

BOOK REVIEW
Rebecca E. Karl,
*The Magic of Concepts:
History and the Economic in Twentieth-Century China*
(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017)

Saul Thomas, *University of Chicago*

This collection of essays is not meant as a work of history as such, but as a reflection on and critique of a number of trends in recent historical thought and social science, especially but not limited to their use in connection with China. The central conceptual figure in the book, though he does not appear in every chapter, is Wang Yanan, translator of both Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Marx's *Capital* into Chinese, and a prolific and sophisticated Marxist economic theorist in his own right from the 1930s through the 1950s. The book centers on a number social scientific concepts, positions, and debates which emerged in the 1930s and then after some decades delay saw revivals in the 1980s and 90s. The earlier versions of these debates were each relevant to Wang's work and the interpretation of Marxism he was developing, and he personally participated in some of them, including discussions on the nature of historical development in the era of imperialist capitalism, the concept of "semicolonialism" and implications, and the social scientific standing of the Austrian School and other "free market" brands of economics, which had entered and become somewhat influential among certain Chinese economists in the 1930s, as they would again several decades later.

Although Wang's insights were sharp and the caliber of his work capable of demonstrating serious flaws in the work of his opponents, the revival of these debates in the 1980s and 90s took place, Karl suggests, as if neither Wang nor even the socialist movement had existed or contributed anything meaningful or of lasting value. And while the post-Mao discussions and debates have naturally reflected the new concerns and positions which have emerged in the context of new social and political circumstances, in many cases arguments hardly improved from those critiqued by Wang still hold sway if not dominance within the academic mainstream and even what presents itself as sophisticated "critical" scholarship. Reflecting this lamentable situation is the irony that Wang Yanan's own son, the prominent economist Wang Ruolin, appears to have forsaken his father's lessons on the Austrian School entirely, and Karl remarks that he became such a promoter of "thorough financial marketization and privatization" that he should be considered a "firm Hayekian" (161).

The title of the book comes from an essay of Wang's criticizing the economist Ma Yinchu (who would be lauded in

the post-Mao era) for conceptual or sloppiness or chicanery which amounted to "*gainian de moshu*" (4). Karl was inspired by Wang's metaphor of magic to find similar references in Marx's works and explore their connections with the issues she seeks to engage. She found fertile ground, most importantly Marx's remark in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* on men "conjuring up old spirits" while imagining themselves doing something new and in the concept of "commodity fetishism" from the first chapter of *Capital*. She returns to the metaphor of magic frequently throughout the book to characterize the poorly conceived concepts of both past and present day historians and social scientists.

Karl's book aims to lay out this pre- and post-Mao "repetition" of several key themes and critique, through an analysis of Wang's work as well as the work of many other scholars and social theorists, the mainstream and faux-critical scholarship she argues continues to dominate the academic mainstream. Two related flaws come in for the most criticism, both of which are at the heart of much socio-historical analysis in general and, not coincidentally, in how the dominant ideological category of "the economic" is conceived today. The first is many scholars' tendency to treat their conceptual categories ahistorically or assume their transhistorical validity, and the second is the uncritical acceptance of a universalistic teleology of development. Accompanying these errors, and reflecting and depending on them, is the frequent reappearance of the "hoary conceit" (75) of essentialist "culturalism," sometimes purporting to "explain" Euro-American capitalist dominance, and sometimes, in its nationalist form, attempting to place China outside of it.

The first chapter takes up the question of "world history" and certain recent scholarly attempts to understand China's development in relation to the emergence of the capitalist world economy. The two main targets of her criticism are Kenneth Pomeranz and Philip Huang, who, she argues, in attempting to overturn previous Eurocentric accounts of Chinese stagnation and "the West's unique genius" (28), have still perpetuated teleological notions of economic growth, modernization, and a relatively anodyne notion of "globalization" as "normal" conditions which hide the actual global interrelationships (including the direct violence and imposition of both commodities and conceptual categories through imperialism) which have been at the heart of

capitalism since its inception. An extended discussion of the key ideological role of Japan's exceptional (being non-Western) yet "normal" (purportedly not diverting far from the teleological path of growth) rise during the development of modernization theory during the Cold War was particularly interesting within this chapter.

