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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Americanization of French Theory and the Rise of “Chinese Postism”

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ABSTRACT


Chinese Postism refers to Chinese versions of poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism, three major western theoretical trends prefixed with “post.” Chinese Postism is largely retranslations of English translations (and interpretations) of French theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism, as well as postcolonialism as American appropriation of French theories. Revisiting the French- American-Chinese journey of theory may help uncover the broader political and ideological changes underlying the intellectual and academic trends.

KEYWORDS Americanization; French Theory; Chinese Postism; poststructuralism; postmodernism; postcolonialism

“Postism” is a Chinese coinage for poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism, three major western theoretical trends prefixed with “post.” It is a Chinese appropriation of the western literary theory that showcases the hybridization of ideas, knowledge, and academic discourse in China since the Reform and Opening up (1979–present). Two predominant modes of the formation of modern Chinese thought and knowledge over more than a century are “translating and borrowing” and “addressing Chinese issues with Western discourses,” and the Chinese Postism as such is their latest embodiment. It should be noted that Chinese Postism is largely retranslations of English translations (and interpretations) of French theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism, as well as postcolonialism as American appropriation of French theories. The U.S. academy proved to be indispensable in the formation of Chinese Postism. Revisiting the French-American-Chinese journey of theory may help uncover the broader political, ideological changes underlying the intellectual and academic trends.

In what follows, we first trace the trajectory of the traveling theory from continental Europe (primarily France) to the U.S within the historical context of the 1970s and 1980s. Of particular significance to our

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discussion is the French Maoism, which not only stands as a core component of the French theory, but serves as a crucial, yet somewhat missing link to the Chinese Postism. Second, we try to tease out two major trends of the Americanization of French theory and the subsequent invention of postcolonialism, that is, professionalization and institutionalization on the one hand, and politicization, or further radicalization, of the radical French theory on the other. Third, we briefly examine the ways by which these French and American theoretical discourses have been translated, adopted, and transformed in China from the late 1990s to the present. We note that just as the contradictory trends of professionalization and politicization mark the Americanization of French theory, the Chinese Postists nevertheless tend to engross themselves in political and ideological warfare, adapting neo-Marxist, and anti-colonialist, nationalist political stances of the Americanized French theories to the Chinese circumstances.

The French Theory, Historical Contexts, and Chinese Connection

The emergence of “Postism” can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century when French structuralist linguistics, figured by Ferdinand de Saussure, including the Prague linguistic circle, Russian Formalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of language, and Semiotics etc., began to take shape. Saussure (1959) believes that “A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas” (120). Not only does this tenet of “difference” lay the very foundation of structuralist linguistics, it also sets the stage for the assault on the western legacy of ontological essence that prioritizes God, Logos, and the Hegelian absolute Geist, paving ways for the “epistemological revolution” of the poststructuralism of the 1960s and 1970s.

The decades of the 1960s to 1970s and beyond constitute the “golden age” of the “short 20th century” or the “Age of Extremes” (Hobsbawm 1995, 5). These were the times when radical political and cultural upheavals swept across the globe. Arising from such a tumult of extremes, French proponents of poststructuralism and postmodernism inaugurated a historic shift by re-foregrounding politics and ideology in academic disciplines of the humanities. They effectively deconstructed the modernist myth of a-political, self-autonomous ivory tower of the Western academia in much of the first half of the 20th century.

In the early 1950s, Jacques Lacan wedded psychoanalysis with structuralist linguistics, inventing three orders of the human psyche. The unconscious is “structured like a language,” and the psychic signifiers are slipping along a chain of signifiers rather than being fixated on certain

mental content. Drawing partially on Lacan, Louis Althusser conflates classical Marxism, structuralist linguistics, and Freudian psychoanalysis to produce a structuralist Marxism that is avowedly anti-Hegelian. A leading figure of the French Communist Party, Althusser (1969) characterized his theoretical work as “double interventions” or “interventions in a definite conjuncture” (9), rebuking Stalinist doctrine as the latter-day orthodoxy of communism, and at the same time relentlessly assaulting the capitalist “ideological state apparatuses (ISA).” Althusser rediscovered, or more accurately, reinvented a French version of Maoism, incorporating of Maoist anti-determinism into his central theoretical edifice of “overdetermination” (Liu 1995, 4–23; Yan 2018, 2–9), along with his rereading of Marx, Lenin, and Gramsci as alternatives to Stalinism.

