

Western Theory's Chinese Transformation: Postscript

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LIU Kang

Western Theory's Chinese Transformation: Postscript

Since 2018 *CLCWeb* has generously sponsored the research project, "The China Question of Western Theory" with its special issues, i.e. 2018 Vol.20.3 Special Issue of "Rethinking Critical Theory and Maoism," and 2020 Vol. 22.5 Special Issue of The China Question of Western Theory. " The current is the third, each with about two years' interlude. I am the guest editor of the two earlier issues, making introductory remarks for each of them. Now the guest editorship moves to the capable hand of Zeng Jun, a leading Chinese scholar in literary theory and criticism, who has contributed to both of the previous issues. I'm immensely grateful to the *CLCWeb* editorial collectives for granting the indispensable platform for the project, involving scholars from China and the U.S. in several disciplines of the humanities. At the same time, I'm equally gratified that our self-styled "project" (with no funding earmarked from any institution) can congregate at this publishing venue with sustained dedication and enthusiasm.

Our readers will note that most participants of the project are Chinese scholars in their early or mid-career stage, whose works are primarily devoted to the study of western theory of literature, arts and aesthetics. As such, they play critical roles in intellectual and scholarly exchanges between China and the West. Their expertise in western theory, however, often becomes a liability rather than an advantage in engaging in conversations with colleagues outside China, for lack of academic venues such as scholarly journals and conferences in western theory and criticism. Unquestionably these venues abound in Europe and North America. Regrettably, they are not widely open to the non-western scholars studying the West. Despite the clamor for interdisciplinary/international collaboration years after years we still find ourselves confined to the comfort zones of academic enclaves. I myself, for one, choose to study China drawing the toolbox from western Critical Theory, and, conversely, interrogate western theory with Chinese questions and experiences, continually attempting to trespass disciplinary boundaries. But my modest disciplinary "deterritorialization" often leaves me literally "out of place", belonging neither to American Chinese studies, nor the "theory people" clustered in departments of English, Comparative Literature, etc. My academic identity in China seems more fluid, by virtue of being a "visiting professor" there. But my Chinese colleagues who participate in our project have no such a wanderer's luxury as mine. Their voices and insights into western theories, and, more importantly, how these western theories have transformed Chinese intellectual life and being themselves transformed by Chinese exposures, remain largely unheard outside China. Chinese studies community in Europe and North America finds little interests in Chinese scholarship on the West; "theory people" in Euro-American English departments and related disciplines are much less keen on knowing the Chinese views. Admittedly the situation has improved recently. Yet a great deal of more efforts must be made, as ours is just a modicum of a broader and worthwhile inquiry.

"The Making of Chinese *Meixue*" deals with the formation of *meixue* or aesthetics in modern China, starting with the controversy around the early translation and coinage of the term from German scholar Ernst Faber's book in Chinese, published by a Japanese press. The paper's centerpiece is a genealogy of Wang Guowei's aesthetic theory that, in the words of Li Qingben, "transforming it (Schopenhauer's theory) into a Chinese question." In the end, the paper asserts Wang Guowei's status as a "founder of discursivity", for the most important contribution he made to Chinese aesthetics is that he merged Western aesthetic terminology into the construction of a Chinese aesthetic discourse, realized the transformation and reshaping in different cultures, and finally created a new cross-cultural aesthetic paradigm in modern China. The establishment of Modern Chinese knowledge and academic disciplines has gained a good deal of attention only recently, thanks to the Foucauldian paradigm of genealogy (and archeology) of knowledge that affords fresh perspectives into the studies of academic history, breaking the binary assumptions of modern versus tradition, West versus China, western impacts and Chinese responses, etc. underlying much of the research on China. Under such assumptions Chinese scholarly research in social sciences and humanities have been grossly undervalued or neglected by international scholarly communities. Chinese academics themselves, on the other hand, have always been entangled by the above West versus China binary oppositions and find themselves stonewalled by such a conundrum. Li-Wang's paper is thus a welcoming attempt to move beyond the binarism in understanding modern Chinese knowledge formations, with solid evidence and convincing analysis of the traveling theories from the Germans to Wang Guowei. *Meixue* is a Chinese concept and a thriving Chinese field of study of literary and art

theory and criticism, emotions and affects, ideology and politics, beyond the Aesthetik in its German origin.

