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Postmodernism as a Nationalist Conservatism? The Case of Zhang Yiwu

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Abstract: The adoption of postmodernist and postcolonial theories by China's intellectuals dates back to the early 1990s and its history is intertwined with that of two contemporaneous trends in the intellectual sphere, i. e. the rise of conservatism and an effort to re-define the function of the Humanities in the country. This article examines how these trends merge in the political stance of a key figure in that process, Peking University literary scholar Zhang Yiwu, through a critical discourse analysis of his writings from the early and mid-1990s. Pointing at his strategic use of postmodernist discourse, it argues that Zhang Yiwu employed a legitimate critique of the concept of modernity and West-centrism to advocate a historical narrative and a definition of cultural criticism that combine Sino-centrism and depoliticisation. The article examines programmatic articles in which the scholar articulated a theory of the end of China's "modernity". It also takes into consideration other parallel interventions that shed light on Zhang Yiwu's political stance towards modern China, globalisation and post-1992 economic reforms, including a discussion between Zhang Yiwu and some of his most prominent detractors. The article finally reflects on the implications of Zhang Yiwu's writings for the field of Chinese Studies, in particular on the need to look critically and contextually at the adoption of "foreign" theoretical discourse for national political agendas.

Keywords: China, intellectuals, postmodernism, Zhang Yiwu, conservatism, nationalism

1 Introduction

This article looks at the early history and politics of the appropriation of post-modernist discourse in the Chinese intellectual sphere, thus addressing the plurality of postmodernity via the plurality of postmodernism. In particular, it examines some of the most representative essays published by Zhang Yiwu around the mid-1990s. Zhang, a professor of Chinese literature at Peking

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University, was the leading figure in a group of young scholars who are credited with the popularisation of postmodernism in Mainland academia during the early 1990s. They are collectively known as the “post school”¹ or “postists”, and Zhang Yiwu as the “post-master”.² This article argues that during a critical phase of intellectual re-positioning after the 1989 crackdown and post-1992 market reforms, Zhang employed postmodernist discourse to defend a nationalist, conservative and neoliberal agenda, and to politically delegitimise critical intellectuals.

Various scholars have criticised Zhang Yiwu’s use of postcolonial and postmodernist theory as conservative and rife with contradictions. Xu Ben and Zhao Yiheng accused him of hiding his pro-regime stance behind a thin theoretical veil.³ Zhang Longxi noted how he employed postcolonial theories against, rather than in aid of national emancipation.⁴ Nan Fan and Chen Yan have criticised Zhang Yiwu for invoking the authority of Western theories with the purpose of portraying positions he deemed “West-centric” as incompatible with China.⁵ Placing Zhang’s stance into the context of post-1978 cultural nationalism, Yingjie Guo argues that his appropriation of postcolonialism provided Chinese nationalism with a new legitimising discourse, while representing “Chinese values” as absolute and universally valid within an imagined “Chinese culture rim” and a new international order.⁶

Zhang Yiwu’s postist discourse and its critique points at the necessity to reflect on how and why Sinophone critical inquiry has appropriated certain European and North-American theories.⁷ As Saussy points out, to discuss said discourse and its critique based on the question of whether he “got [postmodernism] wrong” is “a trap”.⁸ Such a perspective would overlook the circular, strategic and situated use of theory in the context of its appropriation. Zhang

1 *Houpai* 后派. Initially, critics of this group of intellectuals used this expression to mock them, but it is now commonly used to refer to their work in that period. Alongside Zhang Yiwu they included Chen Xiaoming, Zhang Fa, Wang Yichuan and Wang Ning, all of which were academics at top universities in Beijing. In this article I employ the word “postism” to refer to the variety of postmodernism (and postcolonialism) theorised and advocated by Zhang Yiwu and these scholars.

2 *Houzhu* 后主. Barmé 1999: 284.

3 Xu Ben 1995, 2001; Zhao Yiheng 1995.

4 Zhang Longxi 1998: 184–212.

5 Nan Fan 1995; Chen Yan 2002: 164–165.

6 Yingjie Guo 2004: 109–132. On controversies connected to Zhang Yiwu’s writings see also Barmé 1999: 255–280, Yeh 2000: 251–280 and Gao Mobo Changfan 2004.

7 See e. g. Davies 2001.

8 Saussy 2001: 118. Xu Jilin et al. are among those who suggest that postism’s weaknesses stem from a poor understanding of the original theory (see Xu Jilin et al. 2007: 103).

Yiwu himself stated in a 2006 that he and other postists “applied theory to explain reality, and if the theory did not suit reality, then reality was utilised to reflect on theory”.⁹ To use Chen Xiaomei’s words, “however Western these ‘Chinese’ ideas may be in their origins, it is undeniable that their mere utterance in a non-Western context creates a modification of their form and content”.¹⁰ As this article will show with reference to postist discourse, their “utterance” in Zhang Yiwu’s essays also entailed a shift in agenda and purpose.

