


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Can dialectic materialism produce beauty? The “Great Aesthetic Debates” (1956–1962) in the People’s Republic of China

Pang Laikwan 

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Author for correspondence: Laikwan Pang, E-mail: lkpang@cuhk.edu.hk

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Abstract

This article focuses on a set of aesthetic debates that took place in China in the late 1950s. By exploring the main arguments presented by different thinkers, particularly the writings of Zhu Guanqian and Li Zehou, this article demonstrates how the aesthetics took part in the ideological formation of the new socialist state. From the debates, we observe the tensions between the complexity of the material-political and the reductionism of the state ideology. We also recognize why and how aesthetics could be such an important site of political contestation in this young socialist country, and how the interactions between human senses and the material world are essential to arts universally. The dominant materialist aesthetics presented in the debate was less a theory of things than a theory of the social. This historical materialist approach might be useful as a social critique; however, when handled dogmatically, it not only rejects the autonomy of things, but also disallows art works to reflect the complex human interactions with the material world beyond economic power relations. We can find more sophisticated analysis in Zhu’s aesthetic theory, which tries to incorporate the interactions between the subjects and the objects into materialism.

Key words: Aesthetics; China; dialectic materialism; human senses; object

In a recent article directed to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, President Xi Jinping demands that they continue to follow dialectic materialism as their worldview and methodology (Xi 2019). At the beginning of the essay, Xi emphasizes that objective reality is not fixed, but instead change is constant – this is his understanding of materialism. However, instead of elaborating this idea, and how the current governance might be benefited by the possibilities brought by constant changes, Xi quickly turns to criticizing some party members for lacking faith in socialism, and he orders them to gain a firm grounding in historical materialism so the party can fight for the final victory of socialism.¹ While China has evolved enormously from its socialist to its post-socialist period, particularly in regard to the changes introduced during the Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin eras, we also observe how the Party has insisted on dialectic materialism as one of its basic ideological beliefs, particularly under Xi’s leadership. Such statements considering materialism as truth – in the sense that it is the only valid investigative method and the CCP is the owner of the knowledge achieved through this method – can be traced back to the 1950s, when the socialist state tried to develop its state ideology. The open-endedness of materialism was quickly ossified to affirm the authority of the party. While

¹The main purpose of Xi’s essay is to demand that Party members improve their governing skills and ability, and that they maintain a high degree of self-confidence in solving all social problems.

dialectic materialism has been upheld as the official doctrine in China since 1949, exactly what it means has been totalized, and thus emptied.

In this article, I go back to China's recent history and engage with some socialist thinkers who reflected deeply on the material world. My aim is to collect resources in this socialist history for a thinking of the plural that treasures the particulars and challenges totalitarian thought. There are indeed many kinds of materialism that do not necessarily correspond with each other, but they share a common concern about the importance of the material world, which interacts with our mental activities. I am particularly interested in the aesthetic discussions in socialist China that could promote our awareness of the intimate and complex forms of human-to-human and human-to-things relations. They could be read as internal critiques against the sovereign logic, which always try to sever and shift some of our deep connections with our material reality to the identification with the unity.² Dialectic materialism usually refers to the doctrine of social changes based on class struggles and the relation of productions developed from Engel's laws of dialectics, while historical materialism is understood as a way to study history via the method of dialectic materialism.³ But instead of reiterating the definitions provided by Marx and Engels about materialism, in this article I investigate how Chinese socialist thinkers came to terms with the material world, and how they struggled, implicitly, between materialism as a form of social objectivism and materialism as a theory of intersubjectivity.

I focus specifically on aesthetic thinking because it concerns deeply the connection between individuals' subjectivity and the material world. Aesthetics is inherently political not only because, as Kant believes, of the intersubjectivity it necessarily implies,⁴ but also because it reveals how the material world participates in the construction of intersubjectivity and because the subjective can never fully appropriate the material. To investigate how the aesthetics can take part in the political, this article examines an aesthetic debate initiated during the liberative Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956, which morphed to become one of the biggest intellectual events in Maoist China, lasting until 1962. Beginning as a state-directed intellectual critique of the "idealist aesthetics" of Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (1897–1896), this debate was initiated in the hope of establishing a new Maoist aesthetic.⁵ It was heavily directed by the state, which understood that aesthetics could play an important role in fortifying a new political regime. Aesthetics helps us to piece the dominant ideology together, as our conceptualization of beauty most directly describes and prescribes how we connect with each other and with the material world. But, as the debate unfolded, we observe the tensions between the complexity of the material-political and the reductionism of the state ideology. In contrast to the thinkers' deep reflection of the relationship between humans and the material world, the state was interested in utilizing the dialectic method to reduce, instead of expose, the complexity of the material reality.

The great aesthetic debate

Being one of the most acclaimed aesthetic thinkers in the Republican period, Zhu was quickly identified as a bourgeois writer preaching German idealist aesthetics and traditional Chinese poetics

²The term "sovereignty" is most often used today to refer to the state's power over its territory and people, and the state's complete representation of its people internationally. Most of the sovereign discourses are based on the indivisibility of the state, as well as the complete alliance of the people and the state.

³For elaboration, see Pang (2016).