Unlike Althusser’s unequivocal political objectives, Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction appears at first glance to be an esoteric and joyful play with language, in the spirit of the *fin-de-siècle* modernism or avant-garde flamboyance. Derrida, like many other French intellectuals, is fascinated with China. In order to deconstruct Logocentrism that he believes to undergird Western Eurocentric mode of thinking, Derrida is often tempted to flirt with the non-alphabetic, hieroglyphic writing of Chinese language in his *Of Grammatology* and other writings. Michel Foucault, once a student of École Normale Supérieure under the tutelage of Althusser, was attracted to Marxism in his early years. His first book, originally titled *Maladie mentale et Personnalité*, traces the history of madness as a social construct and a result of alienation by social structure (Foucault 1987, 76–85). But Foucault quickly shies away from Marxism and embraces Nietzsche who inspires Foucault’s genealogical approach to the “power-knowledge” relations. Foucault’s relationship with China and Maoism is intriguing, and his reception and appropriation in China is as complicated as his own Maoist connections. However, unlike Althusser, Alain Badiou and other professedly French Maoists, Foucault leaves very few traces in his writings, except in sporadic interviews and commentaries, which regrettably becomes an impediment for understanding Foucault and Mao empirically. Perhaps a Foucauldian archeological and genealogical approach may help shed light on Foucault’s Maoist connection, in his critique of surveillance, panopticism and knowledge-power relationship, and his involvement in the Maoist-inspired activist group, Groupe d’information sur les prisons (GIP) (Karlsen and Villadsen 2014, 3).

Deleuze, Foucault’s close intellectual partner, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (co-authored with Guattari), conjures up the notion of “rhizome,” an open-ended conceptual rubrics that allow free flows of ideas and matter, as opposed to the Hegelian mode of totalizing and unifying thinking, or,

in Deleuze and Guattari's own words, "arborescence" as the paradigm for knowledge and practice in the modern Western world. Standing along with Althusser, Foucault, and Derrida, Deleuzian rhizomatic "horizontal" of thought partakes in an epistemological and intellectual revolution that wrecks havoc on the foundation of western thought, knowledge and faith. Then "postmodernism" came to the fore as a philosophical notion in Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (1979). Lyotard (1983) defines "postmodern" as "incredulity against metanarratives" (xxiv), contending that in the age of information and computer science, grand narratives are delegitimated by the heterogeneous and paralogous postmodern knowledge and thus no longer tenable. Jean Baudrillard, one of the most preeminent figures associated with postmodernism, combines semiology, sociology and Marxist theory of capital to investigate how the system of signs and objects shape illusive and simulated societies that trap human subjects in a state of "hyperreality" in the consumer society. In a nutshell, poststructuralists and postmodernists alike seek to liquidate any form of domination and hierarchy of capitalist societies through relentless assaults on essentialist ontologies, knowledge institutions, and discursive formations. Since the 1980s, after the political fervor of the 1960s to 1970s subdued, the likes of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Baudrillard then retreated to the academia to launch a different kind of intellectual or cultural revolution. Reverberations of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Maoism linger on.

Americanization of French Theory

From the mid-1970s, the shock wave of the French theory was quickly absorbed by the Anglo-American academia. The quirky but chic French theory appeared to boost the waning disciplinary legitimacy of the humanities in the U.S. The French theory was at first made available to the American literary studies circle as a novel mode of literary criticism by such figures as Fredric Jameson (*The Prison House of Language*, 1972), Jonathan Culler (*Structuralist Poetics*, 1975), and the journal of *Yale French Studies* (1966). The self-contained, and self-referential texts of modernist literature, as well as the close reading of formal features of such literary texts provided both the object and methodology of "scientific" studies, thus earning a legitimate status in American universities in post-World War II era when professionalism became the norm and standard of American higher education.

The 1966 symposium held at John Hopkins University, where Jacques Derrida in his presentation famously challenged Levi-Strauss' structuralism, became a prelude to what was later known as the moment of post-

structuralism. Jonathan Culler stood out as a successful arbiter who “domesticated” (105) structuralism, as Frank Lentricchia (1980) put it, to interface with American traditionalist New Criticism. Culler played a pivotal role in transforming the French intellectual movement into a module of liberal arts curriculum for American college education.