To explore this issue, this article adopts a critical discourse approach and focuses mostly on primary sources from the 1990s. This article draws in particular on the works of Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak for its methodology.¹¹ Adopting a definition of discourse as an aspect of social practice, their analytical perspective, which they call “discourse-historical approach”, employs a triangulation of close reading, critical theory, and historical contextualisation. As Critical Discourse Analysis for them constitutes an agenda as much as a methodology,¹² this approach focusses on issues in discourse such power, ideology, nationalism, and discrimination. This approach suits the purpose of analysing Zhang Yiwu’s political discourse in its social and intellectual context. The first part of the article (Sections 2 to 4) will focus on the main themes of Zhang Yiwu’s postism, while the last two Sections (5 and 6) will discuss specific publications that shed light on his relationship with the figure of the modern Chinese intellectual.

2 Postism in its international context

Frederic Jameson was probably the most popular interpreter of postmodernism in late Twentieth century China. His popularity could be ascribed to several factors including, beside his work’s intrinsic qualities, the fact he employs terminology borrowed from Marxism, to which every humanist scholar educated in China is accustomed; the fact he is a literary scholar just like many of the most prominent figures in China’s intellectual sphere, including Wang Hui, Qian Liqun, Wang Xiaoming, and Zhang Yiwu himself; and a series of lectures he delivered at Peking University in 1985.

⁹ In Van Dongen 2009: 268.

¹⁰ Chen Xiaomei 2002: 2.

¹¹ E. g. Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 31–90, 2009.

¹² Reisigl and Wodak 2009.

In the early 1980s Jameson suggested that there might be “as many different forms of postmodernism as there were high modernism in place”, since such forms – at least initially – represent “specific and local reactions *against* those models”.¹³ What is the modernism that Zhang Yiwu and his associates were reacting against? What are the characteristics of the modernity he rejected and the features of China’s postmodernity that he embraced? In the spirit of Critical Discourse Analysis, putting “postism” in context also means asking whether this was a thought of a critical and emancipatory kind, or instead allied itself with the dominant ideologies of the era, i. e. neoliberalism and “depoliticisation”.¹⁴

The 1980s saw an intense and widespread participation of the intellectual elite in discussions on the transformation of China as a country and a civilisation. The reaction of the Party-state to the nationwide protests of 1989 largely ended that debate and convinced many scholars to abandon intellectual engagement and head back to their libraries.¹⁵ Beijing and Beijing-based academics bore the brunt of the repression.¹⁶ A phase of relative relaxation started in 1992–1993 and ended with new, but milder political campaigns in 1996, but it did not bring back the dialogue between the political and the cultural-intellectual establishments witnessed in the 1980s. Now nothing allowed the intellectual elite to believe that it could occupy the centre stage of national politics, with the partial exception of technocrats aiming at strengthening the central authorities’ grip on power.¹⁷ As far as Beijing’s cultural policies are concerned, after 1992 the CCP shifted from a strategy of repression and rectification to one of ideological control and co-optation, as evidenced by policy documents such as “Some Suggestions on Strengthening and Improving Party-Building and Politico-Ideological Work in Higher Education under the New Conditions”¹⁸ and “Summary of Party-Building and Politico-Ideological Work in Higher Education Institutions of the Beijing area”.¹⁹

¹³ Jameson 1983: 112.

¹⁴ E. g. Fairclough 2009: 173.

¹⁵ A number of scholars chose to leave the country, or changed their occupation and left academia.

¹⁶ Literary journals outside Beijing, for instance, including Shanghai’s *Harvest* magazine, suffered less pressure to rectify their editorial line according to the agenda of the conservatives in power after spring 1989 (Barmé 1999: 210). The crackdown on the mass demonstrations in Shanghai was also far less violent than in the capital, even though the authorities carried out arrests of academics and students in Shanghai, too (see Forward 1990 and Warner 1990).

¹⁷ Chen Yan 2002; Zhang Lun 2003.

¹⁸ Central Organisation Department et al. [1993] 1998.

¹⁹ Beijing Higher Education Bureau [1994] 1995.

Following the post-1989 chill, when most scholars were either too afraid or too disenchanted to discuss political issues, the first intellectual debates revolved around the role and status of the scholar/intellectual and their relations with political and economic power.²⁰ For many scholars in the Humanities, it was a period of cautious re-assessment and reflection, as they felt marginalised by the rising market economy.²¹ Other scholars provided ideological assistance to a government suffering a legitimacy crisis. One of the most consequential ideas advanced in this period – one that is usually associated with neo-authoritarian thinkers Xiao Gongqin and Wang Huning – consisted in the use of nationalism as the new legitimising ideology of the Party-state and as a means to secure the “cohesiveness” of the “Chinese nation”.²² I shall return to these debates in the second part of this article.