⁴Kant discusses his aesthetic theory in his third critique of judgement (2001 [1790]). There he argues that aesthetics, which concerns the judgement of beauty, shows its own principles in contrast to other human faculties. To him, in making an aesthetic judgement, one considers how the object is already judged by other people. In other words, how we consider an object is beautiful or not is based largely on our knowledge of others' pre-existing judgement, which forms a common sense.

⁵Zhu Guangqian (1897–1986), traditionally trained in China during his childhood, received his BA from the University of Hong Kong and went on to graduate studies at the University of Edinburgh and University College, London. He received his PhD from the University of Strasbourg in 1933. Before that time, he came back to China to write his dissertation, and he published many influential books and essays about aesthetics, including *Twelve Letters to Youth* (1929) and *About Beauty* (1932).

entering 1949. In 1950, when the state-sponsored art periodical *Journal of Arts and Literatures* 文藝報 was inaugurated, it published essays by senior party members Cai Yi 蔡儀 (1906–1992) and Huang Yaomian 黃藥眠 (1903–1987), attacking Zhu's aesthetic theories (Cai 1944, 1956; Huang 1956). Despite these criticisms, Zhu was still largely accepted by the new socialist regime as a correction target instead of as a state enemy. In 1956, Huang Yaomian again launched a critique of Zhu's aesthetics, criticizing it as “rentier's aesthetics” in the *Journal of Arts and Literatures*. Under the liberating atmosphere of the Hundred Flowers Movement, this writing was largely considered academic discussion instead of political purgations. The journal then invited Zhu to respond to Cai's and Huang's recent and earlier criticisms. Zhu (1956a) then produced the very controversial article “The Reactionary Nature of My Artistic Thinking,” in which he both admitted his mistake of entrenching in idealistic thoughts and defended his aesthetic theory, which considers the human mind an essential component in constructing beauty. The *Journal of Arts and Literatures* also organized a series of essays around the topic, and Zhu became the centre of this alleged “Great Aesthetic Debate.” It is estimated that between 1956 and 1962, more than seventy authors published over 400 articles, not only in art journals such as *Wenyi Bao*, but also in other academic journals such as *Studies of Philosophy* 哲學研究, *Academic Weekly* 學術月刊 and *New Development* 新建設, as well as in major newspaper such as *People's Daily* 人民日報 (Wang 2006). There were also lectures organized at Beijing Normal University by Huang Yaomian, then head of its Chinese Department, in early 1957, with Cai Yi, Li Zehou 李澤厚 (1930–), Zhu Guangqian and himself each offering a lecture in this aesthetics series, allowing teachers and students to debate among themselves (Zhang 2012).

Hailed as the “Great Aesthetic Debate,” these discussions have been widely documented in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Here I will only provide a skeleton of the main theatrical thrust. In his 1956 article, Zhu (1956c) first repented his corruption to young people's souls by spreading idealist sentiments during the Republican period. He was particularly regretful about following Croce's (1992) theory of art as intuition, which he criticized as idealistic, encouraging critics, artists and young readers to detach art from material reality. But unlike most of the confession writings we would see in the Anti-Rightist Campaign that followed, this article was not simply begging for forgiveness. By refuting his previous mistakes, he also tried to launch a serious academic discussion around the problems and merits of Croce's theory. Croce emphasized the importance of intuition on the part of the artist and spectator, who resorts to feelings rather than rational thinking, as the core of aesthetic engagement. Although Zhu clearly proclaimed his conversion to materialism, and regretted his earlier criticism of propaganda, he still stated clearly that beauty was an extremely complex topic and could not be reduced to social facts. He urged his fellows to use neither idealism nor mechanical materialism to offer a simple way to understand and conceptualize beauty. Zhu emphasized the importance of abstract thinking in art, and also insisted on the inevitable distance between art and reality (Zhu 1956b, pp. 157, 160–61). His central argument was that we can be critical of idealism, but we cannot take the subjective away from arts. So he insisted that beauty was the “synthesis of the subjective and the objective” (主觀和客觀的統一) (Zhu 1956b, p. 163).

Zhu's article invited a flurry of follow-up criticisms, many of which did not accept his repentance and continued to accuse him of being an idealist. But the discussions were not one-sided – at least in the beginning. There were thinkers, such as Gao Ertai 高爾泰 (1935–) and Lü Ying 呂癸 (1915–1969), who emphasized the importance of forms in art. But they would quickly be criticized as idealists. Other critics took the official Maoist materialist position and emphasized that the arts should serve the people. Zhu's idealism and indebtedness to Croce were a common target of criticism of all, including Zhu himself. Among these articles, the one published by then 26-year-old Li Zehou would become tone-setting. In this essay, Li (1956) raised his famous idea of the “synthesis of objectivity and sociality” (客觀性與社會性相統一), arguing that we could establish a seemingly intuitive and direct connection with a specific object not because an unmediated relation exists between the subject and the object, but because that object has always already been contextualized and conceptualized within a sociality of many other things and relations (Li 1956, pp. 107–108). Li argued that we need to have the knowledge of the society in which the object is placed before we can develop a relation with that object.

Aesthetic pleasure, being psychological, is not subjective, but is conditioned by the artist's or reader's relation with the objective social world. Revealing the nature of social relations, the artwork is therefore utilitarian and scientific (Li 1956, pp. 115–16). To Li, beauty is not a result of our subjective sense of beauty, but rather is based on our pre-knowledge of the social material world (Li 1957; ZDMLX v1, p. 263).