"The Many Afterlives of Orientalism" is a delightful metaphor of the issue of Chinese translation and appropriation of western theory. The Chinese state's promotion of a China-centered academic research agenda, or "Chinese discourse", now becomes a new mandate for academic research, especially in social sciences and humanities. Wu's paper may not look like a direct response to that calling, but by addressing translation and reception of western theory under the current circumstances, it cannot but confront the age-old question of China versus West in knowledge formation and reformation. Wu takes on the translation and appropriation of Edward Said's writings in Chinese, a subject discussed over and again in China, as postcolonialism and Said have been one of the most favorite western theories, and mostly widely translated and adopted by Chinese academics. Wu, however, offers some novel perspectives here, begging more questions than giving out answers. Wu argues "translation plays an important part in the globalization of ideas, which serves as an indispensable bridge in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural encounters". Oftentimes there is an "afterlife" in translated works, as Wu quotes Benjamin to add certain poetic flavor to tease out the complicated reception of Said's critique of orientalism and postcolonialism in China, where the state-sanctioned nationalist ideology inevitably tilts towards a statist politics that supports assaults against Western colonialism and imperialism in favor of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s master narrative of national liberation and revolution. The paper's account of the Said's Chinese translations, debates, and receptions in China since the 1990s is a fascinating cautionary tale, a silhouette of a torturous academic journey bordering on highly sensitive political issues of nationalism: "In the Chinese context, the new uses of Saidian theory....[is] a starting point appealing to the construction of Chinese literary discourse." The paper allows the non-Chinese readers to taste the messed-up flavors of many "afterlives" of Said, but stops short of pressing on how Said serves to flare up the nationalist flame of "Chinese discourse."

The collision of ideas is the central theme of the paper, "Traveling Theory and Discursive Transformation: The Reception of Walter Benjamin and Emmanuel Levinas in China". Certainly Jewish notions of redemption in Benjamin's and Levinas' works have little resonance in Chinese tradition. Wang, however, does a wonderful job in delineating their Chinese reception and interpretations, and raising thought-provoking questions about whether integration of ideas is possible in responding to "reality." If Samuel Huntington's prognosis of "clashes of civilizations" after the end of the Cold War has some historical bearings on what has followed over next three decades, the reality, or Realpolitik, has increasingly defined the post-Cold War era today in a much polarized, fragmented, and contentious manner. So the question becomes: "Does the Chinese journey of these Jewish philosophical thoughts portend a cultural and ideological storm in the larger context"? Wang describes Benjamin's China journey as a dual process of politicization and depoliticization, but how is this process played out? Wang raises the question of whether Levinas' "redemption" with its underlying assumption of Judaism mesh well with Confucian ideas of home governance, which is based on hierarchical order of kinship or filial pieties, apparently alien to Judaism. There is hardly any evidence of congruence between Judaism and Confucianism. Unfortunately Wang's paper offers little clue.

"Chinese Modern Leftist Affect and Aesthetic-affective Modernity in the Global Affective Turn" is a sterling contribution to the study of the intertextuality of leftist theories across Europe and Asia, France and China in particular. (Japanese leftist intellectuals such as Masao Maruyama and Kojin Karatani, too, have been engaged in the leftist conversations over the last half a century, another important topic to tackle.) Ever since the Reform and Open-up Era from 1978 onwards, "translating and borrowing" and "addressing Chinese issues with Western discourses" have been the predominant modes of intellectual inquiry in the humanities. Western Marxist theories have fared particularly well as the Reform was marked by ideological revamping of the Leninist-Stalinist-Maoist doctrines while preserving Marxist baseline. The question of Western Marxist appropriation and reinvention of Maoism during the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the French Marxist camps spearheaded by Louis Althusser, however, has not received much attention in Chinese "theory fad", as Maoist legacy of cultural radicalism remains till today an intractable quagmire and aporia in China. Yan is among the very few Chinese scholars who ventured into these muddy waters. Yan discusses theories of *qing* (emotion/feeling) in the works of Chinese Marxists Qu Qiubai, Mao Zedong, compares with Western Marxist theories of "affects", emotions in such figures of Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Rancière, and so on, in order to enlarge the scope of Western Marxism beyond critique of culture, ideology as its the comfort zone, and push it further into a broader conceptualization of the Enlightenment, adding a Chinese "aesthetic dimension." The central argument of Yan's paper is "the aesthetics/the-sensible/politics implies a new model of aesthetic modernity." And "aesthetic-affective modernity is not an invention, but rather an indication of the strong adhesiveness and expansiveness

