain dialectic, under which this parallel movement is subsumed, as a fundamental dualistic condition of history itself.<sup>3</sup> My intention in this essay is to re-examine the way we think about the May Fourth movement, against the grain of this dyadic structure, as a form of historical narration—*not* a 'study' of the history (as some *real* object) of, for instance, the 'enlightening role' of the May Fourth movement in the context of a 'backward Chinese society' but rather the interrogation of particular strategies of representation imposed on such 'history' by the dyadic structure of its narrative.

### Figure 1

*Modernity as icon: through cover designs such as these, the idea of May Fourth modernity acquired the status of fashionable high-brow culture in addition to its other symbolic and political values. Among other things, such magazines and journals became de rigeur accessories on the persons of many Chinese intellectuals and professionals, a mark of their 'culturally-enlightened' status.*



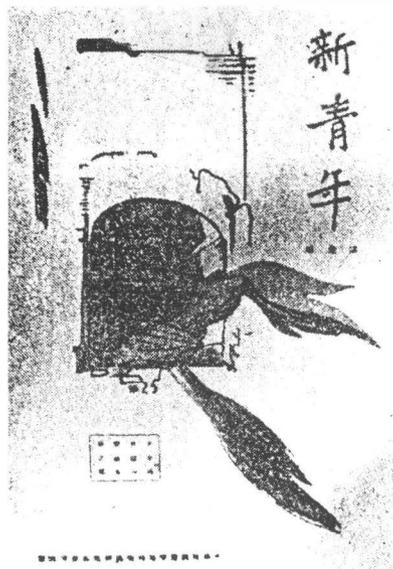
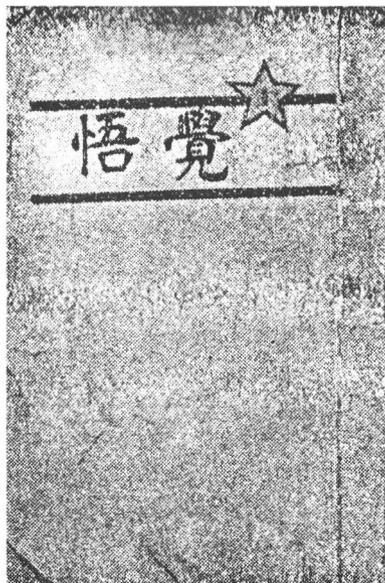
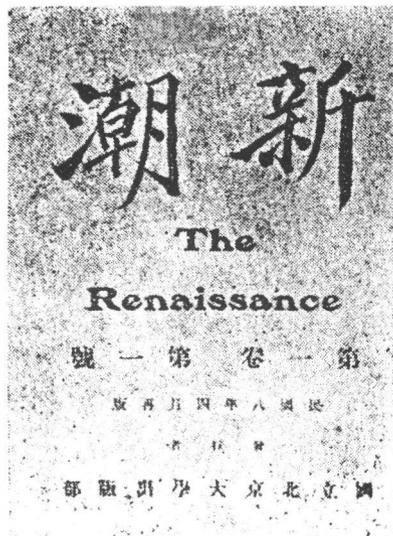
### On Spirit: A Hegelian Preamble

The title of this essay draws attention to a general tendency in May Fourth writings and writings on May Fourth towards uncovering a fundamental law of historical development whereby 'modernity' (and cognates the idea subsumes, such as 'progress' and 'democracy') could be incontrovertibly demonstrated to be the necessary goal of history. In many May Fourth publications, the term 'spirit' (*jingshen* 精神) functions as a metaphor, a means of signalling the 'presence' of some ineluctable force which, once revealed as inner law or principle, would direct historical development towards its proper goal as the fulfilment of a thoroughgoing modernity.<sup>4</sup> Structuring historical understanding in terms of a/the spirit of history necessarily invokes a *telos*. After all, what does spirit signify if not the presence of a force or forces bringing the unfinished business of the past to a glorious terminus of true revelation?

What is interesting about the totalizing and teleological effects of this form of discourse is that, even as the appeal is made to a finality of historical understanding beyond language, the discourse remains bound within language and thus confronts the problematic of attempting, as it were, to step into an extra-linguistic reality by the very linguistic means which resist such a gesture. This problematic will be discussed in a later section of the essay, but I raise it here as an indication of the general predicament in which any attempt to know history as *development* or *process* is placed by a logic whose demand for the emplotment of an intelligible *course* of 'historical development' (with all the effects of causality this entails) always already presupposes an

<sup>3</sup> Among other things, as the idea of what the 'present' can be seen to 'lack' now that the negative forces of the 'past' can be perceived for what they truly entail. The representation of such a rift prevails in writings by May Fourth intellectuals.

<sup>4</sup> Luo Jialun's essay "*Wusi yundong de jingshen*" [Spirit of the May Fourth movement], first published in May 1919, exemplarily demonstrates this metaphorical appeal to the 'force' of 'modernity' and 'progress'. See my discussion of this essay in "What next?", pp.71–2. It is also worthwhile noting here that while recent mainland Chinese writings on May Fourth intellectuality do not explicitly celebrate its 'spirit', nonetheless they similarly assume progressive movement towards a modern *telos* as an inescapable law of 'human evolution' or 'human development'. In this regard, they tend to read May Fourth as an 'incomplete' manifestation of the *true* goals of modernity (as *actualized* through 'democracy', for instance). Such readings suggest that had May Fourth intellectuals been more rigorous in the *practical application* of knowledge of the modern, and Chinese society better able to receive such knowledge, then the 'tragedy' of abortive attempts at democratic reform would not have taken place. Although couched in part in Marxist terms of dialectical /OVER



**Figure 2**

*The words on the banner, “Zhongguo hun,” form the linguistic basis of the crowd’s faith in the existence of a national Chinese spirit—Beijing, April 1989 (Xinhua Wenzhai, June 1989)*



/materialism, these writings take ‘consciousness’ as the subject in the historical narrative and implicitly invoke a totality of ‘human understanding’ (or proper knowledge) as the goal of history, thus investing history willily with the imprint of “spirit” as the dynamic principle of ‘historical progress’. See, for instance, Qian Liqun, “Shilun wusi shiqi ‘ren de juexing’” [A preliminary discussion of ‘the awakening of humanity’ in the May Fourth era], *Wenxue pinglun* 3 (1989): 5–16; Wang Gan, “Yuyan yu weiji: Zhongguo xiandai shi zhong de ‘wusi’ qimeng yundong” [Prophecy and crisis: the ‘May Fourth’ enlightenment movement in modern Chinese history], *Wenxue pinglun* 3.4 (1989): 17–25, 35–47.

<sup>5</sup> By Spirit (*Geist*), I mean the *essential* guiding principle which Hegel regarded as a fundamental law of historical *development*, which he distinguished from partial manifestations along the course of history in the form of spirit of a particular time (*Zeitgeist*).

inner law of the course. In this regard, assumptions of ‘the spirit of modernity’ or ‘the spirit of May Fourth’ share common ground with that most influential historical narrative of progress, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

In Hegel’s philosophizing on history, the idea of Spirit<sup>5</sup> (*Geist*) surfaces as the ground of true knowledge, that is, as the necessary ‘evidence’ that history is not accidental or arbitrary but a progressive development towards a grand synthesis of all contradictions. Thus, for Hegel, history is the path Spirit emplots in its progress towards the full development of the “Idea of Reason”—the state (in both philosophical and political senses of the word) of absolute knowledge wherein reason triumphs over all social and political contradictions by harmonizing these in a full reconciliation of freedom (conceived *inter alia* as the collective will of an ethical community towards the common good) with natural desire (conceived as the contradictory tensions produced by individual self-interest in opposition to the collective will).<sup>6</sup>

Hegel’s formulation of history as the progress of Spirit is predicated on the assumption that consciousness is fully knowable and that it expresses itself through an ongoing process of recognizing the *necessary* union between self-reflection (as individual consciousness) and the general will (as

defined in terms of collective social and political existence). In the endeavour to reach the highest moment of self-realization, consciousness, according to Hegel, discovers that it constitutes the experience of the individual self as nothing more nor less than moments in the constant 'unfolding' of human history. History is understood, in this instance, as a process defined by the movement of consciousness from an early phase of existence motivated by natural needs and desires to a historically deepening awareness of the *necessity* for reconciling the needs of the community (as general will, ethos or the state) and individual needs. This process then leads to a final phase in which all contradictions that have developed historically out of the various contestatory relationships between the individual will and the general (or socio-political) will are resolved through *conscious* recognition and affirmation of an absolute science of philosophy. What this final phase represents is the End of history, the coalescence of individual needs and the needs of the community through the founding of the true rational state, in which, among other things, freedom is "not the empty freedom of the individual to act morally, but the freedom of the individual to act within and as a moment of an all-encompassing political and cultural whole."<sup>7</sup> In the Hegelian historical project, Spirit is the true ethos, "the *ethical life* of a people, insofar as it is the *immediate truth*; the individual that is a world."<sup>8</sup> In elaborating on the Hegelian notion that "the essence of Spirit is freedom" Michael Gillespie writes:

