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LI ZEHOU'S AESTHETICS AS A MARXIST PHILOSOPHY OF FREEDOM

ABSTRACT

Despite his status as one of the most prominent Chinese intellectuals living outside of China, Li Zehou remains an unapologetic Marxist. He also lays enthusiastic claim to his Chinese philosophical heritage. This seemingly paradoxical tryst of ideologies is becoming increasingly common in China, in no small part through the influence of this philosopher-without portfolio. Li is no grandstander, however—it was his 500 page tome on Kant, *A Critique of the Critical Philosophy*, that first caught the public's attention in 1979 and quickly became the talk of intellectual circles. According to Li, the key to his now expansive oeuvre is his theory of aesthetics. After being largely unknown to non-sinophobe aestheticians, Li's ideas are gradually being translated into English, but very little has been done on his aesthetics. In the first of three sections of this paper, I introduce the reader to Kant's aesthetics through Li's eyes, in which he develops an implicit notion of aesthetic freedom as political vehicle through the notions of subjectivity, universalization, and the unity of the cognitive faculties. In the second section, I introduce Marx's notions of "human nature as practice" and "freedom as practice", as outlined in his early manuscripts. I conclude that Marx's politics take free practice as the highest expression of humanity, which is finally, ideally, self-legislating. In the final section, I present Li's interpretation of Marx as a remedy for Kant, introducing some of Li's specialized vocabulary and demonstrating his final synthesis of Kant and Marx in a notion of aesthetic freedom that presupposes political freedom.

Key words: Chinese philosophy; freedom; Kant, I.; Marx, K.; Marxism; subjectivity.

Despite his status as one of the most prominent Chinese intellectuals living outside of China, Li Zehou remains an unapologetic Marxist. He also lays enthusiastic claim to his Chinese philosophical heritage. This seemingly paradoxical tryst of ideologies is becoming increasingly common in China, primarily through the influence of this philosopher-without-portfolio. Li is no grand-

stander, however—it was his 500 page tome on Kant that first caught the public’s attention in 1979 and quickly became the talk of intellectual circles. According to Li, the key to his now expansive oeuvre is his theory of aesthetics.

Even today in China, it is almost impossible for a philosopher to be politically neutral, and Li is no exception. Li’s major work, *A Critique of the Critical Philosophy* (*Pipan Zhexue de Pipan* 批判哲學的批判), never makes any overtly critical statements of the government. It is a Marxist interpretation of Kant’s critical philosophy, supplementing Kant with Marxist theory where Li finds Kant lacking. Nevertheless, Li’s philosophy, despite its being Marxist, would bear out the favoring of a liberalization of the government party structure, in fact implies them quite strongly, if we are willing to look. According to Woei Lien Chong’s interpretation of Li’s work,

[t]he Kantian epistemology has implications which are subversive to all authority [...]: if reality is a construct of our own categories, then there is no ground for claims to omnipotence, omniscience, or a monopoly on absolute truth—claims clearly implied in the way the Chinese Communist Party exercises its power.¹

To this I would add that even Li’s Marxist interpretation of Kant is potentially subversive. The Marx that Li invokes, after all, is not the Marx of *Capital* or of the *Communist Manifesto*, but the 26 year-old Marx who is working out a radical theory of human nature that takes emancipation beyond communism as its ultimate goal. Freedom and its highest expression are what Li finds appealing in both Kant and Marx. In this paper I trace the arc of Li’s aesthetic theory through Kant and Marx, with the aim of demonstrating that ultimately Li’s concern is articulating a philosophy of aesthetic freedom, and therefore, of political freedom.

In reinterpreting Kant, Li develops an implicit notion of aesthetic freedom as political vehicle through the notions of subjectivity, universalization, and the unity of the cognitive faculties. With his treatment of Marx, he stresses the notions of “human nature as practice” and “freedom as practice”, as outlined in Marx’s early manuscripts. Finally, Li interprets Marx as a remedy for Kant, introducing his own specialized vocabulary and offering a synthesis of Kant and Marx through a notion of aesthetic freedom that presupposes political freedom.

