

Reflections on Avant-Garde Theory in a Chinese-Western Cross-Cultural Context – Or an Amateur Attempt in Metatheory

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Abstract

As a prominent Western thinker recently remarked provokingly, when in the course of modernity the Western religion (Christianity) fell into decline, *Weltanschauung* took its place. Indeed, grand scale explanations of the world's ways, mostly from one singular perspective, have mushroomed as "Isms" in the modern period, and the smallest common denominator for these world-views seems to be the term "theory". In the paper, attention shall be drawn to the following notions, first of all, that theories are a matter of fashion and *Zeitgeist*, fluctuating *à la mode*. Secondly, some of the paradoxes and ironies shall be highlighted that occur when we apply fashionable theories, born in a certain culture, to other cultural settings, here: to China. That is, at least in some cases, the universal applicability of social, cultural and aesthetic or literary theories shall be questioned which (without any significant exceptions) have all been creations of the modern Western mind.

A few implications will be pointed out for the transposition of theories or "Isms" in a different cultural setting. First, the appropriation of a theory in a different cultural context usually goes along with an adaptation to new conditions, often leading to a deviation from – if not "distortion" of – the original ideas. Then there is the question of time lag. Due to the long process of translation and popularization, it still might take about a decade for Western theories to take a hold in a non-Western setting. Thus focusing even on the most up-to-date Western theories, China (and other countries) will always lag behind, embracing the hot themes not of today but of yesterday.

As theories are embedded within historical constellations, they not only influence the realm of politics, but are also dependent upon it. Most cultural theories, that have come up within the last decades of Western modernity, are highly political. These ideas have sprung up in post-industrialized, individualistic, libertarian and multi-cultural Western societies (with the US as the paradigm of modernity). When it comes to adopting these theories in other than Western countries (that possibly are neither post-industrialized, nor individualistic, libertarian or multi-cultural) such as China, we encounter interesting tensions and paradoxes.

Finally, one of the most crucial questions in the future, at least if we want to prevent globalization from simply becoming Westernization, will be to what extent the relationship between East and West, North and South, can be balanced. As to China and other countries from the East and South, the question is, how their voices can be heard in today's purely Western centered global debates.

"There has never been an age so theory-drenched as ours."

Charles Taylor

In 1996, the physicist Alan Sokal published in *Social Text* (# 46/47) his now famous article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." This article had quite an impact on the Western intellectual community, not because of its content, which was rather nonsensical, but for its intent. What is now referred to as "Sokal hoax" was nothing but a parody on contemporary social theory. By fabricating an article with lots of senseless but – unfortunately – authentic quotes from and about natural sciences by famous (mainly French and American) intellectuals – without the reader noticing this – he exposed the imposturous use of pseudo-scientific jargon in the academic world. The scope of Sokal's article was recently enlarged by the publication of the book *Intellectual Impostures* (1997)¹ in which Sokal and his co-author Jean Bricmont showed – like in the story of the Emperor's new clothes – that some of the most influential French intellectuals, such as Jacques Lacan, Jean Beaudrillard and others, were "throwing around scientific jargon to their non-scientist readers without any regard for its relevance or even its meaning." Naturally, there was quite an uproar, particularly in French intellectual circles; and some of the writers exposed in the book, such as Julia Kristeva, accused its authors of simply being Francophobes.²

One could shrug off these polemics and turn to some more serious issues, but I think in our context of discussing the topic of theory in a cross-cultural context it is worth taking notice of this incident for at least one reason: The use of scientific or theoretical jargon does not necessarily produce more meaning, in fact, the contrary seems to be the case, a lot of what is considered to be the avant-garde of theory today, might under closer scrutiny be not much more than empty talk.

Let me illustrate this with an example from "literary theory". Take the following sentence: "This discourse of metonymically undecidable systematicity re-enacts a certain crypto-Lacanian countertransference of non-originary desire." If you think that's quite a mouthful, I

¹ In French: *Impostures Intellectuelles*, Paris 1997, English edition as, *Intellectual Impostures*, London 1998, which also includes a copy of Sokal's original article.

² Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal, "What is all the fuss about?", *TLS*, Oct. 17, 1997, p.17; internet version: "The Furor over *Impostures Intellectuelles*".

wonder if you can appreciate the following: "The hermeneutically deprovincialized categorization resists any discourse of neo-Bakhtinian dialogism of the polyphonic carnivalesque." If you should, by now, have the suspicion that this is nonsense, you *might* be right. (I say this with due caution.) Regardless of sense or nonsense – these sentences are constructed according to certain syntagmatic patterns with classified but randomly chosen words and phrases from contemporary theoretical jargon, called "Instant Literary Theory." The document came free of charge through e-mail "as a service to the academic community". The anonymous author advises us to remember (in case we're worried about making sense) that "'Meaning' is in the interpretant of the beholder." (see appendix)

This shows that there is also an amusing side to our topic. Leaving this aside for the moment, I want to draw attention, in the following, to some rather common sense but easily forgotten notions, first of all, that theories are a matter of fashion and *Zeitgeist*. What thus appears to be *haute culture* might in the end be something more akin to *haute couture*³, i.e., a question of style, fluctuating *à la mode*. Secondly, I want to look into some of the paradoxes and ironies that occur when we apply fashionable theories, born in a certain culture, to other cultural settings, that is, I want to question, at least in some cases, the universal applicability of social, cultural and aesthetic or literary theories which (without any significant exceptions) have all been creations of the modern Western mind.

