Identity and Hybridity –
Chinese Culture and Aesthetics in the Age of Globalization

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Introduction: Culture and Identity

Thirty years ago (1977), Thomas Metzger published a book which became well known in Sinological circles: *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture*. In this book, Metzger discusses a serious problem Chinese scholars were confronted with at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century: the modernization of China and catching up with the West without giving up two thousand years of culturally valuable Confucian teachings. From the 1920s on, Confucian thought was replaced by Marxist ideology and, with the beginning of the Peoples' Republic in 1949, the latter was firmly established as the new order of discourse. Metzger argues persuasively, however, in spite of all the new leftist ideology that poured into China after the May Fourth Movement of 1919, that Confucianism was not relegated to the museum of History of Philosophy in China as Joseph Levenson (in his *Confucian China and its Modern Fate* of 1958) had predicted. Instead, Confucian thought – as an integral part of the Chinese cultural psyche – survived and remained influential, though not visible, in shaping modern China. Even radicals of this time, such as Mao Tse-tung, although they attempted to give China a completely new ideological order, were formed by their cultural tradition to such an extent that it was impossible to shake it off completely.

The above historical example is significant for our theme. It concerns the question of persistence of culture in the face of cultural encounters – both of the unfriendly kind, such as the first "clash of civilizations" between China and the West in the 19th century (after the Opium Wars), as well as of the latest and somewhat friendlier meeting, the process of mingling and interpenetration of cultures called globalization.[1] Hence, the significance of culture and cultural identity in the age of globalization remains a question to be answered.

[1] This is, however, only one side of globalization. As is well known, there is a dialectics of globalization at work bringing forth equally strong forces of localization such as the rising fundamentalism in many corners of the world.

In present day debates, we find a variety of responses to this question – all reflect, in one way or the other, the broader and much contented issue of universalism *vs*. particularism (or cultural relativism). Whereas some postmodern theoreticians assume that culture, generally, will become a museum piece to which there are only ironic references possible anymore, others claim that it is no longer politically correct – in an age of global assimilation and universal standards (such as human rights) – to speak of national cultures. They warn of the trap of essentialism, point to the rise of fundamentalism and terrorism and advise, instead, to focus on hybridity, migration, multiple identities and cross-overs – in short, the US immigrant experience and ideology of the melting pot on a global scale. Other critics again, who do not belong to the postmodernist camp, object that the notion of a global hybrid humanity, how ever politically correct it may be, might meet certain difficulties in practice. Michael Walzer, for example, warns:

> "Societies are necessarily particular because they have members and memories, members *with* memories not only of their own but also of their common life. Humanity, by contrast, has members, but no memory, and so it has no history and no culture, no customary practices, no familiar life-ways, no festivals, no shared understanding of social good."[2]

Can we thus still speak of culture and cultural identity in this new context? But do people in other parts of the world, let's say in the Arabian countries, in African countries, India, Oceania or China, share the (post-)modern Western man's (and woman's) anxieties to speak assertively about culture? Or is the postmodern focus on hybridity and multiple identities not something that belongs solely to the postindustrial and increasingly multicultural Western societies – a discourse that doesn't have much relevance to people who have not ventured from these regions to the new promised land of Western civilization?

Walzer only talks about the shared understanding of the "social good" but what about the shared understanding of art and aesthetics? Aesthetics, as an epistemic discipline, is part and parcel of sciences and humanities which, though set up by Western academics, have now become systems with universal or global significance. But other than in natural sciences such as physics, where there can only be one global and common to all form, there are still significant differences in humanistic disciplines such as philosophy, literature or aesthetics as well as in the arts, for they are much more bound to social conditions and developments in the respective countries. Arts and aesthetics form particularly significant parts of a culture: Apart

[2] Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin. Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Notre Dame, Ind./London, 1994, p. 8

from language, the cultural framework of myths, images, allusions as well as references to literature, art, religion and philosophy, in short, the symbolic and aesthetic orientation (shared literary or artistic sensibilities) have, thus far, formed the basis of any cultural identity.

In the following, the way of Chinese aesthetics shall be pursued – integrating today's discussions about culture and identity – from the traditional into the modern period. The first section deals with the main characteristics of traditional Chinese aesthetics which were (and often still are) considered to be at the basis of a Chinese cultural identity. In the second, the position of modern Chinese aesthetics shall be explored with reference to new debates about Chinese culture in the context of postmodernism and globalization. In a third and final section, the tension between Chinese tradition and Western modernity will be exemplified by a work of Wei Dong, a surrealistic artist now living in the US. His work shall illustrate the cross-cultural and postmodern characteristics of dislocation and cultural hybridity in modern Chinese art.