True freedom for the individual is only possible insofar as his actions are in accordance with the general movement of spirit itself. The "freedom" of capricious natural desires is only license and in truth the subjection to natural causality. Real freedom is thus only possible in and through the ethical life of the political community which unites the natural desires of the individual with the rational objects established by society for those desires: it is only the state that can guarantee a reconciliation of these two through laws and education.<sup>9</sup>

Spirit is thus the key metaphor in the Hegelian meta-narrative which enables both the 'objective' consciousness of knowing and the 'subjective' awareness of being to be perceived simultaneously as duality (of knowing and being) and unity (as the reconciliation of knowing and being through the attainment of true freedom—"the individual that is a world"). Spirit, in other words, gives *form* to history, and in so doing *produces* history out of those aspects of the past which are in accordance with "the general movement of spirit" that Hegel narrates in his philosophizing. It is important to note, in this context, that Hegel understood historiography as a form of knowledge which, as Hayden White puts it, deals with "not the real story of what happened but the peculiar relation between a public present and a past that a state endowed with a constitution made possible."<sup>10</sup> For Hegel,

the term *History* unites the objective with the subjective side, and denotes quite as much the *historia rerum gestarum*, as the *res gestae* themselves; on the other hand it comprehends not less what has *happened*, than the *narration* of what

<sup>6</sup> Michael Gillespie provides a methodical discussion of Hegel's conception of the Spirit as the ground of historical development in chap.3 of his *Hegel, Heidegger and the ground of history* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, p.93. My reading of Hegel in this section is based primarily on G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's phenomenology of spirit*, trans. Arnold Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences in outline and critical writings*, ed. Ernst Behler (New York: Continuum, 1990); and G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of world history*, trans. H. B. Nisbet and Duncan Forbes (Cambridge & London: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in Gillespie, *Hegel, Heidegger*, p.90.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Hayden White, *The content of the form: narrative discourse and historical representation* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p.29.

<sup>11</sup> This excerpt from Hegel's introduction to his *Lectures on the philosophy of history* is quoted in White, *Content of the form*, p.12.

<sup>12</sup> As Hayden White, elaborating on Hegel, points out: "The distinction between a humanity or a kind of culture or society that is historical and another that is not nonhistorical is not of the same order as the distinction between two periods of time in the development of the human species: prehistorical and historical. For this distinction does not hinge on the belief that human culture was not developing prior to the beginning of 'history' or that this development was not historical in nature. *It hinges rather on the belief that there is a point in the evolution of human culture after which its development can be represented in a discourse different from that in which this evolution in its earlier phase can be represented*" (my italics). See *ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>13</sup> As quoted in *ibid.*, p.51. My italics.

<sup>14</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of world history*, p.48.

<sup>15</sup> Hayden White's conceptualization of 'truth' as a distinction within modes of discourse provides some elaboration on this issue: "The fact that narrative is the mode of discourse common to both 'historical' and 'nonhistorical' cultures and that it predominates in both mythic and fictional discourse makes it suspect as a manner of speaking about 'real' events. The non-narrative manner of speaking common to the physical sciences seems more appropriate for the representation of 'real' events. But here the notion of what constitutes a real event turns, not on the distinction between true and false (which is a distinction that belongs to the order of discourses, not to the order of events), but rather on the distinction between real and imaginary (which belongs both to the order of events and to the order of discourses). One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less 'true' for being imaginary. *It all depends upon how one construes the function of the faculty of imagination in human nature*" (my italics). See White, *Content of the form*, p.57.

<sup>16</sup> It is thus worthwhile noting here that the Hegelian historical perspective—which had been so influential in European scholarship during the nineteenth century and which

has happened. This union of the two meanings we must regard as of a higher order than mere outward accident; we must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events. It is an internal vital principle common to both that produces them synchronously. Family memorials, patriarchal traditions, have an interest confined to the family and clan. The uniform course of events which such a condition implies is no subject of serious remembrance; though distinct transactions or turns of fortune, may rouse Mnemosyne to form conceptions of them—in the same way as love and the religious emotions provoke imagination to give shape to a previously formless impulse. But it is only the state which first presents subject-matter that is not only adapted to the prose of History, but involves the production of such history in the very progress of its own being.<sup>11</sup>

To paraphrase Hegel, history depends on the existence of 'historical deeds and events' *no less than* the existence of a narrative which is able to *represent* these 'deeds and events' as as subject to the 'internal vital principle' that produces history. In other words, there is, in the Hegelian formulation, a clear distinction between the 'historical' and the 'unhistorical' based on the nature of the past under investigation and whether it "presents subject-matter" appropriate to "the *prose* of History."<sup>12</sup> The role spirit plays in that meta-narrative which Hegel calls "the prose of History" is thus nothing short of the 'internal vital principle' of the narrative itself; the metaphorical figure upon which the historical narrative turns. In one sense, spirit provides the Hegelian historical narrative with its plot. It is by means of spirit that 'events' accrue meaning and value as historical events within the Hegelian narrative. Spirit, as the unifying principle which enables one to speak of proper historical *development*, emplots all events within its purview along a linear path leading toward the absolute reconciliation of all contradictions within human society. As Paul Ricoeur, commenting on narrativity in historiography, puts it:

The plot ... places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity: to be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. *It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot.*<sup>13</sup>

Hegel provides some indication of how spirit figures as 'plot' in his historical meta-narrative in the following comments:

To say that Spirit exists would at first seem to imply that it is a completed entity. On the contrary, it is by nature active, and activity is its essence; it is its own product, and is therefore its own beginning and its own end. Its freedom does not consist in static being, but in a constant negation of all that threatens to

/further diverged along the ideological lines set by, among others, the Left and Right Hegelians—has asserted a paradigmatic influence on what has been institutionally

/legitimated as historiography. This is not to say that there have not been significant counter-influences in the form of Marxist historical perspectives, social-scientific perspectives put

destroy (*aufheben*) freedom. The business of spirit is to produce itself, to make itself its own object, and to gain knowledge of itself; in this way it exists for itself.<sup>14</sup>

The idea that historiography gives us the means to gain coherent and meaningful perspective on life by locating *essential* connections between the records and consequences of past events on the one hand and contemporary ones on the other resonates in the above excerpt. This is an idea that functions to a large extent as the *raison d'être* of historiography itself. What largely remains unquestioned in historiography, however, is the validity of those 'essential connections' when they are assumed to be *real* or are implicitly assigned the status of truth.<sup>15</sup> To put it another way, *pace* Hegel, to say that Spirit exists is to say that there can be no Prose of History if Spirit did not exist to provide it with a plot. This is tantamount to saying that if history were deprived of the guidance of Spirit in the form of the Hegelian dialectic, then one can no longer *properly* speak of history as such but rather of mere accidents or disparate local interests which, to cite Hegel, do not form subjects "of serious remembrance."<sup>16</sup>

As 'plot' in the Hegelian narrative of a progressive reconciliation between subjective freedoms<sup>17</sup> and the objective general will,<sup>18</sup> Spirit thus 'embodies' the principle of historical *progress*, binding the former to the latter through the idea of a grand ensemble in which 'each part' is already necessarily determined through the whole. What this totalizing gesture effects is the naming of History as the ultimate Idea through which all particular histories, in their multiple and heterogeneous forms, obtain *meaning* as instantiations of the movement of Spirit.<sup>19</sup> In this context, Spirit, contrary to the unequivocally positive value Hegel assigns it, can also be construed as a didactic 'plot' which must press all 'events' into the service of demonstrating the dialectical movement of history towards the realization of the Idea, either through homogenization or selective exclusion.

The Hegelian Spirit thus locks history into assuming the form of an ongoing spectacle of seemingly irreconcilable but nonetheless necessary contradictions which it is the *duty* of the individual, as instrument of consciousness, to resolve, through coming to grips with the 'reality' or 'truth' that reason ultimately achieves, a system of absolute knowledge of science in which all contradictions are dissolved. What this also implies is that consciousness is necessarily an unhappy state of being where 'truth' is 'experienced' as the lack of the truth by means of which absolute reconciliation (the happy ending of history as History) can be effected. In this context, the Hegelian dialectic is thus a strategic encoding of the development of 'the unhappy consciousness' in *positive* terms, an affirmation of negation as 'the negation of negation' whereby consciousness, in confronting its despair over the imperfections of life in the present as negation, is *driven* to negate (and hence to overcome) this despair in the bid to transcend the immediacy of its subjective 'truth'.<sup>20</sup>

/forth by the *Annales* group, and so forth. Rather, the situation is one where Western historiography, since Hegel, has acquired (or 'naturalized') certain Hegelian accents in its discursive conventions, to the extent that new conceptual and theoretical paradigms, whether these invoke or oppose the Hegelian paradigm as authority, cannot stake their claims to validity and legitimacy without some degree of engagement with Hegelian inflections in the discursive voices of institutionally-sanctioned historiography. See also Young, *White mythologies*, p.1-4. For Young, the Hegelian historical paradigm was influential in European scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the extent that "it is entirely appropriate that Hegelian Marxism has become generally known as 'Western Marxism'."