KANT’S APPEAL

For the purposes of conference paper brevity, I’ll quickly summarize a few notions in Kant that Li finds attractive and then move on to the less familiar aesthetic notions of Marx.

¹ Woei Lien Chong, “Mankind and Nature in Chinese Thought: Li Zehou on the Traditional Roots of Maoist Voluntarism”, *China Information*, vol. XI, nos. 2/3 (autumn/winter 1996), pp. 149–150.

First, Li turns to Kant to establish a firm separation of subjectivity and objectivity. Li notices that one of the great weaknesses of Chinese philosophy, from the beginnings right up to the present day, is a failure to clearly distinguish subject and object. In the Chinese one-world cosmology, this weakness accounts, according to Li, for many of the ills of Chinese society, including the failure to develop empirical science and for the gross voluntarism that has deluded leaders right up and through Mao Zedong. His antidote is the Kantian subjectivity confined by the limits of the *a priori* structures of human understanding that actively and autonomously construct experience. Now the natural human bifurcation is achieved, and not only is nature there to be molded, but human power is limited by natural laws and by *a priori* principles.

With this bifurcation safely in place, Li seeks a way back to the unities in Chinese thought, which he also sees as its distinctive strength. For this, he turns to Kant's notion of the judgment of taste, non-conceptual cognition, in which the cognitive powers of intuition, imagination, and understanding are in free play. When finally wrapping up aesthetical judgment at the end of Part One of the *Critique*, however, Kant reiterates the unity of the rational, the practical, and the aesthetic, but his appeal to the so-called supersensible substrate, a mysterious spiritual level that accounts for the universalizability of judgments, does not sit well with Li. Li is attracted to the idea of free play, as we'll see below, but to account for the unity in free-play, while staying within the bounds of materialism, Li turns to Marx.

FREEDOM AND PRACTICE IN MARX

It is indicative of Li's project that when turning to Marx he turns to his earliest work, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which Marx himself never intended to be published (although some commentators have taken this work to be the true philosophical Marx, before he was sidetracked by purely political considerations). In an essay titled "Estranged Labor", Marx depicts the human being's non-alienated state, equating labor with life-activity, or productive life. He says that free, conscious life-activity is what distinguishes humans as species beings, what differentiates us from animals. Life as a part of a species is the natural condition of humans, and estrangement from it turns the laborer to individual life and its narrow concerns. Similar to Kant's formulation of sociability as an innate human property,² it is by dint of being a species that humans are human, the human species implying human society. Marx does not address the topic of aesthetics, per se, but he speculates that humans, through practical activity, mold inorganic nature into a world of objects. In this way, they transform nature into their own reality. Marx is explicit that genuine productive life is not a means to an end but free activity, so what else could it be but art—

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 41.

though the closest that Marx gets to saying it is, “Man therefore forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty”.³ Alienation through forced labor (and all capitalist labor is forced labor), is to Marx the animalization of humans, the disenfranchisement of humans from their right to be human. The essence of being human lies in the free activity of production, again, presumably of art.

In his essay, “Private Property and Communism”, Marx offers an even clearer statement of the relationships among art, activity, and the unity of the reason (the rational and the practical) and sense (the aesthetic). Here, he outlines five stages of the dialectical transformation of communism, from the negation of private property to the highest form of existence of human as self-creator. In the first stage, humans realize that being human is their nature, which is, in effect, an evolutionary statement. Animal nature becomes human nature through the long process of human activities, so that one’s human essence is one’s natural essence, and in the case of humans, this is certainly a social essence. In the third stage (skipping the second stage), a fully developed communism equated with both naturalism and humanism is presented as the ideal organization for human nature, because human nature has become inherently social. In the fourth stage, in which the human has become completely emancipated from private property, the human eye, all human senses, perceive the world in a strange, new way. No longer are there objects of alienation. The objects of the world, as perceived through human senses, social senses, become human, become social. All objects give themselves over to the human who is free of all desire of utility or utilitarian enjoyment, who perceives things as they are. All theoretical considerations are removed, and the rational becomes the practical through the senses. This is the stage that most resembles the unification of cognitive powers as depicted by Kant. Yet here, subjectivity is not drifting, is not a mind detached from a body, a soul in the ether. Rather, sensibility is made possible only through humanized nature. Human beings, as they have developed, have created human nature, which has the capacity to view the world in a manner that unifies the purely rational, the practical, and the aesthetic. These, of course, are not Marx’s exact words, but the meaning is clearly there, and Li Zehou capitalizes on it.

