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“Stay Loyal to the Earth”: The Transcendental,
the Teleological, and the Quotidian in Zhou
Zuoren’s (1885–1967) Reflections on Modern Life

I am someone of little faith. I have neither Jehovah’s Kingdom of
Heaven nor the Pure Land of Amitābha Buddha to go to. The
place I was assigned to in *Jambudvīpa*, this human world,
is the land of China. Thus I have to settle down here and
give up any dream of joyful traveling elsewhere.

Zhou Zuoren, Preface to *Talks under the Mulberry Trees*

INTRODUCTION

What Ban Wang sees as “a central dilemma in China’s quest for modernity” based on his reading of Xiaobing Tang’s *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian*, is “the dynamic tension between the heroic and the quotidian,” around which “[t]he story of modern China evolves.” This tension, as Wang puts it, “brings together the utopian yearnings of the political community and the private desire for fulfillment, revolutionary passions and domestic routines, mass culture spectacles and self-absorbed aesthetics, and the impulse for transcendence and retreat to everyday enclaves of private life.”¹ This insightful observation may help formulate a more philosophically informed framework for our interpretation. That is, by focusing on the inner dynamics of Chinese modernity, the new framework should complement previous ones, which relied upon the opposition of such categories as “traditional” and “modern.” It also goes beyond the method of class analysis, making it a more inclusive tool for comprehending the politically charged century of horror and hope.

¹ Ban Wang, “Studies of Modern Chinese Literature,” *A Scholarly Review of Chinese Studies in North America* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2013), p. 377.

Meanwhile, it has to be pointed out that, although “the dialectical movement of the heroic and the quotidian constitutes an inescapable condition of secular modernity,”² the heroic and the quotidian are not equally configured as binary oppositions: the quotidian has often been overwhelmed by the heroic as the “repressed” or “eliminated” trend. In a 2008 interview, Wang Hui points out that, as an exclusive concept, modernity has established a hegemonic hierarchy to eliminate all “non-modern things” that concurrently exist with it.³ Retrospecting the whole of modern Chinese history from this viewpoint, we might observe that the “non-modern things” could have included what David Der-wei Wang names as the late-Qing “repressed modernities” that had been displaced by more monotonic trends of the May Fourth Movement.⁴ They could have also included the eventually marginalized trends that originated within the “modern” (particularly the May Fourth enlightenment) itself, most of which aimed for establishing alternative solutions to the problems facing China: national salvation and modernization. Often, intellectuals who had been associated with such trends were also left in oblivion, and Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (a.k.a. Chou Tso-jen, 1885–1967) was one of them.

Zhou was among the few intellectuals who endeavored to approach literature and society from a perspective beyond the nation-state paradigm. He confessed to having dreamed, from 1918 to 1923, of changing the society with the cultivation of individuality as the central mission. But after awakening from these “rosy dreams 薔薇色的夢,” as he called them, Zhou turned back to warn of the utopian tendencies in mainstream enlightenment practices. Eventually he declared his plan to retreat to a “garden of his own.” Meanwhile, with his writings he continued intervening in current affairs. As he described in 1926, he had been occupied by the two “demons”: a gentleman and a rascal. After the 1927 White Terror, he further withdrew from directly intervening in political reality, and escaped into his “ivory tower at the crossroads” until 1938, when he attended the “seminar on the rejuvenation of Chinese culture 甦生中國文化建設座談會” sponsored by *Osaka Daily News* 大阪每日新聞, a gesture that was regarded by the public as his starting to col-

² Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham & London: Duke U.P., 2000), p. 1.

³ Wang Hui 汪暉, “‘Zhongguo zhizao’ yu lingleide xiandaixing” 中國製造與另類的現代性, idem, *Bieqiu xinsheng* 別求新聲 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2009), p. 105.

⁴ David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1848–1911* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford U.P., 1997).

laborate with the Japanese occupation forces.⁵ Choices like these have led many to despise Zhou or dismiss his opinions. Observing the change in his work's style and content, some Zhou scholars have concluded that the more the time passed, the more trivial and "insignificant" his writings became. The major political cause of his marginalization was his collaboration with the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). Intellectually speaking, however, it was by his own choice. As Lu Yan puts it, "Unlike many others who also chose to remain in the occupied area, Zhou made his decision not simply from private concerns but also from a firm intellectual conviction. By the time of the war, he was already deeply alienated from the ruling Guomindang government as well as from mainstream political culture."⁶ He regarded, since the mid-1920s, the mainstream as "anti-modern" in nature for its resort to faith instead of reason, and for its wide application of violence, whether it sought to modernize the country or engage in other sociopolitical movements.⁷

Zhou's rejection of the enlightenment's irrationality and its violent mode of practice generates a new question: if the mainstream practice was not the right option, what ideal of modern life did he want to establish? To this question he did not give a simple and explicit answer, addressing it instead from multiple perspectives. In terms of literature, this is found in the "literature of leisure" celebrated by him, Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), Yu Pingbo 俞平伯 (1900–1990), and Liang Shiqiu 梁實秋 (1903–1987) in place of didactic literature;⁸ in terms of aesthetics, it is a construction drawing inspirations from local and traditional cultures that centered on *quwei* 趣味 (taste).⁹ In terms of life

⁵ Zhou first used "rosy dreams" to show his disillusionment in a letter to Lu Xun that declared the end of their relationship on July 18, 1923, and then in a preface to his work a week later. See his "Yu Lu Xun shu" 與魯迅書, in Zhong Shuhe 鍾叔河, ed., *Zhou Zuoren sanwen quanji* 周作人散文全集 (Guilin: Guangxi shida chubanshe, 2009; hereafter cited as *SWQJ*), j. 3, p. 184, and his "*Ziji de yuanji jixu*" 自己的園地舊序, *SWQJ*, j. 3, p. 189. For more details on Zhou's life and thought from the 1920s to the 1940s, see Zhi An 止庵, *Zhou Zuoren zhuan* 周作人傳 (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2005), pp. 119–216.

⁶ Lu Yan, "Beyond Politics in Wartime: Zhou Zuoren, 1931–1945," *Sino Japanese Studies* 11.1 (October 1998), p. 3.

⁷ For discussions on these topics, see my "To Believe or Not to Believe: Zhou Zuoren's Alternative Approaches to the Chinese Enlightenment," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 25.1 (Spring 2013), pp. 206–60; and idem, "The Sacred and the Cannibalistic: Zhou Zuoren's Critique of Violence in Modern China," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 36 (2014), pp. 25–60.

⁸ Charles A. Laughlin, *The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 2008).

⁹ Susan Daruvala, *Zhou Zuoren and an Alternative Response to Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P. 2000).

as practice, however, there is another important aspect to be added, which is everyday life.¹⁰

Scholars had widely regarded Zhou as a selfish hermit obsessed with the small pleasures of everyday life, a coward who shed his responsibilities to his nation in exchange for a life of leisure. The “evidence” for these charges can be easily found in his numerous writings on trivial matters that can be easily dismissed as “useless.” Although human emancipation was generally promoted, there was also a puritanical tendency to reject the pleasures of everyday life, especially when intellectuals proposed specific ways a new life might be constructed. At a time when nation-building and national salvation became the center of the attention for most intellectuals, it seemed understandable that everyday life meant little.

Different views of the everyday marked the profound differences in intellectuals’ understanding of the modern itself. Take Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), who somehow did not pay much attention to the everyday issues (unless they could reflect larger intellectual or political issues), as an example. In an unpleasant interview with the Japanese poet Yonejirō Noguchi 野口米次郎 (1875–1947) in 1935, Lu Xun said:

We should pity the common people. However, they are happy in one respect, which is that their life has nothing to do with current affairs and politics. To them, no matter who is in power, they do not have to bother thinking about it. They will live on like ants, bees and bugs. They have always been irrelevant to politics since the existence of the state. Even if China is subjugated [by foreign countries] someday, as a nation it will not perish.”¹¹

While the interview published by Noguchi in *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* 東京朝日新聞 might not have fully reflected Lu Xun’s intent, still, with such remarks Lu Xun differentiated himself from those who mainly cared about their own daily lives. Zhou, on the other hand, chose to identify with the “common people” in their cynical attitude toward politics. To him, life and culture outweigh politics: the elements that truly define Chinese culture are its common people, their way of life,

¹⁰ Here the everyday can be defined with such idioms as “attire, dining, the home, and traveling 衣食住行,” “birth, aging, illness, and death 生老病死,” namely, what individuals encounter in their lives.

¹¹ Keizo Yamada 山田敬三 *Qingmo liuxuesheng: Lu Xun yu Zhou Zuoren* 清末留學生, 鲁迅與周作人, *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* 鲁迅研究月刊 1996.12, p. 46. In his research on Lin Yutang, Wang Zhaosheng 王兆勝 also notices Lu Xun’s neglect of everyday enjoyment and leisure in contrast to Lin, who endeavored to promote “the art of life.” See his *Lin Yutang de wenhua xuanze* 林語堂的文化選擇 (Taipei: Showwe Information, 2004), p. 115.

and their obsession with the trivial matters rather than elite culture.¹² Zhou's view, more proactively than reactively generated, pervades his philosophical writings on the care of the modern self and the cultivation of taste. In his time, it made himself the enemy of the people at a time when China was in a state of emergency, and when modernization—a secular movement to construct a rationalized world order—turned into a bid to establish an earthly paradise through violent, faith-driven approaches.

The way Zhou reclaims the significance of the everyday thus reveals the fundamental differences between him and other enlightenment thinkers. Using the tension between the heroic and the quotidian, which Wang and Tang rationalized as an overarching framework, this article investigates the ways in which Zhou establishes his philosophy of the “quotidian” by denying the “heroic.” It also explores his denial of the grand narratives of the enlightenment, national salvation, revolution, and modernization that reigned in sociopolitical and cultural fields.

On one hand, Zhou, starting from the mid-1920s, regarded the mainstream practice as fundamentally “Romantic” and thus anti-enlightenment. On the other, he imagined a world of the secular, the quotidian, and the trivially ordinary for individuals as their singular home. He viewed everyday life in China as a significant domain, not only for observing universal humanity and rational principles, but also for imagining and constructing a modern way of life. In other words, his oft-disdained political withdrawal is accompanied by an intellectual expedition to uncharted fields—reexamining the various aspects of the quotidian, traditions, folk life, and customs.¹³ For these were the sources of his rational proposals for an everyday-centered modernization project.

¹² It is worth noting that here both Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren seem to have converged in their discourses on the everyday and common people, both regarding everyday matters as the central concern of common people's life. As can be seen in this article, Zhou often expresses himself on behalf of the common people as a strategy to differentiate himself from the more politically oriented intellectuals. In his writings, he often regards “common people 常人, 人民, 普通人” as those who strive to survive and enjoy life. The concept includes members of the lower class and often excludes the social elite. Zhou also negatively regards “common people” in certain collective terms (e.g., 群眾, 大眾) for being irrational and violent.