<sup>17</sup> That is to say, the subjective freedoms of individuals, families, clans, political factions or social groups to protect and further their own interests.

<sup>18</sup> The will of the state as embodied by laws and institutions aimed at protecting the interests of all within the community.

<sup>19</sup> This is explicitly stated in a number of passages in Hegel, *Philosophy of world history*.

<sup>20</sup> Elaborating on Hegel, Jean Hyppolite writes: "In the final paragraph of his analysis of self-consciousness, Hegel writes, 'Consciousness of life, of its existence and action, is merely pain and sorrow over this existence and activity' . . . . The emergence of self-consciousness is thus something other than life, pure and simple, and human existence, as knowledge of life, is a new mode of being that we are justified in calling 'existence'. Indeed, what characterizes man's self-consciousness is the break that it involves with naïve and determined life and its elevation above the static determinations of being. This existence emerges from the womb of the world as the perpetual negation of every particular modality of being. To become conscious of life in its totality is to reflect upon death, to exist in the fact of death, and that is how authentic self-consciousness is experienced by us." See Jean Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, trans. John O'Neill (London: Heinemann, 1969), p.24.

<sup>21</sup> In *The phenomenology of mind*, where he develops a systematic historical conceptualization of consciousness, Hegel focuses in particular on the French Revolution and what he saw as its radical transformation of self-consciousness from 'being-for-itself' (that is, the conflictual self-interests of the wealthy and the poor as elaborated in Hegel's master-slave dialectic) to 'being-in-itself' (as expressed in the effort to attain Absolute Liberty by the exercise of a general will ideally representing the will of each individual). For an excellent interpretation of Hegel's construction of the individual-collective problematic on the basis of the French Revolution, see *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* pp.54–62.

<sup>22</sup> As Hyppolite remarks, however: "Having raised the possibility, Hegel nevertheless seems unwilling to pursue the history of the spirit to this conclusion. Much as Luther considered impossible the reign of God on earth, Hegel ... seems to have recorded the failure of the French Revolution as a necessary event whereby Absolute Liberty 'passes over into another land of self-conscious spirit', namely, Germany, where, instead of being *realized* in deeds, it is *internalized* in the ethical and religious world of Kant, Fichte and the romantics" (my italics). See Hyppolite, *Marx and Hegel*, p.61.

<sup>23</sup> The resonances this calls forth with regard to recent calls by Fang Lizhi and others for 'democracy' are worthwhile noting. See also passages included in *New ghosts, old dreams: Chinese rebel voices*, ed. Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin (New York: Random Books, 1992), pp.345–53, 368–9, 382–5.

<sup>24</sup> That is to say, the effort to recognize 'self' beyond the determinations of subjective reflection by taking oneself as 'object' within the greater enterprise of life (or Spirit) itself. Refer also to n 27 below for an indication of the shift Hegel makes, in the course of his writings, in the naming of 'the whole' (or the greater enterprise). What such 'self-conscious' effort attempts, then, is transcendence of all perceived and experienced contradictions (or the more common Hegelian term, 'diremptions'). As Michael Gillespie points out, there is a sense in which it could be argued that Hegel does not "deduce the objective world from pure thought but more fundamentally derives both subjectivity and objectivity from what is an essentially sub-

For Hegel, the individual-collective nexus was one of the key contradictions consciousness necessarily encounters in the course of this dialectical movement.<sup>21</sup> While May Fourth writings might not have been informed by this Hegelian reading of *telos* as the 'happy' resolution ambivalently achieved through the negative force of the dialectic,<sup>22</sup> nonetheless their narration of modernity in terms of the *positive* effort individual consciousness must make in relation to overcoming the contradictions in play between it and society—in the knowledge that the 'unhappy' state of individual consciousness provides at the same time the impetus for positive action towards full collectivity—shares a 'spirit' in common with the Hegelian paradigm.

### *May Fourth Modernity and Hegelian Spirit*

There is a striking resemblance, for instance, between *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and May Fourth writings advocating 'democracy' in China. Both assume that human consciousness is the true subject of history and that the *progressive objectification* of consciousness, as it proceeds through history, leads to the realization of the Absolute. For Hegel, the Absolute is the actuality of the Idea as the collective experience of true freedom while in the case of the May Fourth advocacy of 'science' and 'democracy', it is the truth of modernity actualized as the collective experience of a *properly scientific and democratic* society.<sup>23</sup> What this resemblance demonstrates is that the discourse associated with the May Fourth movement, like Hegelian philosophy, is fundamentally reliant on (or grounded in) a conceptual structure in which the significance of history has less to do with, say, the 'relevance' of the past for the present than with *bringing about*, through *proper recognition* of what the past represents for consciousness and through *self-conscious*<sup>24</sup> effort at activating the truth inherent in such recognition, an absolute state of being (either in the form of Hegelian 'true freedom' or May Fourth 'modern enlightenment').<sup>25</sup>

/jectivized absolute ... Hegel's thought in this light is understood as a secularization of the Christian conception of God and his creation or as an unconscious projection of human subjectivity into an abstract but still theological absolute." Gillespie, *Hegel, Heidegger*, p.105. In the case of May Fourth intellectuals, if one reads traces of a Neo-Confucian paradigm in their articulation of 'Chinese modernity', it could be similarly argued that there is an analogous projection of human subjectivity into a 'cosmic given'. Refer to subsequent paragraphs in this section of the article.

<sup>25</sup> As Hegel puts it in elaborating on the dialectical movement of developing consciousness, this totality, since it exists in the sphere of reflection (that is, self-conscious realization of being as 'the idea of spirit, eternal but living and real'), is the self-subsisting totality or presupposition, and in opposition to this totality stands the division and finite immediacy of individual subjectivity. For this subjectivity the initial presupposition and its movement are at first an other and an object of contemplation; the intuition of its self-subsisting truth, through which this finite subject, on account of its immediate nature, at first determines itself as nullity and evil. It is, there-

For Hegel, History necessarily anticipates this ultimate unity for it is the narrative of humanity's ascent on the path of Spirit in the form of dialectically developing consciousness. In the discourse associated with the May Fourth movement, the importance of consciousness is similarly stressed as that which provides history with its impetus for radical transformation. This is particularly the case in the writings published in *New Youth* and other journals of the late 1910s and 1920s. For instance, the affirmation of "the new society" as *conscious* (*youyishide* 有意识的) and *faithful* (*xinyangde* 信仰的) opposition to all things which negate or obscure the *experience* of modernity in the manifesto of *New Youth* assumes the presence of something not unlike Hegel's 'internal vital principle' in history as process.<sup>26</sup>

At this juncture, it is important to stress that I do not intend to fashion the May Fourth advocacy of modernity into a version of the Hegelian discourse on spirit. It goes without saying that there are fundamental differences between the two. For instance, the religion-state divide which significantly informs Hegel's conception of the dialectical movement of spirit refers to historical development within the Christian context<sup>27</sup> and cannot be thrust upon the May Fourth idealization of modernity since the notion of spirit implicit in the latter does not share the same Christian ground. Rather, what the previous section on the Hegelian spirit sets out to demonstrate is the possibility of tracing, by analogy, tensions implicit in writings which constitute May Fourth history as well as in writings on May Fourth history, which result from narrative structures geared to the production of *telos*. By such analogy, it is hoped that the narrative features shared by both Hegelian and May Fourth discourses, predominantly in the form of consciousness as

fore, according to the example of its truth, the movement to relinquish its immediate natural determinacy and its own will, and to unify itself with that example in the pain of negativity, in general abstraction. In this way the subject recognizes itself as identical with the essence, which through this mediation brings about its own dwelling in self-consciousness, and is the real, general spirit. (See section 470 of Hegel's *Philosophical sciences in outline*, p.262.) Fu Sinian's elaboration of "modern consciousness" in terms of the tensions between 'subjective' individual desire and 'objective' social needs shows a remarkable correspondence to the Hegelian dialectical model in its narrative structure: "Presently I am in a very dangerous and confusing place. . . . In the end which do I love more: spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) or mankind (*renlei* 人类)? These two often battle in my heart. . . . the latter *accords with my reason, yet the former is closer to my inclination* . . . *Although I cannot speak against reason, I always feel the other is more intimate to me*" (my italics). As quoted in Vera Schwarcz, "From renaissance to revolution: an internal history of the May Fourth movement and the birth of the Chinese intelligentsia" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1978), p.89.