I realize that these musings – I don't quite dare to call them "metatheory" – might have deeper philosophical implications, a great deal of which has already been brought up by skepticist philosophers – Karl Popper, Wittgenstein's notion of "language games" and such.⁴ As I am not a philosopher by trade, I am aware of my own limitations in wanting to talk about these possibly profound issues. Finally, there remains the question if there is at all any place outside theory – a question which Zhang Longxi responded to with a negating answer in an insightful

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Karl Popper, for example (in his ground breaking work *Die Logik der Forschung* of 1939; engl.: *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 1959), points out that while theories can never be fully verified, they can be falsified by just one contradicting observation. He thus distinguishes between scientific and non-scientific theories: "Scientific theories are testable though not provable, and so the demarcation criterion between scientific and non-scientific theory for Popper is whether or not the theory is falsifiable." (http://www.vusst.hr/ENCYCLOPAEDIA/popper_and_the_philosophy_of_edu.htm). The new grand theories of the postmodern age, such as post-structuralism and the so-called cultural theories, would thus count as non-scientific theories. In the following, the term "theory" refers almost exclusively to such non-scientific theories.

essay with relevance to our topic⁵. Hence, I wonder if it would not be wiser – freely adapting Wittgenstein or Zhuangzi – to simply come forward and be silent.

I

As Dietrich Schwanitz recently remarked provokingly, when in the course of modernity the Western religion fell into its final coma, *Weltanschauung* took its place.⁶ Let's leave aside the (not unimportant) question if Western religion has actually died or not – those reputed dead often live all the longer – grand scale explanations of the world's ways, mostly from one singular perspective, have indeed mushroomed as "Isms" in the modern period, and the smallest common denominator for these world-views seems to be the term "theory".⁷ Such theories are competing on a (now more and more global) ideological market governed by needs, trends and fashions. In other words, although "Isms" and theories – as results of allegedly objective, scientific pursuit of knowledge – are claimed to possess universal relevance, its inventors and adherents, last not least also its receptors, are acting under the premises of a public sphere, and this public sphere has its limitations in historical time, cultural setting and geographical space. In short, it is governed by the prevailing *Zeitgeist*.

Moreover, theories have life cycles, they wax and they wane; hence, joining a particular camp and thriving on it, is, in the end, a matter of timing: You can be at the vanguard but you might find yourself just as well at the line of retreat. For example, it's only a few decades ago, that a combination of Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis (e. g. in Germany in form of the so-called Frankfurt School) was the pet ideology of European intellectuals. In the course of this popularity, class difference, class consciousness, Oedipus, penis-envy and castration (understood as socialization) were "hot" items on the ideological market. Trying to defend them today would, at the most, cause a weak smile in the audience. One does not have to be a prophet to predict that, in the same time span, the same fate will befall some of today's hot items, such as deconstruction, gender difference, subalternity, essentialism and such.

⁵ Zhang Longxi, "Out of the Cultural Ghetto", in Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites. From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China*, Stanford 1998, p. 125. Actually, all of his articles in this highly stimulating and recommendable collection of essays are some way or the other related to my topic and contain pertinent insights, as I have come to realize only after having drafted my own essay.

⁶ Dietrich Schwanitz, *Bildung – Alles was man wissen muss* [Education/Cultivation – Everything that One Needs to Know], Frankfurt 1999, p. 345.

⁷ *Ibid.* This applies to the "non-scientific theories" in Popper's terminology. See above footnote 4.

Historical limitation of theories also means that, from hindsight, we usually feel somewhat wiser, having possibly realized that after a certain time some of our former firm beliefs have turned out to be mere nonsense. Let me illustrate this with an example which does not belong to the realm of religion. As is well known, in the early 70s, in the wake of the student revolt of 1968, the avant-garde of Western European intelligentsia saw in Mao's China the Promised Land and regarded the Cultural Revolution as a great achievement. Particularly prominent in this idealization of Mao's China were some influential French intellectuals who are usually considered to belong to the so-called poststructuralist camp – the already mentioned Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and even Michel Foucault. In their writings of the early 70s,⁸ the Cultural Revolution is seen "as the perfect realization of their own political utopia"⁹. As Lisa Lowe illustrates, Kristeva, in an attempt to subvert what she sees to be the Western patriarchal system, depicts in her book *Des Chinoises* of 1974 "China as a culture descending from a pre-oedipal matriarchical heritage"¹⁰. By assuming that there had been a pre-Confucian state of matriarchy in China and by leaping lightly across 3000-4000 years of history, she takes this alleged matriarchy to be the direct antecedent of the Cultural Revolution, the latter of which she thinks of having brought about equality between the sexes.

Apart from these achievements of the Cultural Revolution, Kristeva finds some ideological merit even in the Chinese ideographic script. Echoing ideas of Jacques Derrida, the initiator of poststructuralist critique of alleged Western logocentrism, to her

the logic of Chinese writing (a visual representation, the mark of a gesture ...) [presupposes] dependency on the maternal, socio-natural continuum, absence of clear-cut divisions between the order of things and the order of symbols, predominance of the unconscious impulses.¹¹

Needless to say, such a script with its "pre-Oedipal symbolic fusion of the primal 'first signs'" and "not yet detached from the mother-child continuum"¹² belongs to an originally matriarchical and, as we are made to believe, better world of communication – that is, in

⁸ Including the avant-garde journal *Tel quel*, at the editorial board of which Kristeva and Barthes also sat.

⁹ Ing-Britt Trankell, "Orientalism and Anthropology in Asian Studies", internet version.

¹⁰ Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains. French and British Orientalisms*, 1991, p. 137.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, transl. Anita Barrows, New York 1977, p. 55-56; quoted in Mary S. Erbaugh, "Ideograph as Other in Poststructuralist Literary Theory", in: Mary Erbaugh (ed.), *Difficult Characters. Interdisciplinary Studies of Chinese and Japanese Writing*, Columbus 2002, p. 209.

¹² Kristeva, p. 30-31; Erbaugh, p. 208.

comparison to the "West" which, as Mary Erbaugh concludes in an insightful article, merely has "monotheistic, patriarchal, logical, simple verbal communication"¹³ to offer.

