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## **Zhuyi: From Absence to Bustle? Some Comments on Wang Jianjiang's Article "The Bustle and the Absence of Zhuyi"**

**Abstract:** The article is a response to the article published in *Filozofski vestnik* in 2016 and written by Prof. Wang Jianjiang who in recent years devoted much of his efforts to the influence of Western aesthetics and philosophy on Chinese humanities. Thus a notion introduced by Prof. Wang Jianjiang – *Zhuyi* – became the center of discussion in the papers that are to be found in this volume of *AM Journal*. Prof. Jianjiang claims that *Zhuyi* has a similar meaning as Western *-ism* and argues that Chinese aestheticians and intellectuals in general must develop their own theories (*-isms*) if they want to gain speech and not remain stuck with voice (cf. Jacques Rancière).

**Keywords:** China, aesthetics, *Zhuyi*, republic of letters, voice and speech, national and international humanities

In the article I shall present some observations related to issues raised by the article "The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*. The Example of Chinese Aesthetics" written by Prof. Wang Jianjiang.<sup>1</sup> I will claim that some recent events and processes in the West to some extent resemble those in China. Dialogues such as this one should aid us to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings or stray practices that concern the coexistence, the comparative importance, and the novelty of ideas that are circulating in international academic circles.

Prof. Wang Jianjiang, while criticizing the frequently subordinate position of Chinese academics *vis-à-vis* the positions and practices of their Western colleagues, is at the same time well aware of China's need to communicate, cooperate, and share knowledge with the West. Such position is of course a necessary precondition for any

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Jianjiang, "The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*. The Example of Chinese Aesthetics," *Filozofski vestnik* 37, 1 (2016): 157–78.

kind of equality and mutual understanding. In the past academics often built bridges within the “republic of letters”;<sup>2</sup> there is no reason why this should not be done again and on a larger scale. This need to cooperate and exchange is a necessary precondition for any authentic understanding among individuals, nations and cultures and is a basic feature of any serious attempt to perceive ‘them’ as ‘us’.

Aleš Erjavec begins his article by pointing out that in the comments and remarks published in Prof. Wang’s article he shall be often simultaneously referring to aesthetics, philosophy, and the humanities. His own knowledge is mostly about these three realms that –together – he usually calls ‘theory’. In the West it is generally agreed that aesthetics is a narrower field than philosophy and that the latter is (even if only for propedeutic reasons) subsumed under the humanities.

Another key term the author shall be frequently using is art. Art is important for the topic of this article because its recent development in China is closely intertwined with the developments in art criticism in China and in the West, in their aesthetics as well as in the humanities in general. A characteristic of recent modern as well as contemporary art is that it requires its proper theory. By *art* the author designates primarily visual art; other artistic genres (especially literature and music) while considered art, are in the West at least since the second half of the twentieth century regarded as realms (or ‘genres’) that differ from those of art as visual art. Much of what is being said about contemporary visual art (i.e., painting, sculpture, installation art, performance, cinema, video, etc.), is valid also for literature or music. There is a general agreement in the West that separation into *art* and all the other arts occurred around year 1800.

## **Art**

Chinese contemporary *art* (visual art) has very quickly caught up with global artistic developments but this fact was hardly noticed in China. I cannot ascertain in a satisfactory manner reasons for such ignorance. (I am intentionally using such strong language for only such means properly address the actual situation). On the other hand, ‘literature’ continues to be regarded as both the most important and the most hegemonic artistic genre. Visual art is thus ascribed the second place in such hierarchy.

Specialists in aesthetics often don’t know much about visual art which is why they often tend to privilege, discuss, and ascribe special import to the written word, ignoring visual art and its theoretical discourse. In the West some decades ago literature had to cede its prime place in art to visual art. The main turning point was the advent of postmodernism in the seventies and eighties that was both visual and

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Republic of letters’ was an enlightenment community of scholars and literary figures (*les philosophes*) who in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and America shared knowledge and at the same time respected mutual differences in language and culture.

commercial – two things that literature was not. For a variety of reasons works of visual art are more easily and more quickly accessed than novels and poems. Although I sympathize with the Chinese attempts to retain literature as the main artistic genre, I doubt that in the future in China literature and its theoretical discourse will retain their present special status but will – just like in the West – drift into backstage, with the front stage being glaringly illuminated by visual art and its discourse.