Zhu did not stay silent. In a follow-up article, Zhu (1957) defended himself more forcefully and claimed that the subjective cannot be done away with in any artistic activity. Zhu criticized Li for his misunderstanding of Marxist aesthetics, as Marx and Engels were clear that art belonged to the superstructure, in which human consciousness is essential (Zhu 1957; ZDMLX v1, pp. 336–39). Zhu found Li ignorant to deny the role of ideology played in arts, and Zhu criticized Li's idea as "reflectionism" that did not respect the unique nature of art. Zhu also pointed out that Li was unable to differentiate nature as beauty and nature as the conditions of beauty (Zhu 1957, p. 331). Zhu rearticulated that art is the synthetic unity of the subjective and the objective, which is also the true essence of Marxist materialist aesthetics. Although many people engaged in this debate, Zhu occupied a central position. He tried to defend himself from three different sets of criticism: Cai Yi's naturalism, Gao Ertai's formalism and Li Zehou's social objectivism. In the defence, he also struggled to correct his pre-Liberation aesthetic theory and advanced the idea that art can reconcile materialism and idealism.

However, as the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward escalated in late 1957 and 1958, this debate became one-sided: Zhu's idea of art as a subjective–objective synthesis was simply denounced as regressive, given that anything related to the subjective was deemed politically incorrect. But Zhu was not condemned as a rightist, partly because he submitted himself to a thorough and sincere conversion to becoming a Marxist. Those critics who showed less commitment in Marxism and more assertively advanced the traditional concept of beauty, such as Gao Ertai and Lü Ying, were either officially classified as rightists or suffered from grave political pressure. Although Zhu was able to escape a political disaster, his ideas were sealed as taboo. Li's privileging of socio-political knowledge over independent aesthetic appreciation in understanding arts became the philosophical mainstream. A major consequence of this debate was the official endorsement of the politicization of arts. An artwork is beautiful only because it reflects a certain social reality; those artworks that do not honestly reflect social reality could never be beautiful. Li uses the PRC flag as the example: the Chinese people find the Chinese flag beautiful not so much due to its design but because it represents their independent and great country (Li 1957; ZDMLX v1, pp. 169–70). Li's theory also plays down the significance of the artist's aesthetic mediation, suggesting that the artist will produce good socialist art as long as they have sufficient political knowledge of social reality. As a result, we can evaluate an artwork simply according to the political consciousness of the artist. Aesthetics is completely subsumed by the social awareness and political position of the artist.

This academic debate has attracted plenty of academic attention over the last three decades; it is regarded as a rare philosophical debate with real vigour allowed during the Maoist period. But most attention is directed to Zhu's defence of idealism and the attacks on him. No comprehensive efforts have been devoted to studying the meanings of materialism manifested in this debate, although it involved critics who self-identified as a materialist, while at the same time being criticized as not materialist enough. Amid critics reproaching others and defending themselves, along with the political correctness of materialism, the debate reveals interesting dynamics between the subject-centred approach and the object-centred approach to understanding beauty.

This debate also reflects the social dimension of Marxist materialism in relation to the arts. The aesthetic theory of late nineteenth-century Russian novelist and cultural critic Nikolay Chernyshevsky was translated into Chinese in the 1930s and 1940s by Zhou Yang 周揚 (1907–1989), and these works became very important to the development of Maoist aesthetics. Chernyshevsky privileges material life over aesthetic idealism and advocates the idea that "beauty is life" (美是生活), in which life encompasses both form and content (Chan 2021). Through Zhou Yang's translation and interpretation, life became the mark of the material set of social relations among the masses that also define class-specific aesthetic preferences (Kindler 2020). Depicting the

life of the revolutionary class, the writer/artist will also be transformed accordingly. Mao appropriated the idea and asserted that all literature and art are created to serve the people, particularly the workers, peasants and soldiers. In his famous Yan'an talks, Mao (1942) considered revolutionary literature and art as a reflection of people's life, which also provides literature and art with an inexhaustible source – indeed, their only source.

As such, art is epistemological because it reflects current social conditions. Art is also political in the specific sense that it is produced for the consumption of the revolutionary masses, to celebrate their revolutionary acts and to agitate people towards further actions. It is unclear, however, how art is aesthetic. Mao agreed that arts are products of the creative labour of the cultural workers, who should produce popular arts for the masses. Mao also encouraged artists to raise the standard of their audience at the same time, although he never clearly explained what a high aesthetic standard meant. Being an acclaimed poet and calligrapher, Mao clearly enjoyed art, but he also made it crystal clear that art for art's sake was counter-revolutionary and must be condemned.

In the Yan'an speeches, Mao also mentioned materialism:

To study Marxism means to apply the dialectical materialist and historical materialist viewpoint in our observation of the world, of society and of literature and art; it does not mean writing philosophical lectures into our works of literature and art. Marxism embraces but cannot replace realism in literary and artistic creation, just as it embraces but cannot replace the atomic and electronic theories in physics ... Then does not Marxism destroy the creative mood? Yes, it does. It definitely destroys the creative moods that are feudal, bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, liberalistic, individualist, nihilist, art-for-art's sake, aristocratic, decadent or pessimistic, and every other creative mood that is alien to the masses of the people and to the proletariat ... And while they are being destroyed, something new can be constructed.