The next chapter continues these themes through a discussion of the Marxist concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP). This concept is often considered something of an embarrassment for Marxists, for it seems to set aside the idea that social formations now and throughout history have always been in the process of dialectical and sometimes revolutionary change for an essentialist account of stagnant undifferentiated "Asian" societies ruled by despots. Karl chooses to approach the concept differently, not as a social scientific category which could describe an actually existing past society, but rather as a category born within the specific historical circumstances of capitalism, and as such, which reflects in some ways the capitalist society which produced it. This being the case, she follows with the provocative suggestion that the idea of an AMP-like unchanging and seemingly inescapable totalistic social form persists in surreptitious forms even in the realm of "critical" social theory today, not as the "opposite" of a dynamic and progressive capitalism as one might expect, but in descriptions of an inescapable totality of capitalism itself, as in Hardt and Negri's "empire" among others. So, too, she argues, does an AMP-like concept resonate today, this time with a positive valence, with the work of those scholars who posit an exceptional "alternative" (non-Western) modernity in China today. Yet while critical of these ideas, Karl also argues that the concept of the AMP has at times displayed potentially salutary political potential, including in both the 1930s and the 1980s in China, for providing a potential "multilinear" alternative for thinking outside of the supposed teleological necessity of a capitalist future for China, so much so that she seems critical of Stalin's attempt to relegate the AMP to the status of a non-Marxist concept.

The next two chapters deal specifically with debates in which Wang Yanan was personally involved, the first on the Austrian school of economics and the next on the concepts of "semicolonialism" and "transition." Both of these chapters recount and elaborate on Wang's dismantling of mainstream, "culturalist," and some Marxist thinkers' clumsy efforts to proffer up ahistorical economic and social categories within either some form of timeless laws of human behavior or in capitalist or stagist teleologies. Instead, Karl seeks to carry on "Wang's overriding philosophical and political commitment to historicization and the historically specific within the universalizing tendencies of capitalism" (84). These universalizing tendencies appear in their most crystalized form in the social, ideological, and material relations embedded within the capitalist commodity. Here, Karl draws on the analysis of the "commodity form" developed by Lukacs and revised by the late Marxist theorist Moishe Postone (178 n.26). She argues that in his foregrounding of the commodity, Wang independently arrived at some of the same conclusions as Lukacs (88-89). The historically specific, for its part, is to be found in Wang's analysis of the specific historical

circumstances which China faced, the inherently and necessarily uneven and unequal structure of capitalist imperialism, reflected in the "lived experiences" and struggles of the Chinese people at various levels of society, and giving lie to the to the notion of a "flattened" realm of social interaction posited by mainstream economics and social theory. In this context, she draws on Harry Harootunian's discussion of Marx's distinction between "formal" vs. "real" subsumption under capitalism, and agrees with Harootunian that "real subsumption," that is, an undifferentiated, "universalized," and "deterritorialized" capitalism, is never actually achieved in any social space. Reflecting Wang's commitment to apprehend capitalism as composing a complex and uneven structure was his understanding of semicolonialism, which posited not only China's subordinate position within the system of imperialist capitalism, but also suggested that China was in "a contingent historical situation without a telos" (130) and not subject to an automatic path of development.

The last and shortest chapter continues the themes of repetition, teleology and the unevenness of "lived experiences" through an analysis of two films on the situation in Shanghai just before the Communist victory in 1949. The first film, *Crows and Sparrows* (*Wuya yu maque*), was filmed just before the CCP's entry into Shanghai, while *Once Upon a Time in Shanghai* (*Shanghai jishi*), was filmed fifty years later, and is bookended by scenes of the main character returning from the United States to the now developed Shanghai after decades of absence. The first film presents a condensed yet rich portrayal of the textured "lived experience" of several different social classes in tumultuous Shanghai, the second focuses more narrowly on the bourgeois protagonists, both promoting a nostalgia for the colonial era and reinforcing the erasure of the Mao period.