The Yale Critics further morphed Derridean deconstruction into a highly sophisticated playbook for the elite coterie of the “ivory tower” specialists of literature. Deemed as the “Godfather of the Yale mafia” (Lentricchia 1980, 283), Paul de Man secured his fame as the leading American Derridean critic. Geoffery Hartman contends that literary criticism should expose textual contradictions and ambiguities rather than seek meaning. Hillis J. Miller, considered to be “the most loyal practitioner in the end” of the school (Cusset 2008, 117), cemented the prestige of the French theory in the U.S. academy as he took the position as the MLA president. Harold Bloom, another influential figure, though less of a deconstructive critic but more of a defender of romantic humanism, appropriates the notion of intertext and some presumptions of deconstruction to demonstrate his “poetic misprision” that new poets are embroiled in anxieties of never outclassing their predecessors, merely making creative misreading of earlier ones. By and large, the Yale school appropriated French deconstructionism as a new mode of literary studies, in a concerted effort, with the likes of Culler and so on, to transmogrify the radical intellectual movement from France and other continental European countries into a theoretically sophisticated mode of literary studies, supplementing, and calibrating the existing norms and methods of New Criticism.

The professionalization and institutionalization of French theory in American academia showcase its powerful liberal tradition as the dominant mode of inquiry and education for a good part of the 20th century, particularly in the post-World War II era. However, the U.S. was also an epicenter of the political and social turmoil in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike the elite Ivy League professors of French literature and theory whose appropriation of the French theory served the continuation of American liberal tradition, younger intellectuals such as Edward Said and Fredric Jameson took upon themselves the task of passing on the spirit of revolt and revolution from the Althusserians, the Foucauldians, and Deleuzians to the American campus. It is a continuation of a different kind: not of the American liberal tradition, but a transplantation of the radical, political and intellectual movement to the soil of American society.

Edward Said is the quintessential embodiment of the Americanization of French theory’s kindred spirit of political and social intervention

through intellectual practice. Said's magnum opus *Orientalism* (1979) exemplifies how Foucault's ideas of knowledge-power, archeological and genealogical approaches to history transpires as Said excavates the veiled but deep-seated power-knowledge dynamics in Orientalist ideas, knowledge and scholarship in the West. The West misrepresents and manufactures the knowledge of the colonial world in order to legitimize colonialist and imperialist oppression and domination, and subjugate the colonized and disempowered. *Orientalism* thus laid the foundation for postcolonial studies raging on in American academia and society for decades.

In contrast with Said's high-profile activities as a public intellectual in both the U.S. and other parts of the world, Jameson remains an academic thinker who turns radical political theories into refined academic discourses. As a leading Marxist cultural critic in the United States, Jameson's role in Americanizing French theory is three-fold. First, his *Political Unconscious* erects a neo-Marxist literary hermeneutics to counter the legacy of New Criticism by reinstalling the "political" as a centerpiece of literary writing and interpretation. Second, Jameson reinvents an American version of postmodernism drawing on the American experience of ubiquitous commodification of social life, including the realm of the aesthetic, desires and emotions. And finally, Jameson's controversial thesis of the Third World Literature as the "political allegory" broaches the issues of greatly contested domains of identity politics, contentions surrounding race, gender, and ethnicity, through his mention in this thesis of the internalized "Third Worlds," or the colonized communities within the First World, the United States in particular. Jameson has since been vehemently assaulted by postcolonial critics in the U.S., and meanwhile, quite ironically, touted as a standard bearer of the Third World, nationalist liberation or postcolonial theory in China.

Traveling Theory: The Rise of Chinese Postism

The influx of the Americanized French theory into China occurred at the turn of 21st century. These western theories actually did not make their inroads into China during the heyday of China's "Cultural Fever" or the Cultural Reflections of the 1980s, when China welcomed and embraced modern western ideas and concepts of liberalism, humanism, and existentialism which had been prohibited completely during the Mao era. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping pledged to continue the economic reform and opening up in his "Southern Tour." China's door opened again, with a great deal of caution and selectivity toward western ideas. The former feverish espousal of western liberalism gave way to what amounted to a vehement

rebuttal of the liberal legacy by western Left intellectuals. The arrival of western Postism marked an abrupt turn in reception of western theories in the humanities and social sciences. One witnessed a peculiar “comeback” of Leftist thinking to China, via western theories of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, only to be safely quarantined within, and confined to, the academic circles of literary studies.