### **Western *Zhuyi***

In recent years I have on some occasions been witness to debates among Chinese aestheticians who criticized their compatriots for being uncritical to Western ideas and for not offering ‘Chinese’ alternatives to them. These critics were searching for an alternative to what they saw as being uncritically pro-Western views that encompassed both methods and theories used, as well as subject-matter itself. These proponents of Chinese aesthetics, philosophy, and the humanities in general, are of course also proponents of Chinese tradition. They see Western aesthetics, philosophy and the humanities in general as pushing Chinese thought into the backstage and irrelevance. They wish to stop and even reverse this trend and thus develop theory (or a cluster of theories) that would be an original ‘Chinese’ response both to Chinese and to global contemporary issues. The obvious question raised then is: on which segment or which trend within the Chinese tradition is such ‘Chinese’ theory to rely upon? Could this be Confucianism, neo-Confucianism, Daoism, Marxism or something else? At this point the sterile nature of such dilemma reveals itself: to me the most productive situation is to have all such theories present, whether coexisting or existing in conflict, with theory as well as literature and art being internally torn among these conflicting traditions and new ‘foreign’ theories. The only path available in such situation are struggles and slow mutual exchange and even assimilation. In some other countries the dilemma is usually different: in post-colonial countries, for example, the antagonism is often between the colonial and the post-colonial discourse and culture. Since China is not a colony and, furthermore, was a Marxist state for most of the previous century, can lessons learnt in the former colonies be of substantial use when discussing China? I doubt. I also doubt that postcolonial studies can be of great use in interpreting developments in the former socialist countries.

Recent and current complaints of Chinese aestheticians, philosophers, and experts in the humanities who were defending Chinese identity by stressing the importance of Chinese tradition seem to be well-founded, for the Chinese humanities really are (and have been since the late eighties and the early 90s of the previous century) increasingly under the influence of Western theoretical paradigms (the *-isms*), while their main (if not also exclusive) subject of investigation were issues raised by Western authors. The question is thus whether something – and if so, what? – can in China be put in the place of contemporary Western thought. Furthermore, is this a choice

between Chinese and Western thought or also between Chinese and Western culture and art? If the latter, is such response not a repetition of Chinese tradition of 'splendid isolation'?<sup>3</sup>

Main reasons for the current situation are noted and discussed already by Prof. Wang in his article. Of course, the current situation is not limited to aesthetics, philosophy or the humanities (and Prof. Wang highlights this fact himself): we find it also in popular music, fashion, popular press, and in the general world view of many – especially young – Chinese people. It is not consoling to say that this is what you get with market economy, and it is even less consoling to notice that in the past other countries have found themselves in situations similar to those found in present-day China. They have attempted to counter the influx of 'foreign' theories and artistic practices in different ways.

Such countries – in Europe the best-known among them is France – in past century attempted to actively counter foreign influence (especially that of the United States) which in their opinion promoted foreign ideas and products of mass culture and endangered domestic culture.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes such attempts met with success. Let me offer a few examples:

Case 1: Half a century ago especially French intellectuals criticized the use of 'franglais' (the excessive use of English vocabulary in French language resulting in a mixture of both languages) and attempted to reduce the amount or number of 'imported' English language words and American mass culture works into French language and culture by practicing linguistic, educational and cultural purism. The ensuing de facto prohibition has met with some success.

Case 2: The more 'artistic' (non-commercial) European movies are nowadays supported by a special European fund that offers financial aid for production, distribution and the translation (in the form of subtitles) of movies made in European Union for which a very limited cultural market is a continuous fact of life.