Here Mao considers dialectic materialism and historical materialism analytic tools to challenge the various reactionary conceptualizations of arts, while realism is the correct form of Marxist arts – or, more correctly, materialism, as the “scientific method” to study the contradictions and class struggles of social reality, is the universal approach to evaluating and giving meaning to art, and it determines what kinds of arts should stay and what kinds should be condemned. Ironically, the material is also emptied out from such materialist aesthetics, as the Maoist aesthetic theory is centred around the individual subjects and their social relations, and it emphasizes neither the specific texture and appearance of the object nor the sensations elicited by the beholders.

As Murphy explains in his essay in this special issue, Japanese Marxist thinkers also tend to approach historical materialism as a critical tool to unconceal the social processes buried by the mechanism of reification. To many Chinese and Japanese Marxists, historical materialism is less a theory of things than a theory of the social, primarily concerning the economic relation among people through things. Accordingly, the meanings of things – including arts – are determined by structures of society, in the name of feudalism, bourgeois capitalism or liberalist individualism. This historical materialist approach might be useful as a social critique, but when handled dogmatically, it not only rejects the autonomy of things – which is the concern of new materialism – but by extrapolation, it also disallows art works to reflect the complex human interactions with the material world beyond economic power relation. Historical and dialectic materialism is understood as the only accurate method to study everything, identifying and guiding struggles and directions by downplaying the contingencies, mutations, auto-corrections and unpredictability happening in history. Such methods are most problematic when employed to study arts and beauty. The aesthetic debate initiated in 1956 was meant precisely to answer questions related to aesthetics. I find the debate rich with resources for understanding the dynamics of materialism as both a totalistic theory and one embracing the objects and changes. Here I focus on two seldom discussed topics of the debate that I find most revealing to our understanding of PRC materialism: the autonomy of the object and the idea of synthesis.

The autonomy of the object: Cai Yi's naturalism vs Li Zehou's sociality

Mao never used the term “materialist aesthetics.” Cai Yi might have been the first Chinese Marxist critic promoting it, although the term he used in 1944 was not “materialist aesthetics,” but “new aesthetics,” and this aesthetics is not even about social relations but is entirely “objective.” Cai (1944, p. 68) wrote:

We believe that beauty is an objective fact, not composed subjectively. An object is beautiful due to its own property, not a result of our consciousness. But our consciousness can detect and reflect the charm of the world, creating our sense of beauty. We assert that the source of our sense of beauty comes from the beauty of the object. It is incorrect, hypocritical, and sick to claim that we can develop a sense of beauty without a beautiful object.

Focusing so much on the object, Cai's main concern was to criticize idealism. If idealism believes that beauty is a product of our mental activities, Cai – as a Marxist – argued that beauty resides in the objective reality itself. He further explained that the beauty of a material object is based on both its own unity and its association with other objects: an object is beautiful because, first, it is a coherent and unified one and, second, it belongs to and reflects its kind (Cai 1944, pp. 197–98). “The beauty of nature manifests the generality of the object to its kind, and it manifests nature's inevitability. It is beyond the interference of human forces, and it is not produced for the sake of beauty” (Cai 1944, pp. 203–04). According to Cai, the more an object can reflect the generality of its kind, the more it is beautiful, and its beauty is not conferred by our mental activity. Such an inter-object relation is entirely independent from human's actions and consciousness (Cai 1944, pp. 199–200). Although he does not deny the importance of form in arts, Cai emphasizes that the important dimension of beauty rests in the object's reflection of the generality of its kind. The job of an artist is to find this generality, such as a most typical female face, and represent it through the arts.

Cai continued to argue that the beauty of the object is also determined by its movements: some objects – such as animals – move on their own, while others are propelled by other forces, such as running water and fleeting clouds (Cai 1944, pp. 201–02). They are beautiful based on their own drives, reactions and interactions with the rest of the world. Cai denounced the ways of approaching arts from metaphysical, psychological and objective perspectives, as he found that all of them failed to grasp the process of the external object making an impact on the subjective mind (Cai 1944, pp. 16–17). Instead, the “new aesthetics” proposed by Cai takes into consideration of both the natural beauty inherent in the object and people's sense of beauty – there is clearly a strong Kantian dimension in Cai's aesthetics. He believed that we achieve a sense of beauty when our concept of beauty finds the corresponding object of beauty, or when the external object fulfils our conception of and desire for beauty (Cai 1944, pp. 225–26). Our subjective sense of beauty is rooted in the objective material world, reflecting a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction of oneself connecting to the world (Cai 1944, p. 129).

In his later 1956 essay, Cai criticized both Zhu Guangqian and Zhu's critic Huang Yaomian, and he also took the chance to continue to elaborate his materialist aesthetics. While Cai agreed with Huang's accusation of Zhu as an idealist, he also attacked Huang for not being capable of grasping the crux of materialism. Huang's materialism, Cai argued, was still based on one's social life and social ideal. Huang tended to evaluate the arts according to the ideology of the artist: a materialist artist would produce good arts (Cai 1956; ZDMLX v1, pp. 242–43). Cai argued that this conception would never help us connect to the object depicted. To Cai, this denial of the object's inherent beauty is a “complete denial of beauty itself” (Cai 1956, p. 243); he suggested that this was not materialism at all (Cai 1956, p. 247). In historical hindsight, Cai's criticism was not taken more seriously only because it was delivered at an inopportune moment, as he did not understand materialism as socially and politically based as his Marxist fellows did, but rather from a perspective emanating from the matter itself, foretelling some of the discussions central to New Materialism.

