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The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*.¹ The Example of Chinese Aesthetics**

Compared with the rapid development of Chinese economy, which is the leading one in the world, modern philosophy and aesthetics in China are in a position that is subordinate to the West. In contemporary Chinese aesthetics, for instance, there have occurred heated discussions of and a craze for aesthetics as well as various rampant *Zhuyi* in the 1950s and 1980s. However, the debate of *Zhuyi* in the 1950s was described as politicized and of a low level. The bustle of *Zhuyi* in the 1980s bore witness to all kinds of doctrines and “-isms” in Western philosophy and aesthetics that also found their way into China, though Chinese philosophers and aestheticians remained merely spectators to these processes. A closer look can disclose the reasons behind the absence of *Zhuyi* in Chinese philosophy and reveal the roles played by aesthetics and the humanities as a whole in the earlier bustle of *Zhuyi*. There are subjective and objective reasons for the weakness of Chinese academic power. There exists a severe imbalance between underdeveloped Chinese philosophy and aesthetics and the developed economy. Eliminating the imbalance is essential for China to pursue develop-

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¹ *Zhuyi* in modern Chinese is similar to “-ism” in English. *Zhuyi* designates a systematized, theorized and influential thought or proposition of a specific idea, aim and doctrine related to the objective world, social life and academic issues, while “-ism” refers to any distinctive doctrine or practice, system or movement. When it comes to morphology, “-ism” usually serves as an ending or suffix when forming a noun. Although there were Confucianism, Taoism in ancient China and the Three Principles of the People (*Sanmin Zhuyi*) by SUN Yatsen in modern times, we do not have *Zhuyi* at present except Marxism from the West. MAO Zedong’s thought and DENG Xiaoping’s theory cannot even be called *Zhuyi*. Thus, the usage of *Zhuyi* in modern Chinese is, in a narrow sense, different from the broader use of Western “-ism.” *Zhuyi* in this essay is equivalent to the great “-isms” that have exerted a great impact on humans such as Marxism, existentialism, naturalism, etc.; it also includes those “-isms” that have strongly influenced Chinese aesthetics, such as modernism, post-modernism, structuralism, deconstruction, etc. However, the general ideas and thought as well as the artistic methods and schools are not in the range of *Zhuyi*.

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ment further, but the emergence of a new balance is not possible without the establishment of *Zhuyi* and schools.

With its sustained rapid development over the last forty years, the Chinese economy has become the locomotive of world economy. With the launching of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative² and the founding of the Asian Investment Bank, China is playing an increasingly important role as an international economic power. It has been making remarkable progress in many fields and is unfolding a magnificent picture of the “China dream.” Some clues as to what such development means can be discerned in the popular documentaries. However, compared with its rapid economic growth, China has not achieved comparable positions in philosophy, the humanities or the social sciences. Moreover, it is inferior when compared to international academia, as it blindly adores, follows, imitates, and interprets the West. The reason for the severe imbalance between Chinese culture and the Chinese economy³ can be found in China’s absence of *Zhuyi*. This situation is most visible in the research of aesthetics.

Compared with the West, aesthetics occupies a different place in China. Early in 1906, WANG Guowei claimed in his “Comment on the Delivered Charter of the Juxtaposition of Confucian Classics and Humanities in Universities” to establish the course of Aesthetics.⁴ Aesthetics in contemporary China is endowed with special ideological form. National ideological orthodoxy was first founded in the great discussion in 1950s about aesthetics, which today functions as a

² The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road—also known as The Belt and Road (abbreviated B&R), One Belt, One Road (abbreviated OBOR) or the Belt and Road Initiative—is a development strategy and framework, proposed by the People’s Republic of China that focuses on connectivity and cooperation among countries primarily in Eurasia. It consists of two main components: the land-based “Silk Road Economic Belt” (SREB) and the oceangoing “Maritime Silk Road” (MSR).

³ Karl Marx in the *Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* proposed the important thesis of “the unequal development of material production and of art,” while Engels discussed this thesis often in some of his letters, both forming Marxist theory of unequal development of art and material production.

⁴ See WANG Guowei, “Comment on the Delivered Charter of the Juxtaposition of Confucian Classics and Humanities in Universities,” in NIE Zhenbin (ed.), *Selected Writings of Famous Literary Figures in Modern Chinese Aesthetics* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2009), p. 91. WANG Guowei criticized ZHANG Zhidong, the minister of Education, for juxtaposing Confucian classics and the humanities in universities instead of setting up philosophy and aesthetics within the humanities and merging Confucian classics into humanities.

platform for expressing philosophical ideas, with some important philosophical and artistic issues in fact being resolved within aesthetics. For instance, official aesthetics was targeted during the performances of the 2016 Chinese Spring Festival Gala⁵ and became an object of criticism. Aesthetics is also the discipline in Chinese humanities that takes the lead in connecting with the West and the world at large. At the Beijing 18th International Congress of Aesthetics on August 2010, Chinese representatives accounted for 60% of over 1,000 participants,⁶ which surpassed those of other disciplines. In China, aesthetics is an important secondary discipline, and most universities award units of doctoral and master degrees on aesthetics while most American universities do not. Aesthetics in China is also expected to exert a huge impact on the society, such as helping to build a harmonious society, to create a second nature and to guide literature and art. Educating the public through aesthetics is considered to strengthen the soft power of the country by beautifying objects, deepening the scientific studies and improving people's living standards.⁷ From the 1940s to the 1980s, aesthetic issues were primarily interpreted as the battle between materialism and idealism. In China today, however, the founding of *Zhuyi* besides Marxism and socialism is still a sensitive and unorthodox political issue. Thus, this article probes into the problem of Chinese *Zhuyi* from the example of aesthetics.

The Bustle of *Zhuyi*

After modern Chinese aesthetics came into being in the early 20th century, its founders, WANG Guowei⁸ and CAI Yuanpei⁹ adhered to the principle of “the in-

⁵ LI Youguang, “What Praise-singing Party Will Power Aesthetics Want to Be?” *Exploration and Free Views*, We Chat web, February 7, 2016. “Praise-singing party” here refers to the people who sing high praise for the government and its initiatives. PAN Zhichang, “The Last Supper: Spring Festival Gala and National Imagination,” <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/79860.html>, February 7, 2016.

