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Some Additional Remarks Concerning Issues Opened by Prof. Wang Jianjiang

Abstract: The article is a further exchange of ideas between a Chinese and a Slovenian scholar. The exchange concerns the position of humanities (especially aesthetics) in China. The exchange between Prof. Wang Jianjiang and Prof. Aleš Erjavec brings out two very different experiences of the role of the humanities in China and in the West. Prof. Erjavec believes that China is to a large extent following the path of the development of aesthetics and the humanities in the West, while Prof. Wang Jianjiang argues that China should develop its more specific and more easily recognized Chinese tradition, thereby making China an important and influential academic force in the world. He expects the strength and position of the Chinese tradition in the humanities to equal the strength of China in economy, development and so on. Great efforts will have to be made if such an outcome is expected.

Keywords: China, aesthetics, the humanities, *Zhuyi*, quadrilateral, space, Bie-modernism

Let me immediately turn to the main points of the exchange between Prof. Wang Jianjiang and myself.

Prof. Wang criticizes Chinese aestheticians, people from the humanities and perhaps intellectuals in general for not keeping up with the developments and their speed and success in other realms where China is more competitive, namely economy (and possibly natural sciences, etc.). In Prof. Wang Jianjiang's view China should accelerate its development in aesthetics (as some kind of a paradigmatic example of the humanities, art, etc.) and offer the West (and the rest of the world) a competitive, creative and original aesthetic theory (theories) that could serve both Chinese and global public.

In Prof. Wang's view the reason why China is lagging behind the rest of the world in aesthetics and the humanities in general is that it has not developed its *Zhuyi* – what in the West he recognizes as *-isms*, such as expressionism, pragmatism, or existentialism, as well, I would add, terms such as psychoanalysis, *Jugendstil*, etc.

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Two Examples

In the West *-isms* are usually not isolated trends, fashions, ideas, and currents, but are interdependent with other *-isms*. Let us take two examples:

1) Expressionism is a modernist trend that appeared early in the 20th century. It is built upon the theory of *Einfühlung* developed by Theodor Lipps (1851–1914), a philosopher and a psychologist whose theory supported a shift from sympathy to empathy, with art being the main instance of such sentiment. Expressionism continues where *Jugendstil* (also called Liberty Style, Secession, etc.) has left off. It reaches into painting, sculpture, music, poetry, novels, clothes, interior design, cinema, etc. It expresses the *Zeitgeist* and the subjective situation around World War I, but it does not do this in a direct way but by creating an atmosphere, a sense of time and place. (Take writings by Franz Kafka as an example.) Expressionism is considered mostly a ‘German’ expressive style. It is often pessimistic, it depicts individuals who cannot find a place in society, depicts people from the lower strata of society, and often has a special – mostly mystical – bond with nature, etc.

2) The Frankfurt School is a general name for intellectuals gathered around the Institute for Social Research that also published a publication (a *Zeitschrift*) devoted to social research (*Zeitschrift für soziale Forschung*). Its collaborators ranged from Theodor Adorno to Walter Benjamin and were strongly influenced by concurrent art and literature. Before or during World War II they left Germany (they were Marxists and Jews) and mostly found refuge in the United States, where they influenced an enormous number of people from the humanities, and in a way becoming probably the strongest theoretic current in the United States since the 1960s. (Poststructuralism had other – French – sources, but it was nonetheless linked to the Frankfurt School). Various theories that they developed and which concern philosophy, sociology, art history, psychoanalysis, Freud and Marx, Marxism, film studies, mass psychology, Zen-Buddhism, architecture, design, erotic energy, etc., remain even today the basis for much of the social sciences and the humanities in the U.S. and elsewhere. One of the features of their approach (which was basically critical Marxist theory) was incessant study of concurrent art and social and political history. Imagine Theodor Adorno without atonal music or Walter Benjamin without expressionism or surrealism; imagine critique of mass culture without Adorno and his denigrating criticism of this phenomenon. Even if we totally disagree with Adorno on this matter we cannot avoid mentioning and discussing his view on the subject.

What do these two examples that I have given, show? What do these descriptions demonstrate? I think – at least that was my intent – they show how the so-called *-ism* spreads and soon establishes at least temporary hegemony over other similar *-isms*. Take the example of expressionism: it assimilated and conflated art, philosophy, life style, fashion, design, *Zeitgeist*, and *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life). Before it *Jugendstil* possessed a similar influence. What we are dealing with is a whole constellation consisting of various elements that all express and determine an epoch.

Perhaps Walter Benjamin had something similar in mind when he spoke in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that “During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with the humanity’s entire mode of existence.”¹

As you can see I am trying to point out that an *-ism* (literal or metaphoric) is always related to a concurrent set of events in culture or in certain communities of sense. A philosophical or other theoretical problem usually emerges due to something that is going on elsewhere, in another part of the academic community. We of course cannot find common roots from which the philosophical (or aesthetic) issue develops and is then contextualized with culture, history, ideology or whatever. What is important is that there exists – must exist – a broader realm that gives sense to the one that is the object of our scrutiny. Already Karl Marx spoke of periods in history and of cultures when and where an unexplainable explosion of creativity appeared. A long time ago Martin Jay compared the cultural events in the eighties in Slovenia with that in the U.S. in the sixties. In my opinion recent Chinese art underwent a similar creative explosion.