<sup>26</sup> See "Xin qingnian xuan yan" [Manifesto of *New Youth*] (1 Dec. 1919) in *Wusi shiqi qikan jieshao* [An introduction to journals of the May Fourth era], vol.1, no.2 (Beijing: Shenghuo Dushu Xinzhi Joint Publications, 1978), p.384.

<sup>27</sup> For Hegel, Spirit resonates, among other things, with the metaphorical richness of the somatic experience of divine revelation as *pneuma* or *spiritus* and the Christian conception of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, /OVER

### Figure 3

*The word made flesh: late twentieth-century invocation of May Fourth as historical truth to which the crowd draws near (reproduced courtesy Geremie Barmé from Barmé and Jaiwin, New ghosts, old dreams, p.347)*



### Figure 4

*Drawing near—a detail*



He also invests Spirit with the combined intellectual authority of its definitions by Descartes (as a thing that thinks), Montaigne (the universal soul or genius of a nation), Condorcet (as the general character of humanity), and others (see Gillespie, *Hegel, Heidegger*, p.62). As Gillespie notes, in Hegel's early work the word spirit is little used and "its place and function are generally filled by what Hegel calls 'life'." When Hegel began to use the word and thus to privilege it in his writings, he drew upon all senses of the religious, the political and the philosophical that had already been imparted to the term.

<sup>28</sup> The reader is referred back to n.15 at this juncture.

<sup>29</sup> The ambiguity of this periodization, and the different political interests invested in the historicization of the 'event', can be further elaborated through Xu Jilin's counter-reading of an 'ahistorical' May Fourth in "The vicious cycle of the May Fourth movement," cited in Barmé and Jaivin, *New ghosts, old dreams*, pp.345–9.

<sup>30</sup> Lin Yu-sheng, *The crisis of Chinese consciousness: radical antitraditionalism in the May Fourth era* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), p.155.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153. It should be noted here that Lin's language calls into effect a *perceptual* field in which the realities are given and thus Lin implicitly suggests that it is the task of 'the perceiver' (as consciousness) to 'transcend' the conditions of 'simplification' and 'distortion' to which it finds itself subjected. The problematic in which this structuring of history as 'the history of consciousness' is enmeshed will be dealt with in the latter part of this article.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Metzger, *Escape from predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1977), p.67. For an interesting critique of Metzger's totalizing emphasis on 'spirituality' and his "effort to make Neo-Confucians speak in a Weberian discourse," see H. D. Harootunian, "Metzger's predicament," in *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.39 no.2 (Feb 1990): 245–54.

the subject of history and 'spirit' as the narrative plot, may be provided with possibilities of interpretation that do not confine them to the fate of proving their 'truth' or 'falsehood', 'validity' or 'invalidity', in the face of some assumed correct version of history.<sup>28</sup> That is to say, this present exercise is an attempt to demonstrate interpretive strategies for historiography that are geared to answer the question, "How is May Fourth modernity constructed?", rather than the more problematic, "What is May Fourth modernity?", or "Why was May Fourth modernity thus constructed?", with all the assumptions of History these latter entail.

Many historians of the May Fourth era (generally designated as the decade 1917–27 or sometimes further extended to include the period 1927–37)<sup>29</sup> have noted that intellectuals and political activists associated with the May Fourth movement were inclined towards the belief that 'true ideas' are sufficiently powerful in themselves to shape and to determine reality. Lin Yu-sheng 林毓生 is one of the foremost and influential exponents of this view. In his pioneering work, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era*, Lin reads the May Fourth movement as an "inevitable" crisis arising from "the collision of forces from Western culture with some millennial forces from Chinese tradition."<sup>30</sup> He argues that the "consciousness" shared by May Fourth protagonists was one deeply rooted in the ideological tendencies of the Neo-Confucian tradition and thus influenced at a fundamental level by the philosophical paradigm established by this tradition.

According to Lin, the Neo-Confucian paradigm with its significant investment in the power of ideas to effect changes in the world led May Fourth intellectuals towards a "mental formulation" of modernity "without careful and sustained reference to the complex realities of a phenomenon," in other words, to "simplification and distortion of the realities of the phenomenon."<sup>31</sup> Thomas Metzger provides a succinct generalization of what the Neo-Confucian demand for truth entails:

The Neo-Confucian's emphasis on cognition was invariably combined with the insight that since the capacity to have awareness and think intelligently was itself not the product of human intelligence, it existed as a cosmic given, this *zhijue* 知觉 (purely natural consciousness) had, they further assumed, a kind of spiritual or even magical quality, for which they used ancient terms like *ling* 灵 (spiritually free), *ming* 明 (bright), *shen* 神 (buoyantly emphatic spirit) and *xu* 虚 (empty of all particular concepts or feelings). Thus Zhu Xi said, "the spiritually free aspect of existence is just the mind." Neo-Confucians also assumed that this "purely natural consciousness" was indivisible throughout the cosmos. This idea was a correlate of their belief in the organic oneness of the cosmos and in the mind's transnatural power to control the cosmos.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, in the writings of May Fourth intellectuals ranging from Luo Jialun to Guo Moruo to Lu Xun, an emphasis on the role of consciousness, and hence on cognition, can readily be found and interpreted (if one wishes to enforce such a reading) as corresponding to the value of 'constancy' in the

Neo-Confucian paradigm as outlined above. For instance, the word *jingshen* 精神 features significantly in May Fourth literary and political publications and was even encoded in formulaic fashion in Guo Moruo's advocacy of 'revolutionary literature' in 1926. According to Guo,

Revolution is not something that is of a fixed nature. The revolution of each age is imbued with the spirit of that age. The form of revolution, however, remains constant. The revolution of any age is invariably the total resistance of the oppressed class of that age against the oppressing class. Although the class division is not the same each time and the objective of resistance is not the same each time, *the form in which it is expressed, however, is ever constant.*<sup>33</sup>

In order to write literature which reflects the truth of one's time, according to Guo, reader and writer alike had to "recognize" and to "grasp"<sup>34</sup> "the spirit of the times," a prescription which he sought to cloak in the scientific authority of the following elliptical logic:

Revolutionary literature = F (The Spirit of the Times)  
Literature = Revolution<sup>35</sup>

To return to Lin Yusheng's argument that May Fourth intellectuals tended towards a "mental formulation" of modernity at the expense of, by his lights, the "real" challenges posed by the "phenomenon" of modernity, one could say, especially in regard to explicit formulations such as Guo Moruo's, that the May Fourth emphasis on 'the spirit of the times' *reductio ad absurdum* demonstrates a remarkable oblivion to the complexities which might constitute a politically-engaged interpretation of 'the crisis of modernity'.

Lin's thesis, however, is problematic for reasons which recall the Hegelian attempt to formulate a philosophical paradigm for history. While successfully establishing a philosophical precedent for May Fourth 'antitraditionalism' thereby undermining what had hitherto been readily accepted as unprecedented iconoclasm in May Fourth historiography, Lin nonetheless constructs a model of Chinese modernity in terms of "consciousness" as a given. For Lin, "Chinese consciousness" from the May Fourth era to the Cultural Revolution shares the burden of belief in true ideas at the expense of a *proper* engagement with the *real* issues of the moment. In the conclusion to his book, he writes:

It remains to be seen whether the Maoist vision of infinite possibility will be a useful guide to the solution or settlement of China's cultural crisis, or whether there will emerge a *pluralist and substantive approach* to the specificities of the cultural problems, an approach which the tenor of this study has suggested is likely to provide, in the long run, *more realistic possibilities for creative solution or settlement of the crisis of Chinese consciousness.*<sup>36</sup>

The language in which this prognosis is couched implies that the potential exists for the emergence of a true 'Chinese consciousness', one which could provide the necessary balance between Western and Chinese cultural forces and thus resolve in paradigmatic (or even *totalistic*) fashion the excess resulting from totalistic rejection of either 'Chinese tradition' or

<sup>33</sup> Guo Moruo, "Geming yu wenxue" [Revolution and literature], first published in *Chuangzao yuekan*, vol.1, no.3 (16 May 1926), reprinted in "Geming wenxue" *lunzheng ziliao xuanbian* [Selected materials from the debate over *Revolutionary Literature*], 2 vols (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1981), 1: 3. The italics in the passage quoted are mine. Much of the Creation Society's advocacy of revolutionary literature between 1925 and 1927 revolved around the idea of the 'spirit' of revolution as the transcendental and essential element in the manifestation of different (and evolving) *Zeitgeist* throughout 'the course of history'.

