

THE STORIES OF FOUR WORDS

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It might be unimaginable that during the period from 1978 to 1985 in China, almost all books on aesthetics became bestsellers, with as many as tens of thousands of copies being sold in a short time, and this discipline became a highly popular one with thousands of students choosing it as their subject for master or doctoral level studies. This period is now called the “aesthetics craze,” which, as I wrote in an article, “greatly stimulated the development of aesthetics [...] in China,” and fostered an enthusiastic band of aestheticians.”¹ This was actually a revival of aesthetics after the Cultural Revolution, and historians can continue to dispute the cause of the “craze,” but no one will disavow the fact that this happened during a crucial political period, and played an important political and ideological role in transforming the society from a closed one to one with an “open-door” policy, as it was called by Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues.

Aesthetics, particularly its Chinese translation *meixue*, literally signifies the study of beauty, which became a replacement for Mao Zedong’s “struggle philosophy” (continuously creating enemies and calling for people to fight against each other before and during the Cultural Revolution). This does not mean that aesthetics became a political philosophy at that time. This was simply an effort to develop aesthetics in China, and its importance for social transformation lay in that it balanced the all-encompassing political ideology as a legacy of the Cultural Revolution, as well as offered an entry point for Western ideas by justifying the translation and publication of Western academic works in China. Disinterestedness played a role in relaxing the

¹Jianping Gao, “The ‘Aesthetics Craze’ in China: Its Cause and Significance,” *Dialogue and Universalism*, Vol. VII, No. 3–4 (1997), pp. 34–35. More general information on the “aesthetics craze” can be found in that article; here I present the same history but from a different perspective.

tense atmosphere; it turned out to be most beneficial for a benign political climate.

In this study, I shall choose four words in Chinese aesthetics that were of central import during that period. All four words were originally translated from Russian or other European languages, and have prevailed in China since the middle of the twentieth century. As we know, every word has its own destiny. When a word is translated into a new language, its meaning can somehow be changed according to the new context. This is quite common in Europe when some academic works are translated into various European languages. If we consider that China is a culture quite different from those in Europe, the transformation of meaning in this way will be more understandable. The Chinese have to find a Chinese word or a compound of characters (unlike in the translation among European languages, where often the same word can be kept) that is equivalent to the original one when the translation is made. Nevertheless, the Chinese word or compound inevitably retains the meanings of the original Chinese characters. For instance, when the Chinese translate the word “*Ästhetik*,” they cannot just translate it as “aesthetics” in English or “*esthétique*” in French, but translate it into two characters spelled as “*mei-xue*” that literally mean a study of beauty. This also provides potential freedom for a translator to choose different Chinese characters to translate the same word in European languages.

What I want to present in this study is not merely the change of meaning that occurs when a word is translated into Chinese as stated above, but that during the period of the “aesthetics craze,” many words were deliberately re-translated by Chinese scholars with characters other than the familiar ones in order to imbue them with new meanings or connotations for aesthetic as well as political purposes.

1. Party literature or Party publications

From the 1940s to the 1970s the Chinese mainly received Marxist aesthetics from Russia, and, at a time when analytic aesthetics was prevailing in West, the Chinese persisted in utilitarian or instrumentalist ideas on literature and art by promoting art for the sake of class struggle, art in the service of workers, farmers, and soldiers, and art that would further the purposes of socialist construction and revolution. During this period, Kant’s aesthetics of disinterestedness was sharply criticized, and very few books of analytic aesthetics were translated and discussed. The most important foundation for

these instrumentalist ideas, in addition to many others, was a short essay by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin entitled “Party Organisation and Party Literature.”