I. Traditional Chinese Aesthetics

"Traditional Chinese aesthetics" is a modern perspective on pre-modern Chinese art which includes not only poetry, calligraphy and painting (as the most prominent scholarly arts) but also architecture, pottery, bronzes, music, martial arts and so on.[3] Although it would be impossible to find common traits to all of these disciplines, the three above mentioned scholarly arts do share some common traits (particularly in the combination poetry and painting, on the one hand, and painting and calligraphy, on the other); and these traits did have an impact on a cultural identity for Chinese.[4]

The first characteristic of traditional Chinese aesthetics is to value "suggestiveness" as a poetic quality in a work of art. In poetry itself, this quality can be observed in a metaphoric language which is, first of all, determined by images from nature; second, the focus is on meaning behind the language and the images. Hence, we find notions such as "meaning beyond words" (*yan wai zhi yi*) or "images beyond images" (*xiang wai zhi xiang*).[5] A

[3] See Li Zehou's overview on traditional Chinese aesthetics in his popular book *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
[4] For a detailed discussion of Chinese aesthetics and literary theory see Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China – Von der Tradition bis zur Moderne*, Munich: Saur, 2006.
[5] For Sikong Tu see See Maureen Robertson, "'…To Convey What is Precious': Ssu-k'ung T'u's Poetics and the *Erh-shih-ssu Shih-p'in*", in: Susan Bush and Christian Murck (eds.), *Theories of the Arts in China*, Princeton:

suggestive quality is also required in painting: Ideally, a painting should convey a poetic image, something that reverberates beyond the actual painted scene (*miao zai hua wai* – "the intriguing quality is beyond the painting").[6] Hence, traditionally, Chinese painting does not aim at mirroring the world in the sense of *mimesis* (realistic representation of a scene), and it thus lacks the feature of linear perspective which became dominant in European painting since the Renaissance. Instead, the perspective, for example in a hand-scroll, unfolds from scene to scene as it is unrolled.[7]

A second characteristic is the demand for a "vital quality" (*qi*) which should convey a sense of liveliness in a work of art. Here, specifically painting and calligraphy are implied (although "vital quality" is also discussed in poetry). Such traits are not only in accordance with the first principle of Chinese painting: *qiyun shengdong* – "vital resonance and live movement", formulated by Xie He in the 6th cent. AD,[8] but also touch upon cosmological ideas concerning a work of art, i.e. notions of natural creativity: A work of art should – ideally – come into existence like a work of nature, by the workings of the inexplicable *dao* – the "Way" of the universe (of which the said force *qi* is only an agent). Intrinsic to this idea is the importance of the calligraphic line – the contrast of black and white and the preference for painting in black ink which emphasize the dynamic liveliness of the brushstroke. Movement and dynamics in black and white are aesthetically more interesting than static colour.

The third characteristic refers to the cosmological ideas already mentioned which promote the balance between binary opposites in a work of art. In poetry, for example, we observe a predilection for parallelism through which certain couplets in a poem are antithetically juxtaposed and connected. This inclination toward harmonizing mutually not opposing but rather conditioning forces derives from the pervading influence of *yin-yang*-thought. This can also be observed in a Chinese landscape painting (called in Chinese *shanshui hua* – "mountain and water painting"): A landscape painting unites the two said forces *yin* and *yang*

Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 3–26.

[6] Huang Yue, "Ershisi huapin", in: *Zhongguo gudai meishu congshu*, Peking 1993, vol. 4, p. 23; Günther Debon, *Grundbegriffe der chinesischen Schrifttheorie und ihre Verbindung zu Dichtung und Malerei*, Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1978, p. 75.

[7] Traditionally, the Chinese knew three "distances" (*yuan*) which can be likened to the European notion of perspective. Guo Xi (c. 1020-1090) discusses them in his treatise "The Great Message of Forest and Streams" (*Linquan gaozhi*), in Lin Yutang's translation: "Looking up from below is called the 'high perspective' (*gaoyuan*); looking from the rim at the interior of mountains is called 'deep perspective' (*shenyuan*); looking toward the distance is called 'level perspective' (*pingyuan*)." Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, New York: Putnam's Sons, 1967, p. 79.

[8] Lin Yutang, p. 34ff.

as mountain (*shan*, a manifestation of the male *yang*-quality) and water (*shui*, a manifestation of the female *yin*); hence a landscape painting catches the harmonious cosmological order of the world and its forces in a microcosmic way.

The fourth characteristic in Chinese poetics and art theory gives weight to two seemingly contradictory notions: to naturalness (*ziran*) and regularity (*fa*). The stunning aesthetic effect of this unity of opposites can best be observed and studied in the so-called "regular poems" (*lüshi*), flourishing in the golden age of Chinese poetry, the Tang dynasty (7^{th}-10^{th} cent.). These poems have to follow a strict set of rules concerning length and number of lines, tone patterns, parallelism and the like. And yet, while reading the works of not only the greatest poets of that time, one has the impression of absolute naturalness and ease in style. Similar characteristics can be observed in Chinese painting which also, traditionally, was defined by certain rules. Yet in the works of great masters, one experiences a sense of freedom from rules and restrictions. Thus, the painter Shitao (c. 1641–1717) proclaimes: "The highest rule is the rule of no rule (*zhi fa, nai wei wu fa zhi fa*)."[9] It basically means that all rules become so internalized that they turn out to be natural. The secret to this mastery lies in the notion of *gongfu* ("Kungfu"), i.e. excellence after arduous practice leading to a "perfect intuitive control"[10] over the artistic medium which, traditionally, has been called "spiritual" (*shen*).

