

Exciting Times Ahead: Remarks on Intellectuals East and West

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents some observations about the ambivalent bond between Western intellectual discourse and a developing discourse in East Asia. The two phases of Western intellectual discourse from its heroic phase to the present post-heroic phase are briefly sketched. A major dilemma of this discourse in its two phases is the dilemma of recognition. For intrinsic reasons, Western intellectual discourse has to recognize *other* discourses—the discourses of *other* cultures—as valid and legitimate. For the same reasons, such discourses have to be conceived as accessible only in an aesthetic way. In debates between Western intellectuals and those drawing from other traditions, this leads to serious problems. More often than not, the rhetoric of recognition is a surface phenomenon indicating a collapse of communication below the surface. In the second half of the paper, two points of collision between Chinese thought and Western intellectual discourse are outlined. Analogies between certain positions of postmodern theory and some aspects of Chinese thought should not be overestimated. The reception of postmodern theory in East Asia may be seen as a medium to work out an internationalized idiom for Chinese thought.

KEY WORDS

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intellectuals
physis
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Yijing

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intercultural
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techne
Zhuangzi

1. Intellectual Discourse and the Dilemma of Recognition

What is an intellectual? And what is it that defines the difference of the discourse the intellectual is involved in from the discourse of the scholar or the expert?

Following the recently published study *The End of Critique* by Ulrich Schödlbauer and Joachim Vahland, we may try to answer these questions by locating the term *intellectual* within a triangle of three concepts. (7ff.) The two other terms forming this triangle, *culture* and *critique*, are intertwined in various ways. Culture, on a widely shared view, is the product of distancing and thus criticizing something else, usually called *uncultivated*, *barbarian* or *brute*. In this sense, culture embodies an ongoing process of critique, and it will only last or at least flourish as long as this process continues. The whole idea of a barbarian state before or outside culture, however, provides as well a source of suspicion towards culture. There is no guarantee, this suspicion argues, that the act of distancing the barbarian does not itself proceed, at least in part or occasionally, in a barbarian way. Culture, therefore, does not only embody a process of critique. To be continuously purged from barbarian traits within, it has to be an object of critique as well. The discourse concerned with this task, or primarily with it, is the discourse of the intellectual or *intellectual discourse* in a terminological sense of the term.¹ The intellectual, in other words, is concerned with unveiling and distancing the barbarian within culture. Although expertise and scholarship are helpful and often even necessary in this effort, a scholar or an expert is not necessarily an intellectual and an intellectual does not always have to be a scholar or an expert.

Matters became complicated when the inner dynamics of intellec-

tual discourse transformed the triangle of concepts sketched above into a square. Probably this was unavoidable, however. Early in the process and triggered by the ways the European avant-garde had treated savages overseas, the whole distinction between peoples with culture and those without came to be considered as a barbarian one.² The result of the process criticizing this distinction was a concept of culture that replaced the distinction between culture and non-culture by the distinction between *different* cultures.³ This does not mean, however, that the earlier distinction was given up. It could not be, because the medium criticizing it, intellectual discourse, is based upon it: If the distinction between the cultured and the savage is considered to be a barbarian trait within the culture making this distinction, the distinction itself must be kept.

The concept of culture doubled. On the one hand there still was and still is an understanding of culture as a form and organization of life distanced and distancing itself from others according to standards considered to be universal. Intellectual discourse cannot exist without claiming such standards. Dropping this claim would mean that even regressions into barbarism—we only have to think of the death camps so familiar to recent and contemporary history—have to be interpreted as an expression of cultural difference or cultural change, of a culture applying different standards or changing the standards it is applying. According to this first understanding of the term, therefore, culture implies a potential of reflection and judgment that is not tied to or limited by any particular form or formation of culture. The difference between culture and non-culture, we may even say, is defined here by the presence, cultivation and actualization of this potential, with the absence of this potential characterizing non-culture and different intensities of its cultivation and actualization characterizing different levels of culture. The problem is, and this again leads to the second understanding of the term, that this potential always is and has to be concretized and embodied in particular cultural forms. It cannot exist in the abstract. Cultural forms and formations, however, do not immediately show whether they are a particular embodiment or concretization of the mentioned potential or not. Criticizing and

distanciating them as brute may just as well indicate that the critic lacks the competence of understanding these forms as embodying an effort of distanciating bruteness. The act of criticism would then mean that particular forms of embodying this effort are imposed on others. Precisely this collides with the claim of not being tied to particular forms or formations of culture, the very claim that constitutes—if justified—the distinction between culture and non-culture according to the first understanding of the term. According to this, imposing particular forms of culture on others would indicate a regression towards the pole of non-culture. To avoid this, a second understanding of the term was formed, taking any cultural form, any form and organization of human existence, as a genuine and legitimate form of concretizing the distinction between culture and non-culture. *Other* cultures, in this view, may and do even have their own ways of identifying and criticizing regressions towards non-culture. *Other* forms of discourse equivalent in their function to intellectual discourse have to be assumed and recognized.