This brief account of course cannot do justice to all of the arguments within the work. The book is very dense, the language and arguments complex and the number of references to recent works of social theory sometimes dizzying. Though some of her targets are relatively new, it is not surprising that some important elements of her critique echo concerns originally voiced in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, including some aspects of her critique of modernization theory and the failure of many mainstream scholars to accord proper significance to the role of imperialism. She remarks in a footnote that she was reminded by Tani Barlow that the journal *positions* also anticipated some of her concerns (Barlow's own "Colonialism's Career in Postwar China Studies" from *positions* 1.1 and Judith Farquhar and James Hevia's critique of "Culture and Postwar American Historiography of China" from 1.2 are notable examples of articles that speak directly to her critiques). After acknowledging Barlow's reminder, Karl notes that she aims to "move beyond" (191 n.3) the critiques originally articulated in *positions*. Presumably she means to do this by way of a more rigorous and sophisticated Marxist critique than has been given before.

As suggested above, Karl draws on many different theorists and currents within Marxist social theory and aims at bringing together some of their most profound contributions into a creative synthesis. This is fruitful, and her insights are numerous and challenging. Yet while she is certainly not bound by any stricture to reconcile every aspect of every theory she appeals to with every other theory she draws on, I would suggest that there exists a significant tension between those aspects of her analysis that emphasize China's specific social and historical location within a necessarily uneven and unequal global structure of "imperialist capitalism" and her appeal to the "cultural-ideological effectivity" of the "commodity form" as such (89). As yet, proponents of "commodity form" analysis (Lukacs, the Frankfurt School, Postone) have argued that the commodity form has structured culture and ideology along the same lines throughout the entire temporal and geographical expanse of modernity.¹ Harry Harootunian, for his part, argues that the Western Marxist focus on the ability of the commodity form "to structure thought and culture" not only presupposes the completed "real subsumption" of the society under capitalism, but also tends to "mask its own culturally and politically specific origins."² Karl argues that there exists a contradiction between the "universalizing" and fragmenting aspects of social practice, and believes that it can be addressed through "real-world investigations informed by dialectically produced concepts" (107-111). Whether the "commodity form" analysis she undertakes negotiates this contradiction successfully is an open question.

Furthermore, Karl asserts the importance of the "commodity form" not only within her own unique theoretical project, but also to explain and interpret Wang Yanan. She associates him with the term "commodity form" throughout the book, and although she does not cite Wang directly using the term, she does impute the term or concept to his direct and indirect statements several times (83, 89, 113, 192 n.15). For example, in one case she cites a passage in which Wang defends his beginning his analysis of China's semi-feudal semicolonial social and economic formation with the role of commodities.³ In Karl's account of this passage, Wang defends his use of "the commodity and commodity form" (192 n.15). On page 113 she cites a passage which she seems to imply demonstrates Wang's "emphasis" on the commodity form, yet the original does contain the terms "commodity" or "form," though one sentence asserts that China being "shackled" to its status as a place where imperialists sold "products" (*zhipin*) and bought raw materials, preventing it from becoming a capitalist country.⁴ While these insertions may seem curious or inconsequential, they are related to Karl's effort to associate Wang with this particular body of "commodity form" analysis in which she is interested. It seems that central to her interest is the Lukacsian effort to lay out the specifically *ideological* "effectivity" of the commodity form. But the results are not clear. After repeatedly arguing for the importance of the commodity form to Wang's thought, Karl declares that the appeals to "culture" made by several conservatives Wang criticized was "purely reactive to and reflective of a form of value already thoroughly mediated and thus colonized by and through the capitalist commodity form" (106).⁵ In spite of

discussing Wang's views immediately before and after this statement, she does not indicate that Wang ever associated the culturalism of his conservative opponents with the commodity form. Presumably if he had, Karl surely would have cited it. But she also does not indicate that Wang did not hold such a view. Are we to conclude that Wang may have agreed with this interpretation, but for some reason never expressed it?