Thus, not only periods separated through thousands of years of history are here aligned, also incompatible elements of culture are compared with respective consequences. As Lisa Lowe summarizes: "Confucianism and feudalism are juxtaposed with [Western] monotheism and capitalism; Western saints are contrasted with Chinese concubines."¹⁴ In this sweeping historical and cross-cultural *tour de force*, Kristeva, as a then (and today) leading intellectual, summons and conflates what was in the 70s considered to be the cream of critical theory – Lacanian psychoanalysis, semiotics, structuralism, Marxism and feminism – only to construct "insights", which with the historical distance of only 30 years cannot be taken seriously anymore.

Roland Barthes in his *Alors la Chine?* (1975), likewise, "constitutes China as a feminine, maternal space that disrupts the 'phallogocentric' occidental social system"¹⁵. China opens up for him a Lacanian "preverbal imaginary space, before 'castration', socialization, and the intervention of the Father"¹⁶ – a view which, seen benignly, we might find amusing today. Lisa Lowe, invoking today's fashionable terminology and categories, classifies these intellectual escapades of the French avant-garde as a case of "postcolonial orientalism", that is, as an orientalism, which appropriates the "Other not in a colonializing but in a utopian mode." However justified such an analysis might be (including discussions of heterogeneity, essentialism, subalternity and all the works of postmodern jargon), what strikes me in a rather basic way is that even leading intellectuals and theorists are not simply fallible (after all, they are also only human beings who are – quoting the Lord in Goethe's *Faust* – bound to "err, till they have ceased to strive"), but that they are constricted by the fashions of their day. In other words, it is the prevailing *Zeitgeist* which in the end lets them produce their fallacies (alternatively, and in this case appropriately, also to be spelled "phallacies").

¹³ Erbaugh, p. 208. Referring to Derrida's influence, Erbaugh characterizes the poststructuralist views on languages in the following way: "Alphabetic writing, the poststructuralists charge, built the despotic Western state, unparalleled in slavery, bureaucracy, and imperialism" (p. 206). "Mislabelling spoken Chinese and Japanese as 'nonphonetic', poststructuralists lump them together as a silent poetic Other" (p. 207). Derrida's ideas on the Western "logocentrism" is found in his *Of Grammatology*, transl. Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore 1976 (1967). As to a critique of his views, see the first chapter of Zhang Longxi's, *The Tao and the Logos – Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*, Durham 1992.

¹⁴ Lowe, p. 151.

¹⁵ Lowe, p. 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Thus, theories have their life-cycles; there is yet another cycle regarding theories, which largely goes unnoticed: the cycle from critique to affirmation. Most issues and theories begin as critiques of prevailing theories or systems of explanations, usually introducing a new and previously unnoticed perspective. If successful on the ideological or theoretical market, i.e., having unseated their rivals, avant-garde theories that once were critical often become affirmative, switching roles from heterodox challengers to orthodox defenders. The strategy to defend a new (or old) theory is to claim the right consciousness for its adherents and accuse deviators as having a false one. For, every theory alleges to discover at others hidden and delimiting structures. Thus, as Schwanitz remarks, the theory game works according to the rule: "I see something that you don't see, and that are the structures behind you which condition your thinking".¹⁷ Today, "false consciousness" may come along as political (or ideological) incorrectness, "nativism", "essentialism", "populism" and the like, or in the guise of various "phobias", such as with the already mentioned Francophobes etc.

II

Let us now turn to the intercultural dimension of our topic, that is the question of what happens when theories, particularly under the mentioned premises of being conditioned by certain cultural preferences and limited by historical confines, are transported to and appropriated in other cultural settings. Seen from a historical perspective, this might be a most natural thing as it has always happened. The antecedents of today's (non-scientific) theories and "Isms", for example, the religions and great *Weltanschauungen* such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Marxism and the like, have spread and were accepted all over the globe.¹⁸ This process is, however, dependent on certain facilitating factors; it also has

¹⁷ Schwanitz, p. 347.

¹⁸ Here we can make the following distinction: Although the great religions all presume on a universalistic relevance, some have held up this claim with special missionary zeal, most noticeably the occidental religion. Hence, considering this long history and respective conditioning, it might appear most natural for Westerners to assume that their political, social, cultural or literary theories possess, by nature, also a universal relevance. This view certainly applies to the first secular religion of Western modernity, Marxism, with its professed "internationalism" and supposition of being an objective, historical/economic science. The claim of universality is, of course, even more questionable when it comes to theories in realms such as economics, politics, literature and the like, as they often present, albeit with universal relevance, a particularistic perspective on the world. In spite of the similarities and the historical succession – from religion to *Weltanschauung* and lastly to theory – it is, however, also important to draw the line between these three. As Hans-Georg Moeller made me aware of, in Luhmann's terminology theories belong to the system of sciences and academics; and it thus would be difficult to imagine, for example, postmodern monasteries or a postmodern "single-party" – although this idea does possess a certain entertainment value.

a few seemingly paradoxical consequences and lastly a political dimension, all of which needs to be further explored. This is what Edward Said has to say about "traveling theories":

There is, however, a discernible and recurrent pattern to the movement itself, three or four stages common to the way any theory or idea travels. First, there is a point of origin, or what seems like one, a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse. Second, there is a distance transversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence. Third, there is a set of conditions – call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances – which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be. Fourth, the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place.¹⁹

The process of cross-cultural adaptation thus depends on certain compatibilities due to already existing views or practices facilitating the appropriation. For example, the appropriation of Indian Buddhism in China was facilitated by the existence of a similar strain of thought: Daoism; and the merging of the two brought about the particular school of Chinese Buddhism which we know today under its Japanese guise and name as Zen-Buddhism (another successful cross-cultural appropriation). Likewise, the adoption of Marxism in China was furthered through certain affinities between Confucianism and Marxism²⁰. A second facilitating factor for cross-cultural adaptations would be a demand for a certain "theory" (or *Weltanschauung*) at a certain historical constellation in the meeting of cultures. Let me illustrate this first with the already mentioned examples of Buddhism and Marxism in China: Buddhism entered China at a time of national disunity, political instability and social unrest, thus offering a suffering populace comfort as well as meaningful answers to existential questions such as human suffering. The success of Marxism in China was helped by China being reduced to a semi-colonized state in the 19th century; in this situation, Lenin's application of Marxism to the question of imperialism proved to be most attractive, giving the humiliated Chinese an explanation for their defeat by the European powers that suited their needs and soothed their wounds. Lastly, the introduction and reception of modernism (including pseudo-modernism) and postmodernism to China during the 80s and 90s happened at an important historical junction in 20th century Chinese history: the opening up and the

¹⁹ Edward Said, *The Word, the Text, and the critic*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 227. Only after having finished (and published) a first version of this article I came across Edward Said's notion of "traveling theory". The quote above, however, appears to be all he says about this phenomenon. Although a whole chapter has the title "Traveling Theory", he does not further elaborate on this notion.