Intellectual life was also reaping the fruits of the prodigious effort of translators and publishers who, since the 1980s, had interpreted a widespread urge to re-connect China’s cultural life with the world.²³ While scholars and students had lionised the authors of “high modernism” in the 1980s, the theoretical authorities most read and cited during the 1990s included Foucault, Lyotard, Jameson and Derrida.²⁴ This trend towards so-called “post-structuralism” was particularly evident among younger scholars born between the late 1950s and early 1960s working or studying at elite academic institutions in Beijing.

Zhang Yiwu was one of them. Born in 1962, he was among the youngest and most successful of his cohort, rising to the position of associate professor of literature at Peking University shortly after completing his Master degree in the same university in 1987. Already a well-published literary critic in the mid-1980s, towards the end of the decade he celebrated the avant-garde prose of Ge Fei and the end of the “human-centred” idealism of the 1980s that he read in Yu Hua’s

20 Interviews of the author with Chinese humanist scholars, including Li Tiangang (11 April 2012), Wang Xiaoming (Shanghai, 22 May 2012) and Xu Jilin (Shanghai, 25 May 2012); Luo Gang/Ni Wenjian 2000; see also further in this article.

21 See e. g. Ge Zhaoguang 1993, Lü Peng 1993 and Xie Yong 1993 on the freedom of the men of letters.

22 *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族. Xiao Gongqin 1994: 2–4, Zheng Yongnian 1999: 70–78, Chen Yan 2002: 190. On “*Zhonghua minzu*” see Leibold 2007: 147–175 and Liu 2004: 168.

23 For an account of this effort one can see Sanlian Shudian 2008. The publisher Sanlian Shudian was responsible for the publication in translation of such works as *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, *Sein und Zeit*, *L’Être et le Néant* and *Die protestantische Ethik und der ‘Geist’ des Kapitalismus* – key readings for humanist scholars and students during the 1980s.

24 See e. g. Wang 1996 and the selection of articles in Luo Gang/Ni Wenjian 2000.

novels.²⁵ Although he put forward the “new era” (i. e. 1980s) and “post-new era” (i. e. post-1980s) periodisation only in 1994 (Zhang Yiwu, 1994d), in 1989 he already theorised a historic shift in Chinese cultural production toward commercialism and mass entertainment, and the satirical downfall of elite culture and modernism as the representative features of the age (Zhang Yiwu, 1989a, 1989b).

Among the attendees of Fredric Jameson’s lectures at Peking University in 1985 were he and Zhang Xudong,²⁶ a well-known scholar of contemporary Chinese culture now based in New York. In 1998, writing in a special issue of *Social Texts* mostly dedicated to China’s New Left thinkers, Zhang Xudong praised Zhang Yiwu as the expression of a new, more theoretically informed generation of intellectuals who, contrary to their “liberal” adversaries in China, appreciated the heterogeneity of contemporary culture and the value of nationalism.²⁷ Following postgraduate studies under Jameson at Duke University, Zhang Xudong edited with Arif Dirlik the volume *Postmodernism and China*, which presents Zhang Yiwu and other postists like Wang Ning as the legitimate interpreters of postmodernism in China. Furthermore, Dirlik and Zhang Xudong echoed Zhang Yiwu when they made the disputable claim that “Chinese ethnicity is at once a beneficiary and a generator of postmodernism”.²⁸ As Zhang Yiwu’s influence crossed between the fields of Critical Theory in China and Chinese Studies in the West, Western academia also identified postism with China’s version of postmodernism.

3 Defining “post-new”

Zhang Yiwu’s most distinctive and influential theoretical writings appeared during the mid-1990s, a period in which he published copiously in major Chinese journals and emerged as the leading “postist”. Central to Zhang’s writings from this period is the idea that 1989 represented the end of the “new era”, i. e. the age of the “Chinese enlightenment” and China’s search for

25 E.g. Zhang Yiwu 1988. On Zhang Yiwu’s reading of Yu Hua, also in relation to his view of the May Fourth Movement, see Wedell-Wedellsborg 1996: 87–88. On the reception of Yu Hua’s avant-garde writing in the period see also Wang 1998.

26 Zhang Longxi 1998: 156, Wang Hui 2000, Xu Jilin et al. 2001: 199–226.

27 Zhang Xudong 1998: 122. The special issue was later revised and expanded into the volume *Whither China?*, published by Duke University Press in 2001. This issue of *Social Text* also include the translation of a seminal essay by Wang Hui in which Wang strongly criticises postism (Wang Hui 1998); see also in the conclusion of this article.