Lastly, it was particularly the so-called poet-painters of the literati class[11] who laid down lasting standards of Chinese aesthetics. Because of their preference for calligraphic qualities and disregard of realism (*mimesis*), they not only appreciated scholarly characteristics such as painting in black ink (remindful of calligraphy), but also developed an amateurish unrealistic quality which can be described as "cultivated clumsiness". Because of their reverence of great past scholar-painters, together with their love for allusions (not only in poetry but also in painting), much of the art of the later centuries became what Max Loehr once termed "art-historical art".[12]

Traditional Chinese aesthetics, with its attributes of "suggestiveness", "liveliness", harmony of opposing (cosmological) forces, "cultivated clumsiness" and, lastly, a spiritual quality of

[9] Shitao (Daoji), *Huayulu*, ch. 3, translated in Lin Yutang, p. 142. Lin Yutang translates *fa* as "method".
[10] Richard John Lynn, "Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: Wang Shih-chen's Theory of Poetry and Its Antecedents", in: William Th. DeBary (ed.): *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1975, pp. 217–269.
[11] Scholars had to be familiar with calligraphy and composing poetry; when they painted, they did so as amateurs and for pleasure (not for money), in contrast to professional painters.
[12] Max Loehr, "Art-Historical Art: One Aspect of Ch'ing Painting", in: *Oriental Art N.S. 16* (Spring 1970), pp. 35–37.

naturalness and freedom achieved by strictly training according to set rules (*fa*), constitutes an entirely different world of art in comparison to the Western tradition (although there are certainly overlapping elements). It is no wonder, then, that these characteristics were understood by the Chinese themselves as the most sublime features of Chinese culture. These features served, well into the modern period, as fundamental elements of a Chinese cultural identity. Hence, in their monumental (though not completed) *History of Chinese Aesthetics* (*Zhongguo meixue shi*), Li Zehou and Liu Gangji marked as the last and most important characteristic of traditional Chinese aesthetics the idea that an "aesthetic consciousness" (*shenmei jingjie*) was regarded as the "highest and noblest consciousness to be attained in life".[13]

II.1 Aesthetics in modern China – Encounters with Western Thought

In modern times, aesthetics assumed a special place in Chinas grappling with Western thought: First, aesthetics constituted a realm relatively free of politics. For this reason, it attracted Chinese to explore freely and without political restraint occidental thought. Second, philosophy of art as part of aesthetics offered Chinese intellectuals the possibility of linking up with their own traditional ideas. This was important because – unlike the mainstream of Chinese traditional social and political thought, particularly Confucianism – the Chinese aesthetic tradition had not been discredited by the reception of Western ideas and the radical antitraditionalism of the May Fourth period (1917-23). Quite the contrary, when the Chinese at the beginning of the 20th century began to define themselves in relationship to the West, they understood their own culture as an essentially aesthetic one.

Thus, the encounter with Western thought, on the one hand, brought the Chinese a wealth of fascinatingly new ideas; it allowed them, on the other, to look for familiar concepts which could be aligned with their own tradition. The president of the Peking University during the May Fourth period, Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), was one of the first to formulate the idea of the mentioned cultural-aesthetic self-understanding of the Chinese. Through his studies in Germany he was familiar with occidental philosophy, particularly with Kant. He regarded Westerners to be largely shaped by religion, whereas for China he held aesthetics (a combination of ritual, art and ethics) to be the functional "spiritual" equivalent to religion in the West. For this reason he demanded for modern China "aesthetic education in the place of

[13] Li Zehou and Liu Gangji, *Zhongguo meixueshi* (History of Chinese Aesthetics), I, Beijing: Xinhua, 1984, p. 33f.

religion".[14] It was popular among culturally conservative intellectuals at this time to posit a Chinese "spiritual" against a Western "materialistic" culture;[15] the affirmation of "spiritual" aspects in Chinese aesthetics thus added to this understanding of Chinese culture.

A famous scholar, Wang Guowei (1877-1927), represents thee early encounter of Chinese with European ideas. He coined basic aesthetic concepts for the 20th century such as *jingjie* ("aesthetic state or consciousness") or *yijing* ("aesthetic idea")[16] to denote a perfect aesthetic fusion of artistic idea (or feeling) with a concrete scene. Wang first used the term *jingjie* only with regards to poetry and without any theoretical explanation. But this term (as the above quote by Li Zehou and Liu Gangji illustrates) soon gained a general aesthetic meaning, signifying both an aesthetic idea as well as a most sublime state of mind. Wang Guowei derived his concepts from Chinese tradition (using Buddhist vocabulary), but they are also imbued with meaning that he found in Kant and Schopenhauer (Kant's "aesthetic idea"); hence, they represent early intercultural exchanges of thought between China and the West.

In his article, "The Spreading and Influence of German Aesthetics in China", Liu Gangji showed that modern Chinese aesthetics was largely formed by the reception of German idealism.[17] The discourse of Chinese aesthetics of the 20th century, thus, was shaped by the questions of German philosophy of the 18th and 19th century. Due to many reasons (extensive periods of war, enormous problems of translation, etc.), this tradition of aesthetics – from Baumgarten and Kant to Marx – was received in China with a delay of about 100 years. The rather rigid reception of Marxism only reinforced this tendency. As a result, and in a significant departure from their own tradition, modern Chinese aestheticians focused on categories derived from the European history such as beauty or tragedy, issues that had been completely absent in pre-modern Chinese thought on art. Hence, the encounter with Western aesthetics led Chinese scholars to unfamiliar ground, a situation that also resulted in a few creative misunderstandings of European ideas. Guided by the translation of the term aesthetics