²⁰ Mainly a concern for the common welfare, the utopian society of the Great Community [*datong*], as envisaged in the *Liyun* chapter of the *Book of Rites*.

breaking away from monistic Maoist thought. It is little wonder that under these circumstances modernist views of the subject, and postmodern ones about pluralism, flourished. The realization of the asymmetric relationship between the developed West (America) and the rest of the world also awakened sensitivities for postmodern attitudes, such as the wish to position a postcolonial "Chineseness" against this Western hegemony.

What happens to theories or "Isms" once they are transposed in a different cultural setting?²¹ Two implications need to be pointed out here. First, the appropriation of a theory in a different cultural context usually goes along with an adaptation to new conditions (acculturation), often leading to a deviation from – if not "distortion" of – the original ideas. In the example of Buddhism, it was already mentioned, how it changed after coming to China, leading to the peculiar brand of Buddhism known in China as Chan, in Japan (and the West) as Zen. The need for adaptation was also at the center of the spreading of Christianity to China during the Jesuit mission in the 17th century. With basic concepts of Christianity being absent in the Chinese tradition, such as the notion of a personal as well as of a suffering, tortured God, the symbolism of bread and wine (rice and tea might have been more appropriate), some of the most creative Jesuits (Matteo Ricci and his followers) successfully – although only for a short time²² – adapted the Christian teaching to the new cultural context.

Other incidents of out of context appropriation and transformation of theories can be found during the May Fourth period (1919), when Chinese intellectuals picked and chose Western "Isms" from a menu of theories according to their personal preferences without knowledge or consideration of the respective historical or social backgrounds and relevance. The victor in the battle of theories, Marxism, as an *internationalist* ideology, was finally made to serve a *nationalist* purpose, helping China in its fight for national integrity and ridding her of the yoke of colonialism. Marxist theory thus ended up being transformed, i.e., sinified, to an extent of no recognition of its original teaching. Or take the latest period in the West, where Zen, with the American Beat Generation, became a synonym for an exotically dressed up alternative life-style, corresponding to Western individualism and finally being adopted to ways of motorcycle maintenance, tap-dancing and, most recently, the art of postmodern

²¹ (p. 227).

²² At the same time, they developed a keen interest in Chinese thought, being its first transmitters to Europe. Because their understanding for the foreign culture and attempts to accommodate their teachings to it did not accord with the prevailing rules of the Vatican, this early attempt of cross-cultural understanding ended with the "rite controversy" as a failure.

philosophy²³ and such. Not much differently did Daoism fare in its fashionable Western guise: Taken, just like Zen before, as a religion substitute for a West which had lost its Christian bearings, the interest soon focused on what (not only Western) hearts desire: the "Tao of Money" and the "Dao of Sex"!²⁴ Although these are rather blatant accommodations to the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, the examples still show that appropriations of theories (in the mentioned cases their predecessors as *Weltanschauungen*) in a different cultural context often appear to be misinterpretations, or, putting it ambivalently, become creative misunderstandings. As these new creations usually take on a dynamic of their own, there is nothing to be said against them, if only that, from a critical perspective, one should be aware that the original ideas will live on not only as transformations or, putting it in musical terminology, as "variations on a theme" but that they also often serve a purpose quite different from their original intentions.

Then there is the question of time lag.²⁵ Due to the long process of translation and popularization, it still might take about a decade for Western theories to take a hold in a non-Western setting. As to China, in spite of the eager efforts of many proselytizing Chinese students studying (and finally staying) in America, there is also a considerable time lag due to the difficulty of translation. For example, during the 80s in China, there was, as already mentioned, a craze about "modernism" and "subjectivity" in literature and aesthetics (Liu Zaifu and Li Zehou), while in the West *postmodernism* had already been the "cultural and social air [...] permeating virtually every facet of contemporary life"²⁶, and the "subject" – at least in the academic world – had long been put to its rest by Derrida and Co. Thus focusing even on the most up-to-date Western theories, China and other countries will always lag behind, embracing the hot themes not of today but of yesterday. This also holds true for Marxism²⁷: Its adoption at the beginning of the 20th century made Chinese intellectuals feel as though they had imported the vanguard of Western thought, the one that even exposed the ills of the Western world (i.e. imperialism and colonialism) – only to realize after almost a

²³ See Umberto Eco's essay, "Zen and the West" (written in 1959), published in his *The Open Work*, Cambridge, Mass. 1989; Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, New York 1974; Carl Olson, *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Philosophy: Two Paths of Liberation from the Representational Mode of Thinking*, New York 2000.

²⁴ Karl-Heinz Pohl, "Play-thing of the Times: Critical Review of the Reception of Daoism in the West." In: *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 3-4/2003, p. 469-486.

²⁵ See here also Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites*, p. 143ff.

²⁶ Joseph Netoli and Linda Hutcheon, *A Postmodern Reader*, Albany 1993, quoted in Michelle Tokarczyk, "Postmodernism: No Longer Useful?" (a review of Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*), *Theory & Event* 1:4, internet version.