The question that arises at this point is whether it is possible for the academic community in China to develop an equally persuasive and theoretically deep theory that would reflect this artistic creative revolution. I believe that aesthetics in China is poised to offer a theoretical support to this new Chinese art. If it won’t it will remain ‘pure’ theory, detached from its legitimate subject-matter. Needless to say, such connection between art and theory (aesthetics) works both ways: art draws to itself art and artists rely on theory. Also, of course, art critics serve as ‘middlemen’ between art and theory and vice versa.

According to Edmund Husserl our consciousness is always about something. The same goes for theory or a theoretic cluster: no nation can develop a theory that would be purely abstract and then applicable to any subject-matter. A theory is always about something, it is fused with its other – practice, an artwork, a historical event – for it needs to anchor itself near other bodies or clusters of theory. In Chinese circumstances this means that one needs a grid of different but interrelated phenomena (*zhuyi* or other) after which their combination, link and relevance establish a ‘knot’ that acts then as kernel or a center of an explosion of differences and novelties. To some extent one could compare this process with the developments and inventions that usually accompany technical discoveries.

Philosophical Quadrilateral

“Philosophical Quadrilateral” (or the Humanist Quadrilateral) denotes the process wherein the old world order is being subverted and is being replaced by a new one – all this relating to aesthetics and the humanities too. In other words, my

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 222.

question could be formulated in the following way: what is happening in the humanities and with the humanities once Chinese intellectuals – such as prof. Wang – commence to question the extant situation and decide that time is ripe – that time requires – a thorough change in the extant structure of forces and of the over-all system of the humanities? What happens when (let me return here to Jacques Rancière and Aristotle) someone (or a community) becomes aware of the need to radically transform and change *everything*? After the French Revolution Immanuel Kant wanted to determine what is necessary for a people to start a revolution. His response was that it is a particular kind of enthusiasm that causes people to leave everything, take the risk and fight for the revolution in spite of being aware that such deed may very well cause their death. This is related to what Aristotle had in mind, namely that you have to articulate your position and you can accomplish this only by expressing articulate thoughts and not inarticulate voices that only witness to your suffering and pain. I am of course not claiming that the rise of the self-consciousness of Chinese intellectuals is like the French Revolution, but there are some similarities: the French people, just like some Chinese intellectuals, feel the need to change something and the way they can accomplish this is by changing the extant – the ‘given’ – facts of life. What do I mean by that? – That it is the unhappiness with what we perceive as ‘facts of life’ – the spontaneously given – that causes a change in the identity of ‘facts of life’. In other words, new facts replace the old ones, even though the people in question don’t recognize immediately that a new paradigm has been established.

If some decades ago the cultural antagonisms and competition in the West occurred mainly between the United States, on the one hand, Europe (especially France) on the other, and Soviet Union as a tentative third player, than this situation has now turned into a quadrilateral one: we are still witnesses to the American and the European cultures, but there is now a new player in town, namely China. For some time it appeared that the fourth such player would be the former Soviet bloc countries, Russia included, but this did not happen. Today it is rather the Third World (or the postcolonial one) that as a provisional alliance represents the third player. Still, the important fact is the presence of China as a force striving to place itself on the global map of the humanities too. China furthermore brings a new ingredient into the present global organization of culture and the humanities: from Western perspective it is at the same time exotic and distant and – also due to its Marxist past – very close and easy to comprehend. From this perspective China is both foreign and close – this being almost certainly true also of the Chinese intellectuals in the humanities, philosophy and aesthetics: they too feel – I assume – to be very similar to Westerners and at the same time very distant from them.

Let me end with a brief return to the quadrilateral. As I suggested the previous trilateral schema – Europe, America and the postcolonial world (often still divided into the former the First, the Second and the Third worlds) is revealing its weaknesses and obsolescence. What does the Third World signify? (I am talking here of India, Brazil, South Africa.) All the mentioned segments of the worlds (all segments of the three

worlds and especially the Third World) possess their specific characteristics. There is thus very little long-term policy present, and there is little, if any, strategic planning concerning the interrelations between economy, and culture. Still, under the current global conditions 'soft power' appears to suffice, at least as long as a military conflict doesn't occur.

I could go on and on – a *factum* – perhaps even a *fatum* – that witnesses that prof. Wang has touched upon a neuralgic spot in our minds. He has noticed that somehow a part of the ground beneath us is missing. It is through this rabbit's hole (remember *Alice in Wonderland*?) that we may start consciously to ponder upon issues arising from the issues that he has brought forth. In other words, I definitely think that he is 'up to something' and that this something deeply concerns all of us even if we don't yet know how and perhaps not even why.

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