¹³ Zhao Jinghua 趙京華, *Zhoushi xiongdì yu Riben* 周氏兄弟與日本 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2010), pp. 186–87.

IN SEARCH OF THE ULTIMATE HOME FOR HUMANS

Among the early enlightenment thinkers, Zhou's uniqueness lies in his approach to social problems. Adopting a philosophical perspective, he always situates the solution for problems in China within a broader, cosmopolitan cultural context. One archetypal binary opposition Zhou regards as essential in understanding modern life is the one between the transcendental and the secular. This opposition is the key to understanding his discontent with mainstream practices in the enlightenment, national salvation, revolution, and the whole modernization project. By the same token, it is his imaginative framework. He uses it to find the ultimate human home, and to explore what a human life is supposed to be.

In a view that he formulated in the mid-1920s, while the enlightenment project focused on revaluing traditions in a negative way, the "modern" itself is reminiscent of the "tradition" under attack: it is a process of resorting to faith and violence as a means to create an ideal, transcendental world. In other words, the intellectual and social movements that proclaimed themselves to be based on "scientific" and "modern" social theories were fueled by a hidden force—the dream of the world beyond.¹⁴ For Zhou, however, any dream of an otherworldly existence is illusory. This is true of religious afterworlds like the Kingdom of God, the Buddhist Pure Land, and Daoist Heaven. It is equally true of secular ones, such as the utopian human world and the perfect communist world. Even if it could be realized, such a dream could easily turn into a nightmare through negation of the worldly and the sacrifice of individual life. It is against such intellectual trends that his concern with the "trivial" everyday world becomes understandable. His vision of a depoliticized space of the everyday for common people is the wellspring of his social imagination, and the source of his major strategy for resisting the utopian social movements.

It has to be admitted that Zhou's thought around the binary opposition between the transcendental and the secular went through a dramatic historical change. To some extent, his later criticism of mainstream views is first and foremost a self-criticism. During the initial stage of his engagement in the enlightenment from the late 1910s to the early 1920s, he endeavored to integrate the transcendental into his

¹⁴ Zhou's criticism of the embedded theology found in modern secular social movements is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's criticism of "historical materialism," a puppet whose winning of all games is controlled by a hidden dwarf, whose name is theology. See his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 253.

philosophy of humanity. As Liu Haoming argues, during this period Zhou experienced a “Romanticist impulse,” which found expression in his promotion of the literature of children: “This earlier dismissal of supernaturalism in his critical writings notwithstanding, Zhou was not adamant in opposing all transcendentalism.”¹⁵ In his 1918 essay “Literature of Humanity,” Zhou defined his faith as “individualistic humanism.” He placed the human world beyond the animal one yet below the spiritual one.¹⁶ Humanity, to him, is nothing other than the mixture of the animalistic and the divine spirit. To maintain one’s humanity, it is necessary to rise above the domain of the animal. Meanwhile, it is necessary for human beings to acquire divinity. However, it is also difficult for human beings to discard human traits and reach the realm of the divine spirits.¹⁷

Another of Zhou Zuoren’s articles, “The Bible and Chinese Literature” written in 1921, also “spells out the ultimate vision he had for modern Chinese literature: it must have a transcendental dimension.”¹⁸ In 1922, he developed this argument in “Noble and Commoner Literature.” At a time when the view espoused in the literature of commoners became dominant over the literature of the noble,¹⁹ he further points out that in literature and art, the two cannot be separated. If the latter expresses a Schopenhauerian will to survive within the limited quotidian world, the former represents a Nietzschean will to ascend to a higher realm.²⁰ In other words, the transcendental is an indispensable dimension in Zhou’s humanism.

¹⁵ Liu Haoming, “From Little Savages to *hen kai pan*: Zhou Zuoren’s (1885–1968) Romanticist Impulses around 1920,” *AM* 3d ser. 15.1 (2002), p. 146. While Liu mainly discusses Romanticism as a German literary movement, I would argue that it can be used to represent Zhou’s general intellectual orientation during that period. See Liang Shiqiu 梁實秋, “Xiandai Zhongguo wenxue zhi langman de qushi” 現代中國文學之浪漫的趨勢, in *Liang Shiqiu piping wenji* 梁實秋批評文集 (Zhuhai: Zhuhai chubanshe, 1998), pp. 32–51, and Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1973), pp. 294–95.

¹⁶ In order to understand the three realms of the animal, the human, and the divine, Zhou developed his intellectual interests accordingly in biology, anthropology and psychology, as well as religious studies.

¹⁷ “Ren de wenxue” 人的文學, *SWQJ*, j. 2, pp. 85–93. An English version of the article is available in Kirk A. Denton’s *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford U.P., 1996), pp. 151–61.

¹⁸ Liu, “From Little Savages to *hen kai pan*,” p. 146.

¹⁹ The popularity of such literature can be partially attributed to Chen Duxiu’s promotion of it in his 1917 essay “On Literary Revolution” 文學革命論 (see Ren Jianshu 任建樹, Zhang Tongmo 張統模, and Wu Xinzong 吳信忠, eds., *Chen Duxiu zhuzuo xuan* 陳獨秀著作選 [Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1993]), j. 1, pp. 260–63, and Zhou’s 1919 essay “Pingmin de wenxue” 平民的文學 (*SWQJ*, j. 2, pp. 102–5).

²⁰ “Guizu de yu pingmin de” 貴族的與平民的, *SWQJ*, j. 2, pp. 519–20. Zhou’s relationship with Nietzsche is complicated. He apparently accepted certain of Nietzsche’s opinions in the early

Angelo Rappoport's article "The Philosophic Basis of the Russian Revolution," which Zhou translated in 1919, documented the inner tension of his humanistic ideas. In the essay, Rappoport describes how Bakunin (1814–1876) had given up Hegel's idealism and turned to a materialist approach in pursuing liberty. It was Bakunin's belief that "there was no other world than this real one, and that all transcendental conceptions were inanities."²¹ At the end of his essay, Rappoport also criticizes the various utopian trends then popular in Russia:

Others again have more ideal dreams; they dream of establishing a Republic of the Just, and take for their models the Republic of Plato, the city of St. Augustine, More's Utopia, Huffington's Oceana, and Campanula's City of the Sun, Fenelon's Salente, and the types of society imagined by Jean Jacques Rousseau, or by the ancient prophets who foretold the Kingdom of God. These dreamers forget that even Rousseau himself said that such a city presupposes a nation of gods, or, to use a more modern expression, a race of supermen. It is a city in which no man is born, and wherein no man has ever physically lived; it exists only in the realm of imagination. The men who dream of such ideals would have to legislate for pure spirits and to build a solid structure upon a foundation of clouds.²²

Rappoport's arguments, along with Bakunin's opinions,²³ were echoed in Zhou's reflection on similar issues in the Chinese context. However, Zhou could not completely agree with his negative assessment of the utopian dreams, arguing that he ignored the value of the ideal.²⁴ In 1920, Zhou further pointed out that European civilization was based on two antithetical cultures, the Greek and the Hebrew: the former was concerned with the body and the secular, and the lat-

years, but later gave them up, mainly rejecting Nietzsche's exaggerated writing style. For more details, see Zeng Feng 曾鋒, "Li zhi bingchu: shi lun Zhou Zuoren yu Nicai" 理之摒除, 試論周作人與尼采, in Sun Yu 孫鬱 and Huang Qiaosheng 黃喬生, eds., *Huiwang Zhou Zuoren: yanjiu shuping* 回望周作人, 研究述評 (Zhengzhou: Henan daxue chubanshe, 2004), pp. 237–65.

²¹ "Eguo geming zhi zhaxue de jichu" 俄國革命之哲學的基礎, *SWQJ*, j. 2, p. 189. The original text is cited from Angelo Rappoport, "The Philosophic Basis of the Russian Revolution," *Edinburgh Review*, July, 1917, pp. 123–24.

²² "Eguo geming zhi zhaxue de jichu," pp. 197–98. The original is cited from Rappoport, "Philosophic Basis of the Russian Revolution," p. 131.

²³ Bakunin's influence in China is mainly due to his anarchism. Zhou accepted his nihilist attitude toward social institutions and the established cultural hegemony, and his materialism and anti-theologism, but rejected his violent revolutionary theories.

²⁴ "Eguo geming zhi zhaxue de jichu," p. 200.

ter was concerned with the soul and the spiritual.²⁵ Zhou, a monist, regarded the body and soul as inseparable, and denied the existence of the soul independent of the body. Nonetheless he wanted to keep a balanced view between the Hebraic and the Hellenic. He saw this balance as being necessary to transcend the current human condition and achieve full humanity.

Zhou's insistence on a secular humanist viewpoint chafed with his endeavor to incorporate the transcendental. This discord is best manifested in his short-lived fascination with the New Village movement.²⁶ Starting from 1918, he introduced the movement in several essays. According to these works, the New Village can balance individual freedom and communal spirit, and such a balanced life is the true human life. Therefore, the New Village provides a "gospel" of such a human life, which can be realized through non-violent, rational approaches.²⁷ In 1920, he was apparently amazed by the religiosity of the movement. In his observation, the village accommodates the villagers' spiritual needs in a highly tolerant way:

The second feature of the village is its religious atmosphere. The villagers have deep faith in their ideal and they have a common faith. They have the freedom of religious faith without the pressure to convert to any particular sect. Some are drawn to the teaching of Buddha or Confucius. Most believe the teaching of Jesus. They believe that there is a divine will controlling the cosmos, which humans have to follow for achieving a happy life. The saints can know this will in advance and teach humans to live a proper life. What is this divine will? It is the human will—the principles of social evolution.²⁸

This idea is primarily from the influence of Leo Tolstoy's version of Christianity, merged with Nietzsche's Social Darwinism. It is notable that Zhou regards the will of humans and the will of God as identical. Such an equation is a denial of the transcendental as purely religious,

²⁵ "Shengshu yu zhongguo wenxue" 聖書與中國文學, *SWQJ*, j. 2, pp. 303-4. Zhou's imagination of the future development of Chinese culture is inspired by the view that Greek and Hebrew culture represented two oppositional yet complementary orientations in the development of human culture. Zhang Xianfei 張先飛 has traced the origin of Zhou's ideas about this to the British cultural critic Matthew Arnold, the German poet Heinrich Heine, and even William Blake. See his *Ren de faxian: Wusi wenxue xiandai rendao zhuyi sixiang yuanliu* 人的發現, "五四"文學現代人道主義思想源流 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2009).

²⁶ William C. L. Chow, "Chou Tso-jen and the New Village Movement," *Chinese Studies* 10.1 (June 1992), pp. 105-34.