of mood/feeling/emotion/affect that have always existed in global modernity." However, these concluding remarks, intriguing as they are, miss the real political question of rising nationalism and popularism in both Left and Right camps as a global trend, wreaking havoc in the entire world. Emotions/feelings/affects undoubtedly play pivotal roles in the world of politics today, and deserve serious scrutiny.

Tao Dongfeng's paper "Knowledge Production in the Theory of Literature and Art in Contemporary China: From a Generations Perspective", traces the trajectory of academic studies of literature and arts since China's Reform and Opening-up. As a renowned veteran critic in China, Tao's vantage point as a commentator, or a meta-commentator, is well displayed here. Tao's paper is a metacommentary not only on the recent intellectual history of Chinese literary studies, but also on the manners or methods by which the paper is written: Tao begins with a western theory of generational division of Karl Mannheim, a choice as it is appropriate for the paper's objective as is revealing about the author's theoretical predisposition and upbringing. Tao's generation of Chinese scholars born between the 1950s and 1960s grew from German or Russian ideas, Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy in particular, dominating Chinese academic studies of social science and humanities. As Tao acknowledges that his selection of Mannheim's generational theory is based on the German theorist's authorial status: "first theoretical attempt to treat generations systematically as a sociological phenomenon." Tao doesn't seem to bother looking into the rich theoretical literature in sociological studies of knowledge productions, as Mannheim's notion is conveniently "borrowed" to tell a Chinese story, in the mode of "addressing Chinese issues with Western discourse". Tao suggests a new "anti-essentialist tendency" in the recent scholarship to which his own work belongs. Set against "essentialism", a metaphor for the preceding generations, Tao's "anti-essentialist" gesture reflects a heroic endeavor to carve out alternative approaches to the dominant modes of literary studies, increasingly improbable under the current ideological constraints in China.

"China Form and the Question of the Frankfurt School" tells the story of the Frankfurt School's Chinese journey, first entering China via the Soviet scholars at the beginning of the Reform Era of the late 1970s, and then gradually taken over by the American translations, retranslated into Chinese in the 1990s. The well-known contexts of the pre-Reform Era Soviet domination in Chinese humanities and then the rise of consumer culture, the "discipline building" or professionalization of the Chinese academy in the decades of the 1990s and 2000s are all well rehearsed by Duan, whose personal intellectual trajectory coincided with these interesting times when the Frankfurt School and many other western cultural and aesthetic theories were translated and embraced in China en masse. The comments that Duan makes about these moments bear a good deal of his own experience, a generation of Chinese scholars coming of age in the 1990s, even though in the paper there is no mention of his personal anecdotes, given the protocol of anonymity of individuals in Chinese public discourse. The paper can be mutually illuminating if it is read along Dongfeng Tao's generational account in this special issue. In the end of the paper Duan poses the question, or some kind of prospectus: "contemporary Chinese aesthetics requires a kind of critical theory based on China's context." One may ask what, if anything, would be the Chinese context, where the real "theoretical linkage" would find critical inspiration and utility of the Frankfurt School for the Chinese intellectual inquiry today? Duan seems to suggest that the "Chinese form" of a much sanitized, professionalized (academized) aesthetic theory miss the critical and interventionist sharp edge of the Frankfurt School, thus creating a critical distance by turning the *critical* theory, the benchmark of the Frankfurt School, into a Chinese *aesthetic* theory (my emphasis). Will today's Chinese academic, intellectual, and after all the political contexts call for an emasculated aesthetic theory, a safe haven or new kind of "ivory tower" enclave? Or anything beyond the mere "form", as opposed to "substance", as Duan's use of the term implies, that may revitalize the very "aesthetic" as a critical site for intellectual critique and social engagement?