²⁷ Buddhism actually was also appropriated centuries after its decline in India.

century that now, as conditions have changed, they are sitting on dead stock, on an explanation of the world according to the conditions of the 19th century that nobody else wants anymore.²⁸ And as for the most recent craze about "post-studies" (postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism) in China, the Chinese term *houxue* could alternatively also be translated as "studies of the [West's] rear end". Thus, simply wanting to catch up with the newest Western "Isms" would condemn the Chinese forever to run after and face this rather humiliating side of the West.

Lastly, there should be due caution about claims of universal relevance of any grand theories or *Weltanschauungen*. Particularly in the process of cross-cultural adaptation, instead of finding this claim affirmed, the alleged universal relevance mostly turns out to be merely wishful thinking. Examples abound, only to mention, once again, the fate of Marxism. Or, moving from the political more to the allegedly scientific theories, let us dwell for a moment on the assumed universal relevance of the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis – a theory that has shaken, along with Marxism and Einstein's theory of relativity, the very foundations of Western thought in the 20th century. Admittedly, it took a while to de-mythologize Freud's theory, for it had, for a considerable time span, a firm grip on Western intellectuals, providing a frame of reference (and an ensuing symbolic orientation) that helped break almost all of the traditional taboos in the West²⁹. But as for its actual validity today as a "scientific" approach, nobody seems to "believe" in it anymore; even psychology students learn about it nowadays, if at all, only as part of the history of their discipline, not to mention its applicability in another cultural context. A common-sense assessment would, for example, make us already aware, that Freudian theory – Oedipus and everything else – does not make much sense in the context of non-European families such as the Chinese, apart from the fact that, for such an audience, the symbolical reference to Greek myths is rather foreign, if not meaningless. It was Erich Fromm, who first pointed out the particular cultural limitation of Freud's thought,

²⁸ For another example of historical paradoxes or ironies, one may look at American Liberalism, arising from and with European immigrants. Having left oppressive conditions in their homeland, they then proclaimed individual liberty along with independence from the colonial motherland, only themselves to colonize a whole continent, apart from bringing along slavery. The historical ironies in this particular case go mostly unnoticed because today, in the face of American global power, nobody cares anymore about this not so distant past; hence Native Americans have become the most forgotten minority in the US today.

²⁹ In the early seventies, it also led to a movement to remove the taboo from paedophilia. The following public appeal to abolish a French law regarding "seduction of minors" was launched in 1977: "Children and juveniles have a right to sexual relationships with partners of their own choice." This appeal was signed, among others, by Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Foulcault, Barthes, Robbe-Grillet, Derrida. See Joerg Altwegg "Jedem Land seine eigene Erregung ueber 1968: In Frankreich wird Daniel Cohn-Bendit als 'Kinderschaender' attackiert" [For each country its own commotion over 1968: In France, Daniel Cohn-Bendit is accused of being a "paederast"], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 27, 2001, p. 51.

questioning its applicability in other cultural contexts. In the commemoration of his 100th birthday in the year 2000, the importance of this insight did not go unnoticed. Today one may assume that Freud's theory might only, if at all, have had a relevance to the setting of Viennese *fin de siècle* (end of the 19th century) society. When it still lives on, such as in its Lacanian version or in some types of feminism, it does so – borrowing for once postmodern jargon – as one of the not yet deconstructed "grand narratives" of Western modernity.

III

As theories are embedded within historical constellations, they not only influence the realm of politics, but are also dependent upon it. Social, cultural or aesthetic theories, that have come up within the last decades of Western modernity, have mostly been critical of Western thought and traditions. This is to say that critique of the achievements of modernity has been a constant theme of modernity itself.³⁰ Particularly the latest cultural theories, that also cross-over into aesthetics or literature, are highly political. Certain basic themes of Western modernity, such as individual liberty and equality, have become even more emphasized in these theories whose consequences are a radical pluralism as well as a critique of power and flattening of all hierarchies. Let us take postmodernism (or poststructuralism) as an example. These ideas have sprung up in post-industrialized, individualistic, libertarian and multi-cultural Western societies (with the US as the paradigm of modernity). After the generations of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the first thinkers to shatter the Western (Christian based) order of the world, we have now Foucault, Lacan and Derrida as their successors and high priests of postmodern theory. According to their rules, the aim of the postmodern game is to find and deconstruct power hierarchies (thereby neglecting the aspect, though, that critique of power always also entails interest in power).

Another political aspect is that today we have an ideological marketplace with fierce competition among various theories. This even concerns areas – the "social sciences" – which until recently claimed, as "sciences", a certain objectivity in their respective approaches. But the radical pluralism in this field has led to a phenomenon, which has lately been termed the "expert dilemma", meaning that one can find for each "scientifically", "objectively" and theoretically backed up position another one which asserts – with the same "scientific" weight

³⁰ Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

– the exact opposite. This dilemma has become manifest, for example, in parliamentary hearings of experts for the preparation of legislation.³¹ It shows again that it is lastly a political or ideological orientation, a partiality, which guides theories in the social sciences. Apart from this, sciences are also not free from other (often culturally rooted) biases, preferences and dislikes. Objectivity, thus, is merely a claim, reflecting the pluralization of modern Western societies.

When it comes to adopting these avant-garde theories in other than Western countries (that most likely are neither post-industrialized, nor individualistic, libertarian or multi-cultural) such as China, we encounter interesting tensions and paradoxes. On the one hand, these ideas can be used to critique the existing power relationship within China, on the other, the "hegemonic discourse" between China and the West can be targeted. In both cases, however, the paradoxical twist is that Western theories, which are critical of Western ideas and institutions, are used to either counter Western influence in the outside relationship with the West (*yang-paiwaizhuyi*), or are invoked in order to challenge power relationships within.³² In the latter case, theories are used that at the same time (and from its very origin) question the Western ideals fought for (for example "subjectivity"). It will be interesting to observe, provided that the craze for "postist studies" should continue in China, in which direction this tension will develop. A particularly ironic twist regarding the "postist craze" (*houxue*) in China is that the origin of these postmodern theories are to be found in an intense flirtation of Foucault with Maoism.³³

Another political factor conditioning the present debate on theories is globalization. It needs to be emphasized that globalization is not a culturally neutral development, it is much rather also Westernization, if not Americanization, for it was initiated – and is still being fuelled – by American finance, business, entertainment and, last not least, military. America is also a

³¹ Ulrich Schnabel, "Das Expertendilemma – Viele Debatten werden mit widerspruechlichen Gutachten gefuehrt. Was folgt daraus für Wissenschaft und Politik?" [The expert dilemma – Many debates are conducted with contradictory arguments. What are the consequences for the sciences and politics?], *Die Zeit*, 25 (June 15, 2000).