⁶ AN Jing, “The 18th International Congress of Aesthetics Held in the Peking University,” *Philosophical Trends*, no. 12, 2010.

⁷ See ZHANG Pingzhi, *What Is Aesthetics for?* (Zhengzhou: Elephant Press, 2010).

⁸ WANG Guowei said, “the most divine and noble but disinterested for the current times are philosophy and fine arts. Though the public clamor them as disinterested, it is not detrimental to the value of the disciplines.” See WANG Guowei, “Discussion on the Bounden Duties of Philosophers and Artists,” in YAO Jinming and WANG Yan (eds.), *Collected Works of Wang Guowei*, vol. 2 (Beijing: China Culture and History Press, 2007), p. 3.

⁹ CAI Yuanpei thought of aesthetics and aesthetic education as surpassing politics for their feature of being disinterested. See CAI Yuanpei, “The Opinions on New Education,” in

terest in disinterestedness” as found in Kant’s aesthetics. Thus until the 1930s, ideological struggle had never been launched in aesthetics. After that, however, there were some disputes on whether literature and art reveal class division or exhibit supra-politics. The publication of *New Aesthetics* by CAI Yi in the 1940s¹⁰ is considered to be the formal staging of *Zhuyi*’s aesthetics in China. The discussion as to whether literature and art show class division and whether aesthetics is interested or disinterested continued into the 1950s.

The great debate about aesthetics in China in the 1950s seemed to involve “the contention of a hundred schools of thought” where on the surface teachers and students, scholars and workers, peasants and soldiers could criticize each other. But from the outset this kind of criticism had the characteristics of national ideological controversy and class struggle.¹¹ To begin with, all aesthetic issues were labeled with the attributes of the proletarians or landlords and the bourgeoisie so that aesthetics possessed an obvious class nature and revealed class division. Second, all discussions about the essence of beauty were described as the philosophical dilemma between “idealism” and “materialism,” causing Chinese aesthetics to exhibit a clear ideological divide. Third, this kind of aesthetic ideology was closely connected with class division in aesthetics—idealist aesthetics was regarded as the thought of landlords and bourgeoisie, while materialist aesthetics was considered to be the thought of the proletariat. Fourth, because of this class division and ideological confrontation, many representative figures classified as idealist aestheticians were entangled in politics and even suffered from persecution. The vigorous debate on aesthetics, which produced several aestheticians and several schools of aesthetics, finally ended with political and ideological struggle turning into the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution as a new stage of development.

GAO Pingshu (ed.), *The Complete Works of Cai Yuanpei*, vol. 2, GAO Pingshu (ed.), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985), p. 137.

¹⁰ CAI Yi, *New Aesthetics* (Chongqing: Qunyi Press, 1948).

¹¹ *Collection of Essays on Aesthetic Issues*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Writers Publishing House, May, 1957). See ZHU Guangqian, “The Reactionary of My Literary and Artistic Thoughts,” pp. 1–35; HUANG Yaomian, “On the Aesthetics of Rentiers,” pp. 69–135; MIN Ze, “The Source and Flow of Zhu Guangqian’s Reactionary Aesthetic Thought,” pp. 165–217; WANG Ziyi, “The Art of Fighting,” pp. 218–238.

The great debate on aesthetics in the 1950s resulted in four aesthetic schools: subjectivist idealist aesthetics represented by LV Ying¹² and GAO Ertai,¹³ objectivist materialist aesthetics advocated by CAI Yi,¹⁴ dualist aesthetics proposed by ZHU Guangqian,¹⁵ and a practical aesthetics of Marxism represented by LI Zehou.¹⁶ The contention between these schools of thought led to an upsurge in aesthetics. Despite its distinct color of class struggle and political ideological struggle, the debate about aesthetics was unprecedented in China, which is why the academic circles still call it “the 1950’s Great Debate on Aesthetics” or “four schools of Chinese aesthetics” and give it other academic honorary titles, which almost hide the political and ideological struggle dominated by the leftist thought. Reflecting on the great debate about aesthetics in the 1950s, we can see that leftist thought and logic are unusually visible. In the 1950s great debate on aesthetics, the notion of *Zhuyi* was employed to divide people, factions, and thought, and to help establish the criteria for aesthetics—whether it be progressive or backward, revolutionary or reactionary.

Zhuyi in modern Chinese means the expression of theory, the cohesion of thought, a sign of value and the guiding principle and slogan of action. But there are different levels in *Zhuyi*, which can be spontaneous or original. For instance, materialism and idealism were developed spontaneously since humans had a world view, which therefore can be regarded as the most primitive and the most common type of *Zhuyi* devoid of originality. Nevertheless, *Zhuyi* created by humans in modern times are basically all conscious, targeted and thus original and of a high level.

¹² LV Ying wrote in his *What Is Beauty*, “I still believe that beauty is the social consciousness of human beings.” *Collection of Essays on Aesthetic Issues*, vol. 4 (Beijing: Writers Publishing House, 1959), p. 3.

¹³ GAO Ertai claimed in his *On Beauty*, “Is there objective beauty? My answer is no, and objective beauty does not exist.” *Collection of Essays on Aesthetic Issues*, vol. 2, ed. by the editorial office of *The Literary Gazette* (Beijing: Writers Publishing House, August 1957).

¹⁴ CAI Yi, “On the Fundamental Differences of Materialism and Idealism,” *Collection of Essays on Aesthetic Issues*, vol. 2, ed. by the editorial office of *The Literary Gazette* (Beijing: Writers Publishing House, August 1957), pp. 170–200.

¹⁵ ZHU Guangqian, “On Beauty: The Unity of the Subjective and Objective,” *Collection of Essays on Aesthetic Issues*, vol. 3, ed. by the editorial office of *The Literary Gazette* (Beijing: Writers Publishing House, 1959), pp. 1–56.

