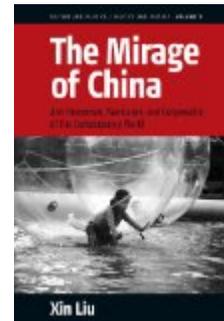**Xin Liu**. *The Mirage of China: Anti-Humanism, Narcissism, and Corporeality of the Contemporary World.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. xii + 209 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-545-3.

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Published on H-Ideas (June, 2010)
Commissioned by Magdalena Zolkos

An Ethnography of Objectivity, for China and the World

The Mirage of China traces a genealogy of the use of statistics and the concept of objectivity throughout the recent history of the People's Republic of China. What at first glance would seem a rather dry topic is given life and interest by Xin Liu's ethnographic writing and keen insights into both the rise of globalization and the fall of Maoism. Positing his work on the notion that "globalization as both a discursive and material force is historically produced, differently so in different social worlds," and the converse notion that "histories of different social worlds are globally made in and of specific places," Liu highlights the specificity of, and the global linkages in, the rise of objectivity and statistical knowledge in China through a detailed analysis of Maoist-era and contemporary subjectivities (p. viii).

Rather than working in chronological order through history, Liu begins his book with an analysis of the current "Mentality of Governance" in the People's Republic (chapter 1) and the population's faith in the "Facticity of Social Facts" (chapter 2). Despite detailed ethnographic moments throughout the book, Liu mostly draws on his own wide knowledge of Chinese society in these first two chapters (part 1 of the volume), which works well for the broadly defined topic at hand. Liu holds that "in turning its attention to the material development of the world, the People's Republic moved away from an older set of ideological concerns. The government's positive embracement of a realistic attitude toward life suggests an implicit denial of the Maoist past, which is seen

as historical madness from the viewpoint of 'petty affluence' " (p. 23). Likewise, with regard to the widespread acceptance of positivism, Liu notes that "hardly anyone in today's China would doubt that there is a universal law of development, or that the modernist and materialist path should be the only route to follow" (p. 58). One of the questions Liu tries to answer in his book is how this transition to a new epistemology occurred–how did both people and government come to adopt the positivist epistemology so wholeheartedly within a fairly short period?

Part 2 moves on to explore this question, beginning in "Discipline and Punish" (chapter 3) with the story of the career of Professor Dai, who worked to bring about the statistical revolution partially through critique of the "Soviet Union Theory" of statistics–which considers statistics as a branch of politics rather than mathematics. The chapter traces the rise of the concept of "the average man" (and the concomitant fall of "the masses") as the unit of governance. In this chapter, Liu makes the interesting point that the People's Republic has become "a safe haven for sociological research–quite contrary to the opinionated view of its political restriction on academic freedoms–insofar as the research is conducted in the scientific mode of statistical analysis" (p. 88). He suggests also that it is not necessarily the act of examining political troubles that is problematic for the state, but that if one should step into this "muddy field," one's research "is not deemed scientific enough, that is, not factual or

quantitative enough" (p. 88). Liu demonstrates the importance of quantitative statistics to the new China, in that "there is supposed to be no ambiguity, no partiality, no bias, no preconception in the strict quantitative reduction of social reality," noting that "this is indeed a new faith for those struggling on the ruins of the Maoist revolution" (p. 88). Chapter 4, "The Specter of Marx," moves on to consider in more detail the transition of the field of statistics from political science to mathematics, through analyzing the work of three key statisticians. The chapter opens with the somewhat sad story of one Professor Ma who spent twenty years writing a book arguing for the Soviet Union Theory, only to find, when he came to publish it, that the state he was defending had actually changed its position to that of his key rival, Professor Dai. Liu's reading of Ma's work provides some interesting insights, especially regarding the fact that Ma was arguing for a view of statistics perhaps not dissimilar from those in science and technology studies in the West today–that the development of statistical method is not insulated from socioeconomic history. Liu notes that "such a point is banal to the post-structuralist and deconstructionist mind; however, in the social sciences of the People's Republic, it came to be seen as a superstitious residue from the graveyard of Maoist ideologies" (p. 95). The next character introduced to us is that of Professor Zou who states definitively to his 1980s students that "Economics is not philosophy!"–a view that has become "a crucial part of social reality" in the People's Republic (p. 104). The question then, for the People's Republic in the era of Deng Xiaoping and his successors, has become "*how* to learn from the more advanced experiences of material development, not whether such a mode of life and knowledge should be borrowed" (p. 109). Statistics is the key method of measuring material development in relation to the Other (the West, America), and thus has become indispensable in the new mode of governance.