²⁷ "Ribei de xincun" 日本的新村, *SWQJ*, j. 2, pp. 134, 141.

²⁸ "Xincun de lixiang yu shiji" 新村的理想與實際, *SWQJ*, j. 2, p. 242.

and a reaffirmation of the idea that the human life itself contains a transcendental dimension. The religious terms Zhou used in describing the human will, therefore, do not just serve rhetorical purposes. Rather, they reveal the internal contradictions and ambiguities in his thought.

Zhou's brief "Romanticist impulse" was unique for his time and "set him apart from other major literary and intellectual figures at the time, whose motives in participating in the New Culture Movement had much less or little to do with any apocalyptic vision or transcendental aspiration."²⁹ Zhou's advocacy of the New Village met mixed response. According to Christopher T. Keaveney, some communists, including Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942), Li Dazhao 李大釗 (1888-1927), Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898-1976), and Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893-1976) were attracted to it, and then gave it up for its being "too idealistic," but the harshest criticism came from Lu Xun and Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962).³⁰ Nevertheless, Zhou suddenly, between late 1923 and early 1924, abandoned dreams for a perfect human world, confessing that his writings before 1924 contained obvious inconsistencies and contradictions in their conceptualization of reality. The tone of a dreamer and preacher faded from his work after this recantation.³¹ His balanced view of the Greek and the Hebrew cultures was eventually replaced by a preference for Greek culture as the model for China to follow. This progression is quite different from that of Lu Xun, who, according to Ito Toramaru 伊藤虎丸, accepted more influences from Hebrew-Christian culture.³² In 1923, Zhou cited Nietzsche's dictum "stay loyal to the earth" to show his change in attitude. He complained that modern people lead lives aloof from the real world, and that they are obsessed with their beautiful imaginations and theories. They have to descend to the earth.³³

In 1924, Zhou professed his decision to "jump out of the Utopian dream."³⁴ He totally rejected the transcendental; only then did he adopt Bakunin's proclamation "there was no other world than this real one" as his motto. He chose to stick to the secular world, arguing that seeking leisure within the limited lifespan we are granted in the

²⁹ Liu, "From Little Savages to *hen kai pan*," p. 154.

³⁰ Christopher T. Keaveney, *Beyond Brushtalk: Sino-Japanese Literary Exchange in the Interwar Period* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong U.P., 2008), pp. 93-95.

³¹ "Yishu yu shenghuo zixu" 藝術與生活自序, *SWQJ*, j. 4, p. 733.

³² See Ito Toramaru 伊藤虎丸, *Lu Xun yu zhongmo lun* 魯迅與終末論, trans. Li Dongmu 李冬木 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008), p. 314.

³³ "Difang yu wenyi" 地方與文藝, *SWQJ*, j. 3, p. 733.

³⁴ "Zhongguo xiju de santiao lu" 中國戲劇的三條路, *SWQJ*, j. 3, p. 316.

secular world is the origin of our ultimate happiness. The afterlife is the concern of mystic poets, but for mortals or common people 平凡人 it is not attractive.³⁵ In this account, the mundane world is the only home for humans. From then onward Zhou often identified himself with and write on behalf of those “mortals” or “common people,” who enjoy only worldly pleasures and are concerned solely the quotidian details of life, and who abandon any dream for a world beyond as an attainable political goal. After 1924, he continued paying attention to the New Village movement, but with a totally different attitude: the movement might only satisfy the participants' personal interests, without having the power to enlighten and enlist people.³⁶

It is unclear what disturbed Zhou's “rosy dreams.” Ha Yingfei argues that the disturbance came from Bernard Russell, who visited China in 1920 and 1921 and lectured on the problems and dangers of religion, as well as its similarity to communism.³⁷ Indeed, Zhou's opinions are reminiscent of Russell's. However, his ideological shift happened two years after Russell's visit. It is more reasonable, therefore, to see the change as the result of his reflection on both his own life experiences and observations of the intellectual and social events of the time. One event that might have contributed to a change was the Anti-Christianity movement. While the movement's leader Chen Duxiu emphasized the anti-imperialist aspect of resisting Christianity, Zhou regarded this resistance as violating the principle of freedom of thought. The violent implications in the movement's proposals alerted him to the danger of promoting rationality through irrational approaches. Another precipitating event, more personal and enigmatic in nature, was his estrangement from Lu Xun. Regardless of its actual causes, for Zhou this event marked his disenchantment with one charismatic figure in the enlightenment movement. It also symbolized the death of Zhou's spiritual Father, and the collapse of an iconic image of the modern intellectual class.³⁸ His break with Lu Xun coincided with the fading out of Zhou's religious fever. From then onward, he completely changed his way of looking at the “newness” in the intellectual and social movements, and found their embedded religiosity highly abhorrent.

³⁵ “Si zhi moxiang” 死之默想, *SWQJ*, j. 3, pp. 564–65.

³⁶ “Yishu yu shenghuo zixu” 藝術與生活自序, *SWQJ*, j. 4, p. 733.

³⁷ Ha Yingfei 哈迎飛, *Ban shi rujia ban shijia: Zhou Zuoren sixiang yanjiu* 半是儒家半釋家, 周作人思想研究 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2007), pp. 80–81.

³⁸ For a detailed account of their conflict and its consequence, see Jian Xiaolan, *Zhou Zuoren de qingfeng kuyu* 周作人的清風苦雨 (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2010), pp. 153–60.

Starting from the mid-1920s, when communism became a widespread social movement that attracted many enlightenment intellectuals, Zhou kept distance from it based on his idea that the transcendental is an illusion. He seldom explored the historical or economic conditions for the rise of communist movements in China, but rather focused on these movements' common religious ethos. Moreover, he did not simply pass judgment on the latter, but rationalized it further, writing that it was based on a universal psychological drive:

The purpose of religion is to preserve life. Either it is this life or the afterlife. The Pure Land 淨土, Heaven 天堂, Penglai 蓬萊,³⁹ Utopia 烏托邦, and the Village of Nothingness 無何有之鄉, all are varieties of communist societies. The only difference lies in the time and location of their existence. Communists are also religious believers, but they are more anxious than others to the extent that they want to build up on earth a Kingdom of Heaven 天國.⁴⁰

Here Zhou traced the psychological drive of communism to the universal human desire that is shared by all religions—to conserve and promote life, a view inspired by the classicist Jane Ellen Harrison.⁴¹ In broad terms, Zhou's view is that communism is one kind of the manifestation of the human being's will to survive. Therefore, there is nothing incomprehensible or alien in communism, as he writes in 1928. To him, all human activities are the manifestation of the will for survival: "Activities such as worshipping snakes and tortoises, cultivating the body in Taoist religion, pursuing eternal life in Christianity and Buddhist Nirvana, and the ideological and political endeavors in building a paradise in the dusty secular world, all are such manifestations."⁴² This touches upon the nexus between religious desire and secular modernity. As Friedrich Schlegel puts it, "the revolutionary desire to realize the kingdom of God on earth is ... the inception of modernity."⁴³ By rationalizing communism as being rooted in human desire, Zhou not only avoids simplistically viewing it as demonic, but also differentiates himself from the government's anti-communist policies, which resulted in the White Terror, the goal of which was to cleanse China

³⁹ This was, in certain myths, an island of immortals located in the East China Sea.

⁴⁰ "Waihang de anyu" 外行的按語, *SWQJ*, j. 4, p. 511. To Zhou, "Kingdom of Heaven" was a general term used to illustrate an ideal world. Besides this 1926 essay, Zhou repeated his view ten years later, in "Tan rujia" 談儒家, *SWQJ*, j. 7, p. 395.

⁴¹ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Mythology* (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1924), p. xii.

⁴² "Funü wenti yu dongfang wenming deng" 婦女問題與東方文明等, *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 475.

⁴³ Cited from Michael Lowy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's on the Concept of History* (NY: Verso, 2005), p. 7.

of communists in 1927. Zhou could not accept the legitimacy of such a brutal and maniacal action the way Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) and Hu Shi did.⁴⁴

Even with such sympathetic understanding, Zhou still regarded the rise of communism as irrational daydreaming. He wrote that “one of the largest weaknesses of humans is their arrogance. They conceal the reality with empty fantasies and think that they are living in a golden world. They are obsessed with their daydreams. This might be some kind of mania.”⁴⁵ In 1928, when the Leftist literary movement grew into popularity, he sharply pointed out that those Leftists abandoned reality in their zeal to imagine the coming of a better world: “They all shout out that the bright future is coming. All the farmers are awakened, and tomorrow is the worldwide revolution. But they do not allow the discussion of how ignorant, mean and selfish the farmers are.”⁴⁶ Holding an attitude towards the peasantry that had been popular among May Fourth intellectuals during the early 1920s, Zhou thought that the premature optimism of these communists caused them to lose contact with the harsh realities.

Zhou continued to ridicule the “Romantic” atmosphere that affected literary fields and social movements in the 1930s. He says, “China now is undoubtedly in a Romantic era. Civil revolution and the anti-imperialist movements are all its manifestations. Even in literature it is so. No matter from which literary school, writers all demonstrate a Romantic tendency,⁴⁷ and are obsessed with the Werther fever, or, speaking more broadly, the Manfred fever.”⁴⁸ In this sense, the revolutionary literature of “blood and tears” is not different from the “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” school.⁴⁹ Criticizing such faith in a reputedly perfect communist world, Zhou sets a threshold that cannot be crossed: no matter how psychologically understandable the communist move-

⁴⁴ See my analysis in “The Sacred and the Cannibalistic,” p. 45.

⁴⁵ “Suku” 訴苦, *SWQJ*, j. 4, p. 700.

⁴⁶ “Funü wenti yu dongfang wenming deng,” *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 476. Zhou’s discontent with Leftist approaches toward literature and society can be seen in his interview with Inoue Kobai 井上紅梅 in 1934. See Inoue Kobai, “Caifang Zhou Zuoren” 採訪周作人, trans. Dong Bingyue 董炳月, in Sun and Huang, eds., *Huiwang Zhou Zuoren*, pp. 28–33.

⁴⁷ Zhou uses the term 文士, scribe, for “writers.” This implied disapproval of the profession. In a 1925 article, Zhou cited the Gospel of Mark to discuss how the chief priests 祭司 and “scribes 文士” went about their plan to kill Jesus, thus giving “scribe” a certain notoriety. See his “Wenshi yu yiren” 文士與藝人, *SWQJ*, j. 4, pp. 114–15.

⁴⁸ “Haiwai min’ge yixu” 海外民歌譯序, *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 98. Werther and Manfred are the protagonists of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Byron’s *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem*, respectively.