Case 3: In Europe today many governments sanction the reproduction of popular music, requesting radio stations by law to play minimum 40% of popular music that is in the native language of respective country, with the rest being left to songs in English (or some other) language.

Case 4: Culture is not the same as 'theory' but it is not that different either. Thus in philosophy (aesthetics and the humanities are subjected to the same treatment) what the French government does is support the translation of French works into foreign languages. The French viewpoint is often equated with that of Europe as a whole, the reason for this being that France was the only 'big' European country to be attentive to this issue and to be constantly averse to the predominance of American culture which it regarded as ignorant, commercial, and civilizationally worthless.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Splendid isolation' was the policy pursued by Great Britain during the late nineteenth century when Great Britain was only minimally involved in European affairs.

<sup>4</sup> See Aleš Erjavec, "Eastern Europe, Art, and the Politics of Representation," *boundary 2* 14, 1 (Spring 2014): 51–77.

Case 5: Some time ago the American historian of ideas, Martin Jay, discussed the preponderance of the post-World War II American art and the fact that at that time the world capital of art has shifted from Paris to New York. He consoled the French public that on the other hand since the eighties the French theory (structuralism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, etc.) have to a large extent conquered American humanities and have positioned French theory as the dominant one in American academia.<sup>5</sup>

Case 6: Yet another example comes from an important observation by the American (Marxist) philosopher Fredric Jameson who offered another possible answer to the problem discussed by Prof. Wang: “Europe – more prosperous and culturally more elegant than ever, a shining museum of an extraordinary past, the most directly of the past of modernism itself – did not succeed in establishing its own forms of mass cultural production. In a similar way the former socialist countries were mostly incapable to establish culture and a recognizable style of life that would be capable of being an alternative, while in the Third World old traditionalisms are equally weak and ossified.”<sup>6</sup>

Jameson thus detects a problem as regards European culture in the fact that Europeans have never established a strong link between high art and popular culture and have treated the latter primarily as a product of culture industry and thereby insufficiently dignified to be regarded of equal relevance as art.<sup>7</sup> In this respect aesthetic theories and views of Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg are two outstanding examples of Western approach to high art that denigrates mass culture. Unfortunately the tradition of this total separation of two realms of culture in Europe that was set apart already in the 19th and then even more strongly in the first half of the 20th century with these two and many other authors continues to haunt western art as well as aesthetics and evaluation of art – a fact witnessed by the theme of the forthcoming International Congress for Aesthetics (Seoul, July 2016) “Aesthetics and Mass Culture” which is directly related to the modernist division into mass/popular/commercial culture on the one hand and high/elite/non-commercial art on the other. Can China produce sufficient amount and sufficiently specific mass culture? Are there any other alternatives to such culture?

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<sup>5</sup> See Martin Jay, “Returning the Gaze: The American Response to the French Critique of Ocularcentrism,” in *Refractions of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2003), 133–47.

<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham: Duke University Press 1998), 67.

<sup>7</sup> Jameson notes that Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), the well-known French novelist, although he was the author of best-sellers is not regarded as a part of the culture industry, for “no contradiction is as yet felt in his time between the production of best-sellers and the production of what will be later understood as ‘high literature.’” Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 208.

## Marxism

The Chinese humanistic scholars were and remain under a strong influence of Marxism. It is certain that they will continue this tradition. Here the question then is: which Marxism are we (or they) talking about? The old division into 'orthodox' and 'Western' Marxism still holds: if the orthodox Marxism is linked to the ruling communist party of a certain community, making Marxism its 'official' doctrine, sooner or later conformism and corruption will be born out of such doctrine and its practice. If, on the other hand, the 'dissident' Marxism is given priority, then this Marxism will supply criticism but very rarely also supportive and constructive views. If it opts to do the latter (if the 'dissident' Marxism opts to support an act of government), then it will often be quickly accused of apologetic approach, ideological intervention, etc. In other words, in the former case we gain the compromising uncritical eye of pure affirmation, while in the latter one (= dissident Marxism) we cannot attain professional support for anything that offers even slight impression of being supportive, for it is immediately compromised by being proclaimed to be an affirmative stance.

