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***“Resistance to Modernity and the Logic of Self-Negation as Politics: Takeuchi Yoshimi
and Wang Hui on Lu Xun***

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by

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Abstract:

Lu Xun is perhaps the most studied figure in modern Chinese literature and is often considered as representative of the May 4th period. There has been a great deal of debate about interpreting his work in the context of the May 4th. However, scholars have paid insufficient attention to the way in which readings of Lu Xun serve as a lens from which to examine political interventions in response to the global dynamic of capitalism. By examining how scholars mobilized Lu Xun for different political projects, we can get a better understanding of the political possibilities that emerge when the work of specific May 4th writers are refracted through various historical lenses. The path-breaking works of Takeuchi Yoshimi and Wang Hui are especially thought-provoking in this respect since they each wrote about Lu Xun to intervene in the politics of their times. Takeuchi and Wang each drew on Lu Xun to develop a new vision of politics at times when narratives and processes associated with the nation-state and capitalism eclipsed critical political practice.

Intellectuals in both interwar Japan and post-Mao China stressed an evolutionary vision of modernity with which they criticized their present and immediate past, imperial fascism and feudalism in Japan, and the Cultural Revolution in 1980s and 1990s China. In both the works of Takeuchi and Wang Hui, Lu Xun evinces a resistance to evolutionary or progressive narratives of history. They both claim that such narratives eclipse the possibility of politics. However, behind this progressive narrative of history lies the dynamic of capital that presents itself as a-political. Takeuchi and Wang’s respective interpretations of Lu Xun respond to the cultural logic of global capitalism with different degrees of reflexivity. In 1943, Takeuchi developed a reading of Lu Xun’s idea of literature as invoking a new type of politics through self-negation. This reading was extremely influential in Japan and informed Takeuchi’s own politics in post-War Japan. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Wang Hui developed a famous reading of Lu Xun as both an Enlightenment thinker and as a thinker of self-negation. In the mid 1990s, when the neo-liberal phase of capitalism was transforming social relations in China, Wang invoked Takeuchi’s vision of Lu Xun, but focused on the structural constraints that capitalism places on intellectual life. In Wang’s view, the nature of intellectual production in capitalist society tends to foreclose the possibility of politics. The May 4th meant different things in post-War Japan and in 1980s and 1990s China, and in these contexts, Lu Xun’s works became a resource to develop different political projects. Wang Hui has recently developed his ideas of politics in his essays about the “politics of de-politicization” and towards the end of this essay I will examine his ideas in light of his reading of Lu Xun.