⁴⁹ “Da Yunshen xiansheng” 答芸深先生, *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 118.

ment is, as long as it pursues a transcendental world, it is unacceptable in practice. Crossing the threshold and devoting oneself to the communist movement thus becomes a sign of losing one's rationality.

In the 1930s, as a means of resisting Leftist literature, Zhou adjusted his strategy and reinvented his image as a typical traditional intellectual who combined the traits of a Confucian scholar and Buddhist monk. Although his real target was the Leftist camp and their communist faith, Zhou seldom explicitly took the initiative to wage war against them. Rather, he took a detour and invested most of his energy in reexamining and reinterpreting Chinese intellectual history, in the process of which he even reduced his use of modern terms and adopted numerous traditional expressions in his writings. In 1936, he declared himself to be a friend of Confucius—a true Confucian—but refused to become a blind follower of Confucian doctrines.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, both his traditionalist gestures and assertions of Confucian fidelity should not be understood merely at face value. Zhou never gave up his humanistic and rationalistic views based on modern Western learning. What he did was search for the historical counterparts of modern figures and thereby examine traditional thought with Western learning as the latent criterion.⁵¹ During the process, he developed more and more sympathy for common people's desire for the transcendental, regarding it as a legitimate psychological need, a "human feeling 人情" that can coexist with "the principle of things 物理." His psychological acknowledgement of the transcendental and his epistemological denial and political dismissal of it formed a creative tension that enabled him to develop a sophisticated aesthetic and a philosophy of everyday life, a theme that is taken up, below.

With the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, intellectuals were forced to side with either China or Japan. After becoming the target of a failed assassination in 1939, Zhou Zuoren finally decided to collaborate with the Japanese. During this collaboration, Zhou became the target of a harsh nationalist attack. However, his activities under Japanese rule show certain ambiguities, and his own self-perception diverges from his public image. That Zhou collaborated is an undeniable fact, but he also helped Chinese interests on many occasions.⁵²

⁵⁰ "Yiyu yu Lunyu" 逸語與論語, *SWQJ*, j. 7, p. 90. For a comprehensive view of the ways in which Zhu developed his humanistic thought through reinterpreting the Confucian tradition, see Huang Kaifa 黃開發, *Ren zai lütu* 人在旅途 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1999), pp. 3-41.

⁵¹ "Ziji suoneng zuode" 自己所能做的, *SWQJ*, j. 7, pp. 697-98.

⁵² For example, after Li Dazhao's execution Zhou helped the family sell Li's books for the

Rather than seeing himself as a traitor, he perceived himself as a resister who worked right in the heart of the enemy.⁵³ Whether Zhou is insincere or not is arguable. However, here I focus more on the texts themselves and provide a way of rationalizing Zhou's writings of the period, viewing them neither as perfunctory lies nor as inconsistent deviations from his earlier thoughts, but as continuations of his earlier humanism and rationalism.

With his writings, most of which are related to Chinese traditions, Zhou indeed developed his unique mode of "resistance" towards Japanese cultural dominance by rejecting the world beyond and insisting on a doctrine of secular humanism.⁵⁴ Zhou reasserted himself as a Confucian in a tone stronger than that of the 1930s. If his invoking Confucianism in the 1930s was a way to resist the so-called "newness" of Leftist culture, his gestures in the 1940s were made to resist the "foreignness" brought by the Japanese invasion. Increasingly, he used Confucian terminology as basic concepts in his writings. However, this was a tactic to give his earlier opinions a new look instead of a sign of abandoning them. As he explained, "I admit that I am Confucian. However, I have my own definition about the term and it might be different from popular understandings."⁵⁵ In the historical context of the 1940s, Zhou hid his intentions behind the label of "Confucianism" to highlight his identity as a Chinese under the Japanese rule, and the Confucianism Zhou reinvented was still humanistic as well as rationalistic.

In the 1940s, Zhou continued reviewing Chinese intellectual history by exploring its traditions, concluding that what was genuine at their core was fundamentalist Confucianism, which was absolutely "commonsensical, practicable, and humanistic."⁵⁶ In his 1943 essay on Chinese thought, Zhou argues that human morality is based on

much-needed money. He also helped rescue Communists and Nationalists who were arrested by the Japanese, and he helped to protect the property of Beijing University. See Wang Xirong 王錫榮, *Zhou Zuoren shengping yi'an* 周作人人生平疑案 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005), pp. 251-60, 304-5.

⁵³ For a comprehensive view of the complexity of the issue of collaboration during wartime in modern China, see Timothy Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2007). The issue related to "cultural traitor" or "cultural collaborator" during the second Sino-Japanese war deserves more academic attention. The figures to be studied might include Zhou Zuoren and Hu Lancheng 胡蘭成, among others. With a comparative perspective on collaboration issues in Europe during World War II, such research would enormously enrich our understanding of the complexity of modern history.

⁵⁴ "Han wenxue de chuantong" 漢文學的傳統, *SWQJ*, j. 8, p. 408.

⁵⁵ "Wode zaxue (4)" 我的雜學 4, *SWQJ*, j. 9, p. 195.

⁵⁶ "Han wenxue de chuantong," *SWQJ*, j. 8, p. 408.

the instinct for survival. At the same time, humans also care for others to guarantee their mutual existence. One thing distinguished the Chinese people from others: other nations developed religions to help them seek everlasting life or nirvana, as the Jews or the Indians did, or turned to down-to-earth power struggles to establish their empire, such as the Romans did. The Chinese people insisted on a simple secularism. They were only concerned about how to survive in this life. Therefore, other religious people might dream that the Kingdom of Heaven is nearby, and decide to sacrifice their lives for the gods or for a doctrine in pursuit of it. The Chinese people would not make such a sacrifice; and thus problems happen only when the means of survival are compromised. Zhou emphasizes that Chinese thought is healthy for being rooted in biological instincts.⁵⁷ Here it can be argued that Zhou is highlighting some aspects from the sophisticated traditions to serve his own political end: promoting the cultural subjectivity of China in a disguised form. His insistence on the inherent secularity of Chinese culture received criticism from the Japanese writer Kataoka Teppei 片岡鉄兵 (1894–1944), who regarded Zhou as a “veteran reactionary writer” for his challenging of Japanese cultural dominance.⁵⁸

Having spent decades introducing Japanese literature and culture to China, Zhou was determined to abandon his studies of Japan right before the Sino-Japanese War started, declaring that he did not understand religion, which to him was the core of Japanese culture.⁵⁹ Saying he “did not understand” was his way to disapprove the irrational fervor of certain aspects of Japanese religion. Yet he continued writing on Japanese culture, highlighting such religious irrationality, which he contrasted with the secular rationalism of Chinese culture. In his rationalization, if the Chinese were a rationalist people concerned only with human affairs in the mundane world, the Japanese were a religious people who resorted to irrational emotions and intended to transcend this world by merging themselves with their Shinto gods. Such views helped him to imagine a Chineseness that was different from and incompatible with the Japanese national character.

The implication in all this was that it would be impossible for Japan to assimilate the Chinese people. In 1943, Zhou wrote a sophisticated essay on the irrationality of Japanese culture titled “On the Festivals

⁵⁷ “Zhongguo de sixiang wenti” 中國的思想問題, *SWQJ*, j. 8, pp. 714–15.

⁵⁸ For a detailed discussion of Zhou’s resistance through his writings during the 1940s, see Kiyama Hideo 木山英雄, *Beijing kuzhu’an ji* 北京苦住庵記, trans. Zhao Jinghua (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008), pp. 140–66.

⁵⁹ “Daigong zhi bian” 怠工之辯, *SWQJ*, j. 9, p. 13.

of Gods,” in which he states that he always had a “terror of religion.” Borrowing extensively from Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男, he compares the varying attitudes towards gods in China versus in Japan, and argues that “in Japanese religion, people want to get close to the gods and merge with them through possession, while the Chinese people keep the gods at a respectful distance.” He goes on to say that in rural Japan the rites are irrational, as one could see in their parades. He contrasts them with the festivals held for gods in China, which arise mainly out of pragmatic concerns and feature rites that are rooted in worldly activities: “Chinese people are satisfied in worldly affairs. They do not aspire to become gods or Buddha even if they could engage in some sorts of mystical experiences. Their religious activities are all intended for the pursuit of fortune and the avoidance of disaster.” Here Zhou obviously ignores cases such as the Boxer Rebellion, in which possession by popular gods formed the essential part of its ritual formulations. But Zhou’s dichotomized view of the two cultures is less academic than political. Speaking on behalf of Chinese culture and people and comparing them with the Japanese counterpart, Zhou imagines a “Chineseness” that is essentially secular and rational. In his articulation of the two cultures, there is “a ditch that cannot be crossed,” which is religiosity.⁶⁰ This ditch thus became the cultural boundary between China and Japan that cannot be transgressed.

PROGRESS WITHOUT A TELOS:
THE CONCEPT OF TIME RECONFIGURED

Zhou’s criticism of a utopian, communist social ideal (with a final goal of realizing communism and a short-term goal of liberating China) coexisted with his criticism of the idea of progress, through which the transcendental can be approached. Therefore, in addition to negating the transcendental from the perspective of space, Zhou also emphasized his dismissal of the concept of teleological progress from the perspective of time. That society progresses along a linear, empty timeline had become the standard narrative on modernity since the European Enlightenment. With the introduction of social Darwinism, and later communism, such a way of thinking had been gaining popularity since the late-Qing period.

Meanwhile, the dynastic cyclic concept of time dominant in pre-modern China lost its aura in the modern era.

⁶⁰ “Guanyu jishen yinghui” 關於祭神迎會, *SWQZ*, j. 8, pp. 111–16.

Zhou, however, developed his own understanding of time. On the basis of this understanding, he declared in 1937 that “China’s progressing and approaching toward the Kingdom of Heaven is certainly questionable.”⁶¹ In fact, Zhou’s negation of the idea of teleological progress became evident in the early 1920s, after his “Romanticist impulse” ended. As he puts it in 1922, “evolution continues without an endpoint. Many people mistake the transitory phase of progress for the ultimate end of all changes.”⁶² At the same time, he believed that “there is nothing new under the sun.”⁶³ Put together, the two phrases represent Zhou’s view of progress: the world changes as it transitions endlessly to the next phase. Nevertheless, the changes do not accumulate to the point that the world becomes totally “new,” because the darkness in human history always casts its shadow on our reality and future. Zhou’s view of progress shares some similarities with that of Lu Xun, who declared that he himself was a transitional figure in historical progress.⁶⁴ However, behind his humble self-positioning and sacrificial spirit, Lu Xun, at least before the 1927 White Terror, still believed in the notion of progress on the basis that, because of the openness and uncertainty of the future, there is always a possibility for humans to move from the darkness of the past to an ever-brighter future, and social practice is the only way to achieve it.⁶⁵ As he saw it, his role was to put his shoulder to the gate of darkness and set the younger generation free.⁶⁶ Zhou, by contrast, gradually denied the popular connotation of the term “progress”, and regarded transition as the only thing in history that is permanent.