<sup>34</sup> These verbs abound in Guo's text (for instance, *gankuai yao ba shenjing de xuansuo koujing qilai, gankuai ba shidai de jingshen tizhe* 赶快要把神经的悬念扣紧起来,赶快把时代的精神提著—to secure/button up' and 'to raise/lift up) and are indicative of a certain effect of condensation (in Freud's deployment of the term) whereby the grand historical complex traced by consciousness-on-its-way-to-truth (and the teleological effect of this narrative) is condensed into the particular actions of individuals. There is also the concurrent effect of overdetermination (in the general sense, derived from Freudian dream interpretation, of several interrelated values converging on the one symbol). For instance, how can the idea of a 'reader' or 'writer' 'grasping' 'the spirit of the times' be produced and imagined without the idea being already an effect of networks of associations? The idea appears at first glance to be simple (and meaningful) enough but as soon as one attempts to 'say what it means', a monstrous indeterminacy or 'unclearness' sets in. In other words, it is impossible to say exactly what 'recognizing' and 'grasping' 'the spirit of the times' means, but these metaphors have a kind of somatic effect, lending 'substance' to 'spirit' as the *experience* of 'spirit'. See *ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>36</sup> Lin, *Crisis of Chinese consciousness*, p.160.

<sup>37</sup> I focus in this context on Lin's implicit appeal to a *unitary* Chinese consciousness, the totality through which particularities obtain their meaning as "realistic possibilities for creative solution or settlement."

<sup>38</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in general linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p.16, as quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*; trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), p.76. Italics are mine.

<sup>39</sup> By (re), I gesture towards the Derridean notion of the paradox of the sign which is at once "ideally iterable" (repeatable) and different each time "according to context, to the network of other marks." If the "ideality or ideal identity of each mark" is construed as only "a differential function without an ontological basis." "This iterability is ... that which allows a mark to be used more than once. *It is more than one*. It multiplies and divides itself internally. This imprints the capacity for diversion within its very movement. In the destination there is thus a principle of indetermination, chance, luck or of *destinerring*." To (re)present is thus to mark the paradoxical slide of signification within the ideally iterable, or what Derrida calls "a principle of indetermination, chance, luck or of *destinerring*." See Jacques Derrida, "My chances/*meschances*: a rendezvous with some epicurean stereophonies," trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronell in *Taking chances: Derrida, psychoanalysis and literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p.16.

<sup>40</sup> The metaphorical significance of 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy' can be productively elaborated through Hegel's notion of the necessary impulse on the part of consciousness towards identity with the essence of Spirit as 'substance': "The immediate idea is life. *The concept is realized as soul in a body*; of whose exteriority the soul is the immediate, self-relating generality. The soul is also its *particularity*, so that the body expresses no other distinctions than follow from the determination of its concept. Finally, individuality is one the one hand the dialectic of objectivity, which is led back into subjectivity from the appearance of its independent subsistence, so that all members are as reciprocally means as they are momentary purposes and determinations of the concept. On the other hand, *life is constituted as*

'Western capitalism', thereby *settling the crisis of Chinese consciousness*. Such an interpretation of history, constructed around 'consciousness' as the proper historical subject, is guided by its conceptual logic to narrate 'reality' as the *presentation of phenomena* to 'consciousness'. And in this privileging of 'consciousness' as the subject of history, Lin implicitly accords something like the "struggle of Chinese consciousness to resolve its crisis" epistemic status as the proper narrative of Chinese modernity.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find many references in Lin's work to opposing *forces* (both cultural and political) of Manichean proportions, for this form of narration is necessarily grounded in a meta-narrative of 'life' (both past and present) as ineluctably propelled towards reconciliation (or Lin's "creative solution or settlement") of the apparently irreconcilable. For Hegel, the fundamental 'opposition' which consciousness must overcome is that between the sense-certainty and desires of individual will and the necessity of harmonious collective cohabitation as represented by the laws of the rational state. As I have mentioned earlier, Hegel constructs history as the production of knowledge oriented towards a particular *telos*; the reconciliation of individual consciousness with the dynamic of spirit as it is manifested through the general will, ethos or state. Lin Yu-sheng's interpretation of May Fourth modernity similarly places emphasis on *resolution* of the crisis of consciousness through identification with a dynamic which he does not name but which he suggests in the form of "a pluralist and substantive approach to the specificities of the cultural problems."<sup>37</sup>

What Lin and May Fourth intellectuals such as Guo Moruo share with Hegel in this regard, then, is a belief in cognition as the potential for 'true insight'. Consciousness thus assumes the proportions of a heroic figure in whom the narrative 'plot' has assigned the responsibility for bringing the narrative to a successful (or at any rate satisfactory) resolution. And it is the absence of any rigorous challenge posed to the 'plot' of what history is assumed to be which suggests that the "plot" itself, whether as Hegelian *Geist* or May Fourth spirit or Modernity, functions as the ultimate sign upon which these types of discourse turn. To speak of signs or the ultimate sign is to recall Saussure's *Course on General Linguistics* and the idea of semiology contained therein:

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology. Semiology would show what constitutes signs and what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it will be; but it has a right to existence, a place *staked out in advance*. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well defined area within the mass of anthropological facts. *To determine the exact place of semiology is the task of the psychologist.*<sup>38</sup>

In the context of these comments, the idea of modernity promoted by May Fourth intellectuals, which predominantly took the form of a series of

negations of 'the Chinese tradition', can be seen to be analogous to that which, as Saussure puts it, "has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance." And in the effort to give form to modernity, to (re)present it,<sup>39</sup> May Fourth intellectuals engaged in an exercise which Derrida aptly calls a "speculative semiology" in reference to Hegel. What does such a speculative semiology consist of?

In the case of the advocacy of 'science' and 'democracy', for instance, it is not surprising to find that there was an attempt at anthropomorphization in the form of 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy' in *New Youth* publications. If consciousness is assumed to be the proper subject of history, as it appears to have been in most of the May Fourth writings, then what modernity represents is the as yet unrealized but realizable *truth* whose repression or submergence in the 'darkness' of the ailing times seeks redress through *proper recognition* of its *role* in the ongoing development of consciousness. References to 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy' are, in this regard, an appeal to the elevation of 'science' and 'democracy' from the ambiguous status of the abstract to the, as it were, determinate (or at least determinable) status of the subjectively knowable, in short, the *being* consciousness seeks to fully grasp. To have recognized 'science' and 'democracy' as 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy' is thus nothing short of having established in advance the necessary relationship between the self-consciousness of the individual on the one hand and 'science' and 'democracy' on the other as the *true* object of its desire, the one with which it seeks to merge.<sup>40</sup>

### *Spirit and Consciousness as Representation*

When Saussure notes that "to determine the exact place of semiology is the task of the psychologist," he draws attention to the crucial role played by desire (as a psychological phenomenon) in any effort to gain perspective on the act of representation. Representation is here taken to refer in the broadest sense to acts of bringing forth, through speech, writing and art, imprints or 'signs' of the world of phenomena to our minds. The images and concepts brought forth by representation are thus signs which function, as Derrida puts it, as "a *provisional* reference of one presence to another."<sup>41</sup> Signs refer to assumed presences which are in turn assumed to be absolute (familiar ideas of love or youth, for instance, as much as complex ones such as *Geist* or *geming jingshen* 革命精神). What the assumption of presence through its apparent representability as sign implies is that the mind or consciousness is, within the limits defined by socio-historical and cultural specificities, 'a-thing-in-itself', (a presence that is invoked, for instance, in the phrase, 'to know one's own mind'), which is engaged in an ongoing relationship with the world it 'sees' and 'grasps' (the figurative force of these verbs in their relation to 'desire' is noteworthy)<sup>42</sup> through the signs which *provisionally* refer other presences to 'it'. By these means, consciousness-as-

*Something alive by the individuality of the concept* (my italics). The 'individualization' of science and democracy as 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy' can be read, in this context, as a strategy of figuration which 'realizes' the concept as 'soul in a body'. Within this, individual consciousness which strives to incarnate it is linguistically transcended through the constitution of science and democracy as 'something alive' and infused with individuality. See section 164 of Hegel, *Philosophical sciences in outline*, p.130. 'Science' and 'democracy' as signs, however, in the context of the preceding note, also demonstrate the paradox Derrida describes as "destinerring"; in other words, what enables 'science' and 'democracy' to be represented (and representable) as 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy' is their paradoxical identity and difference.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, p.72.

<sup>42</sup> See also n.34 above.

<sup>43</sup> What I attempt here is a deconstruction of ‘consciousness’ and ‘desire’ by strategic foregrounding of the pronominal ‘it’ (under which both can be subsumed) as sign rather than thing. In this move, the act of interpretation is traced within the operations of *language* as opposed to the (unquestionable) authority of being.

<sup>44</sup> In any case, the signifying trajectories that such a ‘fuller’ rehearsal necessarily take will lead us away from the issue of ‘May Fourth’ towards the question of metaphysics in the Western philosophic tradition.

<sup>45</sup> This is a Derridean pun which deliberately echoes with the specular effect of ‘desire’. See Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, p.80.