This was an essay written in 1905, when the Social Democratic Party of Russia became powerful owing to a revolution that happened that same year. In this essay, Lenin wrote,

Down with non-partisan writers! Down with Literary supermen! Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, ‘a cog and a screw’ of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class.²

The revolution broke the restrictions formerly exerted on the Party publications. At that moment, Lenin called for a change in the strategy, for an end to the disguises of the past, and for a strengthening of control over the party’s publications, demanding that they openly serve the practical struggle of the party. In Lenin’s view, Russia had not yet developed a capitalist economy. The Social-Democratic Party should thus keep both the minimum program and the maximum program. The minimum program was to be “civilized” and to eliminate the remnants of the serf system, while the maximum program was to realize socialism and communism. At that time, a proletarian party was not supposed to break with the bourgeoisie and disrupt the bourgeois revolution with the intention of “civilizing” Russia, but to join it. In other words, the proletarian party was supposed to unite with different kinds of social groups, including the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. A union such as this, however, should not be achieved at the cost of the independence of the proletarian party as concerns its ideology. In a revolutionary period many different persons with different kinds of ideas would join the party. The Party should “digest” them with its own program, rather than let them keep their own world views, which could eventually transform the Party. Owing to this reason, Lenin did not permit the Party newspapers and magazines to become contaminated and to spread ideas incompatible with the Party’s program. He insisted that the purity of its publications was of crucial importance for securing the purity of the Party.

Lenin did not discuss the “principle” in an aesthetic context, and his “literature” mainly referred to publications in general, rather than to literature as an art form. But the “Party literature” later turned out to be a key concept

² V. I. Lenin, “Party Organisation and Party Literature,” in *Lenin Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), Vol. 10, p. 45.

in the Chinese version of Marxist aesthetics. The Chinese translation for the word “literature” is *wenxue*, which denotes, in the ear of the Chinese, poetry, fictional novels, and other belles-lettres, excluding non-fiction writings. Lenin’s teaching convinced them that pure literature was impure, fictional novels should maintain a non-fictional purpose, and that *belles-lettres* were in the service of the practical political struggle.

In the books of literary and artistic theory in China at that time, a history was invented for the Party spirit. It begins with Engels claiming not to oppose to “partisan poetry,”³ with his explanation of realism as “the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances,” and his calling for a presentation of “the rebellious reaction of the working class against the oppressive medium which surrounds them.”⁴ Lenin’s accentuation of the conscious service of literature to the goal of the proletarian party was regarded as a further development of Engels’ idea in a new historical and social setting. The next stage was set by Mao Zedong, who maintained in his famous “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art” that, “Party work in literature and art occupies a definite and assigned position in Party revolutionary work as a whole and is subordinated to the revolutionary tasks set by the Party in a given revolutionary period.”⁵

Mao Zedong’s “Talks” were made in 1942 in Yanan, a base area of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the warring period, when its central tasks were to fight against the Japanese invasion, as well as to prepare for a possible break with the Kuomintang Government (KMT) during or after the Anti-Japanese War. At such a time literature had to be related to the war; if it was not actually such, at least politicians would require it to be. Mao thus followed Lenin’s principle and insisted that, “Revolutionary Literature and art are part of the whole revolutionary cause [...] they are indispensable cogs and screw in the whole mechanism, and an indispensable part of the entire revolutionary cause.”⁶

After the CCP won the war with the KMT, this “principle” became the guideline for literature and art. What had been only a war time policy, became in the 1950s a central principle for the theory of literature and art all over China.

³ “Engels to Minna Kautsky,” London, November 26, 1885. See www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1885/letters/85_11_26.htm.

⁴ “Engels to Margaret Harkness in London,” April 1888. See www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1888/letters/88_04_15.htm.

⁵ Mao Zedong, “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art” (May 1942), in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 3. See www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm.

⁶ *Ibid.* Translation modified.

There was also a unique distinction in China that the Party principle was held to be a part of the theory of literature and art, rather than a part of *meixue* or aesthetics, since *meixue* literally means the study of beauty, and was thus considered mainly as a discipline devoted to harmony instead of struggle. Therefore, the fate of aesthetics depended on the political situation. There was an attempt to establish aesthetics during the 1950s and early 1960s, but when society turned to the left and the Cultural Revolution approached, literary theory based on the Party principle replaced aesthetics.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), literature became an instrument for political struggles, and Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, who was the actual leader in the realm of literature and arts during that period, pushed the Party principle to an extreme and consequently eliminated most literature and arts except for several so-called "model Peking operas," i.e., Peking operas with modern and revolutionary themes in traditional forms.