⁶¹ “Guanyu Yu Lichu” 關於俞理初, *SWQJ*, j. 7, p. 517.

⁶² “Wenyi shang de kuanrong” 文藝上的寬容, *SWQJ*, j. 2, p. 513.

⁶³ Zhou cited this phrase from *Ecclesiastes* repeatedly; it reflects his disbelief in teleological progress. For examples, see his 1918 essay “Rende wenxue” 人的文學, *SWQJ*, j. 2, p. 85; his 1925 essay “Yu youren lun guomin wenxue shu” 與友人論國民文學書, *SWQJ*, j. 4, p. 222; and his 1929 essay “Weida de bufeng” 偉大的捕風, *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 566.

⁶⁴ Wang Hui, “Lishi de ‘zhongjianwu’ yu Lu Xun xiaoshuo de jingshen tezheng” 歷史的‘中間物’與魯迅小說的精神特徵, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論 1986.5, pp. 53-67.

⁶⁵ Lu Xun 魯迅, “Guxiang” 故鄉, *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), j. 1, p. 510.

⁶⁶ Lu Xun, “Women xianzai zenyang zuo fuqin” 我們現在怎樣做父親, in *Lu Xun quanji*, j. 1, p. 135. Lu Xun admitted that his evolutionary way of thinking “collapsed” with his witnessing of the White Terror massacre. See his preface to *Sanxian ji* 三閑集, *Lu Xun quanji*, j. 4, p. 5. Shih Shu-Mei points out that, “a fundamentally evolutionary mode of thinking underlies much of Lu Xun’s thought and literary practice until the late 1920s, and that there is a surprising coherence in the complex structure of his thought when viewed from the lens of evolutionism. One might even argue that since Marxism was itself premised on a teleological conception of history, Lu Xun never really strayed far from his own particular evolutionary mode of thinking when he turned to Marxism.” See Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 2001), p. 74.

Zhou's disbelief in teleological progress is based on his observation of the persistent recurrence of evil from the past. As he confessed in 1928, he was still "naive" in the years before 1921, a period during which he published many idealistic and optimistic opinions. But gradually he came to understand that "humans are destined to be eaten by ghosts."⁶⁷ In 1923, he borrowed from Ibsen's *Ghosts* to describe the recurrence of ancestors' terrible thoughts and behavior in their descendants.⁶⁸ The ghostly manifestations of the past in reality (the "revenants," in Zhou's figurative phrase) make impossible an optimistic view of a linear progress toward a better world. Reality, therefore, is a disguised copy of history. Borrowing from Bakunin, he even proclaimed in 1924 that "the only function of history is to tell people that things are happening again."⁶⁹ In the next year, he further concluded that in China, "things that never happened will never happen. In the future, what appears on the historical stage is still the old dramas, only with new protagonists, costumes, and audiences." He then continued to discount the significance of the May Fourth Movement, explaining that there have already been such movements during the Han, the Song, and the Ming dynasties. Therefore, May Fourth was not a new event that would set a new starting point for Chinese history.⁷⁰

With such a dark view of history, Zhou almost denied the possibility of all kinds of progress, let alone teleological progress. As he clarified in 1925, he was not absolutely against the idea of progress. However, he did not believe in a rapid and thorough notion of progress. This is because that "no matter how the world changes, things like fighting, murder, adultery, divorce will never disappear. The ideal world is only the cinema for our entertainment."⁷¹ In this absolutely pessimistic view, progress is limited in degree and scope: things can be gradually improved, but the human world as a whole cannot do away with its fundamental problems so as to reach a point of absolute perfection. As he writes in 1928, "The cruelest learning in the world is history. ... Although it makes us hope for progress in the remote future, in the meantime it casts its shadow on reality, and terrifies us by demonstrating the power of the ghosts. Reading history made me lose ninety percent of my faith in and my hope for China and me myself."⁷²

⁶⁷ "Tanhu ji houji" 談虎集後記, *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 434.

⁶⁸ "Chonglai" 重來, *SWQJ*, j. 3, pp. 153-54.

⁶⁹ "Wenxingchu de yuyan" 問星處的預言, *SWQJ*, j. 3, pp. 438-39.

⁷⁰ "Dai kuaiyou" 代快郵, *SWQJ*, j. 4, p. 255.

⁷¹ "Yu youren lun xingdaode shu" 與友人論性道德書, *SWQJ*, j. 4, pp. 165-66.

⁷² "Lishi" 歷史, *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 371.

In this view, the hope for progress is deferred to the remote future since reality is always under the dark shadow of history.

Reading in cultural anthropology inspired Zhou to rationalize the uncanny recurrence of historical ghosts. He borrowed the concept “survival of the savage,” which was used by E. B. Taylor (1832–1917, a founding figure of cultural anthropology) and Andrew Lang (1844–1912, writer and anthropologist) to pinpoint the origin of such ghosts. With this concept, anthropologists managed to trace the origin of the “savage” phenomena in a “civilized” society back to “primitive societies.” In 1924, Zhou introduced J. H. Moore’s (1862–1916) idea that a dog scratches the carpet because it inherited the habit from its ancestor, the wolf. In a similar fashion, the “savage” phenomenon in modern society can be observable as the savage habits passed down from primitive time. Zhou comments that “in our human society, there are many surviving savage habits that have become useless or harmful. Sometimes they are mobilized to produce evil effects and form other absurd superstitions.”⁷³ Therefore, he reasons that our real enemy “is not the living people, but the beasts and ghosts that possess the living people.”⁷⁴ Dead figures are always ready to possess the living, who have no way to escape being possessed.

In Zhou’s hands, the concept “survival of the savage,” is a weapon for social criticism. It is because of the survival of the savage that our reality and future are always predetermined. Therefore, the attempt to periodize history is invalid. As he writes in 1928:

Unlearned persons made arbitrary judgments to periodize history according to either the coming of the new twentieth century, the success of the Northern Expedition, or the emerging of peasant rebellions. They think that those events mark the coming of another world, that there will be a complete change, and the world will be absolutely different from before. The outdated people seem to die out suddenly; the new people descend from the sky, surge out from the underground, or jump out from nowhere; the old and new seem to be different species. All such false impressions are caused by a lack of historical knowledge.⁷⁵

Zhou, of course, was knowledgeable enough to deny such grand narratives of historical progress. To him, the invalidity of the progressive

⁷³ “Gou zhua ditan” 狗抓地毯, *SWQJ*, j. 3, pp. 519–20.

⁷⁴ “Women de diren” 我們的敵人, *SWQJ*, j. 3, p. 560.

⁷⁵ “Bihu dushu lun” 閉戶讀書論, *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 511.

way of thinking lies in the way it totally ignores the power of history. Because of the power of history, it is impossible to create ruptures in historical development. The historical events that seemingly mark any apparent rupture merely constitute another round in the repetition of past events. As Lu Yan puts it, "Beneath the flashy new language and new ideologies of the 1930s, he saw the persistence of the moral basis of patriarchal society that had sustained an oppressive political order in China for ages."⁷⁶ As a form of historical determinism, Zhou's view is decisive in his totally negative conceptualization of the overall situation facing China.

To Zhou, "progress" can only be understood as referring to the endless and indefinite changes of history, a constant self-renewal without a telos—a present haunted by the past, and a future that can never break with the present. Such ideas were inspired by Havelock Ellis (1859–1939).

He translated several pieces from Ellis's *Impression and Comments* and included them into his own collected essays in 1929, regarding them as admirable, but beyond his power to emulate.⁷⁷ In the piece titled "Progress," Ellis first criticizes a notional figure who would believe that "the eminently respectable March of Progress was bearing him onwards to the social goal of a glorified Sunday School." Then he proposes the following:

We realise the world better if we imagine it, not as a Progress to Prim Perfection, but as the sustained upleaping of a Fountain, the pillar of a Glorious Flame. For, after all, we cannot go beyond the ancient image of Heraclitus, the "Ever-living Flame, kindled in due measure and in the like measure extinguished." That translucent and mysterious Flame shines undyingly before our eyes, never for two moments the same, and always miraculously incalculable, an ever-flowing stream of fire.

Here Ellis provides an image of progress profoundly different from the teleological one: things change constantly, not in a linear fashion that progressively moves toward perfection, but in a manner that causes them endlessly to renew themselves.

The end of change is self-termination, not the realization of an end. Ellis believes that this understanding of progress will bring better effects in practice. Then he continues:

⁷⁶ Lu Yan, "Beyond Politics in Wartime," p. 9.

⁷⁷ "Yongri ji xu" 永日集序, *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 544.

The world is moving, men tell us, to this, to that, to the other. Do not believe them! Men have never known what the world is moving to. Who foresaw—to say nothing of older and vaster events—the Crucifixion? What Greek or Roman in his most fantastic moments prefigured our thirteenth century? What Christian foresaw the Renaissance? Whoever expected the French Revolution? We cannot be too bold, for we are ever at the incipient point of some new manifestation far more overwhelming than all our dreams. No one can foresee the next aspect of the Fountain of Life. And all the time the Pillar of that Flame is burning at exactly the same height it has always been burning at!⁷⁸

Nothing is predictable. Not only does self-renewal proceed without a higher purpose or ultimate destination, it even occurs without following definite routes or directions. It comes only with much uncertainty, unpredictability and indeterminacy. In this view, the epistemological paradigms for imaging human society as a teleological totality based on religious belief or reason become invalid. In practice, the grand social, political, and intellectual projects also become impossible since they all set a telos and assign a definite route for approaching it.

Consequently, in a fluctuating world without certainty, people have to make their own decisions about how to live a meaningful life. Again, Zhou found answers in Ellis' writing. In discussing the public's responses to his research on sexual psychology, Ellis argues that the coming of the future is always deferred. Life is always in the stage of transition. In the "Postscript" to his final (sixth) volume of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Ellis writes:

I am well aware that many will not feel able to accept the estimate of the sexual situation as here set forth, more especially in the final volume. Some will consider that estimate too conservative, others too revolutionary. For there are always some who passionately seek to hold fast to the past; there are always others who passionately seek to snatch at what they imagine to be the future. But the wise man, standing midway between both parties and sympathizing with each, knows that we are ever in the stage of transition. The present is in every age merely the shifting point at which past and future meet, and we can have no quarrel with either.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ "Ailisi ganxiang lu chao" 露理斯感想錄抄, *SWQJ*, j. 4, pp. 51–52. The original is cited from Havelock Ellis, *Impression and Comments: First* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), pp. 227–29.

⁷⁹ (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1911), p. 641.