The author of "French Left-wing Literary Theory and Mao Zedong Thought", Han Zhenjiang, has similar background of Duan. He is one of the post-1970s generation of Chinese scholars who find a critical niche in western Leftist theories, and begin their academic pursuit in the latest wave of the contemporary French theory, such as Badiou, Zizek, and others, whose works have caught cross-fire in the Chinese craze for the new intellectual fashion. Not the least of the bonfire was lighted up by their controversial, polemic, and sometimes scandalous affiliation with Maoism. Han's paper is a theoretically well-informed assessment of Maoist ideas in Althusser, Badiou, Zizek, and Rancière, all with extensive references to Mao and Maoism in their writings about ideology, culture, politics, literature and arts. Han makes good effort to contextualize these French theorists (or French-based in the case of Zizek) whose fascination with Mao and Chinese Cultural Revolution arose from the radical socio-political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. The European (and global) Maoism has been an

important subject in the Western Left intellectual circles and a great deal of studies have devoted to it, except, ironically, in China, where issues of Maoism, and specifically Maoist influence in contemporary western theories of "postism" is hardly touched. Han's paper offers a much-needed account of the recent Chinese studies of these French theorists with some mention of their Maoist connections, and the paper engages in comparisons of Mao's writings with each of the French theorists in a clear, succinct, and perceptive manner. However, a critical differentiation is missing in Han's paper, and in several other papers in this special issue, too. Intellectual inquires of the French and politics of the Chinese Communist Party have little in common, with immensely different consequences and ramifications. Even though it may seem like too obvious to say it, failing to mention such a difference may confuse the readers as to the real and practical ramifications, or in Marxist parlance, differences between theory and practice.

Wu Yuyu is not a first-time contributor to CLCWeb's special issue on China, and her paper "Deleuze's Challenge to Hegel's Aesthetics" offers a refreshing perspective on the overall theme of "China Question of the Western Theory". The paper is a theoretical query of a Chinese question, namely, a Chinese aesthetics or *meixue* (though the Chinese terminology not being the subject of Wu's paper), as it appears in German classical aesthetics of Kant and Hegel, and in French destructionist Deleuze respectively. The core issue of the paper is on "the confrontation between German classical aesthetics and French deconstructionist thought", as is viewed by a Chinese scholar, i.e. Wu. Unlike other papers in the special issue that address largely the history studies of the reception and appropriation of Western theory in China, Wu's paper is a brilliant exercise of immanent and self-reflexive metacommentary. It hits the bull's eye, so to speak, on the issues of the knowledge formation of the aesthetic in China. It started out with the translation of German classical thoughts, and then the Chinese wrestling with the alien but indispensable concept to ferret out a Chinese equivalent, steeped in Chinese classical and traditional views (Li Qingben's outstanding paper in this special issue and Wu's can be read complementarily). Eventually, Wu tells us, the Chinese anxiety arising from the tension between Western theory (knowledge) and indigenous tradition may find some solution from a Deleuzian deconstructive perspective. The paper suggests a possible venue for China Question of Western Theory: in each and every moment of the encounter between Chinese and Western theories and questions, there is something valuable and appropriate, if we put on hold the obsessive mindset with the "origins", *Ursprung* or *Herkunft* that Foucault mercilessly deconstructs, then we may find plenty of pleasant surprises, either with Kant, Hegel, or Deleuze. Without German classical thoughts one can never imagine the modern idea of *meixue*, which by now becomes a thriving field in China. Likewise, only by way of the deconstructive Deleuzian "rhizome thinking" can Wu "rediscover" the values of Chinese *meixue*, which cannot be seen from a Hegelian linear and unitary logic. The liberating force does not stop at releasing of the suppressed indigenous; its value lies just in being an emancipatory, open-ended way of thinking.

