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## Is it Possible for China to Go Ahead of the World in Philosophy and Aesthetics?

Response to Aleš Erjavec's, Ernest Ženko's, and Rok Benčin's  
Comments on Zhu Yi and Bie-Modern Theories

The notion of Bie-modern (bie xian dai, 别现代, Pre-Modern, Modern, Post-modern, Bie-modern) theory that I have introduced in recent years in a series of publications, lectures and conference papers refers to doubtful modernity in China. I am employing the Pinyin (Chinese phonetic alphabet) “Bie” because I have not found an appropriate English equivalent to the Chinese Character “别.” “Bie-modern” therefore refers to the pre-modern, modern and post-modern, all of which are mixed together. It signifies a lack of real modernity, and it could therefore also be called pseudo-modernity. What Bie-modernists therefore strive to accomplish is to distinguish between real modernity and pseudo-modernity so as to eliminate this pseudo-modernity and establish a true modernity. Since 2014 there have been four international symposia<sup>1</sup> and two exhibitions<sup>2</sup> of Bie-modernism held both in China and in the United States that have promoted an in-depth discussion of this theory.

In July 2017 the international academic conference “Bie-Modern and Humanities in the Global Perspective” was held in Shanghai. Aesthetician and former President of the International Association for Aesthetics Aleš Erjavec presented his paper titled “Trivial Truths Related to Further Comments on the Absence of *Zhu Yi*” in that meeting. By taking achievements and art events in Japan, Europe, the United States and China as examples, Erjavec concluded that the humanities in China, with philosophy and aesthetics included, had not yet developed as much as contemporary Chinese art. This was the third occasion that

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<sup>1</sup> “International Academic Seminar on Discourse Innovation and Bie-modern Problem in Art and Aesthetics,” September 2016, Shanghai; “International Academic Seminar on Social Form and Art, Ecology, Hero and Bie-modern Problem,” June 2017, Shanghai; “Bie-modern Art and Humanities in the Global Perspective,” July 2017, Shanghai; “Art: Pre-modern Modern Postmodern Bie-modern,” October 2017, Atlanta.

<sup>2</sup> “Bie-modern Works Exhibition,” September 2016, Shanghai; “Bie-modern Art Exhibition,” October 2017, Georgia.

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Erjavec discussed with me the notions of *Zhuyi* and Bie-modern.<sup>3</sup> By now the paper in which I responded to his first commentary has already been published. Two additional European philosophers, Ernest Ženko and Rok Benčin, participated in the discussion. Although foreign scholars discussed Bie-modern theories in various perspectives, they all focused on the question of whether the humanities in China could reach the pinnacle of global philosophy.<sup>4</sup> I'm going to present my own standpoints on these issues so as to arouse more in-depth discussions.

### Is There No Need for Chinese Aesthetics to Go Ahead of the World?

In "Trivial Truths Related to Further Comments on the Absence of *Zhuyi*," Erjavec concluded that, as yet, the Chinese humanities did not obtain the same decisive status in the world as Chinese art. He says,

In spite of the state of humanities in China today, the Chinese fine and the visual arts in general are extremely well-developed and even internationally influential. Any culture and country on the globe would be happy to possess such place, impact and presence within the global art world. Still, in my eyes this obviously did not amount to much. In my view, it seemed, the humanities and aesthetics too would have to be as developed and be as influential as the western theories in China or Chinese theories in China. I think these are two exaggerations: not all the realms of human creativity and activity can or must be equally developed. There is no need for contemporary Chinese aesthetics to be among the best developed in the world (although this would be nice) as there is no need for the Japanese tea ceremony to become a ceremony equal to western "ceremony" of drinking coffee.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Aleš Erjavec, "*Zhuyi*: From Absence to Bustle?—Some Comments on Jianjiang Wang's Article 'The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*,'" *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 13 (2017), pp. 111–121; Aleš Erjavec, "Some Additional Remarks Concerning Issues Opened by Prof. Jianjiang Wang," *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 13 (2017), pp. 143–147; Aleš Erjavec, "Trivial Truths Related to Further Comments on the Absence of *Zhuyi*," *Exploration and Free Views*, no. 5 (2018), pp. 68–72.

<sup>4</sup> Erjavec, "Trivial Truths Related to Further Comments on the Absence of *Zhuyi*," pp. 6–10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Erjavec's statement took me by surprise for we had discussed these issues in previous articles, and he agreed with me to establish *Zhuyi*<sup>6</sup> or "ism" and promote academic prosperity in line with the current development of the Chinese economy. He says that

[t]here are numerous small and big countries across the world that find themselves in a similar situation [to China] as concerns aesthetics, philosophy and the humanities, but not many among them are striving to have their voice heard. I see Prof. Wang's article as an attempt to articulate such a voice and make it heard both at home and abroad. I believe that such stance—to acquire voice—is of paramount importance for any successful emancipation and therefore for erecting one's own position and place in the world (and society).<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Erjavec placed my proposition of *Zhuyi* within the range of a world philosophical quadrangle. In Erjavec's view, the establishment of the *Zhuyi* of Chinese philosophy could change the western philosophical empires (Anglo-American, German and French). Erjavec writes,

In my view the contemporary Chinese situation as regards *Zhuyi*, art and theory (aesthetics, philosophy and the humanities) is in many respects different from the present or the recent situation in the West. If some decades ago the cultural antagonism and competition in the West occurred mainly between the United States, on the one hand, and Continental Europe (especially France) on the other, this bipolar situation has now turned into a quadrilateral one: we are still witnesses to the American and the European culture, but there is now a new player in town, namely China, which has replaced the emergent Soviet culture.<sup>8</sup>

which has replaced the emergent Soviet culture.

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But why does Erjavec suddenly put forward a negative view to Chinese scholars for pursuing the higher development of aesthetics, philosophy and humanities in this article? I couldn't find answers from his discourse. I just recalled

<sup>6</sup> See Wang Jianjiang, "The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*: The Example of Chinese Aesthetics," *Filozofski vestnik*, XXXVII, no. 1 (2016), pp. 157–178.

