

Wang Ruoshui, Marxist Humanist

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The passing of Chinese philosopher and Marxist Humanist Wang Ruoshui on Jan. 10 is a sad event for all those aspiring for a human alternative to capitalism. One of the most creative and innovative thinkers of modern China, Wang was an untiring advocate of social justice, democracy, and human dignity. His legacy will far outlast the platitudes of those who look down upon his “idealism” in the name of finding comfort with the status quo.

Wang, born in 1926, was a student of philosophy at Beijing University from 1946 to 1948, but interrupted his studies to go to the liberated zones as an active supporter of the communist movement. Quickly recognized as one of its most promising young intellectuals, he became editor of the theory department of People's Daily shortly after the Communists took power in 1949.

Even in the 1950s and early 1960s, when Wang largely held to the party line, he displayed an independence of mind that could not be confined within the framework of “orthodox” Marxism. He became famous in 1963 for his essay “The Philosophy of the Table,” which argued against the notion that ideas simply reflect pre-existing realities. Just as the carpenter must first have the idea of the table in his mind before creating it, so too, he argued, creating a new society requires not only material conditions but also the idea of socialism as a living theory.

The essay was praised by no one less than Mao, and Wang rose in the party hierarchy. But this did not compromise his decency of character or independence of mind. Wang was later ordered to write an attack on humanism, and as part of this he was given access to a number of banned works by Western Marxists. After reading them (especially Erich Fromm's SOCIALIST HUMANISM) he decided that the humanist interpretation of Marx was correct. This is also how he first encountered the work of Raya Dunayevskaya.

Wang was one of the first party intellectuals to openly attack Mao's cult of personality, at a 1979 conference of the Communist Party. But it was his vigorous defense of humanism and his contention that alienation existed in “socialist” China that earned him his name as a pioneering figure in the effort to break free from party orthodoxy.

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In a public debate in the early 1980s, Wang argued (in “Discussing the Problem of Alienation”): “Socialism is supposed to abolish alienation, but has it done so in fact, or does alienation [in China] still exist? I think we should admit that practice has proven that alienation still exists. Not only is there intellectual alienation, there is also political and even economic alienation.” He did not shy away from denouncing the fetish of the party as an expression of how something created by the masses becomes alienated from them and turns into an agent of their oppression.

In 1983 he also wrote, “A specter is haunting the Chinese intellectual world—the specter of humanism.” In response to those who condemned humanism as “non-Marxist,” he wrote in “A Defense of Humanism”:

“‘Humanism is bourgeois ideology’—if this statement means that humanism has been a bourgeois ideology, this is an objective historical fact and is indisputable; if it means that humanism can only be bourgeois ideology, it deserves a question mark. These two senses are not to be muddled, and the second sense should not be inferred from the first.

“Materialism, too, has been the ideology of the bourgeoisie (and even of slave-owning and feudal classes), but this did not prevent it from becoming the world-view of the proletariat. Indeed, Marxist materialism and the old materialism were as different as heaven and earth. In exactly the same way that the materialism we advocate is Marxist and no other, the humanism we advocate is Marxist (or socialist, or revolutionary). In the present period we need socialist humanism.”

The Communists responded by dismissing him from his position with PEOPLE’S DAILY in 1983 and expelling him from the party in 1987. Unlike many other ex-Party intellectuals, however, he never renounced his adherence to Marxism.

Raya Dunayevskaya closely followed Wang’s debates on alienation and humanism in the 1980s and often spoke of her desire to meet him. That proved impossible; she died in 1987.

Wang finally met U.S. Marxist-Humanists while on a visit here in 1993-94. He was glad to learn of Raya’s interest in his work and fascinated by how many similar philosophic concepts they had independently developed. I will never forget his excitement when I showed him Dunayevskaya’s copy of Lenin’s PHILOSOPHIC NOTEBOOKS on Hegel, which was heavily annotated with her marginalia. He looked at her critique of Lenin’s comment that Hegel’s “Absolute Idea = Objective Truth,” and proclaimed, “That is

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exactly what I've been trying to say. Lenin only got as far as objectivity, but not the unity of subjectivity and objectivity!"

As he wrote in "Epistemology Must Not Lose Sight of Man": "The unity of subject and object refers not only to the correspondence of knowledge and objectivity but also to man realizing his objective through the practice of reconstructing objectivity."

After returning to China, Wang was largely restricted from issuing public statements. But his commitment to Marxist Humanism did not wane. In 1999 he wrote the Preface to the Chinese edition of Dunayevskaya's MARXISM AND FREEDOM.

The obituary in THE NEW YORK TIMES found it surprising that Wang fervently embraced "principles like free speech, human rights and the rule of law" while "remaining a committed Marxist to his death." But for him there was no contradiction. To him Marx's humanism was the most revolutionary as well as most open of philosophies, the most transformative as well as the most democratic.

As he wrote in "Marxism and Intellectual Emancipation": "Today there are some of the young who go into a frenzy of adulation of Western capitalism, treating bourgeois culture as a fashion to be imitated: this is superstition, not intellectual emancipation. Marxism is not something that confines the intellect, but something that emancipates it."

We are honored to have known Wang Ruoshui and are determined to see to it that his vision of a humanist Marxism takes on new life in the 21st century.

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