[14] Liu Gangji, "Verbreitung und Einfluss der deutschen Ästhetic in China", K.-H. Pohl (ed.), *Trierer Beiträge. Aus Forschung und Lehre an der Universität Trier*, July 1996 (Sonderheft 10), pp. 8-13.
[15] Particularly influential was Liang Shuming and his book *Dong xi wenhua ji qi zhexue* (Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies), published in 1922.
[16] Adele Rickett, *Wang Kuo-wei's* Jen-chien Tz'u-hua *hua – A Study in Chinese Literary Criticism*, Hongkong: Hong Kong University Press, 1977, p. 23ff, and Hermann Kogelschatz, *Wang Kuo-wei und Schopenhauer: Eine philosophische Begegnung – Wandlung des Selbstverständnisses der chinesischen Literatur unter dem Einfluß der klassischen deutschen Ästhetik*, Wiesbaden: Steiner 1986, p. 245ff.
[17] *Ibid*.

into Chinese as *meixue*: the "study of beauty",[18] much of modern Chinese aesthetics was to become – with the literal translation of the term aesthetics into Chinese: "beautology"[19]. The prominent scholars in Chinese aesthetics in the middle of the 20th century were Zhu Guangqian (1897-1986) and Zong Baihua (1897-1986) both of whom had studied in Germany and were quite familiar with Western thought. The former introduced Hegel's aesthetic to China and tried to bridge Western and Chinese ideas; the latter, though a translator of Kant's Third Critique and an admirer of Goethe, was equally focused on Chinese traditional resources and developed these ideas and concepts further (i.e. the notion of *yijing* which Wang Guowei had introduced but left without any theoretical elaboration[20]).

Pursuing further the history of modern Chinese aesthetics, it is worth noting that, even in the ideologically rather rigid period of the 1950s (between 1956 and 1962), aesthetics was a field that allowed for a relatively free debate – within the confines of a Marxist materialist approach to aesthetics.[21] Apart from the concept of beauty, it was now also the Marxian idea of "practice" that was added to the discussion by Li Zehou (*1930), one of the leading scholars of aesthetics in China today. Taking his ideas from Marx's "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844", practice was for Li materially productive activity, such as making and employing tools.[22]

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), aesthetics ceased to exist as a topic of discussion. Nevertheless, in the year this turmoil broke out in mainland China, one of the most influential books on Chinese aesthetics was published in Taiwan by Xu Fuguan: *The Spirit of Chinese Art*[23]. It discusses Chinese art and aesthetics as it had been prefigured by Cai Yuanpei and others, that is, highlighting its spiritual dimension and its connection to a Chinese cultural identity.

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[18] Like many terms from Western thought, aesthetics as "study of beauty" was first coined in Japan and from there introduced to China.

[19] Karl-Heinz Pohl, "Chinese Aesthetics and Kant", in: Mazhar Hussain and Robert Wilkinson (eds.), *The Pursuit of Comparative Aesthetics – An Interface Between the East and the West*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 127-136.

[20] Liu Gangji, pp. 15-19. Representative is a collection of essays entitled *Yi jing* (Realms of Art), Peking: Peking University Press, 1987. The notion of *yijing*, (lit.: "realm [*jing*] of ideas [*yi*]"), in fact, goes further back in history than Wang Guowei (the *yi* in the title of Zong Baihua's book has a different meaning: "art"). For Chinese aesthetics of this period see also Zhu Liyuan und Gene Blocker (eds.): *Contemporary Chinese Aesthetics*, New York: Lang 1995.

[21] Gao Jianping, "The 'Aesthetics Craze' in China – Its Cause and Significance", *Dialogue and Universalism*, 3-4/1997, pp. 27-35.

[22] *Ibid*., p. 30.

[23] Xu Fuguan, *Zhongguo yishu jingshen*, Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1966.

After the Cultural Revolution (in the 1980s), China experienced an unprecedented "aesthetics craze" mainly brought about by the writings of prominent aestheticians such as Zhu Guangqian, Zong Baihua and – most of all – Li Zehou. The latter was the towering figure of this period. On the one hand, he introduced new concepts such as subjectivity and practice, derived from a fusion of Kantian and Marxian ideas[24], and, on the other, he offered stimulating interpretations of Chinese artistic tradition in his widely read *The Path of Beauty* (*Mei de licheng*)[25] for which he had also employed ideas from Clive Bell and Susanne Langer. This craze was facilitated by the political thaw after the arrest of the "Gang of Four" in 1976: Having experienced a decade of chaos and disaster due to radical leftist politics, the Chinese Communist Party slowly departed from ideological notions such as class struggle and introduced the slogan "Practice as a sole criterion for truth" (*shishi qiu shi*). Li Zehous idea of "practice" in the field of aesthetics only added to this new explorative climate. Furthermore, his coinage of other concepts, such as "sedimentation" (*jidian*) as a fusion of the social with the individual in a historical process, resulting in a "cultural-psychological formation" (*wen hua xinli jiegou*), significantly enriched the aesthetics debate of this period. These ideas led the way to a broader debate about aesthetics to include politics and culture – the "culture craze" (*wenhua re*)[26] of the 1990s.