<sup>46</sup> Yu Dafu, “Guangzhou shiqing” [Guangzhou Affairs] in *Yu Dafu wenji* [The collected works of Yu Dafu], 12 vols (Hong Kong: Joint Publications, 1984), 8: 17. (This was first published in a Creation Society journal, *Hongshui hanyuekan*, vol.3, no.25 [16 Jan. 1927].)

presence encodes ‘its experiences’ as ‘life’ and *comes to know* and thus to *desire* identification with the ultimate life-presence (or spirit) whose signs tell ‘it’ who ‘it’ is and how ‘it’ should live ‘life’, from one provisional moment to the next.<sup>43</sup>

The foregoing is a somewhat elliptical *reductio* of Derrida’s reading of the operation of the sign in metaphysics as the article at hand does not allow for a fuller rehearsal of Derrida’s argument.<sup>44</sup> I raise Derrida’s comments here merely as a gesture towards the enormity of the problem consciousness presents as soon as we do not take it simply as given. To return to the question of the May Fourth advocacy of modernity, it would appear that modernity is the sign *representing* a ‘presence’ whose incarnation in the experience of consciousness is, at the same time, an as yet unrealized ideality. What we have, then, is a narrative structure which, like Hegel’s philosophy of history as Spirit, has its sight set<sup>45</sup> on a union of the sign with its original/ultimate presence in the form of transcendental knowledge; or in the less ontologically destabilizing language of presence, consciousness in the moment of ‘true awakening’ to the totality of Being. Consciousness in that moment no longer suffers the experience of contradiction between opposing forces or interests and enjoys instead the merging of, as it were, ‘thought’ and ‘life’ to the full extent that these hitherto separate domains now merge into the oneness of Being. The following excerpt from Yu Dafu amply demonstrates the teleological tendencies of this narrative structure:

...the pace at which humanity’s expectations (*renlei de yuwan* 人类的欲望) improve (*jinbu* 进步) is faster than the pace at which real improvements (*sbiji de jinbu* 实际的进步) take place. An express train or the biggest aeroplane certainly cannot catch up with the leaps which our ideals take. Hence, at this moment, what we need are more cultural critics and political critics who will conscientiously reveal our ideals in their entirety and who will make comparisons between the present and future states of politics and culture. This will enable us to know how much distance there is to cover between the present state of our politics and culture and that which we idealize; what true limits are placed on the pace at which we improve and how we might best seek to increase this pace. This form of critical work is closely connected to the evolution of society. It is a shame that in China, there are very few who specialize in this form of work. It is a shame that those who hold authority in China are, in the main, still unable to understand the importance of this form of work.<sup>46</sup>

The idea of *true* modernity is evoked in this passage, initially, by means of a separating out of “humanity’s expectations” and “real improvements” through the figure of “pace.” Pace or speed implies movement, more specifically a *forward* movement, as the words “expectation” and “improvement” suggest. To say, therefore, “the pace at which humanity’s expectations *improve*” is further to intensify the figurative force of forward movement. This structuring of the spatio-temporal moment ‘now’ as a rift between the ‘ideal’ and the ‘actual’ is reinforced in the next sentence through

an instantiation of the pace of the 'actual' as the pace of an express train or an aeroplane, words which also function metonymically as 'substantial' (or determinate) signs of the modern. Desire for a totalistic modernity which is *as yet* unrealized (or indeterminable)—an ideal—is *made imaginable* through figurative contrast with the pace of "an express train or an aeroplane" and thus it 'appears' in relief.<sup>47</sup> The ideal, precisely because it remains beyond what is 'presently' imaginable, because it *exceeds* the possibilities of figuration or representation, is a spectre that takes the apparently substantial form of 'desire' or 'expectation'.

Thus, the appeal to "cultural critics and political critics who will conscientiously reveal our ideals in their entirety and who will make comparisons between the present and future states of politics and culture" is a representation of consciousness as both narrator and protagonist in a narrative about the progressive overcoming of the 'rift' between the 'ideal' and the 'actual'. A narrative which, like the Hegelian tale of Spirit, inscribes the 'ideal', the 'absolute', the *telos* within a figurative miming of the *movement* of consciousness as 'expectation', 'desire' or, as Hegel would figure it, as the 'activity' of Spirit 'in a constant negation of all that *threatens* to destroy freedom'.

By referring to Spirit as the essence of freedom, Hegel produces a proleptic narrative whose 'end' has already been foretold at the start. But as this 'end' is understood as a transcendental moment where the idea of freedom itself has transcended everything that previously threatened it, (or, to continue the metaphor of 'relief', where the 'solidity' of freedom is produced through the work of the negative), this 'end' could not possibly be represented in language. As Derrida has demonstrated in so many different figurations of this problematic, the effort to produce and affirm a unitary self or absolute being in language, in other words, to make words *reveal* their *true* meaning, is paradoxically 'destined' to produce a proliferation of meanings. It is not accidental, for instance, that the May Fourth advocacy of modernity was mounted on (or better, projected in relief by) a series of negations. That is to say, modernity 'appears' through an inexhaustible series of binary divisions between 'science', 'democracy', 'freedom', 'revolution', 'individualism' and so forth, on the one hand, and the opposites these terms call forth, on the other. And just as the idea of modernity 'appears' by virtue of detours from 'itself'—by the movement of continual deferral from the yearned for but ever absent 'original sense' as represented in each attempt to articulate the idea through contrastive figuration—each attempt at naming 'modernity' through other names turns out (as dictionary definitions amply demonstrate) to be constituted equally by a continual deferral from the absent 'original sense' of these other names in an infinite play of contrastive figuration. This infinite play is what Derrida has called *differance*:

<sup>47</sup> I refer metaphorically to the technique in the plastic arts whereby shape and form (and the appearance of solidity) is produced through projection from the plane surface.

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, p.9. (The individually italicized words appear in the original passage. The rest are my italics.)

The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, 'thing' here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs. We signal. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence. Whether we are concerned with the verbal or the written sign, with the monetary sign, or with electoral delegation and political representation, the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence. What I am describing here in order to define it is the classically determined structure of the sign in all the banality of its characteristics-signification as the *differance* of temporization. *And this structure presupposes that the sign, which defers presence, is conceivable only on the basis of the presence that it defers and moving toward the deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate.*<sup>48</sup>

Read in the context of these comments, Yu Dafu's attempt to close the gap between "the present state of our politics and culture and that which we idealize," to determine the "true limits of the pace at which we improve and how we might best seek to increase this pace," becomes unwittingly an allegory for the, as it were, 'rite of passage' language undergoes each time the act of representation takes place in the effort to "encounter the thing itself"; the offering of signs to the name of the thing, 'itself' a sign. Like the sign of 'Spirit' or 'freedom' for Hegel, the 'ideal'—the word Yu Dafu assigns here to that intricate complex of signs, meanings and associations for which I have assigned the word 'modernity'—is an 'end-in-itself', the yearned-for presence of "the thing itself" which linguistically and textually eludes our attempts 'to make it ours' through some imagined moment of transcendental extra-linguistic reality, paradoxically, within language.

Furthermore, 'the ideal', as a proleptic signalling of the movement 'history', 'humanity' or 'consciousness' necessarily undertakes in the narrative, is fundamentally structured (within the logic of a 'rift' that *needs* to be repaired) to produce the figurative effect of the 'failure' 'now' to 'catch up with' the 'ideal'. *Pace* Yu Dafu, it will always be 'a shame' that the desire for the 'ideal' is always already destined to rehearse the movement of deferral without end. In other words, within the operations of linguistic signs, this is nothing short of a Sisyphean attempt at pushing the burden of human expectations of *telos*, with all that this sign of the absolute promises, ever-forward to an anticipated but unrealizable unity of sign and referent, a word and its true (that is, extra-linguistic) Meaning. Or, to borrow from Derrida, the 'ideal' or *telos* is conceivable only on the basis of the presence that it defers and it is on this very basis that the narrative of 'history', 'consciousness', 'spirit', 'humanity', 'freedom' or 'modernity'—each of these being signs of 'presences' deferred—ineluctably traces detours *from* even while asserting movement *toward* the deferred presence it wishes to reappropriate.

### *Mapping Modernity/Spirit*

In this final section, I offer a few more detours from the impasse posed by the signs of *telos* (including *telos* as sign) we have encountered thus far. What will be attempted in the mapping of these detours is an elaboration of May Fourth as *the* pre-eminent sign of Chinese modernity, within a network of associations which trace the contours of an imagination (and imaging) of historical movement towards a futural grand synthesis which, being a synthesis outside language, must remain unimaginable. The idea of history as 'development', as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, presupposes an intelligible *course* of 'historical development' governed by an inner law of the course. Figurative representations in the narration of history provide us with an 'inkling' (in the full ambiguity of that word as 'hint', 'suspicion', 'intimation' and most significantly, 'faint trace') of the law through its manifestation as 'course'.