How to discuss the principle of the Party spirit in the period after the Cultural Revolution? At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s this became the difficult question for Chinese aestheticians and literary theorists. They were eager to formulate a theory that would be different from the one that prevailed during the previous period of the Cultural Revolution, but that could also find confirmation among those who were regarded as classical writers of Marxism.

It was not an easy job at that time for Chinese literary theorists to challenge the long established system of literary theory within which the Party principle was considered to be one of the key concepts. They made various efforts towards the end of 1970s without any obvious effect, since most people were still used to the old theory. In the end, the reformers in literary circles, supported by certain high ranking officials in the Party, found a way to create some changes in the system while tactfully avoiding a confrontation with literary theory as a whole – by finding a new translation of the so-called Party principle. In No. 22 (1982) of the *Red Flag*, the central magazine of the CCP, a new translation of Lenin's "Party Organization and Party Literature" was published. The new title was "Party Organization and Party Publications." The translators argued that, "literature" in Russian did not indicate pure literature, or *belles-lettres*, but possessed a much broader meaning. In fact, it was the same in other European languages. In English, literature could indicate fictional or creative literature, as well as other kinds of writing. *Wenxue*, the Chinese compound for literature, came from the translation made in the modern era, and was no longer related to the original meanings of *wen* and *xue* that had existed separately in ancient Chinese; it was therefore directly understood as *belles-lettres*. On the other hand, there existed no word in an-

cient China which would retain meanings that would exactly correspond to “literature” in Western languages or in Russian. In this case, it could be only partly correct when it was translated as “the Party *wenxue*.” Lenin indeed emphasized, “that in this field greater scope must undoubtedly be allowed for personal initiative, individual inclination, thought and fantasy, form and content.”⁷ It was thus meant to include the “pure” literature, and it could thus not be said that the old translation was totally wrong. What was at stake was actually not to make a new translation from a semantic point of view, but to create a new ideological and political one.

The new translation indeed had a strong effect, and its public appearance immediately put all authors of literary theory textbooks in an awkward situation. (There were hundreds of textbooks for different educational levels of students.) An examination of the textbooks edited during the period immediately after the new translation was published shows that many editors were panicked, for they did not know what to do. Soon afterwards, the “principle of the Party spirit” disappeared from all the literary theory textbooks in China. At the same time, the “aesthetics craze” appeared. This was an unusual event for aesthetics, and as Chinese aestheticians, we all benefited from it. It was this re-translation that gave Chinese aesthetics a new beginning.

2. *Imaged thought*

From 1978 to approximately 1985, a new key term appeared in Chinese literary theory, i.e. *xingxiang siwei*, namely, “thinking in images” or “imaged thought”. This was originally a term from Russian literary criticism, formulated after an expression by the famous Russian literary critic Vissarion Grigoryevich Belinsky (1811–1848): “thought resides in images”. What Belinsky wanted to do, was to explore the quality of art from the perspective of epistemology.

There exist three possible relations between art and knowledge: art is a kind of knowledge like scientific knowledge, which demonstrates truth; art is a special kind of knowledge, or a particular way of demonstrating truth; art is not knowledge, and thus does not demonstrate any truth. Of these three positions, Belinsky took up the second, i.e. for him, art was a special kind of knowledge and a particular way of demonstrating the truth. On the

⁷ V. I. Lenin, “Party Organisation and Party Literature,” in *Lenin Collected Works*, Vol. 10, p. 46.

one hand, Belinsky tried hard to distinguish between science and art, and regarded them as different human activities. He insisted that their difference existed not in the contents proper, but in the means or methods that were employed in dealing with the contents. Belinsky wrote: “The philosophers speak by means of syllogism, while the poets speak by means of images and pictures, but what they say is the same.”⁸

It appears that Belinsky did not distinguish between imaged thought as a means of recognizing the truth and merely as a way of demonstrating the truth. The examples of the syllogism and images he put forth, implied that this kind of “thought” only related to the latter, but what he intended to do was to prove that “imaged thought” could indeed reach the truth, or, in his words, “art is the direct perception of the truth.”⁹

The “imaged thought” or “thinking in images” was popular in China in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This topic was discussed by many authors who, though different in many respects, shared the same idea that the qualities of art should be studied within the framework of epistemology. Both science and art, according to them, represented a cognition of the world, but the latter retained a special characteristic, namely to do this by means of images.