<sup>7</sup> Erjavec, "*Zhuyi*: From Absence to Bustle?", pp. 119–120.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

the Western theory of dichotomy that he quoted after the philosophical quadrilateral; that is, although Chinese scholars already have their voice heard in the world, they are not powerful enough to turn it into speech. Speech is the decisive factor for Chinese philosophy to become one side of this quadrilateral. Thus, Rok Benčín also points out that this dichotomy is the key to establishing any philosophy, including that of the Chinese.

Rok Benčín comments,

In relation to the Chinese position in the international humanities academia, Erjavec refers to Rancière's distinction between voice and speech derived from Aristotle. China has a voice in international aesthetics, but not its own original speech.<sup>9</sup>

Aside from this dichotomy, my questions here are two:

**1. Is there really no need for Chinese humanities, including aesthetics, to be among the best developed in the world?**

For my part, I believe there is indeed such a need. Nowadays China's culture clamors to be among the best developed in the world—from government to people, and from material to spirit, which of course includes aesthetics, philosophy, and all the disciplines within the humanities. The Chinese government has invested large amounts of funding to support the construction of aesthetics, philosophy, and the entire humanities. China is eager to achieve in the humanities the same status it has in the world economy. It can even be said that the Chinese government is ambitious in this regard despite the current lack of experts in the field. The strategy it proposes is to rejuvenate China. Along with the One Belt, One Road Initiative, it is an expression of this ambition.

In the same way, the Chinese people are not without their needs. On the contrary, they have very strong needs. However, the official needs of China often go against the needs of the people under the banner of "state" and "nation."

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<sup>9</sup> Rok Benčín, "Remarks on Philosophical 'Moments,' on the Aesthetics of Emancipation and on the 'Bie-modern' in the Cinema of Jia Zhangke," *Conference Collection of Bie-modern Art and Humanities in Global Perspective*, July 2017, Shanghai, p. 58.

The former needs use the slogan of enriching the country, strengthening the people and rejuvenating the nation to lead individual thought and speech in order to maintain rule and become bigger and stronger. The latter needs strive for more individual freedom and individual rights under the premise of patriotism. Individual freedom and individual rights belong to independent thinking for people who are free to speak and publish. Therefore, there are often conflicts between the Chinese government and the people when it comes to the concepts of “state interests” and “national interests.” The so-called “Chinese dream” of Chinese scholars is the idea of freedom and the spirit of independence. This kind of freedom and the spirit of independence need to be allowed by the Chinese government. However, it is also necessary to develop the humanities so that they are compatible with international standards.

Therefore, for the humanities in China, it is not the case that there exists a lack of development needs. On the contrary, it is an overly strong demand which has caused internal contradictions, and the Chinese government has thus been uneasy and taken many measures to limit it. Take, for example, the “anti-spiritual pollution” campaign of 1984 that was led by the Communist Party of China and began with critical humanitarianism. Or consider the “anti-bourgeois liberalization” campaign launched by Deng Xiaoping in September 1986 under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. The internal needs of the development of the humanities in China are the need for modernity. What China currently lacks is the modernity of the Western Enlightenment from more than 200 years ago: namely, rationality, human rights, dignity, freedom, equality, and social contract, which can support the idea and system of survival and freedom, instead of post-modernity, which means anti-rationality, decentralization, and deconstruction. However, it is regrettable that Chinese scholars often overlook China’s lack of Enlightenment and modernity, but follow Western scholars’ post-modern theories and methods, thus creating an illusion that China has no desire for modernity. For example, before the Bie-modern theory was put forward, many Chinese scholars proposed many different Chinese modernity concepts, such as nuxws niswwebur (Zha Changping), new modernity (Ren Ping), complex modernity (Wang Xingfu), characteristic modernity (official), and total modernity (Gao Minglu).<sup>10</sup> Although these are different authors, they are almost the same

<sup>10</sup> Gao Minglu says of total modernity, “This ‘modernity’ should not be confused with ‘modernity’ in the Euro-American sense of a marker of temporal logic (as part of a sequence

in concealing and even distorting the modernity in China. Even their claims are farther away from the official assumption, which is that China will achieve primary modernization by 2035. Therefore, modernity in China is supposed to be an essentially inadequate modernity, a doubtful modernity, or even a pseudo-modernity. This kind of pseudo-modernity has obscured the reality of China's counterfeit and shoddy products, pseudo-files, pseudo-historical records, the large number of senior officials and celebrities holding American passports and permanent residence permits while proclaiming their patriotism, etc. All of this accordingly results in the illusion that China is very developed and does not need the development of humanities. This is really an upside-down reality.

In addition, you can also think ask yourself the following question: if the concept of a "country" exists without its core that is, if a country does not have its own philosophy and humanities, just like a person without his or her own mind), then how can it become a powerful country?

**2. Can the development of art replace the development of the humanities? Or, on the contrary, can the development of the humanities replace the development of art?**

Certainly not.

Erjavec does not discuss the details of the relationship between the humanities and the arts as mentioned above, but instead sharply points out the problems that China is confronted with in the process of transforming its voice into speech. In particular, he refers to features inherent to Chinese culture; that is, to what he terms the "internal cause":

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from pre-modern to modern and then postmodern). Rather, it refers particularly to a specific time and a concrete space, and to the value choices of society at that time. This sense of the word had already emerged in the beginning of Chinese modern history, at the turn of the twentieth century. Since then, the consciousness of Chinese modernity has been determined by the condition of the nation. In my 1998 essay "Toward a Transnational Modernity," I put this in the following way: 'For the Chinese, modern has meant a new nation rather than a new epoch. Thus, Chinese modernity is a consciousness of both transcendent time and reconstructed space with a clear national, cultural and political territorial boundary.'" See Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011, p. 1.