28 Dirlik and Zhang Xudong 2000: 4.

modernity, and the beginning of a “post-new era” of commercialisation and pluralism in which said search has subsided. To Zhang, the end of the “new era” signalled the collapse of the intellectual project represented by the May Fourth Movement. The Movement, he argued, viewed the West as a model to imitate and a universal measure of what modern means.

In his view, the demise of this movement represented the opportunity to usher into a “post-new” era of Chinese renaissance, an age in which the “Chinese nation” unshackles itself from a sense of inferiority and backwardness vis-à-vis the Western Other and reclaims control over the interpretation of what “China” is. According to Zhang, China can achieve this only by embracing a unique, un-interpretable and unspeakable “Chineseness”, and by placing this “Chineseness” back at the centre of the world. As Davies put it, Zhang thus “assigns to the postmodern and postcolonial theories he privileges the meta-physical agency of a liberating Sinocentric truth he presumes will have the capacity to deliver Chinese culture from the otherwise Eurocentric and hegemonic designs of Western thought”.²⁹

A pillar of Zhang Yiwu’s socio-cultural theory is something dear to Jameson, i. e. periodisation. In an article published in the journal *East*, Zhang Yiwu articulated “the real image of the cultural transformation in post-new era China” in terms of “fractures” between the “new” (i. e. modern) and the “post-new”, which in Zhang’s writings refers to China’s postmodern era. The article portrays these fractures as the result of such trends as “commodification” and “marketisation in Chinese society. He explained:

What is the “post-new era”? I think this concept represents the new course of development of mainland Chinese culture since the 1990s. [...] It denotes a new cultural era which is dominated by consumption, governed by the mass media, has the utilitarian spirit as value orientation, and is structured around a discursive plurality.³⁰

3.1 A China for Western markets

Zhang Yiwu describes three phenomena as defining the “post-new” cultural field. The first consists in some Chinese artists and authors’ espousal of a “national allegory” that caters to a Western demand for “China as the Other”, an exotic and backward country that Western audiences wish to gaze at and “interpret”. Zhang Yiwu cites Chen Kaige’s film *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) as a case in point. Zhang argues that China’s cultural sphere is no longer interested

²⁹ Davies 2007: 100.

³⁰ Zhang Yiwu 1994a: 8.

in pursuing “the myth of modernity” by trying to “catch up” with Western “advanced” forms and to “awaken” the Chinese people. From Zhang’s point of view, the new self-orientalising “allegory” suggests the end of May Fourth enlightenment. Having abandoned this model of intellectual engagement, which Zhang viewed as out-dated, some of the most successful among China’s culturati turned to exploit “national allegories” of Otherness in order to achieve commercial success and to cater to the tastes of Western film festivals:

The production of this kind of “allegory” has already become the main trend in cultural work with regards to international markets. Only with this kind of “allegory” one can obtain the approval of the West and allow one’s cultural products to enter the international market.³¹

While Zhang Yiwu is highly critical of this phenomenon, his writings suggest that the reason of his contempt lies neither in the commercial aspect of the operation, nor in orientalism per se. It rather stems from his observation that in these works the image of a “backward” China is offered to the gaze of the West and “China” is thus objectified and reduced to a set of “backward” characteristics. As Yiu-Wai Chu points out, the bone of contention in Zhang’s attack against Fifth Generation directors did not lie in the West’s “positional superiority”, but rather in the interpretation of Chineseness, and specifically in the appropriation of the legitimate interpretation of Chineseness.³²

3.2 A new national-popular culture

The second fracture Zhang Yiwu describes as defining the post-new era is the demise of elite culture and the rise of a “national-popular culture”. Zhang values this positively, especially as opposed to and competing with the “allegory” of China espoused by authors and filmmakers catering to Western exoticism. In his view, the new popular culture mainly consists of soap operas, bestselling novels, pop songs and entertainment films. While the output of the “cultural export department” is the target of his harshest attacks, Zhang Yiwu views the new commercial culture aimed at the Chinese masses as the future and hope of China’s national culture.

³¹ Zhang Yiwu 1994a: 9.

³² Yiu-Wai Chu 2013: 27. See also a comparison between Zhang Yiwu’s and Wang Yichuan’s postcolonialist critiques of Zhang Yimou’s works in Ni Zhen 2003: 194–195 and Chen Xihe 2012: 475–476.