Part 3 moves on to the heart of the matter–Liu brings into play his analysis of the Maoist utopian mode of reasoning where the collective will alters materiality, showing how, when this imaginary failed, it was replaced by the notions of chance and statistics where the suffering of individuals is not a matter of oppression and hence cannot be changed through social revolution. Chapter 5, "The Taming of Chance," shows how the suffering or poverty of individuals is explained through the simple idea of random chance–it is an inevitable probability that someone must suffer, but luck and chance decide who that might be. To better understand the radical shift in thinking this entails, Liu dedicates the next

chapter, "Interiorization," to understanding the workings of the Maoist power-praxis. Here, he uses the work of The Oral History Project of Professor Sun Liping, particularly sociologist Fang Huirong's work on the way in which the Maoist years were remembered in a rural community. The Maoist power-praxis was essentially a "narrative transfer," Liu argues, where the land reforms of the Chinese countryside were as much an ideological production of social reality as a material transformation, and where "an enormous population came to feel their pain as a *different* kind of pain–one that became recognized as curable and momentary or temporal," rather than inevitable (p. 159). Liu goes into all the fascinating detail of class struggle in the Maoist years, showing how crude quantitative proportional data (where Mao estimated percentages of "rich peasants" and class enemies) came to be performed as local cadres sought to "uncover" this proportion of class enemies in every revolutionary site. All this demonstrates Liu's point that, in the Maoist world, ethical concerns were central to being, and these were regulated around the notion of *positionality* rather than objectivity.

In his last chapter, "Exteriorization," Liu comments that all his work on the Maoist era strives to more clearly see the nature of the contemporary Chinese world–as background to a painting provides relief for the foreground to be seen. The detailed analysis of the Maoist era indeed helps us to see the specificity of transformation in this local/global interaction. The new subjectivity, unlike the Maoist subject who was constituted by what was interior, is "measured from outside himself" through the "numerical seriality [of statistics] whose visibility has become the definitional criterion for self identity or identification" (p. 184). It is here that Liu explains his choice of title and subtitle, where the "mirage of China" reflects in some way the "symptomatic moment of our world at the present time" (p. viii), where "anti-humanism" alludes to the Maoist worldview (thought now to deny human nature), where "narcissism" and "corporeality" refer to the new exteriorized individual who sees the "true" material nature of the world (see the back cover). This last chapter, a conclusion of sorts, has plenty of fascinating insights, yet what appears to be the climax of this chapter is mostly incomprehensible to this reader–trained outside of sociology and unfamiliar with many of the works Liu here cites. All readers can grasp the direction of the final sentence, however, where Liu highlights both the dangers in the Maoist era and the losses in the contemporary statistical era: "Even if a dialectical utopia was indeed a nightmare, unreal and not verifiable by statisti-

cal science, can we give up dreaming or transcendental contemplation entirely as a sociological remedy to avoid having another one? " (p. 198).

The book as a piece of writing is fluid and graceful. Liu's ethnographic accounts are indeed masterly–deftly weaving dialogue, observation, metaphor, and analysis in a way that would make many writers (of both fiction and nonfiction) sigh with envy. Liu juxtaposes characters and incidents in such a way as to subtly highlight the themes at hand, using humor, irony, and understatement to bring to life the world of "making up numbers"–from the mouths of Beijing taxi drivers (sprinkled with profanity), officials and subordinates, professors, students, and statisticians; and of course through readings of relevant texts both old and new. Some may find this treatment of data somewhat unstructured and perhaps lacking objectivity, yet this reader believes this is part of the argument that Liu is trying to make in his work. Using a somewhat playful and subjective approach to his rich data, Liu shows the importance and significance of the popular and official rise of the concept of objectivity (and its concomitant dismissal of Maoist subjectivities) in the People's Republic of China. His playful attitude toward objectivity, combined with his account of the ideological dismissal of both objectivity and probability statistics during the Maoist era, subtly challenges the new mode of thinking and governance in the People's Republic. Liu effectively suggests that the rise of statistics and the objective mode are, like the rise of Maoism and the ideological mode, a phase in history that may or may not appear equally ridiculous in years to come. Can we see outside our own spot in history, Liu asks, and should we (and the people of China) give up dreaming and utopias merely because our current historical moment favors the narcissistic, corporeal statistic?

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