¹⁶ LI Zehou, “The Objectivity and Sociality of Beauty,” *Collection of Essays on Aesthetic Issues*, vol. 2, ed. by the editorial office of *The Literary Gazette* (Beijing: Writers Publishing House, August 1957), pp. 31–45.

The bustle of *Zhuyi* in the great debate about aesthetics in China in the 1950s was based on the antagonism of materialism and idealism. This antagonism was primitive, low-leveled, lacking in originality, and possessing limited academic value. According to Engels, the problems about idealism and materialism are only meaningful when they relate to the basic philosophical problem, that is, the problem of the relation between thinking and existence; otherwise they possess no meaning.¹⁷ It remains a question whether this kind of debate about materialism vs. idealism works when applied to aesthetics. Compared to modern Western theories such as Marxism, existentialism, pragmatism, structuralism, deconstruction, etc., the great debate in aesthetics of the 1950s is nothing but a primitive and low-level of *Zhuyi*, devoid of originality. In a sense, it can only be called the bustle of *Zhuyi*, rather than the creation and construction of *Zhuyi*. It is the primitive nature and low-level *Zhuyi* that leads to the following characteristics of the great debate on Chinese aesthetics in the 1950s.

First, this debate was primitive. On the one hand, since the twentieth century, Western aesthetics has undergone a major historical transformation through its upgrading and updating. In his *A Critical History of Modern Aesthetics*, William Francis Hare, Earl of Listowel¹⁸ has noted how Western aesthetics has shifted from top-down metaphysical aesthetics to bottom-up physical aesthetics, namely, from speculative aesthetics to experimental, psychological, scientific, and linguistic aesthetics. Accordingly, many new ideas, methods and orientations have sprung up. Chinese aesthetics of the 1950s, however, was still submerged in the problem of the subjective or objective nature of beauty and regarded it as the standard with which to differentiate idealist aesthetics from materialist aesthetics. Its academic backwardness is self-evident. The level of aesthetic debate remained low, which was especially true of philosophical debate, causing a gap of half a century when compared to contemporary Western aesthetics. On the other hand, the philosophical problems discussed embody the preliminary character of research contents. For instance, the old problems such as “is aesthetics interested or disinterested” could not be solved. People only regarded interested pleasure or the interests of revolution as the essence of beauty and

¹⁷ See *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, trans. by Central Compilation & Translation Bureau (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1995).

¹⁸ William Francis Hare, 5th Earl of Listowel (1906–1997), styled Viscount Ennismore between 1924 and 1931, was an Anglo-Irish peer and Labor politician. He was the last Secretary of State for India as well as the last Governor-General of Ghana.

completely ignored the disinterested side of aesthetics, which can lead to the prevailing of such misunderstandings in aesthetics as “the good, the useful, the proletarian or the materialist is beautiful,” while “the landlords, the bourgeoisie, or the idealist is ugly.”¹⁹

The next issue is closure. In the post-World War II decades in the West, various ideas prospered, and all kinds of aesthetic schools were competing, with this trend being characteristic also of Western modernist aesthetics and Western Marxist aesthetics. However, at that time, China was isolated from Europe and America due to its extreme political closure that put it at a great distance from mainstream Western thought and culture. At that time books of Western philosophy and aesthetics were seldom published or translated in the Chinese mainland. Accordingly, for Chinese scholars it was difficult to read the works of aesthetics from the West. In the mid-1960s, *Selection of Bourgeois Philosophy Data*, edited by the *Philosophical Study* editorial office and published by the Shanghai People's Publishing House, was confidentially communicated in the form of “internal reading.” This reality was also reflected in the research of aesthetics, which implied that China's closure had resulted in little knowledge, plain language, layman terminology, and obsolete terms already enunciated by others. It is not an overstatement to say that “louts” were studying aesthetics. The most obvious characteristic that the closure showed was that those who took part in the discussion were restricted by barriers of materialism that they did not dare to cross. Proud of materialist aesthetics and ashamed of idealist aesthetics, they attacked each other, but all they did was to maintain or further develop their identities as materialists. The debate on aesthetics was enclosed in the most primitive and most elementary discussions about *Zhuyi*.

Next comes the politicization of *Zhuyi*. Among the principles of aesthetics there exists the paradox of disinterested form and interested aesthetic function. Kant was the first to put forward the thesis that beauty is the interest in disinterestedness. This thesis looks simple but has actually become a dividing line between aesthetic professionals and outsiders. Since the 1930s, there had been heated discussions about the class character of literature and art, and the relationship

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¹⁹ The academic papers of this period's great debate on aesthetics are compiled in *Collection of Essays on Aesthetic Issues*, vols. 1–6, ed. by the editorial office of *The Literary Gazette* (Beijing: Writers' Publishing House, 1957–1964).

between literature, art and politics. In the 1950s, views that emphasized the interestedness of aesthetics were further intensified; by applying class attributes for the delimitation of taste and the identity of aesthetics, they manifested a strong ideological character and consciousness of class struggle, thus pushing aesthetics onto the track of political struggle. Some scholars in the great debate on aesthetics such as GAO Ertai were accused of researching idealist aesthetics, labeled as rightists, and suffered brutal persecution at the hands of the anti-rightist movement. Political interference in academic work constituted a characteristic of aesthetics in the 1950s.

The next issue is the transience of themes. The issues discussed in the great debate on aesthetics in the 1950s failed to remain major topics of aesthetic revival in the 1980s. Questions such as “Is beauty subjective or objective?”, “What is subjective idealist aesthetics?” “What is objective materialist aesthetics?”, etc.—all of which were debated furiously in the past—were ignored and soon even completely forgotten. Academic history has made these issues transient and temporary. It can also be said that circumstances changed with the passage of time, making such issues invalid and revealing them to be without the gene for sustainable growth.

