Abstract
Theorization is indispensable for making academic research relevant to social struggles, but not all types of theorization are equally useful. We need theory as vision. Conceived consciously from a particular vantage point and with a purpose, theory as vision reveals hidden connections among different aspects of life and enables alternative imaginations about the future. Theory as vision must explain why things are as they are and at the same time show how things could be different. Key to this is a type of imaginative ethnographic accuracy that captures not only existing reality but also potentials for change. This article illustrates this by revisiting historical debates on theorizing the Chinese peasantry between Mao Zedong and Liang Shuming, a philosopher and social reformer, in the 1930s and then the 1950s. The article in the end proposes articulation of connections across scales as a mode of anthropological theorization.

Keywords
China, multi-scalar analysis, peasant, revolution, theory as vision

We need theory as vision. By theory as vision I first mean not as a statement, formula, or a model, but a form that conveys ideas by revealing connections among different aspects of life. In this sense ethnography, with its holistic approach to social phenomena, can be a powerful means of theorization if we use it not only as a method of description but simultaneously as a mode of analysis. Second, vision is conceived consciously from a particular vantage point and with a purpose. It contains messages and answers to the ‘why’ questions people ask. Third, a vision is future oriented in that it draws special attention to possible openings where things may fall into crisis, crash, or transform. Finally, theory as envisioning is based on detailed observations about dynamics internal to practices, not an imposed understanding of these dynamics. As such, a vision is very different from propaganda, or a ‘moral model’ that assigns praise and blame (D’Andrade, 1995) rather than causation.
None of this is novel – we all appreciate the classical theories in anthropology as visionary descriptions of life that enable us to see what we could not see otherwise, including futures that are embedded in the present. Mauss’s *Gift* (1990) is not about an empirical rule of reciprocity in human interaction but about the dynamics positioning individuals in society. Only by being part of that vision do data on exchange acquire theoretical power. But too often we pick fragments of a theory and forget what the vision central to the theory offers. For instance, Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘social capital’ and ‘cultural capital’ are widely used, but his purpose for inventing these concepts in the first place is not always acknowledged – namely, to unearth how inequalities are reproduced in advanced capitalist societies despite egalitarian ideologies and redistributive systems because of the intricate relations between social networks, personal disposition, educational achievement and economic capital. Migration studies routinely describe illegal migrants as ‘social capital rich’. But illegals who help each other to survive or create new ways of life are often fundamentally noncapitalistic. This is conceptually confusing and politically disturbing. We are not short of theories, we are short of visionary appreciations of theory.

Theory as vision explains why things are as they are and at the same time shows how things could be different from what they are. ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it’ (Marx, 1969: 15). In Marx’s own works, mobilization for change is inseparable from interpretation of the world. In order to change the world, one needs first to interpret it accurately. In order for an interpretation to be truly accurate and to be meaningful for actors, it must point to the needs and possibilities of change. In this sense anthropological theories can be tremendously useful. By demonstrating how things are made into the way they are by multiple actors, sometimes including the readers themselves, anthropological theories urge all of us to reflect critically and to imagine alternatives. Social constructivist theory clearly cannot explain gender or racial discriminations fully, but the theory is powerful because it reminds us of how we, as both perpetuators and victims, are involved in the differentiation of people, and thus mobilizes us to think about change. In contrast, texts that present our daily doings in highly complex languages without speaking to what we really worry about are pointless and irritating.

Theory is an indispensable weapon to start creating new realities. It is curious to me why political leaders in the West – cradle of modern social science theories – hardly refer to theories, especially not in their public speeches. Some politicians even gain traction by openly being ‘anti-theory’. These politicians of course have their systematic worldviews, and they heavily rely on certain presumptions in making decisions. But these views are now unspoken faiths instead of debatable theories. The lack of political interest in theory suggests an unquestioning confidence that Western polities have already achieved: liberal democracy + free capitalism = the end of history, with no need for big rethinking, no need for new realities. The 2008 financial crisis proved to be a major exception. The public became interested in theoretical debates in the wake of the crisis not only because
they wanted new concepts and perspectives, but because they desired to problematize the status quo and to envision alternatives.