All this is probably true also of China. In the rest of the world Marxism today exists (and remains) as Western Marxism and 'radical theory'. By this I denote the tradition of the Frankfurt school, and that of various theoretical discourses associated with Freud, Marx and Saussure, i.e. with psychoanalysis, with Marxian political economy and with structural linguistics and theories and methodologies that are connected with it. One can of course argue that Chinese Marxism is exempt from such pitfalls. I personally doubt very much that this is possible.

## The Incomprehensible French Theory

When in the sixties 'French' theory started to spread across Europe, not many experts outside France understood it. In a sweeping gesture it conquered continental Europe to become (and remain) the dominant theory on the continent. (You may recall Martin Jay's views noted above.) At the beginning – in the sixties and early seventies of the 20th century – this cluster of theories (deconstruction, theory of the discourse, structuralism and post-structuralism, structural anthropology, theory of ideology, etc.) – was almost equally incomprehensible to mainstream western academics brought up in the tradition of Wittgenstein, as well as of analytic philosophy and aesthetics, as it was incomprehensible to non-western scholars. In the seventies and eighties the situation repeated itself with the unexpected appearance of postmodern art, culture and theory. Postmodern theories too once again required knowledge of recent French philosophy and culture. As in the sixties and seventies western experts who were taught in the analytic tradition again had big difficulties to understand French thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze or Jean-François Lyotard. The three 'philosophical

empires' – the Anglo-American, the German and the French to use a distinction introduced by Richard Shusterman – coexisted in Europe but this in no way meant that the three philosophical traditions were mutually comprehensible or easily translated one into the other two. There was a joke at that time among the British philosophers that concerned Hegelian dialectics and consequently German philosophy: “What is dialectics?”, went the question – “It is philosophy that doesn't make any sense”, was the answer. In a similar way an English reviewer of Lyotard's book *Discours, Figure* (1971) wrote in the Winter 1972 issue of the *British Journal of Aesthetics* that the French author – much appreciated in the United Kingdom although little read – boasted that his book was full of aporias and voids. Such statements enormously confused the reviewer, for in Britain such admissions would be signs of dilettantish and ‘bad’ argumentation, and certainly not as something an author would be striving for.

This situation changed in the seventies and eighties when post-structuralism and the broader interpretation of critical theory and postmodernism in culture set in. These new tendencies entered American and British academia via French departments, and comparative literature departments and not those of philosophy or aesthetics. Suddenly two very different traditions were fighting for legitimacy in the United Kingdom and in the United States. This situation lasted until the ‘continental’ tradition (i.e. the ‘French’) became the dominant one, and pushed traditional Anglo-American philosophy into the sidelines.

## Eastern Europe

A similar situation emerged in the eighties and nineties in the former socialist countries of Europe and in the former colonies. Due to the lack of information and to their frequent isolation experts from the humanities in these countries knew little about the more recent international developments in their field. If they did, they found no way to bring together ‘Western’ theory and its application to socialist and post-socialist practice. In some respects these countries resembled China. The East Europeans furthermore lacked sound methodology. It took them a few decades of hard work (mostly abroad) to compensate for such weaknesses.

A rare instance of the successful application of ‘Western’ theory to Eastern European social and political practice was the attempt of some Slovenian philosophers (Slavoj Žižek being one of them) who used Althusserian and Lacanian theories to deconstruct the workings of Yugoslav ideology in the eighties, i.e. in the last decade of Yugoslavia and its disintegrating self-management socialism.

Some countries of Eastern Europe find it today difficult to compete on equal grounds with their Western European academic neighbors. Also, the humanities are not regarded as something of great import in most of mentioned countries. Funding for the development of humanities remains scarce. Foundations and foreign governments supply aid, education, and partly research funding. Another problem that



emerges today or, rather, remains alive since centuries ago, is the distinction between provincialism and periphery. This difference was explicated by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann who distinguishes between the province and the periphery: province emulates and copies art of the center, while periphery creatively transforms it into a specific extension or variant of the art that already exists in the center. The same applies to humanities.