The reasons that constitute the features of Chinese aesthetics in the 1950s are as the follows:

First, modern Chinese aesthetics that was transplanted from the West has been involved in continuous revolutionary movements since the Revolution of 1911. Its research and theoretical construction were intermittent, causing its poor development. Chinese aesthetics in the 1930s and 1940s did not gain as much attention from society as modern literature, and aesthetic knowledge was far from being universalized. Young students with narrow academic viewpoints and poor ideological preparation proved to be insufficient in their drive for aesthetic knowledge and were guided mistakenly by the simple struggle of ideology and debate about *Zhuyi*. At that point their aesthetic research served merely the simple debate about materialism vs. idealism.

Second, at that time Chinese aesthetics was separated from the West and held a narrow view. Arrogant, it knew nothing of the broadness of aesthetics, especially the achievements of Western Marxist aesthetics and of basic modern Western

aesthetics. Therefore, many young people worked individually without being very much concerned with the outside world. As LI Zehou wrote in the preface to *A Collection of Translated Essays in Aesthetics*,²⁰ “Many young people who have a craze for aesthetics spend a lot of energy and time to contemplate, creating huge systems, but they do not even have common sense knowledge about aesthetics. Their articles or systems are like castles in the air, and lack academic value. They should not be blamed, because they have no idea about the results and level of foreign research.”²¹ LI Zehou gave these remarks in the early 1980s after China launched its reform and its opening-up policy.

Third, politics dominated academia and academics, and the latter were forced to be interested. Behind the disinterestedness of aesthetics was a systematic interestedness, which caused aesthetics to become a political tool for interested people. The debate on the class nature of literature and art started in 1930s, and by 1942 when MAO Zedong published his *Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art*,²² the functions of literature, art and the “interested” value of aesthetics were increasingly brought to the attention of the party. However, people who did not understand aesthetics were more likely to turn the potentially systematic interest or the interest in disinterestedness into narrow pragmatic interest, which led to the politicization of the debate on aesthetics.

Fourth, the great debate of the 1950s on aesthetics neither linked such aesthetics to traditional Chinese aesthetic thought nor connected it with the reality or the public, but left it isolated as a “castle in the air.” So to speak, it was not Chinese, and it possessed only a limited role in China proper. Therefore issues discussed in the 1950s were no longer considered relevant later on and were thus laid aside, forgotten or avoided by people involved in the 1980s in the revival of aesthetics.

²⁰ A book series of translated essays in aesthetics covering about 50 influential works of aesthetics includes *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) by Friedrich Schiller, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) by Wassily Kandinsky, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (1953) by Susanne Langer, etc. LI Zehou as the editor-in-chief wrote a preface to the series.

²¹ LI Zehou, The preface to *A Collection of Translated Essays in Aesthetics* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1984), p. 1.

²² MAO Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, in one volume (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1964), pp. 804–835.

In a word, Chinese aesthetics in the 1950s was developed in the primitive and lower-leveled debate of *Zhuyi* and thus remained poor in its meaning and function, which likewise arose from the poverty of knowledge, thought, academics, and disciplines.

The Rampancy of *Zhuyi*

The reform and the opening up of China in the 1980s ushered in the second boom of Chinese aesthetics. This boom was very different from the great debate on aesthetics from the 1950s. First, it had a different historical background. With the door wide open in the 1980s, thoughts were liberated, and methods freed while Western disciplines flooded China. Chinese aesthetics was overwhelmed by the treasure house of Western aesthetics and could only obey and follow the West, lest it fall behind. Secondly, with issues being so dispersed, there was no great aesthetic debate such as that of the 1950s. Chinese aesthetics in the 1980s did not renew the issues of the 1950s but offered brand-new visions and Western aesthetic issues instead. The issues concerned had a wide coverage, involving methodology, new ideas and technical application, as well as the essence of beauty. Thirdly, Western aesthetic discourse became the discourse of Chinese aesthetic researchers, with the Chinese aestheticians suffering from “aphasia.”²³ The results of the reform and of the opening up were the massive inroads into China made by Western science and technology, culture and thought in general. Chinese aesthetics thus provided a breeding ground for various Western “-isms.” Some political movements seeking to strengthen the construction of socialist spiritual civilization in order to “combat against spiritual pollution” did inhibit the radical orientation of anti-socialist mainstream values.²⁴ The influx of Western “-isms” (*Zhuyi*) was not suppressed but strengthened, however, because of recognition from folk ideological circles and academia in China. Various introductions of Western aesthetic works involving “-isms” (*Zhuyi*) and different interpretations of “-isms” (*Zhuyi*) proved to be an irresistible trend. As a result, characteristics of Chinese aesthetics were neglected,²⁵ its diversity was

²³ CAO Shunqing, “Aphasia of Literary Theory and Cultural Symptoms,” *Literary Schools of Thought Content*, no. 2, 1996, pp. 50–58.

²⁴ LI Qiang, “Deng Xiaoping and the Combat against Bourgeois Liberalization,” *Studies on Marxism*, no. 3, 2009, pp. 130–136.

²⁵ As some Chinese scholars said, the construction of Chinese *Zhuyi* could only absorb resources of thought from the West instead of China. WANG Hongyue, “The Loss and Way-

hidden, even its existence was made suspect.²⁶ The premise of a dialogue between Chinese and Western aesthetics was disappearing.

In the 1980s, the most striking feature of Western aesthetics swarming into China was the intensive bombardment of “-isms” (*Zhuyi*). The names of influential Western aesthetic thoughts often end with “-isms.” “-Isms” are many kinds and of different types. Although Chinese aesthetics has a long history with rich content, it has almost never been called *Zhuyi*. Therefore, there are not as many *Zhuyi* in Chinese aesthetic thought as there are “-isms” in Western aesthetics. The only few *Zhuyi* we have in modern and contemporary times all still come from Western Marxist, primitive materialist, and idealist aesthetics. Chinese aesthetics thus consists of various *Zhuyi* from the West. The so-called aesthetic diversity also seems to be merely the patent of numerous “-isms” (*Zhuyi*) in Western aesthetics. “-Isms” (*Zhuyi*) from the West flood into China, thereby inevitably exerting an impact on Chinese traditional aesthetic thought and orthodox ideology. In particular, Western modernist and post-modernist aesthetics are transforming and shaping Chinese aesthetic concepts and ideals as well as artistic thinking.