In contrast, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) traditionally has exalted the importance of the correct theoretical line as vital, because it would be unthinkable to make claims for mobilizing such a big state towards a future never before experienced without the assurance of carefully reasoned theories to guide actions and provide a basis for everyday aspirations. The early communist revolutionaries stressed demands that emerged ‘from the masses’, from which the party would then reflectively theorize so as to offer systemized programmes ‘to the masses’. Without actively pursuing theorization, there would be no new understandings, guidance and questions to communicate. Theory is important not only because it is organically linked to the party’s decisions on actions, but also because knowledge has to be theorized in order to be organic.

To probe in this essay the distinction between theory as vision and the pitfalls of theory as illusion, I revisit historical debates on theorizing the Chinese peasantry between Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and Liang Shuming (1893–1988), a philosopher and social reformer, and a major influence on the development of Chinese anthropology.1 Liang’s assessment in the 1930s was in a way empirically more accurate than Mao’s, but he failed to predict the socialist revolution. Mao’s reading of the countryside, so piercing and imaginative in the revolutionary era, turned out to be disastrously wrong in the 1950s. This essay asks why, and contemplates what lessons can be learned.

Both Mao and Liang had deep understandings of rural Chinese society, and both believed that the rural question was pivotal in changing China, which distinguished them from urban-oriented intellectuals including other early CCP leaders. But their analyses of the early 20th-century situation were very different. Their first debate took place in 1938. Liang predicted that the land revolution led by the communists was bound to fail because the peasants were conservative and would readily revert to the social order that they had lived with for thousands of years rather than push ahead for an unknown system. Problems did not reside in the traditional order, Liang argued, but instead were caused by its breakdown due to urban-centred industrialization and modern state building. Further, as China was faced with the danger of being divided up by multiple imperial powers and imploding due to fights among warlords, social reconstruction and unification based on tradition provided the most realistic solution, and radical armed struggle would only further worsen the situation.

Mao believed that peasant revolution was unstoppable. Although he had earlier argued for the necessity of rural campaigns based on broad class analysis and reflections on the incompleteness of the Republican Revolution (which left the rural status-quo untouched), it was his 1927 field research on peasant movements in his home province, Hunan, where he witnessed ‘many strange things’ of which he had been unaware, that convinced him that peasants were ready to be mobilized (Mao, 1927). His vivid and sometime humorous report documented the swift rise of peasants’ associations, repeatedly mentioning how the ‘respectability’, ‘face’,
superiority’ and ‘dominance’ of landlords were swept aside in different social settings. Mao developed a theory that the rural question was first and foremost a question about political struggle. Once the landlords’ political dominance was challenged, entirely new momentums for economic redistribution and social reorganization sprang up from the ground. His report assigned special significance to the rural lumpen proletariat as a vanguard of the movement, a view that even the communist leader of the movement in Hunan felt was too extreme (Li, 1986: 101–2). For Mao the lumpen proletariat were the first to upset the status-quo, and therefore opened up possibilities for new imaginations.

Later research shows that Liang’s theory was closer to the reality than Mao’s. Land distribution in China, especially in the north, was relatively equal; large landholders were rare. Traditional elites derived their authority from public service provisions, such as in education, irrigation, disputes settlement and disaster relief. Local elite also actively protected peasants from being overtaxed by the state (Wu and Fei, 1948; Duara, 1988). Compared to class exploitation within rural communities, resource extraction and social oppression from the outside, particularly from the state, were far more severe (e.g. Qin and Jin, 2010). Throughout history peasants rebelled against the state time and again but rarely identified landlords as their primary enemy. While Liang’s theorizing was historically correct, Mao’s understanding was ethnographically accurate – it captured the most important dynamics of the moment. He stressed what the poor peasants actually wanted and what they could do instead of how traditions had worked as coherent systems. For Mao, the fact that peasants had lived with the traditional order for a long time did not mean that they really accepted the status-quo, and hidden resentment could translate into powerful motivations once the peasants felt liberated from tradition. Mao’s vision was embraced by peasants because it captured what they felt deep down, opening up a different future that they had never envisaged as possible.