Life, in this conception, becomes a pure process without an end. Therefore, in this world of transition people should not pursue eternity. Nor should they idealize and get obsessed with a certain moment of time, be it in the past or in the future. Putting one's ideal in the past or in one's imagined future will eternalize what is in fact transitory. Therefore, the only wise option is to stop dreaming for eternity, and to regard transition as the only constant.

If nothing is eternal and life is limited in terms of time and space, how is it possible for an individual life to associate itself with the whole of human life? Ellis thus concludes his "Postscript" by defining the mission of individual life as passing on the torch through generations:

In the moral world we are ourselves the light-bearers, and the cosmic process is in us made flesh. For a brief space it is granted to us, if we will, to enlighten the darkness that surrounds our path. As in the ancient torch-race, which seemed to Lucretius to be the symbol of all life, we press forward torch in hand along the course. Soon from behind comes the runner who will outpace us. All our skill lies in giving into his hand the living torch, bright and unflickering, as we ourselves disappear in the darkness.⁸⁰

An individual's mission as a group member is accomplished once the torch passes to others. The only future for him is to disappear, and there is no "higher" purpose than that for his life. Therefore, the present is not the inferior, temporary, preparatory stage for the eternal existence, but the only real existence in life and the only thing that he should be concerned with. He needs not sacrifice it in name of pursuing a higher purpose, such as those seen in political and social movements—whether those movements are secular or religious in nature.

By redefining the meaning of life, Zhou dissolved the existential anxiety that comes with faith in linear, teleological progress. However, his move challenged the mainstream view. In the 1930s, his fascination with Ellis was unique. As for the apolitical interpretation of progress he shared with Ellis, it was at odds with the Leftist critics' view. In 1935, with Zhou as the real target of his criticism, Hu Feng (1902–1985) argued that "the era of Havelock Ellis has passed."⁸¹ Zhou criticized the absurdity of such an opinion, rebutting Hu with the statement that Ellis

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 642. This idea of Ellis was so important to Zhou that he cited it on several occasions; e.g., his 1924 essay "Ailisi de hua" 露理斯的話, *SWQJ*, j. 3, pp. 346–47, and the 1933 essay "Xing de xinli" 性的心理, *SWQJ*, j. 6, p. 166.

⁸¹ Hu Feng 胡風, "Lin Yutang lun" 林語堂論 *Wenxue* 文學 4.1 (1935), also published in *Hu Feng quanji* 胡風全集 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1999), j. 2, p. 25.

never had an era of his own in which he became the icon of worship. But to him Hu's attack was not only unfounded, but also mystical:

What is popular now is religious fanaticism. People see that the sun rises and sets every day. But they expect a polar day coming tomorrow. No, for them that's not enough. They want to turn the sun into a lantern hanging forever over their head to create an everlasting day. People like to talk about the "Eve," just as with Christmas Eve, or "Midnight," to put it elegantly. It is a mystic night. For people of little faith, however, it is difficult to understand.⁸²

By the term "midnight," Zhou might be referring to the Leftist novelist Mao Dun's novel *Midnight*, first published in 1933. Midnight is the darkest moment, the one after which the bright day will come. Zhou argues that for people like Ellis, who do not have a belief in the coming of the transcendental, "night turns into dawn and dawn into night, and the world is always in a transitory status. However, such transitions are not necessarily approaching the Kingdom of Heaven."⁸³ Therefore, in Zhou's understanding, progress is nothing more or less than part of a process of constant change. It can be safely said that, should his view have become popular, then the teleological narrative of social progress that was implied in China's modern intellectual and social movements of the time would have encountered a fundamental challenge: sacrifice of life makes no sense in the absence of a guaranteed bright future.

In 1944, Zhou named his view of history "New Fatalism," which was full of darkness.⁸⁴ It was "new" because it was not based on the time-honored belief in dynastic cycles, but on modern learning from the West. In 1945, he described how his reading of history affected his thinking:

Mostly, my worldview is simple and straightforward, and therefore optimistic. However, it is overcast by a dark shadow once it is exposed to reality. I read evolution theory as well as the theory of heredity. Therefore, I usually prefer reading history over philosophy and recommend others read history. However, positive things are rare to see in history. As a result, the more I read the more annoyed I become.⁸⁵

⁸² "Ailisi de shidai" 龔理斯的時代, *SWQJ*, j. 6, p. 456.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ "Dengxia dushu lun" 燈下讀書論, *SWQJ*, j. 9, p. 271.

⁸⁵ "Fanren de xinyang" 凡人的信仰, *SWQJ*, j. 9, p. 620.

Here, “heredity” (in Zhou’s vocabulary) represents the ghosts of history that always come back to haunt reality. It is the tension between evolution (a linear progression) and heredity (the inescapable burden from the past) that prevents him from establishing a determined faith in teleological progress. The tension also created a dynamic that helped Zhou see the complexity of human history. He continues to point out the irresolvable contradictions between rationalist principles and dark reality: “The future for humans is bright based on rationalist principles. Nevertheless, darkness in China is still never-ending according to historical facts. Confucius also had the same worries. On one hand, he pursued the Grand Harmony of the world. On the other hand, he wanted to return to his home in Shandong.”⁸⁶ The endless darkness inherited from history made it impossible to change reality according to rational principles. To some extent, being rational implies living with an internal tension, and a critical attitude toward the mainstream view of reality.

CULTIVATION OF LIFE IN THE QUOTIDIAN WORLD

Zhou’s denial of the transcendental and the possibility of teleological progress implies, in philosophical terms, a political negation of the grand narratives of the associated intellectual and social movements. The remaining questions are these: in his philosophy of negation, what is still affirmative? Also, in light of the doomed destiny of humans who live in a fallen world without the hope of redemption, what can still be done for individuals to live a meaningful life? In response to the first question, he affirms the irreducible value of individual life, which cannot be instrumentalized, undermined or sacrificed for any “higher” purpose. In response to the second question, he recommends the care of the self through the cultivation of everyday life. A meaningful life is a life that mainly concerns itself with everyday reality. Individual life is, biologically speaking, a journey to perdition, not redemption. Death does not lead to a higher state of life, and therefore the most important thing is the journey itself: instead of being anxious about the doomed destiny, it is better to enjoy the “scenery” while one makes this journey.⁸⁷ This is what he concluded in 1923 after awakening from his Romanticist dreams. His advocacy of such a view is a direct criticism of the mainstream enlightenment, national salvation, and revolution—

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Xunlu de ren” 尋路的人, *SWQJ*, j. 3, pp. 190–91.

all of which demand individual sacrifice. To him, such a demand is inherently cannibalistic.

The mainstream at that time often viewed the everyday as a field in which one needed to be emancipated, but only in symbolic terms, which means that the emancipation of the everyday makes sense only when it can be interpreted as part of the higher political goal. In this case, the goal would be the total emancipation of society. Positioning himself in opposition to the mainstream, Zhou intended to reclaim the irreducible value of the everyday: for individuals, the everyday is everything that matters. During his long career, Zhou touched upon almost every aspect of everyday life.⁸⁸ To name just a few examples, he wrote about clothing, various types of local food and drink, different styles of residential houses, the use of toilets, and forms of transportation. He also explored festivals, seasonal celebrations, leisure activities, the experience of traveling, folk beliefs, tales, children's toys, children's games, rites, forms of worship, gardening, antiques, childbirth, illness, and death. He even paid attention to trivial matters such as itching.

To him, all these aspects of daily life were equally valuable. When discussing the issue of individual life in 1925, he opposed the conventional view of seeing the everyday in a hierarchical manner: "In our life, there are issues such as food, love, giving birth, work, aging and dying. They are all interconnected and we cannot just pick one or two from them." However, some people "regard walking as superior and sleeping as inferior, eating meals as superior and drinking wine and tea as inferior. I do not think people can merely eat meals or sleep for the whole day. But I do think that sleeping and drinking wine and tea should not be looked down upon, because they are also part of our life."⁸⁹ "Being part of life" for Zhou means "being an equal part of life." Such an interpretation was at odds with values: the repressed, the ignored reality of the everyday, and the "insignificant" issues all become important issues that deserve attention and resolution.

Zhou's view of the everyday reveals his view of culture. In his personal life, Zhou was aware ever since his youth of everyday needs.⁹⁰ However, his genuine interest in that should not be read as merely the manifestation of his personal taste. It is such indulgence that inspired

⁸⁸ For examples of the profusion of writings on the everyday, see Zhou Zuoren, *Zhitang tan chi* 知堂談吃, ed. Zhong Shuhe (Ji'nan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2005).

⁸⁹ "Shang xia shen" 上下身, *SWQJ*, j. 4, p. 40.

⁹⁰ "Lichun yiqian" 立春以前, *SWQJ*, j. 9, p. 442. Also see his "Jiu riji chao" 舊日記抄, *SWQJ*, j. 7, pp. 158–59. For the financial situation of Zhou's family and the change in their lifestyle, see Wang, *Zhou Zuoren shengping yi'an*, pp. 368–89.

him to reflect on the cultural significance of it all. To him, the everyday was the critical field in which culture is practiced. In his conceptualization, culture was a pyramid structure, with folk culture at the bottom and popular culture in the middle.⁹¹ Elite culture, which represents the highest cultural achievement, is at the top. He believed that, while a few members of the elite might have had rational thoughts, the majority held social power. Therefore, the lower part of a culture was the most influential in determining social consciousness. Zhou contended that cultural study should focus not only on cultural products created by the elite, but also expand its horizons to include popular and folk culture.⁹² He even insisted that folk and popular culture should be regarded as the main body of a culture, the only means by which one could access the fundamental characteristics of a people.

In his writings, Zhou often notices that the quotidian has, since premodern times, been despised as insignificant and irrelevant by the mainstream. He observes that many such issues have been excluded from the general discussion of culture and politics by orthodox Confucian scholars, who might have “forgotten” the humanistic nature of original Confucianism.

In the 1930s, when reading the jotted notes of the Ming–Qing literati, Zhou repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with his inability to find appealing detailed records of people’s daily conduct and trivial concerns. Those literati were mainly obsessed with defending the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy or recording superstitious retribution. Zhou became overjoyed when he found one or two pieces that told of daily conduct and trivial concerns amid volumes of writings.⁹³ In this respect, the situation did not improve in modern times. Such a lack of attention to daily life was inherited by most of the enlightenment thinkers, whose attention was much drawn into the grand sociopolitical projects aiming for national salvation, revolution, and modernization. In a retrospective essay written in 1945, Zhou criticizes the fact that, since the late Qing, missions of revolutionary movements have all been politically related. By and large, folk life and customs were ignored in the mainstream discussions of social transformation, Zhang Taiyan (1868–1936) being the only exception.⁹⁴ With a strong Han Chinese nationalist sen-

⁹¹ When discussing literature, Zhou provided a diagram to illustrate the relationship among elite culture, popular culture, and primitive (folk) literature. See Zhou Zuoren, *Zhongguo xinwenxue de yuanliu* 中國新文學的源流 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), p. 7.