In May 1966, when Chinese society was on the path towards the Cultural Revolution, a paper entitled “Marxist Epistemology Must Be Retained in the Field of Literature and Art: A Critique of the Imaged Thought,” by Zheng Jiqiao, a scholar-official in a northeast province of China, appeared in the *Red Flag*, the central magazine of the CCP.¹⁰ Zheng argued that “cognition” should be realized from the concrete to the general, and from the perceptual stage to the rational one, while the view of “thinking in images” implied a sensuous thought, and thus something impossible. Man *cannot* think in images and thought *must* be abstract. He suggested that the process of creating a work of art was to create ideas by means of abstract thinking, and then to organize images with these ideas.

This paper was, on the whole, written in the style of an academic discourse, but was published at the wrong time. Although written in 1963, its publication was long delayed and it thus appeared only as late as 1966. Its publication in the *Red Flag* also added an authoritative quality to it. The paper met with unexpected success because of the Cultural Revolution, which

⁸ V. G. Belinsky, “A Glance at the Russian Literature in 1847,” translated from Chinese from *Foreign Theorists and Writers on Imaged Thought*, edited by The Institute of Foreign Literature, CASS (Beijing: The Press of Chinese Social Sciences, 1979), p. 55.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁰ *Red Flag*, No. 5 (1966).

commenced immediately afterwards, and because of the rumors that Mao Zedong himself had praised it. Another fact that should be mentioned was that at that time no academic discussions were possible, since the whole society was preparing for a “revolution” or chaos.

The unnatural victory was followed by an unnatural loss. In 1965, Mao wrote a letter on poetry to Chen Yi, a former general and then the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China. The letter contained the following statement: “One should think in images when writing poems, rather than speak directly in prose.”

It was a private letter that was not published until 1978.¹¹ In this letter Mao only discussed the ways of making poetry, criticizing Chen Yi’s poems for writing down feelings or facts in a straightforward manner, rather than demonstrating them by means of vivid images. It was a letter in response to Chen’s poems that were presented to him before – a rather common exchange between the two of them. Nonetheless, this letter became very influential as soon as it was made publicly known. Shortly after its publication in 1978, more than a dozen books and hundreds of papers on “imaged thought” appeared, with the most important among them being the huge volume *Foreign Theorists and Writers on Imaged Thought* (500,000 characters), produced by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, with some leading scholars as its translators and editors.

“Imaged thought” refers to a rather special meaning of “the direct perception of the truth” and to “never separating from images” during the thinking process. The truth was considered to be approached by means of two pathways: the first was through logical thinking with concepts, arguments, and judgments, and the second was thinking in images. “Imaged thought” is the latter. This is a quite modern idea, but during that time the Chinese sought remarks from writers of different countries and different ages to prove it. For instance, Zhu Guangqian, a leading aesthetician in China at that time, wrote that “imagination” was just “imaged thought”. Many remarks quoted in the book *Foreign Theorists and Writers on Imaged Thought* were about imagination, fantasy, intuition, inspiration, etc. The “imaged thought” was taken as something discussed by people from ancient times to the present and not only in China, but also all over the world, though elsewhere purportedly different terms were used.

¹¹ Mao Zedong, “A Letter to Comrade Chen Yi on Poetry,” *Poetry*, No. 1 (1978). *Poetry* was an influential Chinese magazine for poetry and its criticism. It mainly focused on new poems written in modern Chinese language with fewer rules and in non-classical forms, but many of Mao Zedong’s old-styled poems (written in classical Chinese language, and following old rules and forms) were also published in it in the 1950s and 1960s.