With respect to discussions of several preliminary *Zhuyi* in the great debate on aesthetics in the 1950s, *Zhuyi* has been rampant in Chinese aesthetic research since the 1980s. Western philosophy and aesthetics with the flag of “-isms” (*Zhuyi*) are unimpeded in China, as though they were confirming that globalization is of an American and Western designation. The grandiloquence of Chinese scholars who proclaimed to “assimilate the world” in the context of globalization²⁷ appears to be thoroughly spurious. Nevertheless, we hear more about the “aphasia” that Chinese aesthetics has suffered and the plaintive wail of having

out of Spiritual Construction: A Discussion with Mr. Wang Jianjiang,” *Exploration and Free Views*, no. 4, 2012, pp. 36–39.

²⁶ Is Chinese aesthetics, the aesthetics of China or aesthetics in China? This question originated from that of the famous philosopher JIN Yuelin, who asked in the first volume of the Review Report of *Chinese Philosophy* by FENG You-lan in 1930: “Is the so-called Chinese philosophy the history of Chinese philosophy or the history of philosophy in China?” See CHEN Weiping, “The Issue of Jin Yuelin and the Discussion of Subject Independence of History of Chinese Philosophy,” Shanghai: *Academic Monthly*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 12–20.

²⁷ “Assimilating the world,” a phrase from “‘Globalization’ and ‘Assimilating the World’” by YANG Shousen. This paper was included in the *Context of Globalization and National Culture and Literature*, TONG Qing-bing, CHANG Guangyuan, and LIANG Daoli (eds.), (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2002), pp. 54–67.

“aesthetics in China” instead of Chinese aesthetics. The main reasons why philosophy and aesthetics of Western “-isms” (*Zhuyi*) started to become rampant in China in the 1980s are as follows:

First is the impact of globalization. Globalization was once considered to be Americanized, while in fact globalization is not Americanized but designates instead the current situation according to which European and American cultures lead and dominate the development of world culture and economy. This implies that the logic of capital has started to rule the world. Chinese aesthetic circles find the ferocity of globalization unexpected. It is thus a convenient choice for Chinese aesthetics, which has not implemented its modernization, to follow Western aesthetics in the context of globalization.

Second, the strong political nature of the issues of the great debate on aesthetics in the 1950s could not be retained in 1980s. Even more, it causes people to become adverse to philosophy and metaphysics. At the beginning of the 1980s, people regarded Western aesthetics and natural sciences with expectation and curiosity. Consequently in the 1980s there emerged a methodological craze for aesthetics and the theory of literature and art,²⁸ composing a significant part of the second upsurge in Chinese aesthetics. However, with the updating of ideas following this methodological craze, the debate about idealist aesthetics vs. materialist aesthetics was regarded as politicized and abandoned by researchers. There was then a rejection of traditional philosophy such as materialism, thus leaving an opportunity for the massive inroads of the “-isms” (*Zhuyi*) of Western philosophy and aesthetics.

Third, the aesthetic debate in 1980s was separated from traditional Chinese culture. What should be able to resist the infiltration of foreign cultures in China should be its own native culture. But in terms of aesthetics, the great debate on Chinese aesthetics in the 1950s neither reactivated traditional Chinese culture

²⁸ The main characteristic is to use the method of natural science to study aesthetics and literary theory. In addition to some aesthetics researchers and literary theory researchers, some scientists also participated in the research of literature and aesthetics with the methodology of natural sciences, such as the famous scientist QIAN Xuesen. The representative results include *Literary Theory, Aesthetics and Modern Science* by QIAN Xuesen and LIU Zaifu (China Social Sciences Press in 1986) and *Foundation of Literary Criticism Methodology*, compiled by FU Xiuyan and XIA Hanning, Jiangxi People's Publishing House in 1986.

that has been gradually forgotten since the “May 4th” movement nor inherited and carried forward traditional Chinese aesthetic culture. On the contrary, in the politicized struggle over *Zhuyi*, it completely cut off its relation with traditional Chinese aesthetic culture and aesthetic thought. When facing the influx of Western “-isms” (*Zhuyi*), it had no choice but to follow its trends.

Fourth, the national ideological orthodoxy is loosened, leading to a shift in discursive power. After deserting the ideological orthodoxy influenced by the former Soviet Union, it had nothing to rely on. Accordingly, it catered to and followed the influx of various “-isms” (*Zhuyi*) from the West, causing Western liberal thought to spread and gain discursive power while the orthodox thought of the ruling party lost its effect. This was manifested in aesthetics as the marginalization of Marxist aesthetic research. Marxist aesthetic texts, which China pushed forward with great force, are neglected; freedom of thought is hard to be controlled in colleges and universities, which provide soil for the landing and spreading of numerous Western “-isms” (*Zhuyi*) in China.

Fifth is the lack of autonomous and self-guided *Zhuyi*. Aesthetic theories and thought in 1950s have their evident limitations, which are far behind those of the West both in method, ideas, scope and system. In terms of *Zhuyi*, it cannot be said that materialism and idealism are the *Zhuyi* of China. As a result, how can China, with the absence of *Zhuyi*, have an equal dialogue with the West, full of various “-isms,” and then find its place in international academia? Compared with the 1950s, the bustle of *Zhuyi* in the 1980s ran rampant and achieved its extreme form. Almost all essays about Chinese philosophy and aesthetics were shrouded in the halos of various Western “-isms” (*Zhuyi*). Through careful analysis, it can be shown that these are two completely different bustles of *Zhuyi*. In the 1950s a farce of *Zhuyi* was performed on a closed stage of aesthetics in China, while in the 1980s Westerners sang solo on an open stage of aesthetics in China, with the Chinese being only spectators. If the Chinese aesthetics was presented as a farce of *Zhuyi* in the 1950s, it turned out to be a tragedy of *Zhuyi* in the 1980s and beyond: Chinese aesthetics was reduced to dire poverty.