As the name of Postism in China bears the sequence of the entry, reception, and influence of the western theory from structuralism, post-structuralism to postmodernism, French “origin” is therefore a highly recognized benchmark. The fact of the matter is, these so-called French theories are little more than Americanized versions, starting primarily from the Anglo-American “marketplace of ideas.” The Chinese interests in the twentieth-century western literary theories in the 1980s were sparked by a “rediscovery” of the Anglo-American New Criticism, which then ignited curiosity in formalist and linguistic approaches, such as Russian formalism and French structuralism. Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), a textbook for survey courses of literary criticism in Anglo-American colleges, was translated and published several times and eventually emerged as the hottest ticket for the Chinese audience entering the theatre of western Postism from the 1990s to the present (Shen and Zhou 2006, 140). Eagleton, a professedly Althusserian Marxist critic, becomes more of a star celebrity of western theory in China than a Culler-like comprador for French theory in the U.S.

Yet it is both Fredric Jameson and Edward Said’s works that have decisively impacted the Chinese stage of the (French) Critical Theory. Jameson is an indisputable iconic figure of Postism in China. He came to China in 1985 and lectured at Peking University for one semester as a visiting professor. In Beijing, Jameson looked wayward into some sort of Third World political allegory, in defiance of the domination of western-centered “multinational capitalism.”¹ It then took almost two decades after his Beijing sojourn for China to recognize him as a crowning emblem of neo-Marxism, and, in what we would call a Chinese Jamesonism, postmodernism and the Third World allegory emerged since the new millennium as two powerful tools for Chinese ideological critique of capitalism and rallying cry for the Third World nationalist liberation and independence (Liu 2018, 6). These themes resonate well with the political and ideological ambience of China over the last two decades or so, when the rising nationalist sentiments and the ideology of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” become the order of the day. Although Jameson’s fascination with Maoism via Althusser is hardly mentioned in China, his lavish praise of Lu Xun, the modern Chinese literary giant, and his frequent popular lecture tours in China earned

him stardom that none whatsoever French or German theorist can ever imagine.

Said's *Orientalism* and his critique of Western cultural imperialism are widely popular in China, too. Postcolonialism, the American brand of Postism, is rightly attributed to Said's tireless "secular criticism," which is in perfect sync with the new wave of nationalism in China since the beginning of the new millennium. Ironically, postcolonial studies in China hardly refer to Foucault, whose books, along with other French thinkers such as Derrida and Deleuze, nowadays seem to gather more dust than attraction. American postcolonial theories are often invoked to reaffirm anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-Western nationalist claims or justifications of Chinese exceptionalism. These heavily politicized appropriations of postcolonial criticism in the latest assaults on the Western (i.e. American) hegemony are duly noted and rebuked by some Chinese critics (Zhang 2011, 194–197; Zhao 2000, 49–52).

But increasingly, the prevailing nationalist-populist fervor is now targeting at everything that smacks of Western hegemony, Postism included. And the hubris for a pure, singular, and exclusively Chinese theory and scholarship is all-time high. It certainly raises alarm among those who have dedicated themselves to understanding between China and the West through scholarly conversations. Hillis Miller (2018), for instance, questioned shortly before his death, "what, exactly, a uniquely Chinese form of literary theory would be like is also not specified beyond saying that it would be distinctively 'Chinese.' Does that mean Marxist, or Confucian, or Chinese Zen, or what?" (342).

Over the last two decades or so Theory (Critical Theory, French Theory, or Americanized theories) has traversed far away from the academic ivory tower beyond the terrain of literary studies, and entered into the thicket of American society and the realm of the Realpolitik. Identity politics under the rubrics of reinterrogating the issues of race, gender and ethnicity have now penetrated every corner of American society, often at the forefront of extremely contentious political and social issues of "cancel culture," "woke," "critical race theory," cultural wars that have swept across the United States and many western countries. As we shift our attention to China, we observe a similar trend of over-politicization of the academic inquiry in the humanities and social sciences, too, although the directions are often at the polar opposite between the U.S. and China. The combative spirit of the French theory reverberates in the U.S. today. And in China, a different kind of populist-nationalist ethos is gaining momentum. Where these renewed political energies will navigate in the years to come ought be scrutinized with the utmost seriousness.

Note

1. Jameson's "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (New Left Review, no. 146: 52–92) was published in 1984, and in 1986 his "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" appeared in *Social Text*, no. 15: 65–88.

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