The problem of this strategy is that recognizing *other* cultures implies here the recognition of different ways to claim universal validity that do not have any common ground to meet. For that reason, the act of recognition remains and has to remain a merely virtual one: *Other* forms of claiming universal validity are recognized in principle. Because of their *otherness*, however, they cannot be related to intellectual discourse as something that has to be taken into account there. At times, the intellectual may even feel that he has to study and to explore such *other* forms of discourse, and it may well be that he is somehow fascinated. Under no circumstances, however, will he take a position towards *other* ways of claiming universal validity. He will explore and appreciate such ways like flowers. Taking a position towards them, even accepting them, taking them into account in his discourse, would mean to impose his own standards upon them. Recognition, in other words, taking serious what is recognized, destroys itself.

This situation is, quite obviously, a dilemma. And it is not only an academic one. It creates serious problems, although more often than not

covered by politely appreciating each other's achievements, when intellectuals, Western intellectuals, meet others working in *other* traditions.⁴

2. Looking for the Mandarins

Sometimes it counts, where we are reading a particular book or trying to think through a particular problem. Getting involved into the intricacies of intellectual discourse—as described in the above mentioned study by Schödlbauer and Vahland—somewhere in Berlin, Paris, Oxford or New York would be one thing, doing so in Taipei, where a whole generation of intellectuals, or perhaps more than just one, are occupied with the process of inventing and reinventing themselves in a rapidly changing society, is something else. There, the problem mentioned at the end of the last paragraph may just be a distant one, concerning events somewhere else, at places still considered as some kind of periphery, here, this problem is an everyday reality and the inclination there not to deal with it in the meantime may quite likely be taken as an indication of provinciality.

The Western intellectual, visiting Taipei or other places in East Asia, is looking for the mandarins, the *other* intellectuals, masters of the *other* intellectual discourse, concerned with purging culture from traces of non-culture within according to other standards and by *other* means. To his surprise and consternation, he does not find them. Usually invited in his capacity as an expert in a particular field, he first meets other experts in the same field or in related ones. They are the same people he meets or could meet anywhere at international conferences, no need to travel East for that purpose, or better: talking to colleagues is not what traveling East was supposed to be. After a while, at the fringes of the discourse of the experts, topics may shift and the visitor may find himself in the middle of an intellectual discourse following exactly the same standards and procedures he is used to. His colleagues, or some of them, turn out to be, apart from their capacity as experts, intellectuals—not *other* intellectuals—too. Things are even more like home, then, and because of this the whole situation, as the

visitor perceives it, is plunging into the uncanny.

To make sense of this situation, the only pattern of interpretation available to him is the one forming his disappointed expectations. So he is using this one, with the players just exchanging their parts. The people he is talking to, he assumes, are talking to him in the same way as he would be talking to the mandarins, if only he could find them and acquire some familiarity with their ways of putting things. To be polite and to show the act of recognition he is so anxiously trying to perform, he certainly would try to engage in a conversation that might give the mandarin the impression that his visitor really thinks and argues according to his, the mandarin's standards, or at least is trying to. The Chinese colleagues turned intellectuals, he assumes, are doing exactly the same thing. Trained in part at Western universities, they know how Western intellectuals are putting things, although this cannot be *their* way, because *they* are Chinese intellectuals. Making sense of the situation along these lines, the moment of the uncanny is over—and with it the moment that might have allowed some way out of the trap too. Everything makes sense now.

It goes without saying that the story I am making up here is itself an attempt of making sense. Using this story, I am trying to understand some observations I had the chance to make over the years with discourses of the type presented above, being either a participant or an observer. More often than not, one of two mechanisms can be observed in such discourses. The Western intellectual will either shift back into the part of an expert and begin lecturing on some characteristics of Western intellectual discourse, thus not acting as an intellectual any more but as an expert on Western intellectuals; or he will markedly reduce the rigor of his questions and arguments and primarily try to be polite. The Western intellectual, in other words, will act like someone who realizes that the *other*, as a polite host, is not really making the point he is making, but only trying to show the visitor and guest, that he in principle appreciates and recognizes everything the guest is concerned with and involved in. Each one of the two mechanisms is sufficient to reduce the rest of the conversation to small talk. The Chinese intellectuals, realizing the switch, usually try not to feel

offended, the Western intellectual either presents a series of brilliant *trivia* or some politely balanced answers to politely balanced questions.

There should be no misunderstanding here: I am not talking about errors, mistakes, a lack of sincerity or a lack of goodwill. I am talking about a trap.