In 1951 Liang wholeheartedly admitted he was wrong: ‘I now understand that the real concern of the Communist Party was not about land redistribution, but was rather about (letting) peasants straighten up their spines and raise their heads to become the master; the implications are very deep’ (Liang, 1993: 849, my translation). Land revolution created an entirely new political subject – the peasant-soldier in tens of millions, who almost singlehandedly brought the CCP to power. Liang made further methodological reflection: ‘To recognize the absence [of classes] does not mean to ignore class essence. We must grasp class elements without denying the absence of classes, only thus can we find solutions to social problems’ (Liang, 1993: 1001, my translation).

What Liang meant by ‘class elements’ and what Mao called ‘class struggle’ in China can be more accurately described as intensified social contradictions of multiple kinds. In Mao’s analysis, class was a category of actions and a category in the making rather than one fixed by an individual’s political and economic position. Such a dynamic ‘class’ analysis as the basis for future envisioning is best illustrated by Mao’s 1930 Xunwu Investigation, an exhaustively detailed ethnographic survey of economic and social life in a township in south China. Class differences were
manifested in different aspects of life: such as disputes between families of the same clan over ancestral assets and rituals, relations between inclusive community ceremonies and exclusive religious rituals, and how the name of a type of timber, used only by poor peasants for coffins, became employed as a curse. Class intersected with generation and gender, which collectively affected a person’s lifestyle. One’s political outlook was often associated with his/her clothing and hairstyles, which the report described in detail. Class relations were fluid: people moved up or down; they also formed alliances with different classes that varied according to circumstance and purpose. Most importantly, Mao argued that small landlords, especially those who were descended from large landlords, well-educated and less interested in wealth accumulation, were inclined to ally with poor peasants. The tension between large and small landowners and the solidarity between small landlords and poor peasants produced a driving force that advanced the land revolution. The ‘worst enemy class’ in the eyes of poor peasants turned out to be self-made rich peasants, technically part of the peasant class but the most exploitative as the main moneylenders.2

Thus, potentialities for change did not reside in any laws of history or of human nature but had to be closely discerned in the intersections between multiple contradictions. In another article, Mao envisioned ‘a single spark’ could start a ‘prairie fire’ – a nationwide revolution (Mao, 1930). Mao was optimistic not because the revolutionary force was strong at the time of writing but, on the contrary, because China was beset by conflicts among multiple reactionary forces: the Nationalist government aimed to eradicate warlords, while the warlords were fighting each other; and the warlords’ foreign imperialist supporters were vying for dominance in China, which in turn was part of ongoing global contestation over colonies. These contradictory forces created power vacuums, especially in remote areas. Revolutionaries should urgently seize power in these vacuums, develop ‘base communities’ and extend them gradually. Mao ended his prairie fire article with this vision (Mao, 1930):

Marxists are not fortune-tellers. They should, and indeed can, only indicate the general direction of future developments and changes; they should not and cannot fix the day and the hour in a mechanistic way. But when I say that there will soon be a high tide of revolution in China, I am emphatically not speaking of something which in the words of some people ‘is possibly coming’, something illusory, unattainable and devoid of significance for action. It is like a ship far out at sea whose masthead can already be seen from the shore; it is like the morning sun in the east whose shimmering rays are visible from a high mountain top; it is like a child about to be born moving restlessly in its mother’s womb.

The debates between Mao and Liang did not cease with the revolutionary victory. Soon after Liang conceded his mistake, he had a major disagreement with Mao in 1953 in front of hundreds of dignitaries, possibly the fiercest public challenge that Mao faced in his entire career. Liang questioned the General Line of Socialist
Transition, premised on nationalizing the economy and accelerating industrialization, which moved economic and political centres into cities and, consequently, removed the most capable cadres from the countryside. The gap in living standards between peasants and workers was widening, and peasants were migrating to cities in increasing numbers, where they were not able to settle. In sum, Liang argued, Soviet style industrialization was detrimental to rural livelihoods, and peasants were losing confidence in the new China. Mao denigrated Liang’s opposition as a mimicry of the Confucius benevolent politics by confusing ‘petty benevolent politics’ with ‘major benevolent politics’. The major task, Mao insisted, was to develop heavy industries to counter US imperialism; the petty benevolent politics that advocated taking care of the peasants at the cost of rapid industrialization would only serve enemy interests.