The Absence and the Reconstruction of *Zhuyi*

Compared to the bustle and rampancy of *Zhuyi* in Chinese aesthetics, original *Zhuyi* are absent therein. There are no original *Zhuyi* renowned in the interna-

tional forums that would belong to the Chinese, and it is not feasible for us to declare in the international aesthetic forums that materialist philosophy and aesthetics or Marxist philosophy and aesthetics are the original *Zhuyi* of China. There are two reasons for this situation.

On the one hand, there exists a lack of consciousness of *Zhuyi*. It is not recognized that the highest forms of development of any theory, including the aesthetic one, are *Zhuyi* and schools established on the basis of *Zhuyi*. *Zhuyi* and schools are the highest level of the development of human thought. Some *Zhuyi* and schools are produced in our present time. These schools are founded under the influence of *Zhuyi* with the endeavor of several generations. Nevertheless, *Zhuyi* and schools are milestones of thought and symbols of a doctrine, a theory or an idea that is able to stand firmly in the academic community. The lack of this symbol means a lack of necessary recognition and existence. China in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods experienced the contention of a hundred schools of thought that relied on the staging and competition of all kinds of *Zhuyi*, thus forming ideological prosperity and development, and reaching a peak difficult to achieve by later generations. But scholars in contemporary China are not conscious of creating *Zhuyi* and lack the ambition of establishing their own school of thought. They can only think small scale and feel satisfied with the state of Guanzhui²⁹ that they have constructed, while the establishment of *Zhuyi* has never entered their mind.

On the other hand, there is a lack of independent thinking. Blindly subservient to ready-made ideas and ossified disciplinary paradigms, or to turning academics into an appendage and tool of political ideas, Chinese scholars dare not think for themselves, let alone be inventive and creative. They think that disagreeing with some ideas means to stay away from them or resist them, rather than to learn from them. And for the idea they favor, they will worship and follow it without any analysis or criticism; instead of critically inheriting the idea, they accept it entirely and thus lose the ability of independent thinking. Nevertheless, one thing is consistent: if they learn from the West, the scholars

²⁹ Chinese scholars have a tradition of being modest and call their own opinions “views from tube and cone,” which is a modest designation. The most famous academic work of the most renowned contemporary scholar, QIAN Zhongshu, is named *Guan Zhui Bian*, that is, the views from tube and cone, which means “Limited Views” of Ideas and Letters.

follow only the lead of the West. As a result, Chinese aesthetics is reciting books for Westerners. For others, the ancients whom they learn from are respected as a perfect model, or an ideal idol, rather than treated as objects of criticism. If scholars are said to adhere to Marxism, this means that they regard it as a rigid doctrine, without knowing that the living soul of Marxism is criticism and innovation. Marxism was founded by critically inheriting the most advanced thought of mankind and through revolutionary transformation. However, those Chinese people who are engaged in philosophical and aesthetic research today think of Marxism as divine law which can only be indiscriminately cited, without allowing people's thinking and reflection, or the establishment of *Zhuyi*. This approach is completely against the critical spirit of Marxism,³⁰ and does not help in the construction and development of thought.

The subjective reasons described above have led to individual apathy as to the creation of *Zhuyi*.

And there are three objective reasons:

First is the influence of leftist extremist thought, which has imprisoned people's minds. In particular, the psychological deterrent and damage that academic politicization and the enlargement of class struggle have on intellectuals cannot be eliminated in a day.

Second is the alienation from Chinese cultural tradition caused by China's violent modern revolution overthrowing the feudal system and the ideological movement against the feudal culture. The essence of thought cannot be absorbed from the excellent tradition of Chinese culture, which has been regarded as the spiritual element of contemporary aesthetic and ideological construction. Therefore, in the influx of Western "-isms" (*Zhuyi*), Chinese cultural tradition cannot find its foothold and starting point or an opportunity for a dialogue with Western scholars, becoming duckweeds without roots, thus rendered incapable of establishing *Zhuyi* in aesthetics.

³⁰ Marxism begins from dissecting goods and criticizing capitalism, and it does not rule out or suppress criticism. On the contrary, it regards criticism as a motivational force of spiritual construction.

Third is the replacement of the ideological edifice with the aid of discipline. Aesthetics belongs to the humanities. The humanities differ from the natural sciences in their ideological content and value orientation. Between the 1950s and 1980s, there appeared two waves of bustle of *Zhuyi* in Chinese aesthetics. However, since the 1990s, the stage of Chinese aesthetics is full of the performance of *Zhuyi*, all of which originated in Western aesthetics. In Chinese aesthetics, the debate about *Zhuyi* is absent and almost forgotten. Meanwhile, the prosperity of Chinese aesthetics is manifested as the prosperity of discipline construction, such as the springing up of doctoral degree of aesthetics and literary aesthetics, doctoral students of aesthetics graduating one batch after another, aesthetic meetings held one after another, papers of aesthetics published by the thousands, dozens of aesthetic monographs coming out each year, as well as the crisscross of aesthetic projects, which indicate that people with some ability to carry out aesthetic research have all participated. The Chinese aesthetic community is also becoming more numerous. In 2010, the 18th International Congress of Aesthetics was held in the Peking University. Ordinary members of the International Association for Aesthetics numbered over 600, while the number of all participants increased to more than 1,200 due to the participation of new members from China. Inconsistent with the vast legion of Chinese, only a few people joined the group of foreign languages, while a great majority of the Chinese aesthetic researchers talked about Chinese aesthetics in the Chinese language with their discourse therefore being hard to be understood by foreign scholars. Much worse, Chinese aestheticians did not propose any influential ideas or thoughts that could merit the attention of international aesthetic circles, and its large-scale but small contribution was completely unexpected.

Although Chinese aesthetics seems to be prosperous now, behind this apparent prosperity is a poverty of thought, as well as an absence of *Zhuyi* and a flood of academic bubble. Study is replaced by projects, and thought by discipline. The reason is that projects and discipline are driven by financial and pragmatic interests and evaluated by quantity, which has set up a convenient route for people engaged in the study of aesthetics. They need not go through deep and painful thinking, but can achieve honors and fulfill their interests from projects as well as from the support of sheer numbers. Thus the value of aesthetics has shrunk, the critical ability of aesthetics has dissolved, and the construction of *Zhuyi* in aesthetics has been lost on the way. Currently, the “false” prosperity of Chinese aesthetics comes from the deviation between discipline and thought.