With regards to products such as the hugely successful novel and TV series *A Beijinger in New York* (1991), known for its angry nationalism and anti-Americanism, Zhang Yiwu praised their portrayal of the “nationalist fervour and boundless infatuation with materialism” of mainland Chinese audiences.³³ Commenting on the combination of monetary desire and nationalism that animates the *Beijinger in New York* TV series, Shen Yipeng notes how the “media elites” who produced the show cashed in on the mass aversion to Maoist class struggle and promoted “a form of acquiescence to the emergence of capitalists under the new name of entrepreneurs”. Meanwhile, the series narrated the desire for money of the male protagonist as “an embodiment of patriotism”.³⁴

3.3 A new intellectual?

A third cleavage between the new era of enlightenment and post-new era of postmodernist commercialisation is the end of the intellectual as a socio-political category historically bound to the May Fourth project, and the advent of the “post-intellectual”. This fracture is brought about by “the tastes of the masses substituting the status of the intellectual”.³⁵ The result is the emergence of a knowledge worker of a different kind. Zhang Yiwu defines their function in the following way:

The post-intellectuals [...] have a penetrating insight and are able to provide the unconscious and the desires of the masses with a direction. They are able to love popular culture and they have mastery and control of the “media”.³⁶

Enamoured with a culture of nationalist fervour and materialistic values, these “post-intellectuals” will not engage in critiques of the ethical and political substance of culture, but act rather as “culture watchers” while “standing at its margins”. These culture watchers witness “the splendour of the post-new era” and celebrate its cultural creations.³⁷ This, in Zhang’s opinion, will realise

³³ Zhang Yiwu 1994a: 9. See also Zhang Yiwu 1994c: 4–11.

³⁴ Yipeng Shen 2015: 81. Visser reads Zhang Yiwu’s bashing of “national allegory” works and praise for the new popular culture as a comparison between “high culture” for foreign audiences and a “low”, “local” culture that is intended for domestic consumption. She views Zhang Yiwu’s choice to privilege “domestic” urban culture as the true representative of Chineseness as “partially an attempt to resolve the tension between catering to Western stereotypes, on the one hand, and sharing a language with the West, on the other” (Visser 2008: 233–234).

³⁵ Zhang Yiwu 1994a: 11.

³⁶ Zhang Yiwu 1994a: 11.

³⁷ See also Zhang Yiwu 1994c, d.

what Michel Foucault defined as “new intellectuals”.³⁸ The difference between Foucault’s “new intellectuals” and Zhang’s ideal is profound and significant. For Foucault the new intellectual is one who does not aspire to guide the masses or to impart knowledge to them, but supports revolutionary change and uses theory as a tool to realise such change.

The intellectual figure Zhang Yiwu approves for China’s present and future, on the contrary, is one that celebrates the status quo and the “natural”, actor-less course of “marketisation” and “globalisation”. Hence the purpose for which he embraces the anti-normative dimension of the Foucauldian “new intellectual” is of an entirely depoliticising and conservative nature. In it not clear if he describes here a role that Zhang Yiwu himself aims at embodying, or rather a figure that was yet to appear in Chinese society. It does, however, appear to rationalise Zhang Yiwu’s own choice to embrace the post-1989 direction of China’s development.

Zhang’s promotion of an apolitical intellectual occurred in the context of a nationwide discussion on the future of the Chinese humanist scholar and intellectual. In these years scholars and literary authors, emboldened by a more relaxed political atmosphere, discussed how to re-position their activities in an era of economic liberalisation and political uncertainty.³⁹ Against those who advocated a “quiet” scholar who retires in pure scholarly pursuits and disdains popular culture,⁴⁰ and especially against those who advocated ethically-informed social criticism,⁴¹ Zhang argued in favour of a shift from the intellectual as engaged cultural and social critic, to the “culture watcher” and the apologist of nationalism.

4 The end of modernity

In “The End of Modernity: An Unavoidable Issue,” Zhang Yiwu employs his brand of postmodernism and postcolonialism to jettison what was left of the intellectual engagement of the May Fourth Movement and its heirs.⁴² The article appeared in a recently established journal, *Strategy & Management*, which soon became a leading platform for Chinese nationalist and conservative

³⁸ See Pickett 2005: 41–42.

³⁹ See Wang Xiaoming 1996 and Xu Jilin et al. 2007: 72–90 on the “debate on the spirit of the humanities” (*renwen jingshen taolun* 人文精神讨论).

⁴⁰ E.g. Chen Pingyuan 1993.

⁴¹ E.g. Zhang Rulun et al. 1994.

⁴² Zhang Yiwu 1994b.

intellectuals.⁴³ Zhang's essay echoes themes and arguments discussed in an earlier, much-discussed essay that Zhang Yiwu co-authored with Zhang Fa and Wang Yichuan, titled "From Modernity to Chineseness".⁴⁴

4.1 The China/West binary

In both these essays the postist reprobation against the "new era" is not directed against the evils of modernity or the imperialist West, but rather against those Chinese intellectuals who read the past and the future of their country in the terms of a trajectory toward the "advanced" political and cultural forms of Western modernity. Zhang denounces the hierarchy that the modern Chinese intellectual, in his view, establishes between these forms and their Chinese "backward" equivalents. On the back of this postcolonialist stance, Zhang provides three reasons why the political and cultural project of the May Fourth Movement should be discarded, the first being the fact that May Fourth ideals were imported in China from the West.