The fifth stage depicts the transition from communism to socialism. In this stage, the independence of the human being is briefly considered. When communism has outlived its usefulness, what is left? The human being is still social. And human society can now be structured out of the social constructs of the manifold human powers only, “from the practically and theoretically sensuous consciousness of man and nature as the essence”.⁴ Granted, Marx’s wording is

³ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers 1964), p. 114.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146. Li takes this as an explicit statement about art. We must remember that to both Marx and Li, there does not seem to be a clear dividing line between art, practice, and other free life-activities. We could call them all art.

vague and problematic, but it suggest a society in which free practice is the highest expression of humanity.

SEDIMENTATION AND SUBJECTALITY

When Marx approached the problem of the unity of thought and existence, he reversed it, according to Li. It's not that there is humanity on the one hand and nature on the other and that they are somehow unified. Rather, human thought and natural existence can only be thought of in terms of a humans' material practice. Kant made the mistake of maintaining the Cartesian duality of mind as distinct from matter, conceiving mind as not only non-material, but as a result, also non-historical. Hegel introduced the important role of history, and the Marxists viewed humanity as creating itself out of nature.

Li explains that from the very beginning, even before humans were fully human, there were practices, notably the making and using of tools. These tools were used to turn nature to the purpose of human survival. As the need for survival is itself a natural law, nothing supernatural enters the picture. Gradually, the mental faculties engaged in the using and making of tools build on themselves, creating more complex tools and widening the scope of "mere survival". Human consciousness and society become more complex, to the point of tools including cell phones and atomic clocks and human consciousness being marked by a tendency to involve abstract thought and artistic creativity.

Eventually, human society transcended nature, developing into the various cultures with their diverse characteristics. Humans developed their own consciousness and purposes in such a way that thought came to create the objective world, proof of the unity of thought and existence. It is also the origin of aesthetics and art.

In articulating Marx, Li introduces some useful vocabulary. The free-floating Kantian subjectivity is given concrete form in the notion of psycho-cultural sedimentation. Like Marx, Li conflates the notions of practice, science, art, and industry. All are essential human life activities, in fact, they are not necessarily different activities at all. Li articulates them in terms of making and using tools, which he says was the earliest practice of proto-human beings. At the very earliest stages, as humans began to use tools, the usage was objectified in the result and fed back into human rationality as part of nature. In all kinds of primitive manipulations, humans built up a consciousness that as a species gradually grew into the minds we have now. Human practice "sediments" into the mind. This occurs on a biological scale, a social/cultural scale, and an individual scale.⁵ On the biological scale, this sedimentation has produced what Kant called the categories of understanding. On a cultural scale, it has produced all the various

⁵ As pointed out by Jane Cauvel in her "The Transformative Power of Art: Li Zehou's Aesthetic Theory", *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 49, no. 2 (April 1999).

forms of customs and civilizations. And on an individual scale, it continues to affect the way we interact with the world around us.

In this sense, subjectivity takes on a new meaning. Mou Zongsan noticed decades ago that in Chinese there are two words for “subjectivity”. One, *zhuguan* (主觀) means “subjective” in the sense of opposition to objective. If people have limited points of view, they are *zhuguan*. The other word, *zhuti* (主體), is used to refer to the embodied self, to view the world from human instantiation, with a history, a culture, and lived experience.⁶ Li tells us that he not only consciously chooses *zhuti*, for obvious reasons, in expressing subjectivity, but that in expressing it for his English speaking audiences, he even offers a neologism, “subjectality”.

AESTHETIC SEDIMENTATION

As humans transform their nature through practices, in a kind of feedback loop, the human being transcends mere animal faculties, developing what Li terms superbiological powers. These include language, aesthetics, categories of understanding, tools, etc. These have their physiological basis, but they have also transformed us, he says, through subjectality, into a nature beyond our original nature.