The retreating of thought and the foregrounding of discipline will undoubtedly cause an “obesity syndrome” in the disciplinary development of Chinese philosophy and humanities.

The objective reasons above have led to the collective amnesia of Chinese aesthetics on *Zhuyi*. A combination of subjective and objective reasons contributes to the current situation in which nobody wants (nor could anyone even construct) *Zhuyi*, which makes the ideological content and originality of Chinese aesthetics idle talk.

However, behind the subjective and objective reasons there also exists the weakness of Chinese academic power. That is, academia cannot be fully an independent force unrestricted by the regime, nor can it become a completely free subject whose academic ideas opposing the ruling ideas of the regime are allowed to disseminate far and wide. Therefore, in this case, the establishment of *Zhuyi* is a highly dangerous thing that has become the direct cause of China’s lack of *Zhuyi* established on the basis of local culture.

Despite China’s tolerance and acceptance of modern art, Chinese ideological circles have limited freedom, which has largely hampered the emergence of *Zhuyi* from folk thought. After a big discussion at the end of the 1970s, disco, jazz, modern sculpture, and modernist paintings from the West were not only accepted by Chinese intellectuals but also became popular among ordinary people. We can see this just by looking at the frenzy of square dancing³¹ and the scattering of modernist sculpture and paintings in the streets. Chinese modernist and post-modernist art sometimes would even erupt in Beijing and Shanghai and lead the world trend. However, in the field of ideology, the official actions advocating the theme of this era while fighting against spiritual pollution, liberalization, the Western parliamentary system and Western ideological penetration have never ceased. In this case, new and independent thought will be rather unlikely to occur.

³¹ In China, square dancing or plaza dancing is an exercise routine performed to music in squares, plazas or parks of the nation’s cities. It is popular with middle-aged and retired women.

While post-modernism is taken seriously in the former Soviet Union and other countries, Chinese authorities remain alert to the atmosphere of modernism and post-modernism. The post-modern crossover aesthetics of Wolfgang Iser advocated by GAO Jianping,³² the current President of the International Association for Aesthetics, and a lengthy discussion of the “aestheticization of everyday life”³³ in Chinese academic circles are both good examples supporting my argument. However, under the influence of post-modern deconstruction, anti-essentialism, the return to society and the trend of the aestheticization of everyday life, China’s attempt to construct *Zhuyi* has soon become diluted by pragmatism in daily life and therefore become more difficult.

After 1989, Chinese authorities attached great importance again to the ideological realm by trying to apply nationalism against Western modernism and post-modernism and to contribute to the revival of Chinese culture with the so-called national studies. But this cultural construction based on nationalism and national culture studies was just a response to the fact that China has lacked *Zhuyi* since the contention of a hundred schools of thought from the Warring States Period,³⁴ and the result of this has naturally guided academics to the old ways of textual research and interpretation. The majority of humanities projects supported by the Chinese National Social Science Fund are allocated to those topics that are somewhat relevant to national studies and focus on textual research. Since then, while acquiring a huge fund, the establishment of *Zhuyi* has been completely discarded by scholars.

On the background of globalization, Chinese aesthetics has to confront the following question when compared to Western aesthetics: “what is Chinese aesthetics”? Is it technological, disciplinary, morphological aesthetics or aesthetics of thought or *Zhuyi*, or aesthetics as described above? The answer should

³² GAO Jian-ping, “The Transcendence and Return of Aesthetics,” *Journal of Shanghai University*, no. 1, 2014, pp. 21–29.

³³ The view of the “aestheticization of everyday life” comes from the British scholar Mike Featherstone, who published *The Aestheticization of Everyday Life* in 1988, while Wolfgang Iser examined global aestheticization phenomena from a philosophical perspective in *Undoing Aesthetics*, published in 1997 and translated into Chinese in 2002. In China the discussion of the aestheticization of everyday life lasted for nearly ten years.

³⁴ The *Zhuyi* that was clearly put forward in modern Chinese history includes only SUN Yatsen’s “Three Principles of the People” (Nationalism, Democracy, the People’s Livelihood).

be self-evident. For Chinese aesthetics, its disciplinarity is the basis that has guaranteed it has become the object of research and construction as a discipline. And its morphological character is important in distinguishing itself from the aesthetics of other nations. Its technicality also facilitates the improvement of social reality. Moreover, its ideological content or thought is the soul of this discipline, essential for the elevation of spiritual state. And *Zhuyi*, developed from the foundation of thought, is a sign of the discipline's standing firmly in the world academic community. German aesthetics attained the commanding heights of world aesthetics with the emergence of old and new Kantianism, Hegelianism and Marxism, as well as Nietzscheism, existentialism, and skepticism, etc.

With respect to the developed economy, how are the less developed Chinese contemporary philosophy and humanities (including aesthetics) trying to survive and thrive in the process of realizing the "China Dream?"

First of all, the construction of philosophical and aesthetic thought from independent academic groups outside the government management system alongside official authorities should be highlighted, and the construction of thought needs to start with the establishment of *Zhuyi*. Folk academia should remain in necessary tension with official academia and put forward *Zhuyi* beyond Marxism, construct and promote *Zhuyi* according to the policy of "a hundred flowers bloom" and "a hundred schools of thought contend,"³⁵ as advocated by China's ruling party. They should also build *Zhuyi* into the debate on the basis of which schools are established and developed, rather than hesitating, feeling scared, saying one thing but doing completely the opposite, or obeying the unspoken rules.