Predictably, Li Zehou found Cai's ideas unacceptable. In Cai's view, a tree is beautiful because in that tree we can find many common aspects of other trees, but Li argued that this conceptualization of beauty as typicality was a wrong understanding of materialism, and no object can be treated as self-sufficient on its own (Li 1957; ZDMLX v1, pp. 264–65). To Li, nature by itself cannot be beautiful, but the ways we approach all objects are always directly mediated by current social conditions. He also emphasized that we should not confuse this changing conception of beauty as individually and subjectively based; instead, it is society's material conditions that determine how we differentiate beautiful things from non-beautiful things (Li 1957, pp. 268–70). We could say that Li's aesthetic theory is a form of reflectionism: art reflects both the objectivity of the material world and the social relations among the people.

Overall, criticizing Zhu Guanqian's idealism was primarily a stepping-stone for critics to compete among themselves regarding the authentic definition of materialism. Cai's criticisms were directed less at Zhu than at Huang; similarly, although Li's obvious target was also Zhu, this time Li was most interested in attacking Cai's materialism. Huang Yaomian, Cai Yi, Li Zehou and other critics all strived to show how each was the most authentic materialist by criticizing each other's criticism of Zhu. In such competition, we also observe how their materialisms differed, especially in the different approaches of Cai and Li. Both claimed their aesthetics as materialist: Cai's materialist aesthetics was primarily an ontology of the object, while Li's approach was more social and epistemological, believing that the duty of the socialist critic is to discover the rules governing humans' social relations. Or we can say that Li's aesthetic was both epistemological and ontological, because Li believed it is our duty to find knowledge through beauty, while the beautiful object also reflects the ontology of society. Li believed aesthetics is objective not because the object of beauty exists on its own independently, but because aesthetics has its own rules and manifestations in human society, which can be observed using scientific methods. That is why he criticized Cai's aesthetics as not being materialism, but instead metaphysics (Li 1957; ZDMLX v1, pp. 265–66). Li recognized that social life is always changing, but we can still find unchanging rules underlying these movements (Li 1956; ZDMLX v1, p. 144).

A similar academic debate took place in the Soviet Union around the same time. Stalin's death triggered a revision of Stalinist official ideologies at all levels, and aesthetic thinkers also took this opportunity to discuss extensively what beauty meant in the post-Stalinist environment. Fizer (1964) identifies three main schools involved in this debate: the "naturalists," who considered beauty as immanent in nature, independent of human consciousness; the "socials," who argued that beauty exists only in the framework of the aesthetic perception of reality, which is socially determined, so that beauty is socially objective and a third group of theorists who believed in artistic expression, and focused on the creative subject expressing their true self through artworks, with any attempts to formalize the relation between the object and subject ending in failure. We can say that all the Chinese thinkers involved in this debate were entrenched in Soviet aesthetics in one way or another (Hu 2016). Li Zehou's ideas are very likely indebted to the second school of thinkers identified by Fizer (Li 2016).⁶ Cai Yi's ideas also correspond to those of Soviet naturalists of the time and an earlier generation of naturalists in the Soviet Union in the 1930s (Silina 2016). The last group of Soviet expressive critics might find some echoes in the works of Chinese idealists such as Gao Ertai and Lü Ying.

The Chinese critics were clearly indebted to their Soviet counterparts, due not only to the general social milieu of China at that time, which considered everything Soviet worth studying, but also the two societies' common desire to develop a totalistic theory to explain everything. Epstein (1993, p. 3) characterizes Soviet society in this way:

It became a characteristically Russian manner to deduce absolutely all practical and theoretical issues from the "highest" philosophical considerations, and there was nothing more sacred in the world for a conventional Soviet man or woman than "the unity and the struggle of opposites"

⁶The works of Viktor Vanslov (1923–) and Leonid Naumovich Stolovich (1929–2013) were quickly translated and published in China in 1955 and 1956 (Vanslov 1955).

or “history as a form of the movement of the matter.” This philosophical faith was the ground of all other beliefs and opinions, and even the October revolution was fundamentally justified as “a qualitative leap in quantitative social changes” or by some other law of “materialistic dialectics.”

This observation is equally valid in relation to socialist China. We might say that Marx first conceptualized materialism not so much as an ontology against idealism but as a method of trying to understand changing human practices and social intercourse. But under socialist authoritarianism, such an epistemological quest was over. The state declared that truth had already been found, and Marxism became the metaphysics of society. Materialism became an expression of the regime’s ruling ideology on the one hand and a tool of the intelligentsia to master the social world on the other. So materialism was transformed into idealism all over again. To most of these Marxist aesthetic theorists, beauty was worth studying only because beauty could lend humans the knowledge to understand society, and this knowledge would also help us to better master the world. This epistemology, at the end, was defined, fixed and universally applicable, which does not help us understand or imagine anything new but only reinforces an ontological order that already exists.

The desire for synthesis: Li Zehou’s sociality vs Zhu Guangqian’s intersubjectivity

Ignoring the mediating role of the artists, Cai simply accorded beauty in the object itself, and there are non-utilitarian values intrinsic to the object that we cannot help but appreciate and respect. I think Zhu Guangqian’s aesthetic theory is also projected with a similar mission of investing ontological meanings in aesthetic objects, but Zhu offered the human mind a position in parallel with the material world. Here let us focus on Zhu’s efforts at synthesis in contrast to Li Zehou’s.