Li introduces aesthetic sensibility as the most important of human faculties. Through the process of psycho-cultural sedimentation, aesthetic sensibility has transformed the way we view the world, such that even our most mundane practices take on aesthetic qualities: eating becomes dining, mating becomes love, etc. The humanizing of nature becomes the essence of beauty, and what are the activities of humanized nature but those that are free, that are liberated from all kinds of alienation. As in Kant, Li depends on aesthetics to unify truth and beauty, but he substitutes non-purposive human practice for the non-purposive teleology of Kant.

Li emphasizes that the essence of humanity is not mechanical evolution or mysterious reason, but the product of practice. The same goes for the essence of beauty, which symbolizes the change of human practice on the world.

FREEDOM AND POLITICS

Li’s aesthetic philosophy is divided into beauty on the one hand and aesthetic sensibility on the other. Beauty is objective, the objectification of human practice. It is sensual freedom. Aesthetic sensibility is subjective, that faculty that allows us to apprehend beauty. It is free sensibility. Aesthetics brings the faculties of perception, understanding, imagination, and feeling into

⁶ Mou, Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhexue de Tezhi* 中國哲學的特質 [Characteristics of Chinese Philosophy] (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, reprinted in 1994), pp. 57–58.

free play, unifying the realm of truth (natural law, objective necessity) with goodness (social practice, subjective purpose). Beyond the notion of human practice, Li does not articulate a sense in which this unification occurs that is distinct from Kant's. Rather than a substrate that allows for the universalization of taste and communication based on socialization, there is common humanity, subjectality, as developed over time and universal to human beings. Li does not go into any technically psychological or anthropological details beyond this. Nor does he venture any details on how cultural and social sedimentation may play a part in creating different cognitive dynamics in different societies and cultures.

Li's characterization of artistic sublimity is where he shows his stripes as a mainstream Marxist. For him, the conflict inherent in artistic sublimity is not a conflict of nature, but a symbol of the struggle for human liberation. In this sense, it is in neither nature nor the soul, as Kant takes it to be, but is in human practice. "The sublimity that art seeks to express is the warriors of the advance class, the struggle of a billion people, crushing forward, never surrendering, sacrificing all."⁷ Sublimity of nature, for Li, is recognized only after civilization has advanced to the point that humans have realized their own historical struggle, and then when it is observed, it "calls forth fervor".

Li never parts from this socialist conception of art. Even ugly art is an expression of alienation. And yet when Li mentions modern society, he calls it neither socialist nor communist, but capitalist. "Modern capitalist material civilization and consumer life are developing rapidly in society and conversely increase individual loneliness, anxiety, boredom, worry, purposelessness, and fear."⁸ In essence, Li says, we are back in the age of existentialism, when there is neither religion nor primitive society to fall back on. Facing our bare existence, we are left with the old Rousseauian dichotomy between civilization and ethics. Li attributes the source of our social contradictions and fragmentation to all kinds of alienation. As the solution to this problem, Li refers us to stage three of Marx's five stages of communist dialectical development, quoting Marx:

Communism as the positive transcendence of private property, as human self-estrangement; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e. human) being—a return become conscious, and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of

⁷ Li, Zehou, *Meixue Lunji* 美學論集 [Discourses on Aesthetics] (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju 1996), p. 646. My translation (here and elsewhere) from Chinese.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 647.

the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be the solution.

From here, Li refers to an ideally communist society of the future and then progresses on to the role of the individual in society. By fully developing oneself, by humanizing one's nature, a person can unify humanity and nature. This is the realm of freedom, for Li, the sphere of beauty. Without every mentioning Marx's stages explicitly, Li has moved us from the first through the third to the fifth. This final stage of socialism in which freedom is the ideal is also the essence of Li's aesthetics. Li's philosophy is in fact a political aesthetics. This is not to take anything away from its profundity or to claim that it is for this reason irrelevant to an external society. All philosophy is written from specific social and intellectual conditions, and Li's is no different. When we consider his philosophy, we will do best to consider it in its entirety.