The reason why the concept “imaged thought” was so popular was also that it allowed a break with the corpus of literary theory of the Cultural Revolution. It was in accordance with the formula made by Zheng Jiqiao that the recognition of the truth needed abstract thought, while the task of the artists was only to demonstrate the truth and to visualize certain political ideas made by certain politicians who were considered to be the only persons able to think correctly. This formula dominated during the Cultural Revolution. Now that the Cultural Revolution was over, literary theorists needed to find a new theoretical language to justify the artistic styles they preferred. They insisted that artists were able to attain knowledge of life by themselves, instead of merely proving and presenting the “truth” discovered by politicians. Mao’s letter to Chen Yi was useful to them in promoting their theoretical ambitions and their independent thought. At this time, Zheng was no longer important, though he still tried to defend himself. Almost all the important theorists and translators sided with the “imaged thought.” This phrase quickly returned to the textbooks on literary theory and became an authoritative concept. It also added momentum to the development of aesthetics, particularly psychological aesthetics in China. Many of the advocates of “imaged thought” were also the leading aestheticians. In fact, if we were to say that the re-translation of the “Party principle” promoted the “aesthetics craze” from a negative aspect, we could also say that “imaged thought” did it from a positive and active aspect. It encouraged creation and appreciation, which was the focus of aesthetics in the early 1980s.

Our story about “imaged thought” cannot stop here. As we mentioned previously, there may exist three possible relationships between art and knowledge, with the idea of “imaged thought” being the second: art is a special kind of knowledge, or a particular way of demonstrating truth. This idea played a special role in literary theory during the development of Chinese society from that of the Cultural Revolution into a society more open to modern literary criticism and aesthetics. However, as early as the beginning of the 1980s, the concept of “imaged thought” was questioned by some scholars, and in the middle of the 1980s Chinese theorists gradually abandoned this concept, owing to several reasons:

- 1) Art was no longer regarded as a kind of knowledge and a pathway to truth. The process that started with the interpretation of art as a kind of knowledge, continued with the interpretation of art as a special kind of knowledge, and lead to art understood not as a kind of knowledge, but in fact towards the autonomy of art. The concept of “imaged thought” promoted this process. But when Kant’s aesthetics made a return with the help

of the works on aesthetics by Li Zehou, art was no longer taken as a way of acquiring knowledge of the world, and aesthetics was no longer a part of epistemology. This was a natural development, occurring alongside the revival of aesthetics in China.

2) In the 1980s there was a current of scientism prevailing among Chinese aestheticians. At first, people took “imaged thought” as a scientific concept, but later realized that it was no more than a philosophic supposition, instead of a scientific conclusion. This concept was not proven by any accepted psychological studies, nor was it based on experiments on the human mind.

3) Russian influence was gradually replaced by Western influence. Chinese scholars educated before the Cultural Revolution were strongly under the influence of the Soviet Union, while those educated after it were much more strongly influenced by theories arising from Western countries. When the new generation of scholars became the main driving force in academic studies, the whole aesthetic discourse inevitably underwent a great change. “Imaged thought” no longer had a place in it.

Today hardly anyone in China mentions “imaged thought”, but I still think that once it was an important concept, which furthermore played a key role in the emergence of the “aesthetics craze” in the 1980s in China. It deserves careful study since it was a part of the history of modern Chinese aesthetics.

3. *Subjectivity or Subjectivity?*

There were two terms that attracted the attention of aestheticians in China after the Cultural Revolution: one was “subject” or *zhuti*, and another was “noumenon” or *benti*. Both terms related to a book on Kant by Li Zehou, *The Critique of the Critical Philosophy*.¹²

Li called his own philosophy both “subjective practical philosophy” and “anthropological ontology”. In Chinese, the “subject” or its adjective form, the “subjective”, can be translated by two terms: *zhuguan* and *zhuti*. In the semantic framework of the Chinese language *zhuguan* usually bears the sense of willful, or even arbitrary. Under the influence of the theory of reflection (a theory developed mainly on the basis of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*), people would mostly talk about *zhuguan* (subjective) and *keguan* (objective), and regarded the former as something negative and the latter as something positive. For instance, to do something subjectively (*zhuguan*),

¹² Li Zehou, *The Critique of Critical Philosophy* (Beijing: People Press, 1979).

means to do it according to one's will or whim, while to do something objectively (*keguan*), means to do it according to the natural law.