II.2. Aesthetics as Part of the Debate on Postmodernism and Culture in China Today

With the introduction of postcolonialism at the end of the 1980s, the focus shifted from theoretical aesthetics in the European tradition to culture.[27] The 90s saw a flood of assertive studies concerning Chinese culture (*guoxue*) of which arts and aesthetics, but also ethics, feature as prominent parts. Interestingly and ironically, this interest in Chinese culture was triggered again by new trends in Western thought: by the reception of Michel Foucault, and hence of postmodernism and post-structuralism, as well as the notion of "orientalism" by Edward Said and the ensuing postcolonial criticism. All this resulted in peculiar tensions, ambivalences and ironies for aesthetics in China today – in the context of debates on culture

[24] Liu Gangji, p. 19-32. Particularly influential was Li Zehou's book on Kant: *Pipan zhexue de pipan: Kangde shuping* (The Critique of Critical Philosophy: A Study of Kant), Peking: People's Press, 1979. See also Jane Cauvel, "The transformative Power of Art: Li Zehou's Aesthetic Theory", *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April, 1999), pp. 150-173; Woei Lien Chong, "Combining Marx with Kant: The Philosophical Anthropology of Li Zehou", *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April, 1999), pp. 120-149.
[25] See above footnote 3.
[26] See Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
[27] Gao Jianping, "Chinese Aesthetics in the Past Two Decades", in: "Some Facts of Chinese Aesthetics", Wang Keping and Gao Jianping (eds.), Peking: Chinese Society for Aesthetics, 2002, p. 41ff.

and identity – that will be briefly looked into below with reference to the so called "postist craze" (*houxue re*).

A major thread running through the 150 year long history of Chinese modernity – from the Opium war up to today – is to "seek the 'truth' from Western ideas in order to 'save' China."[28] The "craze" about "postist studies" (*houxue*) in the so-called "post-new-period" (*houxin shiqi*) fits right into this scheme. The reception of postcolonial criticism led to the awareness of a hundred year long "self-colonization" of the Chinese in terms of Western thought. As Zhang Kuan, one of earliest Chinese postcolonial critics (now living in the USA), puts it: "The main stream of Chinese modernity discourse has always been enchanted by the magical spell of the Western colonial discourse."[29] With the help of Western postcolonial thought, the focus of the Chinese debate thus shifted from defining Chinese modernity along the Western enlightenment paradigm (including ideas such as rationality, humanism, etc.) to recovering a Chinese "subjectivity" or "Chineseness" (*zhonghuaxing*). This "Chineseness", as was now believed, had been buried and almost forgotten by a politically correct Western modernity discourse, which became the dominant new tradition since the May Fourth Movement (1919). Hence, the new cultural assertiveness led to a critique of the May Fourth paradigm – a delicate task, as the Chinese Communist Party defines itself with particular reference to this movement. Interesting in our context is the notion of "Chineseness" as it entails not only a specific Chinese way of thinking but, in particular, also Chinese ethics and aesthetics as part of a Chinese cultural identity.[30]

This position, however, remained not unchallenged. Not only postmodern critics accused their postcolonial colleagues of essentialism – one of the gravest accusations possible in the postmodern discourse – also New Humanists criticized the postcolonial position as neo-conservative and hence contradicting the Enlightenment paradigm of the May Fourth tradition, and, lastly, it was criticized (mainly from Chinese critics residing outside of China) for joining into the anti-Western rhetoric of the Chinese government. Regarding this last aspect, the charges are somewhat ambivalent, for the Chinese Communist Party considers

[28] Min Lin, *The Search for Modernity. Chinese Intellectuals and Cultural Discourse in the Post-Mao Era*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, p. 185. There has been a heated debate in (and outside of) China as to the relevance of postmodernism in China. For an overview see, for example, Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (eds.), *Postmodernism & China*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, as well as Min Lin's book.

[29] Zhang Kuan, "The Predicament of Postcolonial Criticism in China", in: Karl-Heinz Pohl (ed.), *Chinese Thought in a Global Context. A Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, p. 61.

[30] Zhang Fa, Zhang Yiwu, Wang Yichuan, "Cong 'xiandaixing' dao 'zhonghuaxing' – xin zhishi de tanxun" (From 'Modernity' to 'Chineseness' – An Inquiry into New Knowledge), *Wenyi zhengming* 2/1994, pp. 10-20.

itself, as mentioned, to be an essential part of the May Fourth legacy.[31] As a result of this criticism, however, the debate lost some of its momentum. Through the depicted developments, however, and in contrast to the early phase of engagement with European philosophy, Chinese aesthetics has, by now, entered the sphere of politics.

Summarizing, two characteristics are worth savouring: First, both positions in the controversy refer to Western thought – either promoting or challenging it: In the former case, we have a continuation of the discourse of "complete Westernization" (*quanpan xihua*), prominent since the May Fourth Movement; the latter can be called "expelling Western ideas with Western ideas" (*yang paiwaizhuyi*). Second, we can observe a phenomenon that Edward Said once labelled as "travelling theory": A theory or a worldview, while being adapted at a place different from its origin, might not only change some of its features, it might be used to serve a completely different purpose than originally intended by its inventors.[32] In China, postmodernism and postcolonialism as "travelling theories" serve to promote discourses on identity and even nationalism – a new "Chineseness" – with arts and aesthetics as its basis. This twist of thought is something that probably neither Michel Foucault nor Edward Said had in mind when they put forth their ideas. However, as their "theories" are also not without internal contradictions,[33] this development can be taken as a natural course in the life-cycle of a theory – or as a creative misunderstanding that is frequently encountered in intercultural loans and exchanges.