Zhang Yiwu proposes here a binary opposition of paramount importance in his writings. Zhang conceives of the issue of the legacy of May Fourth as grounded in the opposition between "me/us" (China) and "you" (the West), two entities he never subjects to deconstruction. With reference to his adoption of this binary, Yang Xiaobin observed that Zhang simplified "the 'hybrid' situation of reality": "This hybridity exists, indeed, in the fact that it is exactly by the way of the official policy of China today that this Third World country (*sic*) is placed under the First World economic and cultural domination".⁴⁵

In fact, by the mid-1990s Zhang had relegated the "Third World" to the background of a conflict between the only two meaningful geographical entities of his analysis, i. e. China and the West. While Zhang defined "Third World" in the 1980s as including China, in the 1990s this entity has disappeared from his analysis and China had become the centre of a "Chinese Cultural Sphere".⁴⁶ Most of his articles of the period start from a concern for the relationship between these two entities, China and the West, a relationship that in Zhang's eyes is chiefly defined by China's humiliation in the Opium Wars and its aberrant attempts to emulate the West.

⁴³ Barmé 1999: 365–378.

⁴⁴ I.e. Zhang Fa et al. 1994: 10–20.

⁴⁵ Xiaobin Yang 2002: 237.

⁴⁶ Zhang Fa et al. 1994.

4.2 The triumph of postmodernism

The second reason Zhang Yiwu adduces to prove the end of China's "new era" and therefore the demise of the modern intellectual is the victory in the West of postmodernism over Modernism as a theory. Without citing a thinker in particular, Zhang Yiwu claims that postmodernist criticism has killed "the myth of modernity" once and for all. He observes that postmodernism and postcolonialism have become the mandatory basis of cultural critique in the West and this shows that "modernity" as a concept has lost credibility. Therefore, China is moving to an era in which "a new road to development and new cultural strategies" will emerge.⁴⁷ As far as "Chinese modernity" is concerned, Zhang Yiwu avoids discussing the multifarious and competing political and cultural projects that emerged in China during the Republican era, such as various forms of socialism, anarchism, liberalism and so on. He argued instead that all China's "modern" projects have contrasted China and the West in a dualism in which China was constructed as "other" to the West, and intellectuals has for too long judged these projects on the basis of Western "universalistic" values. By viewing "modernity" in China as representing a Western project based on Western standards, Zhang discards a history of Chinese experimentation with imported political and cultural theories.⁴⁸ Incidentally, this is consistent with the official narrative of modern Chinese thought, which portrays Marxism as the only foreign theory to have been truly "Sinicised".

4.3 Speaking Chineseness

The aspect of "modern" intellectual critique that really incenses Zhang Yiwu, however, is neither the China/West dualism nor the essentialism, but the fact that China's essence – what he calls "Chineseness" – is spoken out, is expressed and put into words, and thus offered to the West to be understood and thus, he believes, "tamed". In his view, only Chinese born and living in China have the right to speak out this essence, but preferably not in a way intelligible to Western ears and not as part of a comparison which involves ethical or political values. Chineseness ought to exist in discourse exclusively as an

⁴⁷ Zhang Yiwu 1994b: 108.

⁴⁸ This experience of experimentation with a range of political theories and models, which has been largely erased in the CCP-approved narrative of modern Chinese history, is at the heart of an influential essay published by Li Zehou in 1986 (Li Zehou 2008).

awe-inspiring unspeakable essence.⁴⁹ Anything else implies for Zhang the assumption that some sort of “commonality” or shared ground exists between these two entities, China and the West. For example, during a debate on the role of humanist scholars in society Zhang attacked Zhang Rulun and Wang Xiaoming’s attempts to define such a role as ideally connoted by a critical attitude⁵⁰ as a mistaken “attempt to postulate the existence of a cultural space that is homogeneous with the West”, thus denying “China’s position as ‘the Other’ in the global ‘post-Cold War’ cultural context” and overlooking its “marginality” in such a context as defined by the West.⁵¹

5 “Denying the present”

Returning to the key theme of periodisation, it is worth noticing how, between the vision of history offered by Zhang Yiwu and the one he critiques in “modern” thinkers, there is an important similarity – the idea of history as a sequence. To be sure, Zhang was not strictly against recovering elements from China’s past to forge the culture of its “post-new era”. For example, he advocated re-integrating elements of classical Chinese language into the contemporary vernacular to create a “post-vernacular” language⁵² for contemporary literature.⁵³ However, he frequently employ the argument that history moves from A to B and never “backward” in order to dismiss the ideals of the “new era”. Those who adopt them in the post-1989 age, in his view, are either delusional or against the postmodern realities he celebrates. In practical terms, this translated in an attack on the critics of the combination of political conservatism and economic liberalisation as defined and implemented by Beijing after 1992.