The most direct evidence Karl marshals to demonstrate Wang's affinity to Lukacs' notion that the commodity form has a specifically ideological effectivity is a quote from Wang's essay "Austrian School Economics in Chinese Economic Circles," which she gives as:

Various ideologies about modern capitalism filter in with the arrival of capitalist commodities. The penetration of commodities and of commodity ideology/consciousness is intimately related to one another. . . . If the arrival of commodity ideology is neither voluntary nor sovereign, those imposing the commodities violently use commodity ideology as an organ-izing mechanism for the imposition. (89)

She concludes that "Wang was quite clear that" these ideologies were "produced by and reflective of the commodity form" (89). Karl here omitted from the quotation a parenthetical phrase and subsequent discussion which in my view significantly diminishes the possibility this passage should be read as evidence of a Wang-Lukacs convergence. The second sentence of the quote actually reads:

商品的输入，特别与商品意识（经济学）的输入，原有极密切的关联。⁶

Wang glossed "commodity ideology/consciousness" simply as "economics," suggesting that it is economics that arrived along with commodities, that the arrival of economics was neither voluntary nor sovereign, and that economics constitutes an organizing ideology for the imposition of commodities. Wang goes on to explain on the same and following page that "commodity ideology/consciousness or economics" (*shangpin yishi huo jingjixue*), mainly "capitalist economics," largely entered China by way of the many students the country sent abroad due to the need for China to understand economic science, but the students were unprepared to fully understand it. The second prop of this importation was the "imperialist countries" which expended great effort to facilitate the importation of this type of economics in the backward countries in an effort to preserve the pre-capitalist social and economic institutions and prevent the development of industry.⁷ Wang's decision to label economics as "commodity ideology/consciousness" appears to reference his belief that economics was meant to facilitate the continued importation of commodities from the imperialist countries into China. This is an incisive Marxist criticism, but it is not Lukacsian, and does not indicate he believed that economics was "produced by" or "reflected" the commodity form as such.

Indeed, the specific contexts and concerns which motivated Lukacs' interest in the commodity differed greatly from those that shaped Wang's research. Associating him with a framework which he never clearly adopted, and whose basic focus and orientation he did not appear to share, serves only to distract from his actual research. However, in the end, Karl gives such a strong exposition on the issues of unevenness, China's place within the unequal structure of imperialist capitalism the concrete question of "everyday life" throughout the book that I believe that the book would not be harmed if claims associating Wang with the particular "ideological effectivity" of the commodity form were simply abandoned. Karl's discussion of Wang's research on the social and historical implications of the expansion of capitalist imperialism to China, as well as her critical commentary on contemporary China studies, are contribution enough.

Karl's book is rewarding and thought provoking. This is not a book that can be skimmed—the complexity of the language and arguments requires that one think hard on each page, and the more energy one puts into the book, the more one is likely to gain, whether one accepts all of her arguments or not.

¹ Like some theorists of the Frankfurt School before him, Postone argued that the so-called "actually existing socialist" societies were also structured by the commodity form, and as such should be analyzed as "capitalist" societies. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. (New York: Cambridge, 1993). Postone referred to the notion that capitalism is "uneven" exactly once, in a footnote in which he

dismisses the idea near the beginning of the book. (Postone, 43 n.1). He believed that "unevenness" was a surface phenomenon, products of "mediations" which should not obscure the singular capitalist logic holding sway in all modern societies. Karl notes that she will not in this book enter into this "huge contemporary debate," though she does indicate that she is not entirely sympathetic to a view which would conflate Maoist China with capitalism (171 n.4).

² Harootunian, Harry D. *Marx after Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015): 1.

³ Wang Yanan, *Zhongguo ban fengjian zhimindi jingji xingtai yanjiu* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1957): 2.

⁴ Wang Yanan, "Zhongguo shehui jingji shigang xulun," *Wang Yanan wenji* vol. 4, (Fuzhou: Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe, 1987): 19

⁵ This is an interpretive move very typical of Lukacsian/Postonian intellectual history. Two Postone-inspired historians of China have elaborated on this interpretation in their reviews of Karl's book: Jake Werner, "The Magic of Concepts: History and the Economic in Twentieth-Century China. By Rebecca E. Karl," *Journal of Social History* (5 September 2018) <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shy071>; and Nicholas Ryan Zeller, "The Magic of Concepts." *Journal of Labor and Society* 21, 2 (2018): 275–80. It is not clear whether either of these historians agree that Wang Yanan's work actually shared common ground with Lukacsian "commodity form" analysis.