⁹² “Ribei guankui (3)” 日本管窺之三, *SWQJ*, j. 7, p. 11.

⁹³ “Changtan conglu (2)” 常談叢錄二, *SWQJ*, j. 7, pp. 356–57.

⁹⁴ “Tan husu” 談胡俗, *SWQJ*, j. 9, p. 732.

timent, Zhang regarded folk life and customs as a way to differentiate “civilized” and “barbarian.”

To improve the situation, Zhou constantly promoted folk studies as a way to better understand the cultural history of China. He criticized the approaches of traditional historical studies in 1940:

Chinese historiography has been highly developed. However, from the point view of an outsider, I feel that it excessively emphasizes political as well as military history. Research on economic history has been rare. The records of folk life have almost been missing and nobody paid attention to it.

Here Zhou challenged the established academic disciplines for overemphasizing the “grand” aspects of history and ignoring the “petty” aspects. However, he saw this pattern as occurring well beyond the academic setting:

We have not studied the clothing, food, residences, means of livelihood, language, rites for birth and death, and beliefs of the past generations around the country. It has to be done. Synchronically it is folk studies and diachronically it is cultural history. Bit by bit and category by category, we will accumulate valuable materials in this field. Many important undertakings, such as the survey of dialects, collection of folklores, and recording of costumes have not been accomplished.

Bringing up the ignored issues concerning folkways also opened up the possibility of viewing history differently. He continued, “Traditional scholars might regard such research as trifling with playthings and losing one’s lofty aspirations. However, serious learning such as philology, literary history, religious studies, moral history and intellectual history would become unfounded or shaky without knowledge of folk life.”⁹⁵

In 1934, in another context, he explicitly argued that “the people’s history is nothing more than the continuation of their quotidian activities and experiences.”⁹⁶ Here the emphasis is the total opposite of the conventional one. However, Zhou does not elevate everyday life and culture to a political position that is in the service of a grand project. Instead, he argues that such projects are not what confer significance.

⁹⁵ “Nüxue yixi hua” 女學一席話, *SWQJ*, j. 8, p. 497. Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 discussed the omission of contextual information, mostly related to everyday life, from a different perspective, arguing that, “such subjects as everyday food and clothing, general cultural preferences, and habits of the various social classes tend to be omitted precisely because they are so well known.” See his *Limited Views*, trans. Ronald Eagan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1998), pp. 252–53.

⁹⁶ “*Qing jialu*” 清嘉錄, *SWQJ*, j. 6, pp. 247–48.

He argues that it is peoples' quotidian activities, rather than their political and social activities, that constitute the main body of human life. In Zhou's hierarchy, they form the very foundation of not only modern learning, but also any grand project. In a culture where the political has always been the center of attention, Zhou took many pains to lead young scholars away from those issues. He called for them to join folk studies instead, which would allow them to investigate the "lower and broader" aspects of society.⁹⁷

To Zhou's surprise, the issues ignored in mainstream Confucian culture received plenty of attention in non-Confucian ones, such as the culture *that arose out of* Buddhist practice. Zhou noticed that the regulations of conduct, termed the vinaya, are heavily directed toward basic matters, from using the bathroom to chopping firewood and purchasing meat. In a 1940 essay on the Buddhist vinaya, Zhou gives an example of the regulation on chopping firewood to demonstrate how meticulous and considerate the Buddhist rules of conduct are: "Five things need to be remembered when teaching others to chop firewood. First, do not block the way. Second, make sure that the shaft of the ax is tightly attached. Third, do not chop the green ones. Fourth, do not chop the ones that can be used in building pagodas. Fifth, put the chopped pieces in dry places."⁹⁸ He then comments that even the Confucian scholar Zhu Bolu (1617-1688) did not provide such detailed and considerate instructions in his well-known text *Family Instructions of Master Zhu* 朱子家訓. There are also regulations in Buddhist texts on toilet etiquette, which was of course not much remarked about in people's everyday discussions or by scholars. To Zhou, however, it was an issue that might even be more important than the grand social and intellectual projects. As early as in 1921, he described the unhappy experience of seeing scattered human excrement in the Western Hills, a famous tourist site where he was recuperating.⁹⁹ In 1935, he took up this issue again and described the unsanitary toilets in China in a humorous tone. And again, he found that it was indeed subject to orderly regulations in the Buddhist vinaya.¹⁰⁰ He was convinced that all of the latter's detailed regulations on daily conduct were rooted in a thorough understanding of human emotions and the principles of things – an understanding lacking in modern China.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ "Fengtu zhi" 風土志, *SWQJ*, j. 9, p. 409.

⁹⁸ "Sanqian wei yi" 三千威儀, *SWQJ*, j. 8, pp. 356-57.

⁹⁹ "Shanzhong zaxin (5)" 山中雜信五, *SWQJ*, j. 2, pp. 350-51.

¹⁰⁰ "Ruce dushu" 入廁讀書, *SWQJ*, j. 6, p. 844.

¹⁰¹ "Du jielü" 讀戒律, *SWQJ*, j. 7, p. 305.

However, the construction of everyday life was, in Zhou's view, more about taking care of basic needs in a decent way. In his view, the everyday artifacts, particularly food, should become a "cultural site" that reflects the richness of local life throughout the vicissitudes of history.¹⁰² With its historical-cultural dimension, the everyday as a whole should be an object of artistic appreciation, even though it arises from a concern with issues of survival. In this view, the quality of the everyday life acts as an indicator of the health of a society and culture. The meagerness of the everyday life led by most Chinese people thus becomes a symptom of the fundamental problem of Chinese culture and society: people were suffering both material and spiritual poverty.

In 1924, Zhou lamented that Beijing – after having served as China's capital for more than five hundred years—was even unable to produce good-quality tea cakes, although it should have been generally able to cultivate fulfilling and sophisticated lifestyles. To him, it is a great pity that people were unable to find cookies that reflect "the delicacy and the decadence of history" while living in a historical city.¹⁰³ Twenty years later, he repeated such a complaint:

I often think that, with such a long history, the culture and history of a country will leave traces on everyday life. Such traces, whether splendid or delicate in style, should be refined in nature. They are not for showing off. It happens naturally. When I first came to Beijing, I complained because there were no good tea cakes. I was not gluttonous. I just felt that it was a disgrace for Beijing's inability to produce fine tea cakes, being the capital city for five hundred years.¹⁰⁴

"Reflecting the delicacy and the decadence of history" might be a difficult task to carry out in cake-making, and, to many, Zhou's discussing food in such a way in 1944, when the war was ongoing, seemed untimely. Yet his doing so reflected a serious consideration of how to enrich and refine everyday life by associating daily consumer items with the broader cultural-historical context of human activities. The everyday should not be treated as a wasteland or a site only concerned with the pragmatic issue of survival. Rather, the treatment of everyday objects, materials, and activities should imply an aesthetic dimension.

¹⁰² Chang Jun 常峻, *Zhou Zuoren wenxue sixiang ji chuanguo de minsu wenhua shiye* 周作人文學思想及創作的民俗文化視野 (Shanghai: Shanghai shiji chubanshe, 2009), pp. 268–71.

¹⁰³ "Beijing de chashi" 北京的茶食, *SWQJ*, j. 3, p. 377.

¹⁰⁴ "Suzhou de huiyi" 蘇州的回憶, *SWQJ*, j. 9, p. 172.

Tea drinking serves as a prime example of the aestheticized everyday activity Zhou had in mind. When introducing the Japanese tea ceremony in a 1924 work, he underlined that it provided an opportunity for people to enjoy a bit of beauty and harmony in the imperfect human world, and a chance to experience eternity in the ephemeral. According to Zhou, then, the ideal tea-drinking experience is like this:

Drinking tea should be under the paper-covered window of a tile-roofed house. Using a set of a simple but elegant teapot and cups, a person, with two or three acquaintances, should drink green tea prepared with clear spring water. Such a moment of leisure is worth ten years' dusty dreams. When finished, we can go back to our own serious undertakings, either for fame or for profit. But it is necessary to have the short moment of carefree leisure.¹⁰⁵

Tea drinking, in this way, not only goes beyond the satisfaction of physical needs, but also provides an escape, a suspended moment of time within the fluctuating world of chaos. This moment contrasts with "serious undertakings," which in his time included not only the usual employments, but also the engagement in the various social, political and intellectual movements that aimed to modernize the country.

However, from the late 1920s onward, Zhou Zuoren gradually gave up his purely aesthetic approach. Tea drinking became the symbolic activity closely associated with his cultural identity and philosophy of life, and he focused less on the experience of eternity than on an appreciation of tea's "genuine taste," which is "bitterness," not fragrance. He used the term "turbid tea 苦茶" in his poem and in the title of his book.¹⁰⁶ Such "bitterness" could be read as his evaluation of everyday reality: the world was inherently imperfect, without escape or remedy. The only way to endure it was to accept and appreciate it as it is. Therefore, tea drinking came to be seen not as an exceptional event outside of everyday reality, but as a daily practice occurring under any occasion. It represented a reconciling of oneself to reality. In short, for the person who reconciles himself thus, there will be no more efforts to transform reality into the transcendental; he will only take a serene attitude toward it, knowing it rationally and appreciating it inwardly.

According to Zhou, the everyday can also cater to spiritual needs. Although he denies a world of beyond, from a psychological perspective he still acknowledges the legitimacy of people's spiritual needs.

¹⁰⁵ "He cha" 喝茶, *SWQJ*, j. 3, pp. 568-69.

¹⁰⁶ Examples include his 1935 essay collection *Kucha suibi* 苦茶隨筆 and the jokes he edited in *Kucha an xiaohua xuan* 苦茶庵笑話選 in 1933.

In his rational framework, which unites the physical and spiritual, he does not necessarily refer to a transcendental world order, but in his view people might satisfy themselves within the bounds of everyday reality by engaging in activities of a religious nature.¹⁰⁷ In sum, having started with a discussion of eating and drinking, Zhou broadened his view by emphasizing the importance of leisure and recreational activities in general:

Besides daily necessities, we have to have some useless games and enjoyment to make us feel that life is interesting. We appreciate the sunset, the autumn river, and the flowers, listen to the rain, and smell the scent of the incense. We drink wine that is not intended for quenching one's thirst, and eat delicate cookies that are not intended for satisfying one's hunger. All these are necessary in life—even though they are useless—and the more refined they are the better. It is a pity that life in China now is extremely dull and vulgar.¹⁰⁸

Zhou's discussion of the usefulness of the apparently "useless" indicates that enjoyable objects or activities can provide an imagined spiritual space. To him, what makes life worth living falls within the domain of the everyday objects and activities. Everything enjoyable is concrete, and nothing is associated with elusive beliefs in the existence of a world beyond this one. Leisure, in this framework, takes its place as the defining activity in the search for life's meaning.