After 1949, Zhu tried hard to be a real Marxist, in the sense of adopting the social as the base of his theorization. Struggling to get rid of the label of idealism, Zhu could not bring himself to take the human mind away in understanding how beauty is conceptualized, even under severe attack by his peers. Instead, he developed a new aesthetics by merging Marxist materialism with parts of German idealism and parts of traditional Chinese poetics to describe how beauty is conceptualized through multiple levels of mental activities. He coined his theory the “synthesis of the objective and the subjective.” Li, on the other hand, raised the idea of “synthesis of sociality and objectivity” to theorize beauty. Li believed that, as mentioned, the beauty of an object resides in its ability to reflect people’s social relations. As such, Li also believed that beauty exists in society objectively, and it is not up to individual persons to decide which object or artwork is beautiful.

Both Zhu and Li chose to use the logic of synthesis not only because they needed to take into consideration the play of different elements in the forging of beauty, but because they had to follow the official understanding of dialectic materialism as the synthesis of thesis and antithesis. But compared with Li’s theory of synthesis, Zhu’s is clearly more open and receptive. By calling aesthetics a study of the synthesis of the subjective and the objective, Zhu referred to art’s mediation and activation of the connections between humans and things. By “things” he meant that both the tools of artistic productions and the objective reality served as the reference of the art. The most important idea in Zhu’s theorization is art’s ability to promote interaction between people and the world. It is not only a critique of Cartesian dualism, but it also demonstrates how art promotes our imaginations to attain new ways of seeing and doing. Zhu believed that such unification of objectivity and subjectivity exists not only in the producer, but also in the audience, the members of which also need to exercise their own creativity to achieve aesthetic pleasure (Zhu 1960b). The dominant thought at that time considered dialectic materialism a universal doctrine that synthesized contradictions and unified the party and the masses. But when exposed under aesthetics, the subtler and more indeterminate dimensions of the matter and materiality inevitably appeared, which also challenged the socialist theoretical attempts to synthesize non-complementary elements.

This aesthetic debate was underlined by the translation and publication of Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* in China in 1956 (Marx 1884), while sections of the manuscript had

already been translated and made available in journals such as *Xin jianshe* in 1955. Li Zehou's criticism of Cai Yi was based largely on Marx's idea in the manuscripts that humans' basic characteristic is commerce with nature through one's labour. Li argued that there is no inert nature as such, but only the nature being transformed by humans. The meanings of nature to humans reside in the work of human labour on nature, not in the material object itself, so that beauty is not a natural phenomenon but rather social (Li 1957, pp. 268–69). While Li was correct about Marx's emphasis on the social aspect of our relations with nature, Marx's ideas must be first and foremost contextualized within his critique of the alienation produced by capitalism. Marx argued that, under capitalism, private property becomes the only conceptualization framework for us to relate to things, and this depletes both the richness of the material world and our many relations with it: "The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world" (Marx 1988, p. 107). Instead of promoting an anthropocentrism to reduce our relations with the world in a utilitarian way, Marx wished to see a world of "wealth" and "richness" – two words he uses many times in his manuscripts. By liberating humans from the world of things as their private property, humans would also expand their senses, "corresponding to the entire wealth of human and natural substance" (Marx 1988, p. 109). Among all the theorists participating in this debate, we might say that Zhu's ideas are most relevant to Marx's wishes to realize this wealth, in which "the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfillment" (Marx 1988, p. 104).

Zhu's aesthetic theorization in the late 1950s was also heavily impacted by Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Marx 1844), which he read earlier than Li through Russian translations. Zhu's reading was also much less reductionistic than Li's. Zhu argued that the aesthetics of both the German idealists such as Croce and mechanical materialists such as Cai Yi were based on the inert stillness of an object in a particular time and space, while Marx takes into consideration the interaction of the object with humans' social world (Zhu 1960a; ZGQJ v10, pp. 188–89). From Marx, Zhu learned that humans gain self-consciousness through interaction with the external world, particularly through the objects they make. Such human-made objects allow the producer to gain an awareness of their labour and consciousness, and through the ways it is used by others, it also produces a community (Zhu 1960a, p. 192). The "synthesis" produced by this interaction between the subject and the object is thus not a reduction to a unified force but a proliferation of the enrichment of people's life and social life through the liberation of oneself and one's hands (Zhu 1960a, pp. 199, 203, 204). Aesthetics, according to Zhu, is the realization of such non-alienated labour, which allows humans to become truly autonomous and free. If Li's materialism was an abstraction of a sociality that rises to a totalistic level, Zhu chose to emphasize the idea of richness in Marx's writings, proliferating rather than reducing our comprehension of beauty.