In this context, the discussion of the subject, the subjective, or of subjectivity required a new translation. Chinese theorists chose *zhuti*, and thus *zhutixing*. Again, it was Zhu Guangqian who gave a new translation of Karl Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach". The first sentence of this short note reads as follows: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively."¹³

It is obvious that Marx used "subjectively" in a positive sense. Here "subjectively" was translated by an authoritative institute into the Chinese language as *zhuguan*.¹⁴ Zhu Guangqian, however, made a new translation of it as *zhuti*. Zhu gave a particular explanation for this new translation by arguing that *zhuguan* gave the reader the impression that it was conceived as a personal opinion, while *zhuti* stressed the meaning of conceiving it from the viewpoint of human practice.¹⁵

Li Zehou provided a clearer explanation as to what "subjectivity" and "practice" were supposed to be. He maintained that *zhutixing* was not like the subjectivity advocated by many western philosophers, Jean-Paul Sartre, for example. Instead, his intent was to stress the physical activities of human beings, rather than the spiritual activities which he thought were considered by Western philosophers. Owing to this reason, he argued that his *zhutixing* could not be the translation of "subjectivity". It was actually untranslatable, and, if a translation had to be made, he suggested translating it as *subjectivity*, a new word coined for a new meaning. For the same reason, he also maintained that his *shijian* could not be translated into praxis, but only practice. He interpreted the former as including also various spiritual activities, while the latter supposedly referred merely to the physical ones.

Practice was a key notion from the end of the 1970s to the beginning of the 1980s because of the great ideological campaign called "Practice is the sole criterion of truth." This was not merely an academic discussion in a narrow sense, but a political campaign led by Deng Xiaoping and his team

¹³ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucher, 2nd edition (New York and London: Norton, 1978) p. 143.

¹⁴ *Selected Works of Marx-Engels*, trans. & ed. by the Institute for the Compilation and Translation of the Works by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, CCP (Beijing: The People Press, 1972), Vol. 1, p. 16.

¹⁵ Zhu Guangqian, *Pick up Wheat-Ears of Aesthetics* (Tianjin: Hundred Flowers Press, 1980), p. 73.

to eliminate the ideology of the Cultural Revolution, which implied that everyone's remarks, including those made by Mao Zedong, should also be verified by practice. Although *zhutixing* as a term was discussed in a narrower philosophical circle, it echoed the broader general discussion.

Zhuti and *zhutixing* became extensively influential in aesthetics and literary theory, owing to a 1985 paper by Liu Zaifu entitled "On the Subjectivity of Literature". This paper became important due to two reasons: (1) The discussion of "imaged thought" came to an end at that time, and art was thus no longer regarded as providing knowledge of the world, thus leaving room for the subjective tendency in art. (2) Its publication coincided with a great discussion on human nature and humanism, which became the background for the idea of "subjectivity."

4. The "study of noumena" and "ontology"

Ontology is translated into Chinese as *bentilun*, but this translation also has its own history and its special complexity.

Bentilun is a word translated from German philosophical writings in the early twentieth century. In Lan Gongwu's translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, "Ontologie" (ontology) was translated as *bentilun*. This word was accepted as a suitable Chinese semantic equivalent for ontology in general, and was adopted by many encyclopedias, dictionaries and books on western philosophy.

In the West, ontology refers to the discipline or study of being. This word was first coined by the German philosopher Rudolf Goclenius in a dictionary of philosophy published in 1613. Christian Wolff (1679–1754) gave a definition of this discipline as "a science of being as being in general."¹⁶ It is clear that this discipline was conceived as a study of the general characteristics shared by individual objects, or their being, rather than something that exists behind the appearance of the world. *Bentilun*, as its Chinese translation, refers to the study of *benti*, which retains a strong sense of the original, the source, and the true body of the object. The word *benti* reminds the Chinese of Buddhism and the neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi (1130–1200). The translator attempted to facilitate the Chinese understanding of the word, and therefore employed a traditional Chinese term. This translation was actually an effort to match Chinese thought with that of Western philosophy. Owing

¹⁶ Christian Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive ontologia methodo scientifica pertractata, qua omnes cognitionis humanae principia contineuntur*, § 1.

to the fundamental difference between Chinese and Western world views, a match such as this will necessarily result in a misreading: the Chinese stress lay on the ceaseless generating process arising from an original body to its various appearances, while for Europeans it designated the being in general in the world.