In the 1930s, traditional leisure activities were suppressed by both enlightenment-minded intellectuals and officials of the Nationalist state. These restrictive measures were taken in the hope of modernizing China. Proponents of the Western-centered mode of modernization thought traditional celebrations—including Chinese New Year, temple fairs, and other festivals—should be banned. The pragmatic intellectuals and officials regarded these celebrations as a sheer waste of time and money, and therefore incompatible with modern life.

Zhou had to fight against such proposals, pleading that traditional celebrations should be preserved to provide the common people with some opportunities to enjoy their life:

There should be some joy beyond the concern in life to simply survive. Only then will people think that life is meaningful. That's why little girls ask for flowers in addition to shirts, and old women

¹⁰⁷ It is worth noting that Zhou does not propose to eradicate religions, or to present his proposal as the single legitimate option.

¹⁰⁸ "Beijing de chashi," *SWQJ*, j. 3, p. 377.

want to buy a cake after having lunch. Except for being incompatible with the solar calendar, the traditional New Year's celebration does no harm in life. It should be kept in order to preserve the very limited joy of life for the common people. We might rename it "Spring Festival," but people should be allowed to celebrate it as they wish, and schools and governmental offices can have a three-to-seven day holiday.¹⁰⁹

Strongly opposing the pragmatic, "modern" view, here he has argued that the most hard-working people in China, namely farmers, workers, and business people—most of whom did not have state-sponsored vacations—enjoy celebrations like Chinese New Year the most. After working hard the whole year round, they deserve a break. As for the consumption of goods during the celebration, there is nothing wrong with it, as long as people are willing to pay for leisure while giving others opportunities to profit.¹¹⁰

Zhou repeatedly emphasizes the importance of taking joy in life. Such joy should not be a negligible complement to the "serious" part of life. Rather, it becomes an essential that provides a space both within and beyond the daily pragmatic concerns, a space in which people can take care of their spiritual needs. In a work from 1937, Zhou defines leisure activities as activities that range "from boat racing and spring excursions to storytelling, going to a tea house, idling outside the door, cracking melon seeds, and smoking. They are what change the daily routine, and any activity that changes routine life, not as a burden, but as a means of enjoyment, can be counted as leisure."¹¹¹ In the secularized world, where pursuing the transcendental is not a rationalistic option, leisure activities become the necessary substitute for spiritual needs.

What Zhou called everyday life is neither an idealization of the status quo nor a permanent escape, but an examination of life in the harsh light of reality. On one hand, he celebrated the disenchantment brought by the development of modern sciences. On the other, he lamented the disappearance of the aura that surrounded the traditional way of life: life in the modern world means that humans face loneliness and consciousness of their immanent doom (death). What's more, they must face these realities without belief in gods or ghosts to console them. Science cannot solve every problems related to imagination,

¹⁰⁹ "Changdian" 廠甸, *SWQJ*, j. 6, p. 264.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ "Tan yule" 談娛樂, *SWQJ*, j. 7, pp. 713-14.

taste, and the terror of death. As I mentioned earlier in this article, Zhou, against this trend, tried to reintegrate the transcendental as a psychological element into the secular. In his ethic, rationally expelled “superstitious” beliefs are transformed into the object of knowledge and arts to satisfy people’s psychological needs and enrich their experience of the everyday.¹¹² In other words, what Zhou imagined is a reversed world: as Noriya Ito proposes, life no longer serves a higher purpose, but becomes a “life for life’s sake.”¹¹³ The transcendental makes sense only in serving the mundane.

Zhou’s concern with the everyday sometimes gives readers the false impression that he was a reclusive hedonist. In his time, only a few intellectuals realized the significance of his writings.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, in the 1930s he received harsh criticisms from the “serious” Leftist critics, criticisms based exactly on the Left’s contempt for the everyday world—a position against which Zhou was fighting. Therefore, his writings on the everyday also need to be read as a counter-narrative to the grand narratives. As Charles Laughlin insightfully points out, the experience of everyday life “is more than an accumulation of trivial details. It can pose a serious challenge to abstract discourses, a concrete critique of hollow theories.” This is because “grand theories by their very nature lose touch with reality, while writings that focus on the everyday can yield deep insights through their meditation on the subtle and complex meanings and connections of apparently insignificant objects or incidents.”¹¹⁵ Of course, we also can argue that the everyday cannot only substantiate the abstract discourses, but also raise significant questions outside such discourses. Perhaps in order to answer Zhou’s essay on tea drinking, Lu Xun wrote an essay in 1933 that bore the same title, but advanced a contrary opinion: while admitting that the tea-drinking experience is appealing, he dismisses it as overly subtle and delicate —

¹¹² For a discussion on the ways in which Zhou reconfigured the transcendental through rationality and aesthetics in his 1930s “new enlightenment” project, see my “To Believe or Not to Believe,” pp. 234–45.

¹¹³ Noriya Ito 伊藤德也, “Shenghuo zhi yishu de jige wenti” 生活之藝術的幾個問題, *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* 2007.5, pp. 51–56.

¹¹⁴ Hu Lancheng 胡蘭成 (1906–1981), another famous “cultural collaborator” 文化漢奸 during the Sino-Japanese war, is among the few intellectuals who tried to interpret Zhou’s writing on the everyday as politically and intellectually significant. Hu argues that Zhou’s writings of this type provided necessary details of society and thus enormously enriched the discussions about grand institutions and systems. In Zhou’s view, since revolutions and reforms have repeatedly happened already in the political and social realms, everyday life remains the same. Therefore, Zhou’s writings are his effort to reform everyday life. See Hu, “Tantan Zhou Zuoren” 談談周作人, *Renjian* 人間 1943.1, p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Laughlin, *Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity*, pp. 77–78.

features that did not fit the harsh political reality and might even have compromised the political struggle.¹¹⁶ Obviously, Lu Xun's neglect of everyday enjoyment is out of an intentional political choice instead of his lack of sensibility towards the quotidian. In fact, the issues of the everyday did not engage Lu Xun's concern until right before his death. Only then was he truly aware of how valuable daily activities were. Still, he regarded the everyday as indispensable yet secondary (as "twig and leaf") to one's serious work (as "flower and fruit").¹¹⁷ To some extent, his view attests to the significance of Zhou's emphasis of the centrality of the everyday, and its aesthetic and spiritual aspects.

CONCLUSION

Zhou denied that the transcendental could be pursued in a teleological fashion. After he dismissed the former possibility as illegitimate, the realm of the everyday grew in significance for him. Eventually, he came to see it as most important and significant place where life's meaning could be sought. He ultimately decided that virtually all one had to (or should) concern himself with was the rationalized, secular world.

A close reading of Zhou's numerous essays shows that in cultivating everyday life, Zhou took inspiration from the Chinese, Greek and Japanese traditions. We may argue that without such a sophisticated set of global cultural contexts, Zhou might not have accomplished very much. From a philosophical perspective, Zhou shifted his focus, to borrow the terms of Xiaobing Tang, "from the heroic to the quotidian." He turned from the grand to the petty, and from the novel and exotic to the homely. The domain of the everyday finally became a space in which he reexamined the fundamental problems of Chinese culture and society: the ultimate concern with the transcendental thus became irrelevant. In this domain, any impulse to transcend this world is to be seen as a betrayal of reality. The world becomes a place in which humans enjoy their mundane life by engaging in diverse and constantly changing activities. It is a world where miracles and solutions to life's inherent problems are absent. In an essay written in 1930, he complained that "most of the time we are only capable of dreaming. What we see is either Heaven or Hell. But we are reluctant to take a look at the mundane world and see what kind of people there are and how they think."¹¹⁸ As the only affirmative reality in Zhou's notion of

¹¹⁶ Lu Xun, "He cha" 喝茶, *Lu Xun quanji*, j. 5, pp. 331-32.

¹¹⁷ Lu Xun, "Zhe yeshi shenghuo" 這也是生活, *Lu Xun quanji*, j. 6, pp. 622-26.

¹¹⁸ "Caomu chongyu: shuili de dongxi" 草木蟲魚, 水里的東西, *SWQJ*, j. 5, p. 649.

a post-belief era, the quotidian activities of the secular world captured his intellectual attention. In so doing, he proposed a bottom-up enlightenment project focusing on examining and improving the quality of people's everyday lives.

Of course, one should not misread Zhou's promotion of the everyday as an endeavor on behalf of the so-called lower class. He was aware of the distinction in lifestyles created by different economic backgrounds. However, he refused to see social class as a decisive factor in analyzing cultural issues. In his view, the social consciousness, civilization, arts, and culture of everyday life do not belong to any particular class. Rather, they can be appreciated by members of different classes as universal social products. In a public letter to the last emperor, Puyi 溥儀, in 1924, Zhou wrote, "It is necessary for people to be free from hunger. But it is also critical to research luxury tea cakes, because we hope that one day people not only have food to eat, but also be able to appreciate tea cakes."¹¹⁹ Here he emphasizes that class analysis should not be used on behalf of the oppressed and poor to delegitimize the exploration of luxury and leisure in everyday life. On the contrary, it is the unsatisfying economic conditions that need to be improved, in order to make it possible for people to share the "aristocratic" decency of the everyday.

In summary, the everyday world Zhou Zuoren imagined provides for us an alternative to the mainstream view of the enlightenment in particular and in the Chinese modernity of his time in general. Insisting on the importance of joy in everyday life, he rejected the centrality of national salvation and revolution. More significant from today's perspective, this notion questioned the idea of a modernity centered on lineal progress, and which reveals its monstrosity when it tries to overthrow the existing "backward" social and cultural order in the name of efficiency and profit. It became more obvious in the 1930s that the ugliness of the monstrous materialist development had destroyed the aura of the past but failed to replace it with the beauty of the new. On the shabby debris left by both revolution and modernization, Zhou endeavored to build a lifestyle that was humanly attainable and acceptable. This mission only became possible nationwide in the post-Mao era, when the revolutionary fervent gave way to the enthusiasm for getting rich. After long oblivion, Zhou has thus regained scholarly and popular attention. His writings on everyday life, especially on food

¹¹⁹ "Zhi Puyi jun shu" 致溥儀君書, *SWQJ*, j. 3, pp. 537-38.

and drink have been widely read since the 1980s. Both the change in political atmosphere and the rise of consumerism have contributed to his popularity, and have indeed made the lifestyle Zhou promoted attainable, after decades of deferral. It now forms the core of the post-revolutionary construction of our quotidian life, although it does so in a way that Zhou may never have imagined.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SWQJ *Zhou Zuoren sanwen quanji* 周作人散文全集