In 1995 Zhang Yiwu directed this sort of criticism against the advocates of the “spirit of the Humanities”, in particular those who interpreted such “spirit” as a critical attitude towards culture and society, and believed that cultural commercialisation and disengagement were responsible for its decline.⁵⁴ In a strong-worded essays – published by the official newspaper aimed at intellectuals, the *Guangming Daily* – Zhang Yiwu accused those who advocated a critical spirit for the Humanities to be out of touch with modern times and

⁴⁹ Zhao Yiheng 1995, Xu Ben 1995, Zhang Yiwu 1995a.

⁵⁰ Zhang Rulun et al. 1994.

⁵¹ Zhang Yiwu 1995b: 2.

⁵² 后白话 *houbaihua*.

⁵³ Cited in Leo Tak-hung Chan 2004: 36–38.

⁵⁴ See in particular Gao Ruiquan et al. 1994 and Xu Jilin et al. 1994.

against modernity itself.⁵⁵ The title of the article, “The Spirit of the Humanities: A Cultural Adventurism”, seems to contain an inter-textual reference to Vladimir Lenin’s article “Adventurism” (1914).⁵⁶ In this article the Russian revolutionary leader criticises intellectuals such as Plekhanov for their political attitude towards workers. Lenin accuses them of being out of touch with the proletariat and having “no roots among the masses”, and “politics without the masses are adventurist politics”.⁵⁷ The accusations moved by Zhang Yiwu’s article against the “advocates of the spirit” included that of being out of touch with the “common folks” and unable to interpret their interests and needs. Other than this, the two documents bear little similarity as far as their political standpoint is concerned.

Behind the vagueness of the phrase “spirit of the Humanities” Zhang Yiwu read dangerous political implications:

This phrase has brought the hysteric emotions of a cultural adventurism, has led to the extremist inclination of denying the present and rejecting communication and dialogue. It has led to the narrow and simplistic position of refusing “tolerance” and difference.⁵⁸

The dominance of the semantic field of “denial” in this article is especially noteworthy. Zhang Yiwu repeatedly accuses the advocates of the “humanist spirit” of “denying the present”, that is, of refusing to accept the consequences of economic reforms and forced political disengagement as inevitable facts of life. To Zhang, this appeared equivalent to being anti-modern and anachronistic. Furthermore, he chastised the discontents of the reforms for their “mad theological spirit”, which

lead to a medieval-like denial of technological progress and modern civilisation, and reveals a sentiment of terror for and evasion from the course of marketisation and globalisation.⁵⁹

Zhang Yiwu viewed marketisation and globalisation as one with historical development and considered rejecting them as tantamount to delusional fanaticism. His reaction against the discontents of these processes – which were neither complete nor inevitable in 1995 China – hardly displays what Zhang Xudong described as

⁵⁵ Zhang Yiwu 1995c.

⁵⁶ Lenin 1972. The use of the term “adventurism” (*maoxianzhuyi* 冒险主义) is rare enough that it is safe to assume that many in the well-educated intended audience of the *Guangming Daily* could make the connection with Lenin’s 1914 essay. See, alternatively, Lenin 1964.

⁵⁷ Lenin 1972: 356.

⁵⁸ Zhang Yiwu 1995c: 7.

⁵⁹ Zhang Yiwu 1995c: 7.

Zhang Yiwu's "postmodern sensibility for heterogeneity".⁶⁰ As odd as it may appear for an enthusiast of postmodernist theories, Zhang Yiwu seems to pose here as a staunch defender of Renaissance modernity by attacking "medieval" religion-tainted backwardness. Actually, the modernity he champions against the supposed darkness of the Middle Ages had little to do with a Renaissance, but rather consisted in neoliberal globalisation and market-oriented reforms. He repeatedly codifies religiosity and religious faith as being at odds with the achievements of China's contemporary era. The representation of medieval times as antithetical to progress also appears more like a modern misapprehension than a postmodern perspective.

In conclusion to his article Zhang Yiwu constructs a "us versus them" dichotomy and proclaims that "we cannot approve" religious faith when it leads to "the outright denial of the common man, leads to the outright denial of urban life and modernity, leads to denouncing every worldly need". "They" also express "an extreme cultural reaction to the new post-Cold War scenario and to social development in China during the 1990s".