⁶ *Wang Yanan jingji sixiangshi lunwenji* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1981): 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 164-165.

Response to Saul Thomas's Review

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I thank Saul Thomas for a close reading of my book. His review takes up some of the more important issues I wished to raise, and zeroes in on many of the theoretical as well as historical points I highlight. As I explain in my preface and introduction, I wrote the book over the course of a decade, in the context of the full-blown arrival of neoliberalism in our intellectual, political, and academic lives. This has been particularly pronounced in my everyday life at NYU in New York, which now functions as a satellite to the illiberalisms and constraints introduced by the school's imperial settler colonies in Abu Dhabi, Shanghai, Tel Aviv, among others. This combination—my everyday and the larger historical moment—prompted me to try to trace some of the intellectual and academic sources of the normative turn to a neoliberal and self-professed apolitical global culturalist logic. I found those traces in China, where the rapidity of the defeat of most forms of radical imagination needs to be explored and explained. My main historical figure, Wang Yanan, helped me tease out some of the historical antecedents to this full-on global turn from the vantage of China in the world. As Saul correctly notes, but as I will emphasize here, the book is by no means a thorough explication of Wang or his thought.

For all his care, however, Saul at times seems to want to read me against the grain. That is sometimes productive and at other times puzzling. While there is no doubt that we can disagree amicably, some of his evaluations of my book are strangely askance to what I actually say or argue. So, herewith are a four points of dispute and clarification:

1. Saul says that the *Magic of Concepts* is not “meant as a work of history as such.” It isn't clear to me what “history as such” might be—is it the *an sich* of the Kantian philosophical tradition or of Hegelian idealism? If so, then I agree, this volume is neither Kantian nor Hegelian, and nor is it intended to be so. That said, I am quite sure that I wrote a book of and about history “as such”. *Magic of Concepts* is intended to be about history as a temporal form of repetition (in the Marxist mode), as a spatial form of repetitive conceptualization (as a form of Marxist materialism), as an intellectual form that allows for the excavation of thought in and about the historical (an exploration into the materiality of thought itself). It is true that the book does not tell a linear story—would that be history “as such”?—although it does raise, more than once and as a central concern, the problem of narrative as a material problem in and of history as a type of inquiry and presentation. So, as far as categorizations go, I'd say I wrote a book of history as such, albeit certainly not a monograph.

It is true that the book has not been treated as “history” among those who wish to police the boundaries of the discipline or the genre. I'm pretty sure that policing is not what Saul has in mind. Perhaps he wished to signal that *Magic* is not an

expected volume, in which case, he is correct and I thank him for the compliment. I wasn't attempting a genre (narrative history) and failing; I was attempting something entirely different (a different ‘as such’ maybe). (And yes, the book is difficult to read; it was difficult to write. The theoretical, philosophical, and historical questions it raises are dense and complex. I did the best I could to present them in a way that clarifies rather than mystifies through simplification.)

2. In the midst of his illuminating discussion of my critical review of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP), Saul suggests that I wish to rescue the AMP to allow us to think about “multilinear” alternatives “for thinking outside of the supposed teleological necessity for a capitalist future for China.” This is simply not true. I explicitly exclude any desire to revive the AMP for anything. Let me quote myself: “...before I move into my consideration of the AMP I should note explicitly: I have no intention of arguing that AMP can or should be rescued... in my opinion, the AMP died an appropriate death in the 1930s and should remain dead” (p42 *MoC*). My point in raising the AMP (again!)—aside from the fact that it is one of those zombie ideas that is dead but cannot stay dead—is that it allows us to see how the AMP repeatedly became an issue historically and historiographically precisely in the context of the imperative to write the problem of China and/in world history. It is obvious, it seems to me, that particular forms of capitalism are inflected differently, as they are the products of different histories. The recent culturalism of the AMP (“alternatives”) argues that China cannot be capitalist because capitalism is European and China can only ever be primordially Chinese; this is the object of my fiercest critique, not of some rescue operation. I'm afraid Saul misread my point here.