All this witnesses that at least as concerns the Chinese visual art it was not only on an equal footing with that of the rest of the world, but was even further down the road—it was turning into an unofficial leader of various trends within the contemporary global art. As such it displayed precisely the features that the Chinese academics were and are searching for in the humanities and in aesthetics. This combination, while an everyday occurrence elsewhere, was almost non-existent in art criticism and aesthetics in China. But since these two realms were epistemologically far apart, they were hardly ever regarded from the position of a common denominator that would include art and theory, even though the two remain, as for the moment, still essentially separated for they remain prisoners of earlier ideological struggles.<sup>11</sup>

According to Erjavec, well-known overseas Chinese art works are separated from the domestic Chinese public. For a variety of reasons, until recently the domestic public had known little about those artists, and even Chinese art critics were unfamiliar with them. This situation hampers the transformation of voice into speech for Chinese aesthetics.

Erjavec says,

It could be concluded that contemporary visual art in its different settings has been seamlessly integrated into “contemporary global visual art” and it has furthermore from time to time served as a characteristic and perhaps even a leader within the global setting. So far this has not yet occurred to a significant extent in the humanities in China. Nonetheless I do believe that I have good reasons to criticize the current situation in the humanities in China. But the link between the two will only be established (and strengthened) when internal causes will outweigh the external ones: *contemporary Chinese humanities must feel the need to fuse with, and refer to, contemporary Chinese art.*<sup>12</sup>

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In the view of Erjavec, Chinese art has gotten rid of the influence of political ideology, while the Chinese humanities, including philosophy and aesthetics, are still under the control of ideology. Moreover, Chinese art has its own foreign

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<sup>11</sup> Erjavec, “Trivial Truths Related to Further Comments on the Absence of *Zhuyi*,” p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

market, while the humanities in China have not yet been able, as yet, to form their own specific type of discourse.

Before pondering this question further, we should ask what kind of connection exists between the Chinese humanities and Chinese art. Is this connection a positive or a negative correlation? Has one part been affected positively or negatively by the other part? If a nation's art leads the world, is it inevitable that its humanities will lag behind the rest of the world? The examples of the developed countries—especially France and the United States, which developed synchronously both in the humanities and in art—suggest what the answer likely is. The soft power of a country comes first from discourse—philosophy and thought—not from art. The economically less developed countries have often shown amazing achievements in art and have been in this respect appreciated by other countries and nations, but their works of art are only decorations of the beautiful world, not the aesthetic pinnacles of the global world. Furthermore, at any time, under any circumstances, the development of the humanities cannot be ignored, abandoned or disregarded.

Erjavec claims that contemporary Chinese art has the world's leading position but the Chinese humanities possess only voice instead of speech. But why?

Erjavec thinks that the problem lies in the internal causes of the humanities in China, but I think there exist external ones as well. Whether China's humanities can establish themselves in the international arena not only depends on China's domestic needs but also requires recognition from the international academic community.

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I wish to argue that the success of contemporary Chinese avant-garde art<sup>13</sup> lies in exports and in its works being recognized by international buyers, artists and art critics. So, what does this international recognition mean? Although China's avant-garde art could not directly criticize reality, as the post-socialist art of Eastern Europe did, but instead adopted a metaphorical approach, its crit-

<sup>13</sup> The well-known and influential art critic and theorist Gao Minglu writes, "It is this double complexity or multiple social system that makes it more difficult to make a judgment on what is a true Chinese avant-garde art in current China." See Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, p. 5. Bie-modernists usually designate this Chinese avant-garde art as Bie-modernist art.

icism was a powerful one, one that was both an aesthetic criticism and a criticism of society. Therefore, the international reputation of China's contemporary avant-garde art comes from this response to China's realistic appeals and social needs. Works of Zhang Xiaogang (Picture 1), Yue Minjun (Picture 2), or Fang Lijun (Picture 3) reflect and criticize the Cultural Revolution and the reality of Bie-modern society. Other works by artists like Meng Yan (Picture 4) and Wang Wangwang (Picture 5) also belong to this category of Bie-modernist works, which, as we stated earlier, eliminate or remove the pseudo-modernity of the Bie-modern in order to establish a true kind of modernity. However, the reason why China's humanities cannot exert the same international influence as that of Chinese contemporary art lies in the lack of critical spirit in Bie-modernism. Why is this so? The image of art is greater than previously thought. Most Bie-modernist art uses metaphors and hints that the audience can understand, but the art administrator cannot confirm what the idea of a given artistic image is or might be. On the contrary, the humanities need to be clear and precise in their expression. As a result, its criticisms will be expressly limited by China's political and cultural thought management system. Once the humanities in China acquire the modernity of contemporary Chinese avant-garde art, they will be at the forefront of the world.

Gao Minglu says that China's avant-garde art has disappeared since the political turmoil at the end of the 1980s, that it has become the art of everyday life and of the so-called "cynical realism," that—since 2000—it only exists as museum art.<sup>14</sup> However, I think that the avant-garde art that was famous at home and abroad in the 1990s is still fruitful now. As a representative of "cynical realism," Fang Lijun says in the recent "Turning Point" exhibition in Shanghai that "it can no longer be deceived."<sup>15</sup> Yue Minjun's work was evaluated as laughing not only at "socialist things," but also at the history of the pre-modern Chinese.<sup>16</sup> These bold statements are barely visible in the humanities and social sciences literature since the 1990s. Actually, I have called Erjavec's "internal causes" a

<sup>14</sup> Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, Beijing: China's People University Publishing House, 2006, pp. 58–59 and 155.

<sup>15</sup> Fang Lijun: "We would rather be called lost, boring, parlous, pimped, confused, but no longer be deceived. Stop educating us with old methods, any dogmas will be questioned 10000 times, denied, and thrown into the dump." See *Turning Point—40 Years Chinese Contemporary Art*, in Long Gallery, June 2018, Shanghai.