After the nineties, intellectual fashions (not only) in China changed again. With the turn toward the new millennium, Chinese debates on culture, art and aesthetics are dominated by the notion of globalization. First of all, postcolonial critics, although they managed to put traditional Chinese aesthetics back on the agenda, did not succeed in ending the infatuation of the Chinese intelligentsia with the West. It seems that it is still mostly Western writings that attract Chinese scholars at the moment. As to Western audiences, the irony is that, particularly concerning aesthetics, it certainly would be interested in ideas genuinely Chinese but, first of

[31] The CCP was founded in 1921, i.e. during and through the intellectual forces of the May Fourth period.
[32] Edward Said, *The Word, the Text, and the critic*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 227. As a well known historic example of a "travelling theory", Marxism lost its internationalistic orientation when adopted by Mao Tse-tung; instead it served a nationalistic purpose in China, intending of ridding China of its domination by Western (and Japanese) colonial powers.
[33] The internal contradictions in the thought of Foucault and Said have been mentioned time and again by others. Particularly ironic is Foucault "flirtation" with Maoism during the Cultural Revolution; see Gao Jian, "Wenge sichao yu 'houxue'" (The Ideological Trend of the Cultural Revolution and 'Postist Studies'), *Ershiyi shiji* (*Twenty-first Century*), 35 (June 1996), p. 116; see also Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites. From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 138, 207. As to Said, see Zhang Kuan, p. 64f.

all, there does not seem to be much produced with a significant Chinese touch. Secondly, because of the language barrier, little has been translated from Chinese into Western language. Instead, the Chinese, not only those who have studied abroad, are busy in what Gao Jianping calls the "translation industry".[34] Theoretical works in aesthetics and many other disciplines are frantically translated from Western languages (mostly English) into Chinese and are being just as eagerly sold and bought on the market.

As a result of this predilection for Western theory, Chinese aestheticians feel a certain degree of isolation, as their work is not being acknowledged outside of China.[35] Even a figure such as Li Zehou, who has in the meantime moved to the USA (he publishes in both English and Chinese) and whose popular books have been translated into other languages, hardly finds an audience in the West that is adequate to his standing in China.[36] Surely, his concepts such as subjectivity and practice, as refreshing they might have been for a Chinese public in the 1980s, do not cause the same stir here in the West: After all, "subjectivity" had long been debunked by postmodern trends such as deconstruction, whereas "practice" as a Marxian idea lost its allure ever since the collapse of the Communist regimes East of the Berlin Wall after 1989. Thus, there is a certain risk facing these theoreticians to end up dealing with "outdated" concepts and to lag behind with their thought in China (and in the West), as there still is a considerable time-lag in introducing the latest trends of Western theory to China. Therein lays, however, also a chance, that is, to pursue "classical" ideas without *zeitgeist*-conditioned anxieties and demands of the newest and most fashionable "theories". Be that as it may, the Western centeredness will probably not be changing too soon. The West has defined the terms of discourse in the sciences and humanities, and thus also in philosophy and aesthetics; these disciplines are being practised under conditions set up by European and American scholars, and it will still take a while until they might also be set by the Chinese themselves.

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[34] Gao Jianping, "Chinese Aesthetics in the Context of Globalization", *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Vol. 8 (2004), p. 65.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] His book *The path of Beauty* (*Mei de licheng*; cf. footnote 3 above) was also translated into German: *Der Weg des Schönen – Wesen und Geschichte der chinesischen Kultur und Ästhetik*, ed. Karl-Heinz Pohl and Gudrun Wacker, Freiburg: Herder, 1992; but, with only one single edition, it has long been out of print. His work, does, however play a role in Sinological circles. For example, in 1999, the journal *Philosophy East and West* devoted a whole issue on Li Zehou's notion of subjectivity. See the articles by Cauvel and Chong mentioned above in footnote 24 as well as Timothy Cheek's introduction as guest lecturer of this special issue: "Introduction: A Cross-Cultural Conversation on Li Zehou's Ideas on Subjectivity and Aesthetics in Modern Chinese Thought", *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April, 1999), pp. 113-19, and Li Zehou's response to the articles: "Subjectivity and 'Subjectality': A Response", pp. 174-183.

Hence, there is no alternative for the Chinese than participating in the meanwhile global debates on aesthetics, culture and identity. The question is, if they would be able to bring in a particular experience or perspective to the discussions taking place in the Western academic world, giving them a singular point of view. As is well known, some Indian born intellectuals, such as Homi Bhabha or Gayatri Spivak, are now at the vanguard of postcolonial criticism in the US, teaching at major US universities. With their Indian colonial background, on top of it being ardent deconstructionists, they were able to leave their mark in this field. What are the possibilities for the Chinese (and not only for them)? Will they just follow these intellectual fashions (as the "postist craze" suggests), or will they be able to criticize and challenge them, setting different marks, inspired, for example, by their own rich philosophical and aesthetic tradition? Chinese thought could and should be as much a common frame of reference as the thought of other "local" thinkers, from Plato to Derrida and Heidegger. After all, Western modernity is also nothing but a creative transformation of a long and rich tradition, and modern Western theorists most naturally refer to this tradition in their writings but don't have a clue of non-European history of ideas. Another question is, if Chinese (or scholars from other non Western countries) will have to move to the West for this purpose. Surely, no Chinese scholar would decline a professorship at Harvard[37] or Columbia, as is documented by the many excellent Chinese teaching there. The prospects are though, that this focus will, on the long run, only further cement the Western centeredness in the humanities.