The figure of 'course' produces, as its effects, figures of directed movement: 'run', 'flow', 'flux' or 'current'. What enables the imagining of these figures is the idea of space and time, of movement within spatio-temporal *existence governed* by the physical laws of this existence. In other words, if an inner principle of historical development is assumed, the fundamental figure for this principle is the 'reality' of times as 'experienced' by 'consciousness'. The idea of temporality under which this figure is subsumed is integral to the notion of history. One might even say it is the very ground upon which concepts of the past, present and future, or *becoming-past*, *becoming-present* and *becoming-future* (divisions constitutive of history), emerge as divisions fundamentally structuring what we mean by historical understanding or awareness.

When Lu Xun writes:

Burdened as a man may be with the weight of tradition, he can yet prop open the gate of darkness with his shoulders to let the children through to the bright, wide-open spaces, to lead happy lives henceforward as rational human beings,<sup>49</sup>

he represents historical understanding as temporality figured in terms of a fundamental division between the 'dark' present and the 'bright' future. In this allegorical moment, the 'unhappy consciousness' who experiences the 'darkness' of the present as an apparently impenetrable impasse, the gate of darkness, is urged to break with the limitations of the immediacy of this subjective 'truth' by propping it open. While the 'bright' future beyond is physically inaccessible, nonetheless, by the act of negating the darkness of its subjective experience through propping the gate open, the 'unhappy consciousness' thus exists, as Hyppolite puts it, in the face of death. It becomes being-for-another through negating itself in the moment of identifying *itself* in terms of existing for *others*, *enabling* "the happy lives of the children" to take place. The Hegelian resonance here is unmistakable.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Lu Xun, "What is required of us as fathers today," in *Selected works*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, 4 vols (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 2: 57.

<sup>50</sup> See Hyppolite, *Marx and Hegel*, pp.24, 26–9.

<sup>51</sup> Hegel. *Philosophical sciences in outline*, p.261.

<sup>52</sup> RayHuang, *China: a macro history*(New York & London: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989), p.226.

Furthermore, in the act of ‘propping open the gate’—the temporal impasse which subjective consciousness confronts as, to borrow from Hegel, the ‘pain and sorrow’ of immediate ‘truth’—consciousness transcends the division between the ‘dark’ present and the ‘bright’ future. That is to say, it places itself *in* the position of the impasse and *internalizes* the contradiction within itself. By this very gesture towards reconciliation, the ‘self’ which has internalized the contradiction transcends its own limits and is elevated to the higher existence of being-in-itself (the reconciliation of being-for-itself and being-for others). The following remarks by Hegel provide a striking concordance with the dialectical movement traced in Lu Xun’s allegory:

In the movement of individuality as such, namely, of subjectivity and of the concept itself, in which the antithesis of general and particular has sunk to its identical ground, the *place of presupposition is taken by the general substance, as actualized out of its abstraction into an individual self-consciousness. This individual is also as such identical with the essence, and thereby evil in and for itself is suspended.* Further, this immediate concreteness *expires* in the absolute pain of negativity (for Lu Xun, the act of propping up the gate), in which it, as concreteness, is identical with itself, and thus, as absolute return from that negativity and as general unity of the general and individual essentiality for itself, *has realized its being as the idea of the spirit, eternal, but living and real.*<sup>51</sup>

The integration of ‘time’ and ‘consciousness’ through the enacting of history as the *experience* of temporality necessarily produces a narrative course which is nothing other than the drama of ‘evolving consciousness’ as it is impelled forth by its progressive realization or marking out of *time* itself as a *concept*. As concept, the constitutive divisions (of past, present and future) of time as temporality are no longer determinately fixed. Instead they are figured as the *resistance* of an impasse (which invites breaking or ‘propping up’) within a totally whose form—as eternal ideality or, as it were, timeless Reality—the impasse simultaneously suggests and obscures. This metaphysical preoccupation is expressed in various ways in writings which constitute the historiography of the May Fourth movement.

Ray Huang, for instance, writes:

Today when student riots are commonplace and scenes of ‘confrontation’ appear daily on the television screen, it is difficult for us to imagine how unusual the May Fourth Incident was, occurring at *a time* when modern communications were in their infancy. The reader would do well to remember that *traditional China was like a submarine sandwich*. Even though the civil service examination had been terminated in 1905 and the monarchy abolished in 1912, no social reconstruction of substance had followed ... on the whole, agrarian China remained unchanged. The undiversified economy offered few jobs and little of the variety found in a modern society ... Those we refer to as the ‘intelligentsia’ *found themselves by circumstances a class of misfits.*<sup>52</sup>

This passage inscribes the idea of temporality within the figure of a continuum in which the division between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ (or ‘past’ and ‘present/future’ in their metaphysical figurations) is produced out of the

*confrontation* posed by the ‘intelligentsia’ to the ‘submarine sandwich’-like, or self-enclosed, society of traditional China. The schema here is thus of a linearity of forward movement resulting from the contradiction between the ‘static’ and the ‘dynamic’. In other words, it is through the *actions* of the intelligentsia as they ‘marched’, and ‘protested’ for, and ‘demanded’, change that time itself (as the ‘undifferentiated’ time of an unremarkable continuum)<sup>53</sup> is rendered temporal—time as ‘experienced’ by ‘consciousness’. This enaction of temporality is thus, in a fundamental sense, the *making* of ‘a time’ out of the undifferentiated continuum as specifically *historical* time. ‘A time’ of self-conscious existence (a time of *misfits*) wrested, to recall Hegel, out of “the uniform course of events” which would otherwise form “no subject of serious remembrance.”

These concordances with the Hegelian narrative suggest that, as in the case of Hegel’s positing of a totality that is the End of history, May Fourth historiography is led, by the logic of its figuration of ‘historical development’ as the transcendental experience of temporality by consciousness, to project an End to temporality itself. A *telos* in which contradictions between ‘past’ and ‘present’, or ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, are resolved through an End to the experience of the very temporality which produces these contradictions. The “happily-*ever-after*” End to temporality is the necessary spectre of total reconciliation such imaginings of history produce. At the same time, however, the very impossibility of calling forth such an unimaginable end through the act of representation leads, conversely, to the attempt to represent May Fourth as *its* sign; to invest ‘May Fourth’ with the value of *telos* as Modernity in which the ‘now’ breaks absolutely with temporality to become the ‘forever more’. This transcendental elevation of May Fourth as Spirit (in one sense, an historicization of May Fourth) is nowhere more explicitly figured than in the following passages by Vera Schwarcz:

These (May Fourth) survivors had been architects of the original enlightenment movement. They had paid dearly for their initial quarrel with China’s inherited tradition, and then again for their unwillingness to reduce May Fourth to a politically useful patriotic movement. In 1979 they rescued historical memory, and with it the possibility that a new generation might reinherit May Fourth *unencumbered* by the polemics of the Communist Party and the Guomindang. The hope of 1979 burst into full bloom with the student demonstration of 1989. The seventieth anniversary of May Fourth was shown on television in China and around the world; hundreds of thousands of young Chinese marched in Beijing chanting “science and democracy” honoring and reappropriating the event of 1919. The Communist party’s plan to host a more modest, more controlled commemoration—that was to include newly sanctioned dancing parties as well as scholarly meetings—was upstaged by the students who took to the streets and insisted that *the past had a direct, questioning relevance to the present. Locked in struggle over the Party’s corruption, over the slow pace of political as opposed to economic reforms, students taunted Party elders to come and join them in living up to the spirit of May Fourth.*<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> These are words taken from *ibid.*, pp.225–7.

<sup>54</sup> Vera Schwarcz, “No solace from Lethe: history, memory and cultural identity in twentieth century China,” *Daedalus* (Spring 1991), pp.102–3. Italics are mine.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, p.81.