Liang was silenced. Peasant migration to the cities was forbidden by the introduction of the household registration system, and the state monopolized grain procurement to purchase agricultural products at artificially low prices to facilitate urban-centred industrialization. Furthermore, worried about the revival of the bourgeois mentality in rural society, Mao decreed that peasants give up assets recently received through land reform and join communes. The rushed collectivization led to the great famine of the late 1950s that cost tens of millions of lives and produced three decades of economic stagnation.

Mao was not wrong that China must industrialize rapidly in order to be economically independent in the midst of both the Cold War and the new threat of the Soviet Union. The problem lies in how he related his theorizing to peasants’ lived experiences. His pre-revolution analysis was based on bodily understanding of rural life. As a result he learned by heart what the peasants wanted, and furthermore recognized the potential transformative capacity that the peasants had which was mobilized for the revolution. Mao in the 1950s lost the ethnographic intimacy in apprehending rural life. In his new theorization of the path to communism under the proletariat dictatorship, peasants were suppliers of foodstuff and labour power rather than a historical force of change in their own right. Instead of forming new alliances between peasants and the post-revolutionary state to face external challenges, Mao regarded whoever openly resisted forced collectivization as potential class enemies on the same side as hostile foreigners.

In the 1930s Mao utilized the multiple contradictions to create new space for revolution; in the late 1950s he suppressed the contradiction between peasants’ immediate needs and his global geopolitical concerns. He simply declared peasants’ reluctance to collectivize and desire for non-farming economic activities wrong, rather than take the contradiction seriously as a source of policy innovation, despite his celebrated speech ‘Correctly Handling Contradictions Among the People’ (1957). His loss of an ethnographic grasp of local rural life led to not only erroneous assessments of rural reality, but more importantly to problematic articulations of the relations between various social forces, and unrealistic visions of how China should move from the present to the future. In other words, what matters is not only how accurately one assesses immediately observable conditions, but also
how one relates local life to global geopolitical forces. Anthropologists do not theorize local life, they theorize the world by putting local life in conjunctural contexts.

The Mao-Liang debates provide important lessons that appropriate articulation of connections across scales is critical. If fixated on what we immediately see, we may miss historical opportunities for change. We may fail to recognize ordinary people’s will and capacity to transform the status-quo and mistake their tactics of getting by every day for their political agency, as so many anthropological studies tend to do. But if we don’t combine an assessment of broader structures of power with an astute understanding of people’s experiences and perceptions, vision may turn into illusion.

How can we develop theory as vision? Clearly there is no formula to follow. Perhaps a first thing that we could do is to read existing theories as visions. Many theories, now remembered as static depictions of the world, may have emerged as part of intense debates about how to envision the world. This becomes clearer if we realize that theory is always developed in a particular sociohistorical conjuncture. It is influenced by political movements of that time even though these movements may be unacknowledged by the theorists. Thus my argument for reading theories as visions includes calling for a multi-scalar conjunctural excavating of past theories, and rediscovering the political context that contributed to theorists’ agendas, big or small. In this way we may enliven those theories declared by many to be dead-ends, such as Mao’s, and bring them into conversations with our ongoing theorization, analysis of changing conjunctures, and visions of future possibilities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. I rely heavily on others’ work in reconstructing the debates, particularly Lü (2013); Alitto (1986); Wang (2007); He (2012).
2. For an excellent English translation by Thompson see Mao Zedong (1990).

References

Fei Xiaotong (2005) *Fei Xiaotong fangtan lu* [A record of interviews with Fei Xiaotong], interviewed by Zhu Xueqin. *Nanfang Zhoumo* [Southern Weekly], 28 April.


Mao Zedong (1930) *A single spark can start a prairie fire*. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_6.htm (accessed 1 April 2015).