Before turning into a Marxist, Zhu Guangqian was heavily influenced by Croce's idea of intuition in the 1930s. As mentioned before, one of the main features of Zhu's aesthetic in the 1950s was his denunciation of Croce, specifically Croce's theory of intuition. To Croce, the aesthetic sense is not conceptual, which involves space and time and composes universal law. Instead, Croce viewed aesthetics as intuitive knowledge, which is expressive, distinguished from intellectual knowledge (Croce 1992, p. 11). The intuitive to Croce is both impressions and expressions of feelings, and the aesthetic sense is an act of mind that results from, but also creates, a synthesis among feelings (Moss 1987, p. 24). Croce's theory of art is highly indebted to Vico, who believed that metaphysics withdraws mind from sensation, while the poetic faculty immerses mind in sensations. Both Vico and Croce were critical about the unity of philosophic system, and they were both more interested in the richness of the particular. While Croce approached art as an epistemology, seeing art as a form of humans' knowledge of the world, Zhu was concerned about the changing relations between humans and things through artists' production of art and the audience's reception of it. As a Marxist, Zhu believed in labour and participation, and he was critical of the alienation produced by the proletariat being forced to sell their labour to their employers. To Zhu, what socialism needed to do was to encourage the people to re-experience beauty through labour, which realizes creativity and the full potentiality of human beings (Zhu 1961b).

On the other hand, Zhu was also heavily indebted to traditional Chinese poetics, which emphasize cosmic connections. Zhu believed that both the poet and the reader can connect with other subjects and objects through poetries and arts, by means of imagination, allegories, empathy and transference. We can find such ideas elaborated in his early writings: “From a rational perspective, transference is an illusion, a superstition. But without it, not only is art but religion is also impossible” (Zhu 1932; ZGQJ v2, p. 24). To Zhu, transference is not only the most basic form of humanity, but also the highest manifestation of human civilization. In the arts, “not only can an individual exercise empathy, but she can also absorb the features of the object into oneself, and she models after the object. This can cultivate one’s mind and temperament” (Zhu 1932; ZGQJ v2, p. 25).

The idea of transference can be elaborated further through Zhu’s idea of *qingqu* 情趣, which has been widely agreed to be an original concept of Zhu, who developed this term by assimilating ideas of the Ming dynasty Gong’an School and Kant’s aesthetic theory (Lao 1998, pp. 12–42; Xiao 2013, pp. 20–47). The term does not have a direct English translation, but we can separate it into two parts: *qing*, meaning emotions, and *qu*, referring to a deep acknowledgement of happiness and meanings.⁷ Zhu demonstrated that in aesthetic experiences, “My *qingqu* and the *qingqu* of the object flow forward and backward between each other. Sometimes the *qingqu* of the object is determined by mine ... sometimes my *qingqu* is fixed by the appearances of the object” (Zhu 1933b; ZGQJ v1, p. 237). He called this interactive relation between humans and things *yiqing* 移情, which could be translated as transference or even anthropomorphism (Zhu 1932; ZGQJ v2, pp. 20–25). He believed that through such aesthetic encountering, humans might imitate the objects. This is also central to many artistic productions and religious experiences across time and cultures. But he also clarified that such transference experiences do not simply force humans’ ideas and emotions onto external objects; they also encourage the human to transcend their consciousness and bodily confines (Zhu 1933b; ZGQJ v1, p. 246).

Zhu quoted the famous passage of *Zhuangzi*:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Zhuangzi said, “See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That’s what fish really enjoy!”

Huizi said, “You’re not a fish – how do you know what fish enjoy?”

Zhuangzi said, “You’re not me, so how do you know I don’t know what fish enjoy?” (Zhu 1932; ZGQJ v2, p. 20)⁸

Zhu quoted this passage not to discuss the circular and futile rhetoric of Huizi that Zhuangzi criticizes, but to maintain that there are sufficient common connections between humans and things for them to sense each other (Zhu 1932, p. 21). Instead of elaborating through rational deduction or scientific observation, traditional Chinese aesthetics relies on a simple leap of faith in the interconnectedness of the world. Many great arts are produced based on such a leap of faith. Zhu no longer emphasized such “idealistic” cosmic connections in the late 1950s, but he changed his analytic framework to the dialectic logic of “synthesis,” and Zhu used the term to refer most often to the interaction between human and nature: “When a person finds nature beautiful, this nature definitely contains that person. Here the person and nature co-exist as a synthetic whole” (Zhu 1960b; ZGQJ v10, p. 225).

Zhu’s idea of synthesis is full of kinetic energy, and neither the object nor the subject is transformed to a definite form. Li Zehou’s “synthesis,” on the other hand, denotes a final totality in the form of the

⁷Consider Li Bai’s poem “Drinking Alone by Moonlight,” which contains the line “Dan de jiu zhong qu” 但得酒中趣. Arthur Waley translates the line as “The things I feel when wine possess my soul.” Waley translates *qu* as “the things I feel.” See <http://bs.dayabook.com/poetry/more-translations-from-the-chinese-by-arthur-waley-1919-at-sacred-texts-com/drinkingaloneybymoonlight>.