3. Most curiously, though, is Saul's dispute with me about the commodity form and Wang Yanan's raising of the question. I am not going to get into a discussion of Postone, since that is not really the point that Wang (or I) am making. My Marxism is not doctrinaire but rather pretty eclectic, as Saul recognizes. When forced to fit myself into a “school” I am incapable of so doing. The matter of categorization is the least of the problems, in my opinion.

In my presentation of Wang, I do not mean to take sides on whether the commodity form is the best way to see capitalism's spread—as an economic, ideological, and cultural matter—but rather to note that Wang himself was concerned with the commodity as an integrated form of imperialist intrusion, as an historical moment of invasion that could not be vanquished merely by kicking foreigners out of China. For Wang, the arrival of the commodity as a historical form signaled the advent of capitalism's take-over of China from outside and from within; he refused to reduce the

“commodity” to a “thing on the market” and thus to proclaim China a market-economy and thus always-already capitalist (or “alternative”). For Wang, the commodity was a historical form, produced out of a particular historicity of social production tied to capitalism, which itself could only be understood as a historically-specific conceptual, ideological, economic, cultural, and socio-political form. This approach allowed Wang—unlike many of his contemporaries—to separate out China’s historical economy marked by and through flourishing markets from the arrival of capitalism in China, which came by and through imperialism. *That* is the main target of Wang’s critique: the conflation of China’s market economy with capitalism—a conflation, I note, that is common today as well, and in fact is a mainstream paradigm. It is to untangle that specific conflation that Wang deploys the theory of commodity form, and it is to attack that contemporary conflation that I excavate Wang’s theory.

The point is that Wang’s interpretation of the commodity—as simultaneously an ideological-cultural and socio-political and economic effectivity tied to a particular extended historical moment that is socially transformative—is precisely what Marx says about the commodity form in *Capital*, Vol I, which Wang had translated with Guo Dali and published in 1938. As should be clear, I powerfully disagree with Postone and his flattening of everything into “mediations.” I did not enter into that argument in the book, because I was concerned with something else: I accept that commodity analysis can be flawed because it flattens, and yet I also attempt to show, through Wang, how one can use it in combination with other theoretical standpoints, to *not* reproduce the Eurocentrism of its derivation, but to produce something else. To produce, that is, a unique theorization of a social formation such as China’s at mid-century, that was both capitalist and yet not wholly so. To produce, that is, a theory of social relations that is both global and historically (not culturally) Chinese at the same time. This is a philosophical, theoretical, and historical question; it is also a revolutionary question (*pace* Dirlik). My attempt to excavate Wang as an independent Marxist thinker, who does not merely cite and follow others, but who has his own formulations, was the goal here. Orthodoxy was not. (I also indicate throughout the volume that “economics” and “the economic” are forms of ideology for Wang, in addition to being social scientific practices; it does not seem necessary for me to remind readers of that at every turn.)

Finally, on this subject, Saul says: “she does not indicate that Wang ever associated the culturalism of his conservative opponents with the commodity form.” The *magic of concepts* (*gainian de moshu*) is the name of the book, the leitmotif of the volume, and in fact precisely the critique of the ideology of the commodity that Saul says is missing. That is the critique with which I begin, and it subtends the book completely. I’m not sure how much more clear about that I could have been.

4. Saul cites a footnote of mine to Tani Barlow and *positions*; he opines that I am attempting a “more rigorous and sophisticated Marxist critique than has been given before,” implying that I am critical of *positions*, Barlow, and so on. For the record: I am a member of the *positions* editorial collective

and have been for over a decade. I am more Marxist than some and less Marxist than others on the collective. I would never presume to be “more sophisticated” and nor “more rigorous.” I have my own form of critique, to be sure; and I have learned from many people in and outside the collective, indeed especially from those I disagree with passionately (including Ken Pomeranz, whom I admire greatly). Of course, I take sides because I am clear that all scholarship is ideological and political and I prefer to announce my politics from the outset. But my hope is to take sides by taking all sides seriously. That was/is my intention.

In the end, these are disputes among friends. I thank Saul for his heroics in taking my book and its arguments so seriously. And I thank Yidi Wu and the *PRC History Review* for giving us this forum in which to engage in such serious discussion.