<sup>16</sup> Zhi Yu, *Primary Form in Re-idol: Yue Minjun*, Hu Bei Province Gallery, December 2017.

desire for doctrine or *Zhuyi* since 2012, when I published my article, “Chinese Aesthetics: The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*/ism” in *Exploration and Free Views*. In my opinion, we can develop our voice and have international dialogue with Western scholars only by proposing our own *Zhuyi* or -ism. The reason why China’s philosophy and humanities develop slowly and suffer from aphasia is that they lack independent and original discourse, thought and theoretical systems. In such a situation, we must create various and independent *Zhuyi*.

However, the construction of *Zhuyi* is not easy.

First, contemporary Chinese scholars’ capacities and resources, as many western scholars know well, are limited. Second, the Chinese humanities are separated from contemporary art, which forms the soil that nourishes aesthetics and philosophy. Third, western recognition is still an accepted standard that strongly influences and assimilates Chinese scholars. All of this does not support the construction of *Zhuyi*.

However, because *Zhuyi* is always regarded as great wisdom that relates to world view and methodology, in order to understand the degree of civilization of a country, one has to examine the development of that country’s philosophy. The development of philosophy is not in contradiction with the development of art. Whether China can become a truly modern society or just remain a Bi-modern country, the development of its *Zhuyi* together with philosophy and the humanities is particularly important.

In short, China’s avant-garde art is a call for and expression of modernity, and it has an obvious reflexive and critical nature. However, due to the various publishing regulations and restrictions of the authorities, China’s humanities are not able to tell the truth in the face of reality and thus have more pseudo-modern attributes than properly modern ones. Therefore, in order to develop, the Chinese humanities are very much in need of learning from the experience of China’s avant-garde art in being successfully exported overseas. Ideologically, however, it is also necessary to learn from the spirit of reflection and criticism of China’s contemporary avant-garde art. Only when China’s humanities study the path of reflection and criticism can it be possible to turn needs into ideals and ideals into reality, so that it will be possible to be among the best in the world,

even though this means a great risk to Chinese scholars, even sometimes at the cost of one's own right to speech.

### **Why Are the Chinese Humanities Voice Rather than Speech?**

Since my theory of Bie-modern was first published in the journal *Exploration and Free Views* in December 2014, it has aroused a great deal of attention and heated discussion at home and abroad. European scholars, such as Erjavec, Ženko, and Benčin, and American scholars, such as Keaton Wynn, Judy Orton Grissett, Margaret Richardson, Caitlin Daglis, Xiaodi Zhou, etc., have joined in the discussion. The *Journal of Media and Art Studies* (Belgrade) has published seven articles on the theme of *Zhuyi* in English, and *Filozofski vestnik* (Ljubljana) has published two relevant articles in Serbian and English respectively. Many Chinese journals of high standing have published 13 sets of articles that have discussed this proposition, and domestic scholars have also actively participated in the discussion. Up to now, there have been more than 60 articles and three academic books published that involve research into the Bie-modern theory. Another 30 articles are in the process of being published either in Chinese or in English. These articles discuss various questions, but generally speaking, European scholars focus on the aspect of philosophical ontology and methodology (such a choice is probably due to their being authored by philosophers).

The reason why American scholars pay increasing attention to issues of Chinese history and modernity has to do with the fact that they are concerned with the feasibility and applicability of Bie-modern theory.

However, Chinese scholars lay more emphasis on the legitimacy of transforming the Bie-modern theory into a *Zhuyi*.

Since “The Center for Chinese Bie-modern Studies” (CCBMS) was founded in the United States in the spring of 2017 and the European academic journal of *Art and Media Studies* started a special column on “China and the West: *Zhuyi* and the –Isms,” the research of Bie-modern theory has deepened and intensified. Domestic scholars of aesthetics also joined the discussions on professional websites for several days. After the conference “Art: Pre-modern, Modern, Bie-modern” held in Atlanta, Georgia (USA) in October 2017, more and more American scholars, critics and art historians joined in the research of Bie-modern theory

and the discussion on Chinese Bie-modernist art. In addition, the Bie-modern Works Exhibitions, guided by the principle of “letting art speak,” were successfully held in Shanghai and in the United States in 2016, 2017 and 2018. However, Erjavec’s argument that China has no domestic demand to develop the humanities to the same high level as its avant-garde art and the Western support of his view seem to give a test for the Chinese humanities to answer. To that end, let us look at Benčin’s comment on my discussion with Erjavec again:

In relation to the Chinese position in the international humanities academia, Erjavec refers to Rancière’s distinction between voice and speech derived from Aristotle. China has a voice in international aesthetics, but not its own original speech. While this distinction is indeed useful to describe the concerns expressed by Wang in the original article and inequalities certainly exist on the world academic stage, it has to be noted that the analogy also has its limitations, since the supposedly speechless Rancière is originally talking about the repressed, i.e. the slaves, the plebs, the proletarians, etc., whose position is hardly comparable to China’s academic ambition to be more of a leader and less of a follower in the international humanities. Nevertheless, Rancière’s thought extends beyond such cases into a theory of intellectual equality, as shown by Ženko, which also has implications for how Rancière views the academic research practices.<sup>17</sup>

I believe Erjavec himself communicates with me on an equal basis, but what is “intellectual equality”? Benčin does not give an explanation. Furthermore, this so-called “intellectual equality” cannot replace the distinction between voice and speech, because this definition refers to the distinction of various categories, namely, the difference between human and animals. Maybe Prof. Erjavec has just adopted the western tradition and simply maintains that Chinese scholars cannot make speech all at once, because it takes a process before one finally gets speech instead of voice, much like what has happened in Eastern Europe or the post-socialist countries.<sup>18</sup> However, this argument is indeed likely to arouse

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<sup>17</sup> Benčin, “Remarks on Philosophical ‘Moments,’ on the Aesthetics of Emancipation and on the ‘Bie-modern’ in the Cinema of Jia Zhangke,” p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> Relevant here is the following: “As Jacques Rancière reminds us, for Aristotle, man ‘is political because he possesses speech, a capacity to place the just and the unjust in common, whereas all the animal has is a voice to signal pleasure and pain. But the whole question, then, is to know who possesses speech and who merely voice.’ If, then, individuals and communities in Eastern Europe are successful in making their voice heard—this voice

controversies. Guo Yaxiong, a young Chinese scholar, believes that the distinction between voice and speech is actually a defensive measure in the republic of letters, by means of which western scholars deal with non-western heterogeneous thoughts.<sup>19</sup>

The voice-speech distinction cannot answer the question of how to identify the equal dialogues between West and non-West. In other words, when western scholars and artists start to discuss Bie-modern theories and to establish the Center for Chinese Bie-modern Studies (CCBMS), is it necessary for the voice-speech distinction insisted on only by European scholars to continue to matter?