⁸The original is excerpted from the “Autumn Floods” section of *Zhuangzi*. English translation from Zhuangzi (2013, pp. 137–38).

so-called objective sociality. Calling beauty a synthesis of objectivity and sociality, Li did not demonstrate how objectivity and sociality interact and mutually influence each other; the idea of “synthesis” simply suggests “both.” To Li, beauty is objective because it is not a result of human cognitive activities, but rather exists in reality; it is social because this external reality does not exist on its own but is in a world made up of and participated in by human beings collectively. The two are conditions of the same phenomenon: there is a sum total of human sociality out there in the objective world that determines what is beautiful and what is not. In contrast to the claim that this totality is a concrete material existence, the idea of objective sociality is extremely abstract. In the end, whoever owns the power to define this abstract entity can decide what beauty is, facilitating both the politicization of aesthetics and the aestheticization of politics. In contrast, Zhu’s dialectic theory encourages active imaginations and constant metamorphosis, and his concept of synthesis animates life and promotes changes, which is much more appropriate than Li’s in realizing Chernyshevsky’s idea that “beauty is life.” As Zhu wrote in 1933, “life is an organic entity, with many parts intercepting, so that taking out any part would impact on the whole ... Analytic methods tend to be mechanical, but our life is not a machine” (Zhu 1933a; ZGQJ v2, p. 232). To Zhu, no aesthetic experiences can be understood in isolation from other parts of life. As such, this aesthetic way of relating to the world also effectively refuses the enclosure of society and therefore refuses totalitarianism.

Aesthetics as epistemology or ontology

Echoing the concerns of Murthy, Otake and Lo in their articles in this special issue, I want to investigate how serious thinkers in Asia have tried to go beyond the subject–object duality. The aesthetic debate that began in 1956 and developed most heatedly in 1957 demonstrated the Chinese thinkers’ struggle with the richness of the material by way of Marxist materialism, but its continual development also showed how it went along with the state’s attempt to construct an official socialist aesthetics. While the debate was generally considered a manifestation of the liberalist environment of the Hundred Flowers Movement, we should also note that the debate took place around the same time as the PRC was trying to develop its own official aesthetics against Soviet socialist realism. It was clear to the PRC leaders that the influences of the Soviet Union on China had operated both at the institutional level and the psyche level, and a whole generation of Chinese youth in the 1950s saw the Soviet Union as their ideal (He 2010).

To correct this cultural imperialism, the PRC needed a new nationalist campaign to legitimize its political autonomy and cultural sovereignty. It was under this political milieu that the aesthetic debate was increasingly seen as part of the campaign to fortify a theoretical base in order to develop a PRC national aesthetic. This drive to reach a unified national aesthetic formula explains the stiffening of the debates and how the voices converged in endorsing the party’s existing policies after the first 2 years of heteroglossia. In socialist governing, aesthetics is often identified as an important intellectual bridgehead that must be taken over by the party, so the human senses can also be controlled. Through a combination of intellectual and sensuous manipulation, ideology provides a particular and totalistic way to piece the world together, and aesthetics plays a key role in this process.

As shown in this debate, most of the involved thinkers were genuinely interested in exploring the complexity of the human–material world. They reflected on the intimate and contrived relationships among the material, the aesthetic, the social and the political. Searching in vain for beauty, these Chinese materialists together succeeded in demonstrating the complexity of human–object relations. At the end, aesthetics, with its roots in the Greek concept of *aisthēsis*, concerns not only beauty in the narrow sense but perceptions and feelings in a much broader sense, and it naturally introduces us to the field of open multiplicity that resists definition. While, for political reasons, the debate inevitably suppressed the more expansive purview of the many possibilities of the senses, Cai’s faithfulness to the beauty inherent in the object and Zhu’s portrayal of an interactive world made up of humans and things reactivate our human perceptions to appreciate the multiplicity and becoming of the world. These discussions also provide us with links to connect classical Marxist concerns to new materialism, to see the emergence and evolution of life and the material world in its complexity. This consciousness

of the open-endedness of our world as processes is also a most powerful critique of the sovereignty. These Maoist aesthetic discussions are politically significant because, other than ideological contestations, they were also attempts to engage socialist thoughts with the plasticity of human senses, *aisthēsis*. Some of their reference to traditional Chinese aesthetics also reminds us how to direct attentions to the multiple ways of interactions between humans and things. Reading these writings today, we might find them outmoded as they circle around the futile question of the ontology of beauty. But a serious investigation in aesthetics and materiality also leads us to approach philosophical questions about authenticity and freedom.

Zhu (1961a), in a repentance essay, describes the debate as being organized and promoted by the state, and it was due to the Party's special attention on aesthetic theory that this debate became so widely participated in and discussed. Praising the Party's promotion of intellectual discussion, Zhu also made it clear that this debate was initiated with the state agenda of promoting the mass line in the arts, forcing the intellectuals to humble themselves and follow the mandate of the people – or, more correctly, Mao – by privileging life over art. The debate ended with the endorsement of Li Zehou's theorization of art as reflection of social relations in line with the mass line policy: an object or an artwork is found beautiful because it reflects the sentiments of the masses. In the CCP rhetoric, the method of dialectic materialism is the epistemological path for the party to understand the people and society, and to inform the members how to conduct politics. They are scientific and they could lead to truth. But a major problem of the CCP, and arguably Marxism, is to confuse method with truth, with the conviction that there is only one “true” method to lead us to the determined “truth.” This should be the exact opposite of aesthetic thinking.

Abbreviations

ZDMLX: *Zhongguo dangdai meixue lunwen xuan* 中國當代美學論文選 (Selection of Contemporary Chinese Aesthetic Essays) 4 vols. Edited by Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences Research Institute 四川省社會科學院 研究所 (1984). Chongqing: Literature Department of Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences.

ZGQJ: *Zhu Guangqian quanji* 朱光潛全集 (Complete Works of Zhu Guangqian) 20 vols. Edited by Editorial Board of *Complete Works of Zhu Guangqian* (1987–1993). Hefei: Anhui Jiaohu chubanshe.

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