³² 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, and Min Lin, *The Search for Modernity. Chinese Intellectuals and Cultural Discourse in the Post-Mao Era*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999. As to postcolonialism, apart from the mentioned ironies, the debate circles around its political context, relevance and possible instrumentation. Opponents of postcolonialism accuse its adherents of giving up the ideals of Enlightenment and Humanism and siding, instead, as "neo-conservatives" with the authorities in its anti-Western ideas. See 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. 58-72.

country with a traditionally strong missionary spirit, and the issues of free trade, American style liberty, democracy, Human Rights, in short the American way, have become the new religion-substitutes in this missionary endeavor³⁴ (as the whole world was able to witness during the events running up to both the Kosovo and, most recently, the Iraq war). In the course of globalization, in its sense of a break down of national borders, we have a few interesting consequences. One is the flood of non-Western (such as Chinese) students and scholars abroad, studying Western ways in order to apply the knowledge gained for the modernization of their motherland – similarly to the situation during the May Fourth period. What happens, though, is that many, if not most of these students don't return to their homeland. They understandably prefer a career, let's say at Stanford or Yale, to a career at home. At the same time, if they are in the cultural field, they not only publish in English but also in Chinese magazines, introducing Western views and theories to the folks at home. In the West, these overseas Chinese scholars, because they mostly also assume a critical attitude to the political conditions at home, are often taken – rightly or wrongly – to be the true or authentic voice of China. Having many friends and colleagues that belong to that group I want to refrain from commenting further on this situation, but would like at least to question whether this view is justified. Considering that people anywhere on this globe need a sense of cultural identity and that, apart 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, is the basis of this cultural identity – the question arises: What is the authentic voice of China today? Or putting it differently: What can still be called authentic in a globalized world, with the break down of national borders and the mixing of cultures, at least in the Western hemisphere? Authenticity is a *modern* Western idea that goes along with the notions of the subject (or subjectivity) and identity, which have just been debunked by *postmodern* theorists. Who or what is authentically Chinese, if we have 1.3 billion Chinese living in Mainland China and possibly up to a hundred million living outside of it? Not knowing any answers, I just want to leave this as a question.³⁵

³³ Guo 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*, p. 138, 207.

³⁴ William Pfaff, "In America, Radical Globalizers Talk Like Missionaries", *International Herald Tribune*, July 9, 1998.

³⁵ Due to the strong (and growing) presence of ethnic Chinese in the US and the impact this will have (in a feedback process) on China, I see in this context – in spite of all the current anti-American rhetoric in China – the possibility of China, in the long run, becoming the most "Americanized" country in the world.

Apart from this, it has always been the case that Chinese (or Asians and Africans) living in the West became Westernized. They developed a predilection for Western things and adopted the respective views and priorities. With Westerners living in China for longer, the same happens vice versa, they usually also adopt Chinese views, customs and preferences. This happened even to missionaries from Matteo Ricci to Richard Wilhelm (Wei Lixian), the famous translator of the Chinese classics into German at the beginning of the 20th century. The latter went to China as a Protestant missionary, but praised himself after living in China for about twenty years of not having baptized one single Chinese. Instead he became the most important transmitter of Chinese thought to Germany (and to the US through the English version of his German translation of the *I Ching* with the preface by C.G. Jung). Westerners living in China or Sinologues have by nature of their profession a certain predilection for things Chinese and would certainly like to see the Chinese giving more weight to their own cultural resources. After all, according to Tu Weiming's definition, they also belong to "Cultural China", even if only to its most peripheral layer.³⁶ Is their attitude only romanticized cultural nostalgia in an age of Coca-Colonization?

Let us, at last, take a closer look at the process of reception of Western theories in China. This process, one could say, has gone through three phases: In the first phase, from the end of the 19th century up to the May Fourth period, Western theories were admired and – uncritically – taken as new standards for China. At that time, the West was at the pinnacle of its global imperialist and colonial success, and – apart from the critiques of Marx and Nietzsche – Western thought was more or less unquestioned in the West itself. The second phase is the period of Marxism in China. At this time, only one Western theory – the one that was most critical of the Western tradition – was admitted to China, everything else was classified as ideologies representing a false, i.e. bourgeois consciousness. In the third and most recent phase, the 80s and 90s, Western thought, other than Marxism, is again admired and received. There even is a fierce competition among Chinese of being the transmitters of the latest Western intellectual fashions to China – from Habermas to "Postism". One of the differences to the reception process before is that now a considerable part of the Western intelligentsia seems to have lost confidence in its own tradition and strengths, as quite a few of the fashionable theories are very critical of Western ideas and institutions, deconstructing its own achievements as "grand narratives". Hence, the situation today is similar to the May Fourth Period: Again it is precisely the theories that are most critical of Western thought itself,

³⁶ Tu Weiming, "The Periphery as the Center", *Daedalus* 120/1991.

alleged to be the most advanced Western theories (like Marxism before), which attract the mind of the Chinese.