The Bie-modern conference held in the USA in October 2017 witnessed the process of Chinese aesthetics and art theories spreading to rest of the world. The conference also indicated that Bie-modern theory is not simply a matter of making a voice but rather of speaking in our own Chinese words. When the banner with the word “Bie” (别) was hung on the administrative building of a university in the U.S. (Picture 7) and the American “Center for Chinese Bie-modern Studies” uses “Bie” (别) as its name (Picture 6), it shows that Chinese aesthetics and arts are not just making a voice but speaking in their own language, which is the speech of academia, that is, of *Zhuyi*. There is no better representation than this.<sup>20</sup>

Coincidentally, Ženko and Benčin, both of whom participated in the discussion, published some relatively objective comments on Bie-modern theory when they defended Erjavec. All of these comments highly praise Bie-modern theory. Ženko says,

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stretching as speech from the sociopolitical realm to the artistic and cultural ones—then they have taken a political stance and have effected action toward others, themselves, and their place in the world as subjects.” See Aleš Erjavec, “Eastern Europe, Art, and the Politics of Representation,” *boundary 2* 41, no. 1 (2014), pp. 53–54.

<sup>19</sup> Guo Yaxiong, “Disenchanted the Distinction between Voice and Speech: Rethinking of the Construction of National Philosophy in Bie-modern Era,” *Exploration and Free Views*, no. 7 (2017), pp. 72–76.

<sup>20</sup> See Wang Duo, “Which Kind of New Theory Offered by Shanghai Scholar Lets Western Scholars Reflect Themselves and Sets up CCBMS?” *Shanghai Perspective News*, 11 November 2017, p. 39.

A good case in point is the Time spatialization theory of Bie-modern, developed by Prof. Wang. The theory that he developed is not “extended from Western space theories, neither the application of them, but the generalization of China’s reality.”<sup>21</sup>

I think, Ženko understands me well. After all, the characteristics of the Bie-modern era are distinct because they are intertwined with the modern, pre-modern, and post-modern, which is quite different from western synchronic social form and historical stages of development (modern replacing the pre-modern, post-modern exceeding the modern). Bie-modern is neither modern nor pre-modern nor post-modern.

Ženko writes,

Bie-modern that has been developed in order to grasp the historical stage of development in China is still related to the West, however, not as a translation, but, in words of Rancière, as a bridge, “which is a passage, but it is also distance maintained.” The materiality of this historical stage, however, keeps two approaches at an equal distance, and enables a verification of the theory.<sup>22</sup>

Ženko, who uses Rancière’s theory of equality to give Bie-modern theory an equal position, declares that the relation between Chinese humanities and Western humanities is not that of teacher and student, but rather a relationship between equals. Is this opinion still concerned with the distinction between voice and speech?

Benčin goes much further. He writes,

Badiou uses the Hegelian concept of the “concrete universal” to explain how philosophy, even though it addresses itself to all, has particular cultural and national characteristics. Great outbursts of philosophical creativity with a universal reach, he claims, are characterized by the moments in time and the specific places in which they appear. I believe that the concept of a “philosophical

<sup>21</sup> Ernest Ženko, “Lesson in Equality: Some Remarks on the Development of Chinese Aesthetics,” *Conference Proceedings of International Academic Seminar on Discourse Innovation and Bie-modern Problem in Art and Aesthetics*, September 2016, p. 123.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

moment” is very close to what was discussed by Wang as *Zhuyi*. Badiou cites two historical and one contemporary European philosophical moment: the Greek moment, which lasted for a couple hundred years between Parmenides and Aristotle; the even shorter German moment between Kant and Hegel; and finally, the French moment in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from Sartre to Deleuze (Badiou eventually counts himself in as the last figure of this moment).<sup>23</sup>

Although Benčín also defended Erjavec’s assertion of a dichotomy theory, the Western tradition of distinction between voice and speech finally vanishes when he connects the theory of the Bie-modern with the “moment of philosophy.” If the Bie-modern *Zhuyi* can really become a human philosophy, as Benčín has said, China will become a philosophical empire in the world, one side of philosophical quadrangle, or even in a higher position beyond these. However, after getting the encouragement from building a philosophical quadrangle proposed by Erjavec, and at the same time suffering from the embarrassment of the voice-speech distinction, shall Chinese scholars become rashly and blindly optimistic?

I do not think so.

Erjavec claims that his article that he does not stop at the dichotomy between humans and animals; he instead admits that a process is needed in order to get from voice to speech. This process has been experienced by “post-socialist” countries in Eastern Europe.<sup>24</sup> In any case, Erjavec’s claim of dichotomy is still a challenge to the humanities in China. Is there any speech in China now? If this point of view had been put forward five years ago, it would indeed have posed a problem, because at that time, as pointed out in my articles published in 2012,<sup>25</sup> and 2016,<sup>26</sup> China did not have any internationally influential *Zhuyi* other than German Marxism since 1949. But now the situation has changed. Since I proposed Bie-modernism in 2014, China has had independent and free *Zhuyi* which

<sup>23</sup> Benčín, “Remarks on Philosophical ‘Moments,’ on the Aesthetics of Emancipation and on the ‘Bie-modern’ in the Cinema of Jia Zhangke,” p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Erjavec, “Eastern Europe, Art, and the Politics of Representation,” pp. 53–54.