III. Chinese Art and Aesthetics in the Context of Globalization

There is a saying, "Art knows no borders." This slogan appears to be appropriate for the new age of so-called global modern art. And yet, even in modern art, we might also only see what we know or, put differently, the more we know, the more we see. Modern artists, regardless where they live, if in China, India, Africa, America or Europe, seem to maintain similar ideas about art, derived from the Western tradition: A work of art should have an original concept; its purpose should be self-expression and/or socio-political criticism. But this is only the ideal side of global modern art; the real one is that art has become an integral part of the global market place. Hence, what can be observed around the most recent debates about postmodernism and globalization (not only) in China is the trend towards consumerism: Art is

[37] In 1998, Homi Bhabha won second prize in the Denis Dutton Bad Writing Competition (first prize went to Judith Butler), but this did not prevent him from getting a professorship at Harvard University. This illustrates how influential one can become today – even with bad writing. See http://denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm.

a commodity much sought after. Although we can find a vibrant "art scene" in China, dominated by the above mentioned Western trends and characteristics, the Western audience with its money is interested in Chinese art "with Chinese characteristics" – how ever they may be defined. And where there is a demand, there is a supply. Chinese artists are moving along with the global streams of capital, that is, they move to the West, particularly to the US, and thus it is not surprising that Chinese avant-garde artists, generally speaking, are known better in the West than in China.[38] Here they can supply "local" art (politically critical or not) for a "global" market and – on top of it – make a far better living than at home.[39] Although the Western audience is interested in art with a native touch (one may call this predilection "exoticistic" or not), sophisticated as it is, it also demands that this art has caught up with Western modernity. Hence, the supply must satisfy this double demand.

At the end of these musings about Chinese aesthetics from tradition to modernity, a painting, dated 2002, by the Chinese artist Wei Dong (born in Inner Mongolia, now living in the US) shall be discussed as an example of the trend toward a fusion of traditional Chinese and modern Western elements. It bears the title – not without relevance to our topic – "Culture Culture".[40]

[38] Gao Jianping, "Chinese Aesthetics in the Past Two Decades", p. 43
[39] Gao Jianping, "Chinese Aesthetics in the Context of Globalization", p. 71.
[40] http://www.chinesecontemporary.com/art.php?image_id=427. On Wei Dong's art, see also Henry Steiner's introduction to "CrossEyes. Three Painters and a Designer", *Ex/Change* (Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, City University of Hong Kong), No. 12 (Feb. 2005), pp. 14-15.

Wei Dong: “Culture Culture” (2002)

Many of Wei Dong’s paintings, particularly those painted before 2003, show young half naked Chinese women who pose in front of traditional Chinese landscape paintings, and the painting in question is no exception. In contrast to Western tradition, portrait paintings and depictions of human beings in general have never been considered prominent works of art according to Chinese traditional aesthetics (in comparison to landscape or bird and flower painting). “Culture Culture” shows a girl leaning on a Chinese garden rock in front of a monumental traditional Ming Dynasty landscape. The picture is a bewildering mix of details (Chinese landscape background, female figure and her accessories), lacking fantastic Dali elements but nevertheless appearing estranged and somewhat surrealistic.

The female figure shows a number of remarkable features: Her scantily dressed body is painted in a realistic manner remindful of renaissance paintings; the colour of her skin appears rather white than yellow; blue veins are showing through the skin at many places, and the

fingernails are coloured red. She wears a skimpy pink outfit that somewhat resembles a loosely fitting bathing suit with many folds. Altogether, the figure comes across as very female, except for head and face. Although she wears lipstick and has half open braids hanging at the sides of her head, the rest of the face appears rather masculine, with a broad nose, a big left ear and the top of the head being half bald – the baldpate, in fact, is remindful of Mao Tse-tung (many of the women in Wei Dong's paintings are half bald).

There are a few interesting accessories: A red bind is wrapped around her left arm indicating the "student on duty", as was popular in the Mao period. A school bag with the red star of the Red Guards hangs over her left side, and a walking cane with a Mao head is squeezed under her right arm – it is the only object in the painting which eerily casts a thin shadow on the ground. In her décolleté she has – on one side – a bottle decorated with a traditional bird motif which we usually find in the hands of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, the Chinese Buddhist goddess of mercy. In traditional iconography, Guanyin uses the bottle to sprinkle water in order to bless the believers; in Wei Dong's picture the bottle is sealed with a Communist red star. On the other side of her bosom, two bundles of 10 Yuan bills are exposed – some of the bills are flying around in the air on the left side of the picture. With her hands she clenches a book of which one can detect (when zooming into the picture) a few hints concerning title and content: a capital A and D – the insignia of Albrecht Dürer – as well as the last three letters of Dürer's name ("…rer").

Thus, we have a medley of elements of traditional Chinese culture and religion, of the Cultural Revolution as well as of Western tradition and modernity – all in front of a traditional Chinese landscape painting. In the depiction of the figure, not only Western and Chinese elements, but even male and female elements are fused together. Hence, the doubling of the term "culture" in the title of the picture might have an ironic meaning, suggesting a parody of culture or a postmodern cultural hodgepodge: a culture of bodily exposure, remnants of a cultural tradition (including art, an almost forgotten religion and reminiscences of the Mao period), a culture of money and, finally, a barely detectable artistic homage to one of the greatest German Renaissance painters: Albrecht Dürer[41].