Secondly, Chinese aesthetics should start from the filtration, extraction, processing and transformation of traditional Chinese culture by focusing on the integration and innovation of Western and Chinese knowledge. Chinese aesthet-

³⁵ They are also called DOUBLE HUNDREDS POLICY, referring to a period in 1956 in the People's Republic of China during which the Communist Party of China (CPC) encouraged its citizens to openly express their views and offer solutions to national policy based on the famous expression by former Communist Party Chairman MAO Zedong: "The policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend is designed to promote the flourishing of the arts and the progress of science."

ic culture has a long history and rich resources while taking various aesthetic forms; in the meantime its conservative and moderate inertia also contributes to the restraint of scholars' original thoughts and impulses. A successful experience tells us that Western academic thought, including Marxism, is accomplished in the process of inheritance, development, opening and criticism. Accordingly, the idea of establishing *Zhuyi* and schools in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics through outright opposition to Western culture, instead of absorbing its reasonable elements and successful experience, is not a wise choice. On the contrary, based on the history and current situation of Chinese aesthetics, scholars should excavate and systemize the resources of Chinese philosophical ideas while at the same time looking around the world, drawing conclusions on the basis of advanced experiences from the West and focusing on meritocratic selection and creative combination in the convergence of Chinese and Western cultures today.

Finally, Chinese aesthetics should be alert to the trend of "narrow" nationalism in the construction of *Zhuyi*. In the face of rising China, various tones from the West show up together.³⁶ Some of them believe that China can only be an economic superpower but will never become a great power in culture because China can only provide goods to the world instead of ideas. When confronting such a weakness, many Chinese scholars do not find differences or look for reasons through the contrast with the West. On the contrary, believing that China is a big country with a long history and splendid culture, they always think about walking "towards the world" and assimilating the world. In their understanding, the construction of a humanistic spirit is like a battle against the West.

Therefore, to establish *Zhuyi* with important academic meaning, first of all dialogue and understanding should be enhanced between China and the West, and the practice of highlighting national spirit or local characteristics should be discarded when confronting the West. In 2009 when the international conference

³⁶ This is a hot topic about China often found in the Western media in recent years. It contains roughly four different views. The first posits that China is on the rise. The second describes the China threat, which holds that China will expand after its rise and pose a hazard to world peace. The third projects a China without power in the belief that China can be a big country but not a powerful country because it doesn't have strong cultural (soft) power. And the fourth foretells a collapse of China, according to which China will eventually crumble because of defects within its system and the size of its population.

on aesthetics titled “Global Aesthetic Dialogue” was held in Amsterdam, I was warmly received by Professor Dennis of the Goethe Institute in Frankfurt. When I asked him what are the specialties of Frankfurt, he said, there are two things: one is the Euro, and the other is the Frankfurt School. The European Central Bank is in Frankfurt, and the Euro comes from the central bank. The Frankfurt School (also known as the school of Western Marxism or of Critical Theory) produced many academic masters, the impact of whom is beyond compare. China has always advocated its Chinese characteristics, but in addition to the independence of the political system and ideology, should these so-called characteristics only retain their national and local qualities? Could there be a “universal standard,” a value able to be recognized universally besides these national and local characteristics? Should there also be a high level of thought and theories?

Furthermore, if the present cultural situation in China is taken into account, it will turn out not only that Chinese aesthetics lacks *Zhuyi*, but also that Chinese philosophy and ethics (and even all of the Chinese humanities and social science circles) lack *Zhuyi*. China believes in Marxism only, while Mao Zedong’s thought and DENG Xiaoping’s theory cannot be called *Zhuyi*. Admittedly, as a person born in Trier in Germany, Marx is not surnamed Ma³⁷; Marxism is from the West. This is no doubt a problem for China, which sticks to its national pride. In recent years, China’s official theoretic circles have put forward the proposition of the “Sinification of Marxism,” designed to tone down this problem. However, despite its expectations for China to become a great cultural power comparable to its economic status, it has not generated its own *Zhuyi* and schools, so how could it then take part in a dialogue with Western theories and thought? How could it defend the “cultural security” that China cares about? How can it guarantee the independence and prominence of Chinese culture among all kinds of thought and culture throughout the world?

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Given the critical importance of *Zhuyi* in theory and its absence in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, I appealed for strong consciousness of *Zhuyi* in the “Haikou Chinese Philosophy Forum” in December 2011 and wrote to construct *Zhuyi*.³⁸ In fact, I have already proposed “Bie-Postmodernism” (Bie-Xiandai

³⁷ Ma is a Chinese surname.

³⁸ WANG Jianjiang, “Chinese Aesthetics: The Absence and Reconstruction of *Zhuyi*,” *Exploration and Free Views*, no. 7, 2012, pp. 25–30.

Zhuyi),³⁹ a theory of the new times and the new historical development stage in which this *Zhuyi* is no longer the original form of materialism or idealism, nor a social form of socialism or capitalism. Materialism and idealism, as Engels said, are basic philosophical problems that are irrelevant to aesthetics. Even if the labels of socialism and capitalism are used, they are irrelevant to aesthetics. What is questioned is not Western modernism or postmodernism but rather a new Chinese-style modernism with practical connotations. In my opinion, any kind of *Zhuyi* should be a unique ideological system under the background of a specific culture.

In short, academic influence is significant for the strength of a country. Pursuing cultural revival is particularly important for China. But academic influence comes from academic quality instead of quantity. In the assessment of academic quality, *Zhuyi* is the hard currency for academics. Academics without *Zhuyi* have difficulty to stand on their own, while those governed by original *Zhuyi* can truly be independent in the academic world. As the saying goes, a great era calls for great thinkers and academic masters. However, great thinkers and academic masters do not only emphasize the innovation of opinions and disciplinary systems. Innovation on these two aspects is far from enough because they have not reached the height of *Zhuyi*. Therefore, if China wants to change the present situation of possessing a developed economy but less developed thought in order to promote its academia, to enhance its soft power and to realize the “China Dream,” it should advance in a pioneering spirit by starting to advocate and construct *Zhuyi*.

³⁹ WANG Jianjiang, (1) “Bie-Postmodernism: the Appeal and the Construction of *Zhuyi*,” *Exploration and Free Views*, no. 12, 2014, pp. 72–77. (2) “Bie-Postmodernism: Beyond Aesthetics and after Postmodernism: On Reaction to an International Aesthetics Trend Led by Wolfgang Iser,” *Journal of Shanghai Normal University*, no. 1, 2015, pp. 5–14.