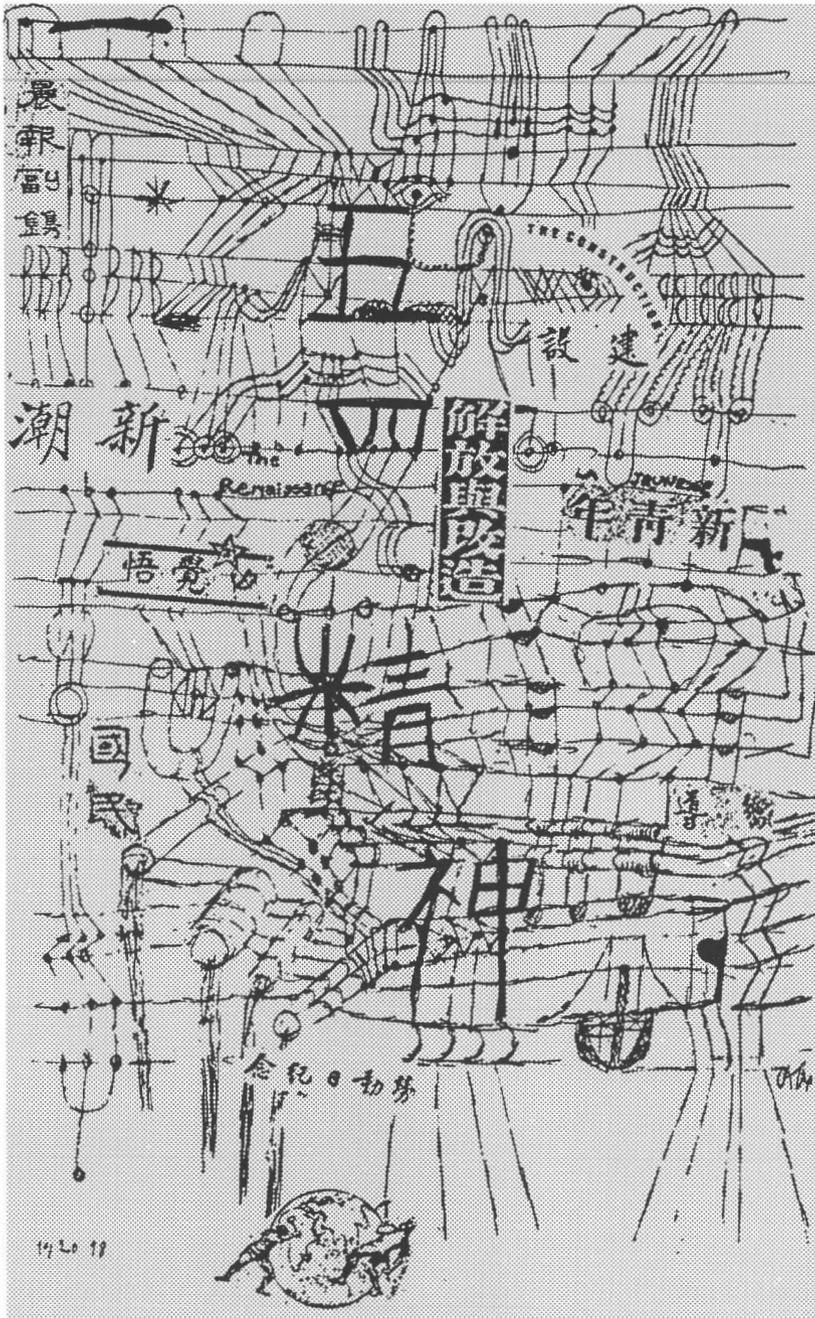
These mappings of Chinese modernity stake out a terrain of life as the 'life of consciousness' and it is not accidental that the narratives through which such mappings are produced valorize notions of 'struggle' and 'spirit', words whose associative networks figurally suggest the deictic force of the metaphysical. In other words, where there is "struggle" and "spirit," there lurks an unwitting somatization of language as the medium through which one is able to interiorize the 'feel' of Truth. What then, given the discussions that have taken place here, is the status of such narratives? How are we to receive them? As the necessity of history for lived life or as dramatic fictions which have no business to call themselves history? There is obviously no one answer to these questions and perhaps, as Derrida has demonstrated, posing questions about history in this manner is to have mistaken the sign for a truth exterior to language and thus to re-enact the unhappy drama of consciousness yet again.

*Why* is the relationship between sign and truth thus?

This "why" can no longer be understood as a "what does this signify?" And even less as a "What does this mean?" Formulated this way, the questions would be stated naively, presupposing or anticipating an answer. Here we are reaching a limit at which the question, "What does signification signify?" "What does meaning mean?" loses all pertinence. Hence we must posit our questions both at the point and in the form in which signification no longer signifies, meaning means nothing; not because they are absurd within their system, that is, within metaphysics, but because the very question would have brought us to the external border of its closure, supposing that such an operation is simple, and simply possible, within our language; and supposing that we know clearly what the inside of a system and a language are. '*Why*?' then no longer marks, here, a question about the "sight-set-on-what" (for what reason?), about the *telos* or *eschaton* of the movement of signification; nor a question about an origin, a "why?" as a "because of what?", "on the basis of what?", etc. "*Why*?" therefore is the still metaphysical name of the question which we are elaborating here, the question about the metaphysical system which links the sign to the concept, to truth, to presence, to archaeology, to teleology, etc.<sup>55</sup>

As Derrida implicitly suggests, deconstructing the '*Why*' of history is not a linear movement which *ends* at a point representing the opposite of metaphysics as, for instance, 'hard facts'. Rather it is an elaboration, a reflexive re-presentation of 'the still metaphysical name of the question' that demonstrates trajectories and linkages within the metaphysical system of our language *without end*. In a different figuration of this problematic, Jean-Luc Nancy writes that "our time is no longer the time of history, and therefore, history itself appears to have become part of history."

... History is suspended, or even finished, as *sense*, as the directional and teleological path that it has been considered to be since the beginning of modern historical thinking. History no longer *has* a goal or a purpose, and therefore, history no longer *is* determined by the individual (the general or the generic

**Figure 5**

*May Fourth Spirit as sign suspended in the labyrinthine net of associations traced out by the different textual tyings and unties of May Fourth historiography. The resultant May Fourth narrative net, being not unlike Paul Klee's *Zeichnung in der Art eines Netzes geknüpft* ("Drawing knotted in the manner of a net"), is treated here, with apologies to Klee, as a projection on Klee's net of which Sabine Rewald notes: "Here the lines form a fantastical 'net' that seems 'knotted' by a possessed sailor. Some things nautical, some not can be recognized in the intricate pattern" (S. Rewald, *Paul Klee: the Berggruen Klee collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988]). The choice of Klee as the ground of this projection is not accidental for I am referring implicitly to another phantasm here—that of value: the preservation of May Fourth as the 'serious' subject-matter of history and the canonization of Klee's net as 'serious' art. What law or code operates to make May Fourth historically valuable and to distinguish Klee's net from an ephemeral doodle?*

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Finite history," in *The states of 'theory': history, art and critical discourse*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.150.

<sup>57</sup> Of course, the writing of 'Chinese modernity' in these terms will necessarily confront other versions of the problematic discussed in this article. These other *narratives* of modernity, while subverting the epistemological ground of May Fourth modernity, will have their own ground rules by means of which they will be constituted as some but not other *things*. However, by writing these other histories of Chinese modernity interrogatively, in other words, marking self-reflexively in the act of writing in the operations of certain signifying chains and the political effects of the 'truth' they invoke, one produces narratives that are enabling, precisely because they are less illuminatory and more problematical. The loss of a certain grand vision should not be mourned for in demonstrating the inadequacies of narrative representation, a certain intimacy is established between, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, "our own vulnerabilities" and the texts we engage. (See Gayatri Spivak, *The post-colonial critic: interviews, strategies, dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym [New York & London: Routledge, 1990], p.27.) And this is where all our stories continually begin.

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individual) or the autonomous person that Marx frequently criticized in the speculative, post-Hegelian way of thinking. This also consequently means that history can no longer be presented as—to use Lyotard's term—a 'grand narrative', the narrative of some grand, collective destiny of mankind (of Humanity, of Liberty, etc.), a narrative that was grand because it was great, and that was great because its ultimate destination was considered good. Our time is the time, or a time, when this history at least has been suspended: total war, genocide, the challenge of nuclear powers, implacable technology, hunger and absolute misery, all these are, at the least, evident signs of self-destroying mankind, *self-annihilating history*, without any possibility of the dialectic work of the negative.<sup>56</sup>

These deconstructive strategies demonstrate a certain politics of reading which could provide us with possibilities of interpreting 'May Fourth' and 'modern China' that are not locked into an endless 'struggle' with 'consciousness', 'modernity' and 'spirit' in the vain attempt to 'end' the crisis of struggle through appeal to the linguistic opacity of telos. The increasingly ungeneralizable (and hence untotalizable) specificities of cultural and political practices in the People's Republic of China, Hongkong, Taiwan, Singapore, and so forth, clearly suggest that any attempt to construct Chinese modernity, whether as May Fourth or some such thing, is, of necessity, an act of epistemological violence which constrains these cultural and political heterogeneities to fit within the logic of a given metaphysics or else constitutively excludes them as 'insignificant'. What this essay attempts by its mapping of Modernity/Spirit is an interrogation of a certain 'truth' of 'modern Chinese history' claimed in the name of May Fourth. As such, it also gestures towards those other Chinese modernities (popular cultural practices and overseas Chinese communities, for instance) that have been written out of the May Fourth account.<sup>57</sup> But it should also be clear by now that any attempt to 'redress' the existing 'history of May Fourth' is an act which cannot lead to the revelation of some fundamental truth; rather, it is an act which enables the telling of yet another story to begin, an act driven by 'the metaphysical system which links the sign to the concept', always to try and tell the story better.