The painting can probably be interpreted in different ways, depending on the focus – the meaning is in the eye of the beholder. If we give weight to its title then it reflects the

[41] According to an interview, Dürer (next to Delacroix and Cezanne) belongs to Wei Dong's models of the past. See http://www.jerseycitymuseum.org/exhibitions/virtualCatalogue/dong.html.

dislocated, hybrid and trans-cultural (or cultureless?) situation of postmodernity. The picture does not, however, send out any definitively negative or positive signals. Hence the viewer is left with a strange but ambivalent impression of cultural alienation.

In an earlier picture, interestingly, Wei Dong used the identical female figure but placed her in front of a different background. This painting (dated 1998) is part of a four part polyptych with the title "My Attendants", showing altogether four half naked and half bald young women in front of an overarching monumental traditional Chinese landscape painting.[42]

Wei Dong: "My attendants" (1998)

Another picture, dated 2000, with the title "Dragon and Businessman" shows a (business)*woman*, half dressed in a traditional Chinese outfit and embraced by a benevolent looking dragon, hovering upside down on a Chinese garden rock in front of a largely empty traditional Chinese landscape.[43] A few American accessories – such as Marlboro packages

[42] See http://www.chinalink.be/MCAF2.htm. The head of the second "attendant" from left – the only one without braids – is strikingly similar to that of Mao Tse-tung.
[43] See http://www.plumblossoms.com/WeiDong/CX0141a.htm; http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/aany2004/plum_blossoms.html and http://www.jerseycitymuseum.org/exhibitions/virtualCatalogue/images/artworks/2003TheyCanDoAnything.jpg.

and playing cards floating through the air (in other paintings it is the motif of the American stars and stripes) – hint at the dislocation of Chinese culture, suggesting that Chinese culture has finally arrived in America or – *vice versa* – American culture has made it to China.

Wei Dong: "Dragon and Businessman" (2000)

The above focus on (post-)modern Chinese works of art which, moreover, have not been painted in China but in the USA, do not offer any general conclusions concerning the situation of contemporary Chinese art and aesthetics. And yet, they illustrate, on the one hand, the trend toward a fusion of traditions; on the other, they also reveal a lasting preoccupation with aspects of the Chinese tradition. In the pictures discussed, there seem to be a few culturally relevant elements, such as allusion to the past, i.e. to traditional Chinese landscape painting, to the tension between emptiness and fullness, hints of a cultivated clumsiness, etc. The love for details in the painting is remindful of detailed depictions in the Chinese tradition of an "aesthetics of fullness";[44] in their combination with elements of Western style painting they convey a surrealistic impression. In any case, these aspects of Chinese culture – even if

[44] An example for "aesthetics of fullness" (in contrast to the "aesthetics of emptiness", prevalent in much of Southern Song painting of the Ma-Xia-School) is the famous hand-scroll: "Along the River on the Qingming Festival" (*Qingming shanghe tu*) by Zhang Zeduan (1085-1145). The c. 10m long scroll (now in the Palace Museum of Peking) depicts life in its fullness in the Song capital Pianjing (now Kaifeng).

they are dislocated, if they appear alienated and if they are only ironically employed – suggest that they still possess a certain relevance for Chinese artists: as cultural memory, regardless of their residences: in or out of China.

Final Remarks:

Around the world we now have Western priorities, also in arts and aesthetics. According to these standards, art has to be conceptionally innovative, it has to serve a liberating function or should, at least, be politically critical – not to mention the achievements brought about by Dadaism and such. In contrast to these tendencies we have a – largely extinct – Chinese tradition with different priorities. There, a work of art, first of all, should possess suggestive poetic qualities – an enriching capacity beyond the actual work (painting or poetry). Also, an artist ought to have "perfect intuitive control of the artistic medium" through long and arduous practice (as in Chinese calligraphy), only then will he be able to create great works of art with a "spiritual" impact. The majority of Chinese artists – in and out of China – follow the Western trend, consciously or unconsciously.[45] But just as Western modernity is unthinkable without a constant re-engagement with its own long history and tradition, so too is there a possibility that China, on her way into global modernity, might also become more aware of her cultural tradition as an object of active engagement. Because of the increasing Western interest, the rediscovery of her tradition might even serve as a means for further cultural and artistic exchange. There is already an over hundred year long history of stimulation of Western artists by East Asian art (from Art Nouveau in the 19th century up to Mark Tobey and others in the 20th). The encounter of cultures has not just begun in the last decade, it has only gained a new dimension in the age of globalization. It has to be seen how artists will arrange themselves in their moves between different cultures and traditions as well as in their gaining multiple identities. And thus only time will tell to which hybrid forms of art – and of aesthetics – this will lead to: if there will be great works of art resulting from this fusion, and whether or not the rich Chinese artistic and aesthetic tradition will still play a significant part in this encounter.

[45] The predominance of installations over paintings also illustrates this tendency.

As intercultural issues have been steadily on the rise within the last decade – also in aesthetics – there is, however, a growing chance that interesting intellectuals in China will find a broader audience also in the West.