<sup>25</sup> Wang Jianjiang, “The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*: The Example of Chinese Aesthetics,” *Exploration and Free Views*, no. 2 (2012), pp. 22–26.

<sup>26</sup> Jianjiang, “‘Quadrilateral in Philosophy’ and Bie-modernism,” *Exploration and Free Views*, no. 9 (2016), pp. 80–86.

is popular in the world and is equal to the modern and post-modern concepts of the West. This is what Bie-modernism is all about.

The core views of this doctrine are as follows:

- (1) The Bie-modern is a hybrid of the three primary stages in human history, namely, feudalism, socialism, and capitalism (or modernity, pre-modernity, and post-modernity). Bie-modern looks like the modern in the chronicle of history, but actually it is non-modern. It is the coexistence of authentic modernity and doubtful modernity. Therefore, Bie-modernism is the distinction between authentic modernity and pseudo-modernity, which means the establishment of true modernity. Compared with European and American countries entering post-modern society, China has not completely entered the modern world. In the report of the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017, it was that basic modernization cannot be achieved until 2035. Therefore, the biggest problem for China today is the lack of sufficient modernity. Even compared to the post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe mentioned by Erjavec, China still lacks modernity. This can be related to the reality of three aspects. First, more than 20 million people are waiting for poverty alleviation by the Chinese government. Second, hundreds of thousands of migrant people without registered residence membership, a social system for the past 3,000 years in Beijing, where they are regarded as the “low-end population,” were sent away in the winter of 2017. Last, more than 1.3 million corrupt officials were officially documented. They all share a feudal patriarchal ideology, an emperor’s awareness of the country, feudal authoritarianism, feudal superstitions, hierarchical concepts, a prioritization of sentiment over the law, and the tradition of acting in accordance with unspoken rules. It is no longer a problem that post-modern and post-socialist countries face or something they can understand. However, Bie-modern issues exist not only in China, but also in countries such as Iran and Turkey, where democratic systems and religious authorities are intertwined and mingled with each other, though because of their religious traditions, they lack the so-called socialist stage and are therefore different from China. Many countries in East Asia look like they are Bie-modern, such as India where democratic structures do exist, but there is no socialism. The status of women is low, and social material supply is not sufficient; again, there is something that sets them apart from China. But Bie-modern issues

(that is, pseudo-modern issues) exist ubiquitously. Bie-modern theory has international universality because it is connected with pseudo-modernity and real modernity together. Therefore, the applicability of Bie-modern theory is not limited to China.

- (2) Bie-Modernism claims that everyone, although he or she still lives in a Bie-modern society, regardless of race, ethnicity, nation, wealth, poverty, strength, or weakness, and whether or not he or she is working, so long as he or she was born in this country, has a share in this country and society, namely, the life stocks. It is not related to a religious savior or to the leader, party, or government that controls the power of the state. Therefore, he or she has the inherent right to reap without sowing, just as the members born in the family naturally have the equal right to share food, safety, and convenience. This right is sacred and inviolable.
- (3) The settlement of the problem of disparity between the rich and the poor in the Bie-modern era, which has always plagued human society and caused countless revolutions and riots that bring about great damage to society, is different from the Marxist theory of destroying class society through the elimination of the bourgeoisie. It is believed that the solution to this human problem is to get rid of the proletariat rather than the bourgeoisie. The purpose of getting rid of the proletariat is to allow everyone to truly acquire and enjoy his or her share in the society, thereby carrying out the exchange of capital and thus qualifying equality. This exchange in the sense of equality is the foundation of democratic freedom, fairness, and justice. For this point, we have seen the hope that has sprung from the establishment of various social welfare systems in Europe.
- (4) With the unimaginable progress of AI and technology, the proletariat will become an extra class. If a member of this “extra or unemployed class” cannot become a bourgeoisie who enjoys the life stocks, he will inevitably become a part of a discriminated and oppressed class, one primed to become a rebelling class, a revolutionary class, and a destructive class of the sort that Marxism expected and that will eventually hinder the development of mankind. Therefore, the eradication of the proletariat and the idea of life stocks that will make a capitalist bourgeoisie of each member of the proletariat have become the shared mission of human society in the Bie-modern era.

- (5) The ideological and cultural development in the Bie-modern era does not choose the way to go after the post-modernism of the West, but first distinguishes modernity from authenticity and the pseudo by establishing a true modernity. This modernity includes natural share rights, democratic and free thinking, principles of fairness and justice, social welfare protection, legal system, etc. Achieving true modernity is not to follow the path of Western post-modern society, but to look back to the Bie-modern society after Western post-modernism so as to fully utilize the positive results of modernism and post-modernism to realize the modernity of our information age. That is, the modernization of multi-dimensions (materials, ideas, systems, technologies, services, and souls) can be realized quickly and easily with the help of informationization.
- (6) Emphasizing the existence and extension of Bie-modern aesthetic form in present-day China, maintaining the diversity of cultures and aesthetics, inheriting from traditional aesthetic spirit and forms, and interacting with the Western aesthetic form need to be implemented so as to set up an aesthetic morphological system with Chinese characteristics.
- (7) We should encourage a leapfrogging pause in the establishment of a democratic system, the inheritance and development of cultural heritage, the genre of art, and the formation of academic schools. Countries and districts such as the Soviet Union, Burma, Malaysia, and China's Taiwan have undergone a sudden democratic transition without a violent revolution. Many in China working in culture, art, and academia have succeeded in cutting off the successor and the inherited person, thereby realizing new cultural forms, artistic schools, and academic schools. Although Bie-modernism does not speak of "aesthetic revolution" like Rancière, Erjavec,<sup>27</sup> etc., it is in fact a kind of political revolution, involving politics, economy, art, and culture. It is a full-scale revolution in the way of thinking.