Considering the firm grasp that poststructuralism (in the form of Cultural Studies and such) has by now on the American academic world, the impact of this avant-garde theory is not limited to the foreign students studying in the US (many of them Chinese) but has snowballed on a global scale. Mary Erbaugh who probes into the appeal of poststructuralist theory to Chinese literati assumes that there is "more than a desire to please Western thesis advisors at work". Having picked up the new rules of discourse (abroad or at home) and thus being "armed with a prestigious and intimidating theory", she sees the Chinese literati again – just as in the May 4th period – to be allured into "iconoclasm". Equally attractive, though, as Erbaugh points out, is the "fashionable Western validation for Chinese pride in culture and script" which poststructuralist theories of *différance* offer to its Chinese adepts.³⁷

Be that as it may, these observations, finally, touch upon the ultimate historical irony regarding the "postist craze" in China today: Having just acquired a certain national dignity after a century of colonial humiliation, regained a sense of collective identity, managed to retrieve the remnants of Chinese culture from the ashes of iconoclasm (from the May Fourth Movement to the Cultural Revolution) and finally begun to discover subjectivity as an alternative to Maoist monism, the Chinese are now told by the seemingly advanced Western cultural theorists, that in an age of globalization the idea of nationhood doesn't make much sense anymore, that – according to the American paradigm of a multi-ethnic and hybrid immigrant society – identity comes in multiple forms today, that cultural difference – corresponding to one interpretation – comes close to being politically incorrect in an age of universalistic secular beliefs, or that the notion of culture, according to a rival understanding, is to be taken as mere life-style preference or orientation (sexual and other), and that finally the subject – in spite of rampant subjectivity (such as in poststructuralist readings of texts) – is a concept of the past.

IV

What are the consequences from these observations of the dynamics of cross-cultural appropriations? It would, of course, both be a form of cultural condescendence to either

lecture the Chinese about their needing to adapt to Western up-to-date theories, or to advice them in the contrary, i.e., telling them to forget about the West and to develop their own ways. After all, it is their prerogative to find our ways interesting or amusing – just as we Sinologues find things Chinese stimulating or not. Yet, a possible way of responding to the flood of theories, ideologies and "Isms" coming from the modern or postmodern West had already been pointed out by one of the most prominent protagonists of the May Fourth Movement, Hu Shi, who suggested to "Better Study a Few Problems, Talk Less About a Few 'Isms'", so the title of one of his articles published in 1919 (*Duo yanjiu xie wenti, shao tan xie 'zhuyi'*). In the light of the ideological battles of his day, when Chinese intellectuals, having just discovered European ideas, fiercely fought each other with constant reference to but only limited knowledge of Western theories, his pragmatic and moderating advice was very sound, albeit (and up to our days) ideologically not correct in Marxist China. But now, as even the Chinese Communist Party, with the slogan "Search Truth from Facts" (*shishi qiu shi*) has embraced a pragmatic attitude, a re-evaluation of Hu Shi's ideas might be called for.

Another way of dealing with this situation would be to engage more seriously in dialogues with the West on cultural issues. Unfortunately, though, such cross-cultural dialogues are proceeding in a rather asymmetrical way, as Chinese intellectuals are quite familiar with the basics of Western civilization, but not vice versa. The following assessment made by an African might just as well hold true for Chinese (and East Asian) intellectuals:

Which European could ever praise himself (or complain about) having put as much time, studies and effort into the learning of another "traditional" society as the thousands of Third-World intellectuals who have studied in the school of Europe?³⁸

Moreover, cross-cultural dialogues are usually held in English, a setting which certainly determines not just a little of their outcome. For, controlling the language means control over the means of communication, encompassing the whole cultural-symbolic orientation as part and parcel of human communication. Finally, "dialogues" are often conducted on the basis of a teacher-student relationship. It is just this persistent unbalanced constellation which appears to prevent any attempts of bridging the gap between China and the West. For, some of the most ardent proponents of inter- or cross-cultural dialogue in the West take it as a means – according to their universalistic convictions – to level all cultural difference, the sooner the better. But intercultural dialogue should not be understood as one side (the student) accepting

³⁷ Erbaugh, p. 213-214.

³⁸ Ahmed Baba Miské, *Lettre ouverte aux elites du Tiers-Monde*, Paris 1981, p. 143.

the views of the other (the teacher). Much rather it should be based on mutual enrichment, enhancing mutual understanding.

Thus, one of the most crucial questions in the future, at least if we want to prevent globalization from simply becoming Westernization, will be to what extent the relationship between East and West, North and South, can be balanced. The reasons for the asymmetry are manifold, some of which (dominance of the English language as well as globalization as basically an American missionary endeavor) having already been mentioned. As to China, the question is, how her voice can be heard in today's global debates. It is not that Westerners are not interested in Chinese views or theories, much more so it seems to me that not much of its own worth – something with a Chinese touch – is evolving in China today which would justify being transmitted to the West by either Sinologist or Chinese students living abroad. This concerns in particular the intriguing realm of aesthetics of which China has a rich and distinguished tradition. Hence, while being in touch with global developments, a little more Chinese assertiveness would certainly do some good, offering ignorant Westerners not only a glimpse of the rich Chinese cultural legacy – in a creatively interpreted way – but also making a contribution to world culture by adding a whole new dimension to today's purely West-centered cultural debates. In the present craze with postmodern and poststructuralist theories, much of Western theory, for example, because of its focus on language and script, pays attention to Chinese texts only in a very selective way, usually "to the shortest and most ambiguous genres: lyric poems, Maoist slogans and the *Dao de jing*." But, as Mary Erbaugh concludes,

When Mao and *Dao* remain almost the only often-cited works, a universe of art remains sealed off, unseen and unheard, along with much potentially valuable Chinese theoretical influence.³⁹

Thus, the Chinese cultural heritage seems to be cannibalized by – and for the sake of – fashionable Western theory. But this legacy certainly deserves a better treatment than this. Chinese thought could and should be as much a common frame of reference as the thought of other local thinkers, from Plato to 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. But this Chinese touch could and should refer to more than the Chinese tradition, it could entail, most of all, a critical engagement in discussions about prevalent theories, that is,

challenging Western fashionable views. Finally it could also include creative (mis-) interpretations or adoptions of Western thought. Who knows, in the long run China might come up with a fine-tuned Marxism or sinified Capitalism and Postmodernism, to be hailed, after a century or so and not only in the West – just as Zen-Buddhism previously – as a revelation and a great achievement of the Chinese mind in the meeting of cultures.