### The National and the International

China has an incredibly long history of statesmanship and thus a very long history of conscious belonging to a single state. A person from continental Europe often finds it surprising when he experiences the strong sentiment of being Chinese among his or her Chinese friends. In Europe such strong patriotic sentiment could perhaps be encountered among the British or the Poles and the Croats but hardly elsewhere. A European intellectual is most often torn between different identities and self-identifications: religious, national, regional, educational, pro-European or pro-national, class-based, etc.<sup>8</sup>

The same sentiment applies to the humanities. Quite some time ago I responded to the questions put forth by the American journal *Metaphilosophy*.<sup>9</sup> The journal's question was: how national or international is philosophy? I discovered that while it was at that time very difficult to find 'national' philosophers, there still were some (or at least such tendencies existed). One such case was Croatian philosophy which at that time attempted to develop Croatian 'national' philosophy. This meant giving special treatment and funding to a research institute doing research on the history of philosophy in Croatia. To be precise: the name of the research project was that of 'Croatian' philosophy. Books on little-known Croatian philosophers were funded and distributed, a few special teaching posts were established so as to give more prominence to the teaching of the history of Croatian philosophy. Although the project appeared sound, it ran for only four years: until the Croatian nationalist President Franjo Tuđman died, after which the research project collapsed. Croatian philosophers obviously didn't want to pursue research in the history of little-known medieval Croatian philosophers but wanted to study Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard and the like. (In this they resembled a little their Chinese similes.) In this case as in many others it turned out that support from the government or its institutions usually doesn't produce desired results and that it is more productive to leave the researchers to pursue their own priorities. In a way the difference was like the difference between the production for the free market and production according to the five-year plan. It appears that *Zhuyi* can be born mostly from the latter.

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Aleš Erjavec, "Philosophy: National and International," *Metaphilosophy* 28, 4 (October 1997): 329-45.



If China decides that such action is necessary it may be more successful than other countries that attempted to carry out the same. It may find like-minded (especially) Chinese researchers and thinkers who will be willing and happy to support the broadening and deepening of the place and role of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics in the world. But allow me to voice my belief that such support will be generated only if such researchers and authors themselves will from their own free will decide to carry out such agenda. Only then will they produce results. Otherwise they will spend a lot of funding, visit many countries for talks about academic cooperation but at the end that is all that China will get.

Let me conclude this commentary by saying something about *Zhuyi*. It has been observed that *-ism* isn't a perfect rendering of the Chinese meaning of this term in Western languages, although I do agree with Prof. Wang that something similar to *Zhuyi* occurs also in the West. Perhaps the terms 'movement' and 'trend' could be partly suitable translations of *Zhuyi*?

### **Who Possesses Speech and Who Only Possesses Voice?**

In my view the contemporary Chinese situation as regards *Zhuyi*, art and theory (aesthetics, philosophy and the humanities) is in many respects different from the present or the recent situation in the West. If some decades ago the cultural antagonism and competition in the West occurred mainly between the United States, on the one hand, and Europe (especially France) on the other, this bipolar situation has now turned into a quadrilateral one: we are still witnesses to the American and the European culture, but there is now a new player in town, namely China. For some time it appeared that such player would be the former Soviet bloc countries, but they then never took on this role. The so-called 'Third World' has once more moved away, has remained 'mute', while China is striving to gain a 'voice' to paraphrase Jacques Rancière.

Althusser's positions and developed his own theories about aesthetics, art, education, politics, etc. In his *Politics* Aristotle claims that man "is political because he possesses speech, a capacity to place the just and the unjust in common, whereas all that an animal has is voice to signal pleasure and pain. But the whole question, then, is to know who possesses speech and who merely possesses voice."<sup>10</sup>

There are numerous small and big countries across the world that find themselves in a similar situation as concerns aesthetics, philosophy and the humanities, but not many among them are striving to have their voice heard. I see Prof. Wang's article as an attempt to articulate such a voice and make it heard both at home and abroad. I believe that such stance – to acquire voice – is of paramount importance for any successful emancipation and therefore for erecting one's own position and place in the

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (London: Continuum, 2009), 24.

world (and society). At the same time Chinese contribution to global aesthetics, philosophy and the humanities should keep open channels with the Western tradition. I interpret my remarks in this article as my contributing step in that direction.