"Two Imagined Chinas in *Tel Quel*" explores a subject hardly touched in Chinese academic circles. China figures prominently in *Tel Quel*'s manifest objectives and widely acknowledged intellectual indebtedness, and studies of *Tel Quel* in English and French often mention its relationship with Maoism, nevertheless with insufficient empirical evidence, let alone theoretical analysis. This paper is certainly a welcome contribution to the studies of Maoism in Western Left thinking of the 1960s-1970s, and the enduring impact in "postism" that followed. Wang notes two principal strains of inquiry in *Tel Quel*'s China connection, known as "China period", an imaginary poetic "ancient China" and a radical Maoist China, probing deeply into *Tel Quel*'s avant-gardist fascination with the exotic, and Orientalist "Taoist China", referred to as a "newer version of the Chinoiserie." Wang delineates Derrida's fascination with Chinese characters and its *Tel Quel* connection, and its relationship with the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries European imaginations of China and discipline of Sinology. Maoist connection is mainly traced through Julia Kristeva and *Tel Quel* groups 1974 China trip during the Cultural Revolution. The significance of the paper's broaching the issue cannot be missed. The radical legacy of the 1960s French Left and *Tel Quel* and their enduring impacts on the recent wave of radical politics under the name of political correctness, identity politics, and so on, are compelling and urgent questions to be reckoned with today, and their Chinese transformations and appropriations, as Wang's and most papers in this special issue try to address, deserves continued efforts of scholarly inquiry across the world.

"Out of the Myths of "Revolutionary China": Liu Kang versus Žižek & Badiou" by Liu Xin takes to task my 2011 debate with Zizek in *Positions*. The Liu-Zizek debate covers a wide range of issues from the Western left's view of Maoism and post-Mao, contemporary China, to the theoretical gist of contemporary western left, in which China may serve as a prism or a litmus test, of the political and ideological strategies and ramifications in today's world. Liu Xin's paper mainly focuses on the Chinese

aspects of the debate, particularly the Chinese reactions (or non-reactions) to the debate. Oddly, Žizek became a taboo and strictly banned on his commentaries on Mao and today's China, whereas his Lacanian theories of cinema and ideology remain a hot commodity in Chinese academic circles. A conference on Žizek in 2021 organized by Nanjing University's philosophy department, a Chinese hub of Žizek fans and apostles, ended up banning Žizek's "keynote speech", depriving him any chance to speak there. It was surely a scandalous event, yet even any mention of it in social media is banned in China. Han Zhenjiang, who contributes to this special issue with his paper on Badiou, Žizek and Ranciere, actually translated all the Liu-Zizek debate papers into Chinese, which are sitting in dust now after more than a decade of translation, with no possibility of getting published in China in a foreseeable future. Liu Xin's paper in this special issue, written first in Chinese, will have hard time getting published in China, too. I add this sequel of the very real events around this scholarly exchange partly to express my gratitude to Liu Xin for continuing the conversation, partly to further reflect on the project that we've started for years under the rubrics of China Question of Western Theory. Liu Xin observes that "revolutionary China is not a myth that can easily be "bid farewell"; it must still be critiqued and subjected to critical reflection," and that "For today's China, the revolution remains a historical and structural as well as an emotional, intellectual, and practical force,.....Revolutionary China is not a "focal point" or "antidote" with regard to left-wing melancholy, and it should not be led into nihilism by Žizek's "cynicism" or Badiou's "moral indignation," which are ultimately irrelevant and unhelpful to "China." I agree with Liu Xin's assessment of my work to continue to confront revolutionary China and to find relevance by critiquing Western post-Maoists such as Badiou and Žizek. It should be noted, however, that finding relevance from such a critique of the western left and self-styled Maoists does not simply concern China, and limit itself to the China question. It has a far-reaching implication to the renewed critique and self-reflection of the modern and contemporary movement of the Left, especially the hard-pressed but compelling rethinking of its social and political consequences of the cultural and ideological campaigns in academia and in general public via social media. In the wake of the rising political and ideological tides of nationalism and populism on both the Right and the Left, leaving no corners of the whole globe unaffected, the urgency of pursuing these questions cannot be overstated now. This is, after all, the principal consideration of intellectual, social and political intervention and engagement, and overarching theme of this special issue.

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