A last (and, admittedly, unrealistic) alternative to deal with this situation – one that due to its very nature I don't necessarily want to push – would be to assume a Daoist attitude, that is to sit back and let this storm of Western theories pass by unmoved. As already Johann Gottfried Herder (1744 - 1803) noted in his *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, "It would be senselessly arrogant to presume that inhabitants of all parts of the world need to be Europeans in order to live a happy life." One does not have to preoccupy oneself with, let's say, Nietzsche, Foucault or Derrida in order to deal with literature and aesthetics, not to mention living a meaningful life; one could either turn to more serious businesses or simply enjoy oneself with literature and art (*you yi*) without the advice of secondary theorists, a way, for example, that George Steiner strongly recommends in his book *Real Presences* (1989). Apart from this, one has to point out that a lot of "Postism" (in particular poststructuralism) does not offer much direction, if any at all; it rather seems like a self-referential language game, or discourse for discourse's sake, with certain self-contradictory characteristics. Thus, with its grand men still around, it might just stop short of the only logical consequence, of debunking (deconstructing) itself.

Be that as it may, reality changes faster than our conceptions of and theories about it. We are always lagging behind in trying to make sense out of the world and its new developments. What remains are thus mere words that inadequately refer to things and situations which have already changed. Seen from this perspective, which one of all the attempts of explanation of the world and its ways (including this essay) would not be intellectual imposturous? With understanding possibly being nothing but another form of misunderstanding, and interpretation, in its best case, being merely creative misinterpretation, one can question the validity of any proclamation of the "right" view of things when seeing the world from just one singular theoretical angle.⁴⁰ Or as Bertolt Brecht, a modern German writer with a keen interest in things Chinese, particularly in Daoism and the philosophy of Change, once glossed over in

³⁹ Erbaugh, p. 210-211.

⁴⁰ I remember a saying – I think it was by Paul Goodman – that I read years ago: "May God keep me from singular vision – and from Newton's sleep."

his *Stories of Herr Keuner*, not without relevance to the issue of theory: "What are you working on", Mr K. was asked. Mr K. responded: "I'm making great efforts. I'm preparing my next mistake."⁴¹

⁴¹Bertolt Brecht, *Kalendergeschichten* [Calender Stories], Hamburg 1953, p, 116.

Appendix:⁴²

This came through on the ESPAN-L list...do you have it already?

Caveat emptor: The author of this text cannot accept any responsibility for the consequences of using this document, including but by no means limited to public lectures, refereed journal articles, research grants and fellowships, and any and all decisions regarding academic hiring, promotion, and tenure.

INSTANT LITERARY THEORY

Instructions: Select at random one item from each column below and combine grammatically to position yourself on the cutting edge of contemporary critical discourse. Try paradigms E-F A-D B-C and A-B-C D A-B-C. And, if you're worried about making sense, just remember:

"Meaning" is in the interpretant of the beholder.

N.B. The word "discourse" does not appear in any of the columns below for the simple reason that it is a required component of every statement. Its position within the sentence, however, is completely flexible.

e.g. "This discourse of metonymically undecidable systematicity re-enacts a certain crypto-Lacanian countertransference of non-originary desire."

OR: "The hermeneutically deprovincialized categorization resists any discourse of neo-Bakhtinian dialogism of the polyphonic carnivalesque."

A	B
latently	deconstructive
intrinsically	postmodernist
narratologically	undecidable
pervasively	referential
archetypically	marginalized
conventionally	phallogocentric
strategically	transferential
implicitly	localized
metonymically	heterogeneous
manifestly	essentialist
equivocally	deprovincialized
diachronically	paralinguistic
metaphysically	hierarchical
covertly	gynocritical
self-consciously	displaced
negatively	transformational
subversively	recidivist
nascently	legitimizing
synchronically	antithetical
hermeneutically	sophisticated

⁴² I am grateful to Stuart Sargent for forwarding this to me many years ago.

C	D	E
ambiguation	resists	crypto-
mimesis	reflects	neo-
intertextuality	re-inscribes	proto-
systematicity	recovers	post-
patriarchal order	recreates	quasi-
formalism	re-introduces	meta-
diegesis	refutes	sub-
ontology	repositions	anti-
phenomenology	retraces	macro-
categorization	reconceptualizes	pseudo-
counter-narrative	re-articulates	super-
actantial model	reifies	retro-
contextualization	reconstructs	infra-
juxtapositioning	reverses	pre-
dialectic	re-enacts	ultra-
discontinuity	restores	auto-
orientation	recalls	
teleology	reinforces	
indeterminacy	replicates	
differing and deferring	retrieves	

F

Austinian opposition of the constative and performative

Bakhtinian dialogism of the polyphonic carnivalesque

Barthesian "jouissance" in the multiplicity of the "scriptible"

(no, no, Cartesian jouissance!--Judy)

Derridean invocation of an underlying generalized absence

Econian exploration of sign-function in a global semantic system

Foucauldian archeo-genealogy of the cultural "episteme"

Freudian allegory of repressed psychosexual domination

Greimasian deep structure of "enonce-spectacle"

(You mean there's no Hegelian/Husserlian/Heideggerian goodies?--Judy)

Jakobsonian network of distinctive-feature interstices

Kristevian elaboration of the pre-oedipal in the "avant-garde"

Lacanian countertransference of non-originary desire

Levi-Straussian competence of homology by "bricolage"

Marxist critique of the disguised ideological hegemony

Peircean trichotomy of semiotic mediation

Saussurean framework of "langue" and "parole"

Shklovskian emphasis on the defamiliarizing "ostranenie"

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