They divide human being between "clean" and "filthy" ones and flatly deny the legitimate material needs of the common man. They deny the present while collocating themselves in some transcendent "point" outside of it.⁶¹

While attacking the alleged elitism of the "advocates of the spirit", Zhang Yiwu voices his support for the "needs the common man" and thus appears to claim for himself the role of spokesmen for the people. It is unclear what "we" stands for: An "anti-spirit" faction? Is the author trying to make the reader identify with his side, while portraying the opponents as a negligible minority? One could argue, The first person plural, as Billig reminds us, "is an important feature of the syntax of hegemony, for it can provide a handy rhetorical device for presenting sectional interests as if they were universal ones".⁶² In this essay by Zhang Yiwu the negative space of the "non-we" includes what it portrays as the dangerous, irrational but ultimately marginal voices of those who critique modernity, globalisation and development, voices who are also ultimately against the Chinese nation.

6 Conclusion

Zhang Yiwu's intellectual stance was one primarily "against" something, rather than a positive project. While arguably tainted with nationalism and perhaps

⁶⁰ Zhang Xudong 1998: 122.

⁶¹ Zhang Yiwu 1995c: 7.

⁶² Billig 1995: 166.

xenophobia, the main objects of his reprobation were not Western ideas of progress, democracy and human rights, but instead those among his colleagues who continued to engage in critiques of the political trajectory of the country and what was left of the political debates of the 1980s. Furthermore, Zhang Yiwu drew on the resources and authorities of critical postmodernism to advocate what Hal Foster would define a “postmodernism of reaction” In the preface to a book that Zhang Yiwu cites in several of his essays, *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983), Foster argues that “a basic opposition exists” between a postmodernism of resistance, which “seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo”, and a postmodernism of reaction, which instead repudiates modernism in order to celebrate the status quo.⁶³ A postmodernism of reaction, while sometimes playing with the forms of the past, is generally affirmative of the status quo and renounces “the modernist project of critique and opposition”.⁶⁴

As this article has shown, Zhang Yiwu’s postism corresponds to this definition. His postmodernism did not seek to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo, but affirmed the post-1989 political and economic set-up and, on top of it, attacked and dismissed those who resisted it. This is perhaps because Zhang did not have a successfully established modernism to deconstruct. What he had in 1994–1995 was the survival of such a project in the ideals of some humanist scholars like him. Not Western imperialism or hegemonic ideologies, but these ideals and their advocates became the targets of his attacks. This represented a “reaction” in that it was directed against those who resisted the status quo and nonetheless lacked the power and influence to change it. Zhang Yiwu’s postism therefore “repudiated modernism to celebrate the status quo” and chastised the last remnants of “adversary” culture in China while legitimating the direction imposed on the country by the CCP. His call for Chinese intellectuals to re-build their profession on the basis of “Chineseness” and Sino-centric nationalism represented a new “master plan imposed on a heterogeneous present”⁶⁵ that echoed official calls for patriotism and national cohesiveness.⁶⁶

Finally, one could read Zhang Yiwu’s criticism of China’s embrace of Western definitions of modernity as preparing the emergence of the New Left, which occurred only a few years after the publications of the essays analysed in this article. While it is possible that postism played a part in the birth of this phenomenon, such a reading of Zhang’s words would fail to understand them in

⁶³ Foster 1983: xi-xii.

⁶⁴ Best/Kellner 1997: 137.

⁶⁵ Foster 1983: xiii.

⁶⁶ See e.g. Zhang Jiangming 1992, Yu Shaobo 1993, and Li Zonggui 1993, all articles on the importance of national cohesiveness and patriotism aimed at Chinese intellectuals.

their historical context, as they actually legitimised and defended a new status quo defined by “marketisation”, “globalisation”, and so forth against its critics. In addition, China’s leftist intellectuals are unlikely to portray postism as their inspiration. In 1997 Wang Hui, who was to emerge as a leading figure in the New Left, lambasted “Chinese postmodernism” for failing to analyse Chinese modernity and for reading postcolonial theory as a kind of nationalism.⁶⁷ Another left-leaning intellectual, Wang Xiaoming, was among those attacked by Zhang Yiwu in 1995 for disparaging China’s new commercial culture.

This article has highlighted crucial political connotations in the history of postmodernist discourse in China. This is not a history of emancipation or revolution, not even of reformism, but one that combines economic neoliberalism, political reaction and the depoliticisation of intellectual discourse. For the sake of reflexivity, this should be kept in mind when applying critical categories borrowed from postmodernism to Chinese phenomena. Rather than portraying “Western postmodernism” as something that simply “arrived” in China,⁶⁸ the political connotations of this theory and its political agendas both at “departure” and “arrival” need to be taken into consideration.

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⁶⁷ Wang Hui 1998: 27–28.

⁶⁸ Rowe/Kuan 2002: 186.

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