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These above-mentioned theories are unique in China, and they are also innovative in the history of human thought as a whole. The construction and promotion of these theories are related not only to the shallow needs of China's discourse

<sup>27</sup> Aleš Erjavec, ed., *Aesthetic Revolution and Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

power, but also to the influence on the entire human being of the development of any country in the context of globalization. Therefore, Bie-modernism as an innovative theory not only happens to be a manifestation of China's domestic demand, but also a clear-cut and powerful speech backed by a loud voice. When Bie-modernism spreads worldwide with its works and writings, it communicates equally with international philosophy, aesthetics, and arts. Is it far from embracing the "moment of philosophy"?

### **Why is there uncertainty among Western philosophers about the Chinese humanities?**

The three articles in which Erjavec addresses my work indicate both his spiritual process of researching Chinese humanities and his complicated feelings. Despite the promising future in which Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, and the humanities more broadly are likely to form part of a philosophical quadrangle, he limits the promise of the voice-speech distinction and ultimately feels doubtful about whether China truly has the need to establish a world-class discipline of humanities. Sometimes his complicated emotion appears as a pain. In his second article discussing me, he expresses his feelings in this way:

I could go on and on ... [P]rof. Wang has touched upon a neuralgic spot in our minds. He has noticed that somehow a part of the ground beneath us is missing. It is through this rabbit's hole (remember *Alice in Wonderland*?) that we may start consciously to ponder upon issues arising from the issues that he has brought forth. In other words, I definitely think that he is "up to something" and that this something deeply concerns all of us even if we don't yet know how and perhaps not even why.<sup>28</sup>

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How could I touch his sore spot? To be sure, I have given him the truth of Bie-modern reality and shock him. Maybe he is in the midst of realizing that the base of researching China is missing. Perhaps he has also discovered an incision or "rabbit hole" through which one can observe and even solve Chinese issues.

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<sup>28</sup> Erjavec, "Some Additional Remarks Concerning Issues Opened by Prof. Jianjiang Wang," p. 147.

I see the Bie-modern as an innovative theory concerning social form that can be used to explain the characteristics of present-day society. It can distinguish between true and false modernity and thereby establish a real society. In brief, it is an organic combination of social morphological description and social morphological transformation.

As Bie-modern theories are rooted in the specific social and cultural backgrounds of China, they can grip the reality of China closely and develop a set of theories on society, culture, economy, art, and aesthetic issues. These include Bie-modern theory, Bie-modernism, time spatialization theory, four-stages of development theory, aesthetic morphology theory, harmonious collusion theory, self-renewal theory, leapfrog-pause theory, theory of cutting the link between inheritance and innovation, the proposition of Chinese-Western-Marxism-I, theory of looking back from post-modern, and so on. These theories construct a system of Chinese speech and surpass the Chinese governmental voice of “going abroad” so that we can open an equal dialogue with western ideologies and art. This dialogue should be regarded by Western scholars as a pioneering work of human philosophy that comes from the construction of a philosophical quadrangle with Chinese philosophy and humanities included. However, if it is constrained by the tradition of European centrism and is to be evaluated only by the hoary old distinction between voice and speech, then it will inevitably produce confusion and pain.

On the other side, Erjavec’s expectations for and hesitations about the theory of the Bie-modern just represent the uncertain state in which we currently find ourselves when it comes to the process of the Chinese humanities spreading into the world during the Bie-modern era. The Bie-modern period is full of randomness, which may lead to a real modern society and may go backward to the pre-modern society. It is this randomness that has caused the uncertainty among Western scholars about whether or not to study Chinese issues or about how to evaluate Chinese academic circles.

What was not expected, but is nonetheless very interesting, is that the discussions on *Zhuyi* and Bie-modernity between Erjavec and myself have actually reached a high degree of consistency in methodology. Erjavec’s dichotomy between voice and speech is the same as the difference between modernity and pseudo-modernity. It is a distinction between different things, although he

stresses the disparity between people and animals, while my focus is on different social forms, yet both of us embody the methodological philosophy of difference, embodying the core values of the Bie-modernism distinction (Bie, 别). The word not only has methodological significance in China, but also has ontological significance. Chinese philosophy speaks of the unity of the heavens and the man. Western philosophy speaks of the separation of the subject and the object, but they cannot be separated from the rules of distinction. The universe, life, and society are all formed by divisions and unity. Therefore, the word of Bie has ontological significance. Although my cultural background is different from Erjavec's, and our philosophical perspectives are different as well, we have finally achieved a dialogue on the methodology and ontology of philosophy based on distinction.

Just as the old Chinese saying goes, adopting the good qualities or suggestions of others, one can remedy one's own defects. Erjavec's complicated views have illustrated the following issues:

1. The problem of *Zhuyi* is of universal significance, and China may form a key part of the philosophical quadrangle due to the establishment of *Zhuyi* and its approaching moment of human philosophy. The suspicions and disputations about *Zhuyi* held by Chinese and western scholars do not mean that *Zhuyi* has been outdated, but on the contrary, they demonstrate the value of our discussions about *Zhuyi*, which is being constructed at the right time. Only by the way of proposing *Zhuyi* can those countries with underdeveloped thoughts transform their voice into speech, achieve self-transcendence, and take their place on the stage of international philosophy.
2. Although Bie-modernism theory has been accepted and studied by world-wide scholars, Chinese philosophy still has a long way to go before it finally forms one side of the international philosophical quadrangle. The reasons are as follows: firstly, no other Chinese academic *Zhuyi*, which differs from the political tool of dominance, such as reports from the top, has come to the world except Bie-modern theory; secondly, Erjavec worries that the construction of *Zhuyi* is still under the control of nationalism, such as "five-year planning model"; and thirdly, there are the limitations of instrumentalized Marxism and a wide gap between Chinese aesthetics and its contemporary art.

3. The significance of Erjavec's argument is that, on the one hand, he has given us an expectation of constructing one side of this international philosophical quadrangle, so let us be confident. On the other hand, he has forced us to retain a clear mind, to recognize our own path, to find our own background, and to understand the internationalism of the academic world.
  