When the word *bentilun* became popular in the 1980s in China, it was still related to the terminology arising from the Chinese translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the one hand, Lan Gongwu translated ontology as *bentilun*, on the other hand, he translated "the doctrine of noumena" or "the concept of noumena" as *bentilun* as well.¹⁷ Deng Xiaomang, another translator of the same book, translated these two expressions in the same way.¹⁸ As we know, Kant held a negative attitude towards ontology, and was, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, critical of Wolff's ontology. He attempted to transfer the question of philosophy from "How can the world be possible?" into "How can man's cognition become possible?" Kant put forth the concept of "things-in-themselves" and considered that they cannot be objects of cognition. He argued that man was unable to recognize the "things-in-themselves" or "noumena", but he maintained that these "noumena" indeed existed behind the phenomena of the world. Therefore, Kant was not the person who erected a new ontology. He named his philosophy a critical one, and decided to do away with any kind of ontology. Therefore, from Kant's "things-in-themselves" or "noumena" (*benti*), an ontological system could not be developed.

It would thus be misleading if one was to interpret Kant's philosophy from the position of traditional "ontology". Nevertheless, the desire or even "craze" for ontology in China could find its clue in the second *bentilun* mentioned above, i.e. in the doctrine of noumena. Kant argued that "things-in-themselves" are not recognizable, but many philosophers after him, such as Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche engaged in a struggle to attain the "things-in-themselves". Chinese philosophers attempted to achieve this same goal by means of the concept "practice", on the basis of their readings of Marx's works. In his "Theses on Feuerbach", Marx wrote: "Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice."¹⁹ This was considered to be the key to opening the door towards "things-in-themselves". Practice thus becomes "*benti*", while

¹⁷ See Lang Gongwu's translation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1997).

¹⁸ See Deng Xiaomang's translation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (Beijing: The People Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 144.

the discussion of this *benti* becomes a *bentilun*. The situation was made even more confusing when this *bentilun* was translated back into “ontology”.

Benti and *bentilun* formed their characteristic histories in China. Many Chinese, especially those in the fields of literary and art criticism, no longer followed the original meanings of these words, but used them according to their own needs.

This discussion has continued up until the present day. Some scholars have tried to trace the original meanings of these two words in Western languages, and some regard them as words indigenous to China. In reality this is not a matter of being correct or wrong, but of understanding what these words actually mean in the Chinese context.

A word has its own fate, and follows its own path. This is not only the case with ontology, but also with subjectivity – and with all the four words discussed, and many more that have not been mentioned here. Every word can tell us an interesting story, if we are interested in listening. I chose these four words as examples to show how important it is for us to notice the trans-cultural histories of certain terms, theories, and themes. When a term or a theory travels to a new culture, it necessarily gains certain meanings, and plays a new role in that society. When we attempt to understand the acquired meanings of notions and terms from philosophy and aesthetics in a culture other than our own, we should not only try to find something similar to us, but, more importantly, look for the additional meanings generated in that culture for our familiar terms.

When we talk about the revival of aesthetics in China, we may find that in the last two or three decades in modern China there have been two such revivals. In the 1980s, there was an “aesthetics craze” which was achieved, as we saw above, with the help of the translation and re-translation of certain key words, and by breaking away from the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. This revival of aesthetics resulted in the establishment of the autonomy of art and in aesthetic disinterestedness, which was, in some senses, an interpretation of Marxist aesthetics with the help of Kant’s philosophy. We are currently faced with the second revival of aesthetics in China, in which Kant is being questioned, and Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and John Dewey are becoming more and more important to us – although for most Chinese aestheticians the most important works remain those by Confucius, the *Book of Change*, and other ancient Chinese classics.