My remarks regarding Prof. Wang's article have mostly been only indirectly related to the Chinese circumstances: I have given a few randomly chosen examples of the ways in which Europe countered the American cultural pressure and expansion. I have also pointed out that the characteristic feature of China today is that its aestheticians, philosophers (or at least some of them) have sensed the need to counter the influence of the West and are now therefore demanding the development of Chinese aesthetics, philosophy and the like. In this process Chinese academics and intellectuals have reached the phase wherein they have started to articulate their critical positions and have voiced their dissatisfaction with the current state and course of events.

I cannot judge to what extent such ideas and demands are part of a broader trend and expectation obvious also in other realms of life; it seems that in recent years China is reconsidering its position and its relation to the West, a consequence of this being also the Leninist strategy of stepping back one step so as to proceed forth two steps.

To accomplish this feat of establishing in China what I have called 'theory' on an equal footing with that of the West and to establish *Zhuyi* that would help in such endeavor, remains a task that is yet to be accomplished. In his article Prof. Wang discerns key steps on the path to accomplish the equality between China and the West. He furthermore notes innumerable obstacles on the path of *Zhuyi*: its politicization, the lack of independent thinking, the accentuation of discipline, and the expansion of financial and pragmatic interests that counter the authentic thought. He furthermore notes that the official position was to counter Western modernism with nationalism and national culture studies. He supports independent research and ends his article by a call for the advancement and construction of *Zhuyi*.

I believe that such call may in fact offer a persuasive and productive atmosphere for the development of 'theory'. Such Chinese path towards the desired situation is also not only original and specifically Chinese. There is at the same time a danger that the less capable, the more conservative and the less knowledgeable Chinese academics and other involved people will influence the official positions to such an extent that the *Zhuyi* initiative will stumble and perhaps even fall or go elsewhere. Marxism can also be employed for such undesired purposes. Of course, such Marxism is a parody of its real self, but this does not prevent it, as 'orthodox Marxism', to be used and abused for the aims such as power, influence and control.

My final remark is that our Chinese colleagues should not forget that in most of the world 'theory' is from the left and is on the left. Only through a leftist and radical position can Western 'theory' survive. (In China today it may be just the other way around: in this time there the 'Leftist' critique be more harmful than that from the right, for it is by definition closer to the center of power.)

The Chinese intellectuals find themselves today in a unique situation: how to solve contemporary questions with intellectual tools from a different time?" "Reshape

the tools, invent new ones?” How to theoretically respond to new ideas, new art, novel theories and so on? As so often there are no pre-given answers, only questions.

What Prof. Wang is doing in his article is posing questions. Whatever direction the answers to such questions may take us, they always require also a new community, a new ‘republic of letters’ which brings us together. An intellectual is not only a part of a nation and of a country, but is at the same time also a part of that imaginary community with members of which we silently converse as we do when reading a book by Confucius Aristotle, Kant or Li Zehou; whenever standing in front of a Buddhist or a Greek temple, contemporary European or American installation artwork or a Chinese painting from the recent past. And, yes, the ‘republic of letters’ is but a miniature of a much larger imagined entity: of the *sensus communis* or the ‘common feeling’ of which Kant wrote as of a feeling of belonging to the human species, of a sense of solidarity with the members of such species.

But to return to *Zhuyi*: if *Zhuyi* is seen as being rampant in the West, and is desired by the Chinese scholars, so much better: then it is high time also to start working on *Zhuyi*, whether Chinese or others.

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Article received: May 3, 2017  
Article accepted: May 8, 2017  
Original scholarly paper