4. Erjavec's argument may manifest the complex mentality of many western philosophers when they consider the renaissance of Chinese culture, and this may be viewed as an incentive by Chinese scholars. First of all, we must affirm that Erjavec provides a western scholar's perspective of considering the Chinese humanities and a frame of reference for their further development. His view on Chinese issues is sincere and worth respecting, because the construction of thought is always accompanied by doubts and criticism rather than slavish praise. Second, his insight is profound, and for having training and experience in the history of aesthetics and art, he points out the kinds of dangers that can eventuate when the construction of theories become detached from the practice of contemporary art.

Erjavec holds that the Chinese humanities have no need to lead the world, which raises a question of great value. This is how the Chinese see the creation of the freedom of thought (how to express it freely and how it can attract international attention). Compared with China's propaganda of going abroad and speaking loudly, Erjavec's question is also a matter that is more universal than the narrow-minded nationalist conception of competition. The value of this issue lies in the fact that a European scholar has used both explicit and implicit Chinese methods to activate the Chinese people's internal needs for the development of consciousness within the humanities, and this issue has the potential to cause more discussion or growth.

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All in all, whether it is Erjavec's quadrilateral idea, Ženko's concept of equal dialogue, Benčin's quoted philosophical moment, or Aristotle's and Rancière's claim of dichotomy, all of them are using existing Western ideas. The philosophical theory system examines and tests the doctrine of Bie-modernism from China. Although the Bie-modern theory comes from the generalization of China's social form, it still cannot be separated from the recognition of human universal values and cannot be separated from the recognition of Western philosophy. However, on the other hand, even if it is not fully recognized by

Western philosophy as yet, the Bie-modern theory still has its influence in China and internationally, and it has already had an impact.

The American philosopher Richard Rorty said that classical philosophers live for raising questions, whereas modern philosophers live for transforming questions. Accordingly, we could transform Erjavec's question from "Is it necessary for Chinese aesthetics to lead the world like the Chinese arts?" into "When will Chinese aesthetics lead the world like the Chinese arts?" I do not know whether Prof. Erjavec will agree with my transformation of his proposition.

## Appendix



Picture 1. Zhang Xiaogang's *Bloodline: Big Family No. 3*  
179 × 229 cm, 1995

*Bloodline: Big Family No. 3* is the most important and classic work among Zhang Xiaogang's *Bloodline* series. The tension of history and politics hidden behind the work can be pursued via the well-ordered portrait-like format and the image icons of the Cultural Revolution (Mao badges, red armbands, and the costume of Little Red Guards). Spots on the faces of the figures and red lines on their bodies represent the memory of history and their blood relationship. Their similar zombie-like faces signify a soul deficit. On behalf of Chinese art, the work once appeared in many important international exhibitions and at last was sold for HK \$47,3675 million at Sotheby's in April 2008.



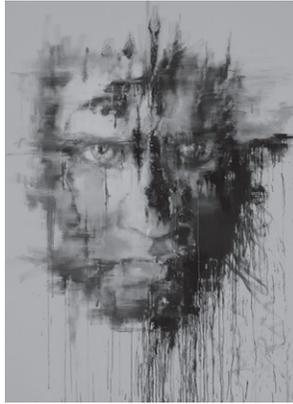
Picture 2. Yue Minjun's *Execution*  
1996

*Execution* is a deconstruction and reconstruction of Francisco Goya's classic work, *The Third of May 1808*. With a jocose technique, the artist reassembles pre-modern, modern and post-modern elements. He substitutes Chinese political elements for the original figures and background. The atmosphere of terror and oppression caused by executing righteous men in the original version has changed into a relaxing atmosphere in which people are playing games by pointing finger-guns at people. The dark background of midnight is replaced with a scarlet wall under midday sunshine. The picture is dealt with in a typical Bie-modern artistic technique. It depicts that there is a fight against pre-modernism in real life. Behind the visual impact between pre-modernism and post-modernism, the artist deconstructs the meaning of the sublime, subverts the hero image, and scoffs at the executioner's ugly face. In that way, it produces a spoof effect. *Execution* was sold for US \$5.9 million / RMB 43.5 million at London's Sotheby's, which set a new record.



Picture 3. Fang Lijun's 2008 *Spring*  
180 × 140 cm, 2008

During his peak period in 2008, Fang Lijun produced his most representative work, *Spring 2008*. In it, an overburdened boat is laden with fruit-like bald heads and drifts in a boundless sea. Living creatures are flying around the boat, living together or dying together with it. The work is symbolic. It transfers the feeling of disappointment about modern time into the salvation of pre-modern times. Behind satire, there is a Bie-modern hesitation: revitalization or re-enchantment? Back to modern times or pre-modern times? The overall style of Fang Lijun's work is adopting Pop art techniques to reveal the connection between modernism and pre-modernism while using its "bald head composition" to produce the artistic effect of helplessness, absurd, hesitation and comedy. The work was sold for RMB 5,726,160 / HK \$2,440,000 / US\$ 312,158,18 at Sotheby's Hong Kong Autumn in 2013.



Picture 4. Men Yan's *Happiness*  
170 x 230 cm, 2007-2017

Meng Yan uses black and white oil portraits to uncover the soul of Chinese people. His paintings have been exhibited several times in Europe.



Picture 5. Wang Wangwang's *Meat Hills*  
Color enlargement, 60 x 100 cm, 2007

The “Meat Hills” and “Money Hills” series adopt the traditional cavalier perspective in method, but use the piling of bodies or dollars to deconstruct both ink (the most important medium in traditional Chinese painting) and artistic conception. Both seem to have the form of Chinese ink painting but in fact are mixed with the artist’s present experience of Chinese and western concepts.

Their core is no longer a depiction of mental imagery, but the accumulation of the debris of the symbols of desire and the loss of human spirit and faith in the world of desire. The same is true of series such as “Find God in Money Hills” and “Find God in Vehicle Hills.”



Picture 6. The Studio of Center for Chinese Bie-Modern Studies (CCBMS) at GSW, USA



Picture 7. Bie-modern as a Slogan (別) Hung on a U.S. University Administration Building