3. Taking Charge

The project of critique or cultural critique that defines the Western intellectual is an invention of the 18th century. It can even be linked to one name: *Rousseau*. The knack of this invention is the idea of humanity as a species realizing itself to be in bad shape and pondering how to turn things round. Critique as the intellectual is pursuing it, in other words, is not just a matter of some hypersensitive individual not being satisfied with particular affairs in his or her world. The voice of the intellectual, rather, is the grudging voice of the species talking to itself.⁵ As an abstract fellow, however, the species is neither equipped with organs to speak nor to be aware of itself. Only individuals are. The species has to wait until some individuals are working their ways towards a level of awareness representing the self-awareness of the species. Thus lending their consciousness to the species, the task is theirs to lead and sometimes even—avantgardes differ in their style—to push others towards the same level. At a certain point this will lead to the general awareness that the bad shape of the species in the present is the product of a history made without any self-awareness and thus not actually made by the species, with the species not actually being in charge of its own fate. Creating this awareness is the beginning of turning things round. The major tool of creating this awareness is the reconstruction of some point in the past where the species lost the way. The present is then, the second reconstruction, presented as a point of crisis. Only two options, a startled audience is told, are left: tumbling into catastrophe or taking charge. The present is the point where history either ends, be it with a bang or with a whimper, or a new form of history begins, with mankind in control of its own fate.

The invention of this cluster of ideas assembled around the idea of

a level of insight representing the self-consciousness of the species was the birth or self-invention of the Western intellectual. In the service of the species he is pointing at barbarian elements within culture, hidden and obvious ones, as the traces of history not really made by humanity. Cultural criticism, the self-declared task of the Western intellectual, is the perennial turning point from prehistory to history, mediated by the heroic effort of avoiding catastrophe.

From here, the architecture of the trap, forcing the Western intellectual to be looking for the Mandarins when traveling East, may be understood in more detail: If all members of a culture were aware of barbarian elements within, cultural critique as an institution would not be necessary. The concept of cultural critique, therefore, implies a distinction between two levels of awareness, the first one being blind towards the object of critique and only the second one being aware of it. So far, of course, this distinction is only a formal one. Everything depends upon how it is established in more concrete terms, and different traditions and civilizations may do so in different ways. As sketched above, Western intellectual discourse conceived the second level of awareness as the consciousness of the species. Why should this be a trap? If we do not assume the species to be schizophrenic, the very idea of a consciousness of the species implies that there is only one. As long as the distinction between culture and non-culture remained in an innocent state, this did not create any problems. When it came under fire and the concept of culture doubled, the *otherness* of other cultures had to be understood as the *other* of any possible consciousness. *Other* cultures, more precisely, had to be conceived as the unconscious of the species and inaccessible to anyone identifying the consciousness of the species as the highest level of awareness. Western intellectual discourse, defined by the invention of exactly doing this, has to conceive *other* cultures, other intellectual discourses, the way *others* are putting things, as inconceivable. Understanding the mandarins would mean to misunderstand them. The only way to understand them is not to understand them. The trap has no doors.

The heroic phase of the Western intellectual, as is well known, did not last very long. Marching along under the guidance of some

borrowed consciousness or other, the species tumbled from one disaster to the next. It took some time and quite a few wars to realize that all this was not unrelated to the spirit of taking charge as invented in the 18th century. Once it was realized, the second phase of the Western intellectual began. The paradigm of cultural criticism shifted, but it did not change. Barbarian elements within culture, still abundant, are not seen any more as the result of neglect and not being in charge, they are seen as the very product of taking charge. Assisted again by the consciousness of the intellectual, the species is pushing its self-awareness to an ultimate position: The barbarian side within, always returning, is unveiled as the product of not being aware that the quest for transparency is itself a barbarian project. Light, the barbarian factor hidden for so long, has finally been brought—to light? No one denies the paradox, of course, and we all get over it with an elegant sigh.

4. Exhausting Spirit

The project of taking charge as invented in 18th century Europe is quite alien to Chinese thought. The distinction between two or more levels of awareness, as conceived in Chinese thought, is not compatible with the idea of a consciousness of the species, and the Chinese view on what it would be to act or to intervene under the guidance of a higher level of awareness is not compatible with that idea either.⁶

In the Great Appendix (*Da Chuan* 大傳) of the *Yijing* (易經) we find the following phrase: 書不盡言，言不盡意 (Index, 44). Legge translates: “The written characters are not the full exponent of speech and speech is not the full expression of ideas.” (376f.) Wilhelm/Baynes translate: “Writing cannot express words completely. Words cannot express thoughts completely.” (322) The crucial term in this text is *jìn* (盡), usually translated *to exhaust*. In a more literal translation we would have to read: “Written characters cannot exhaust speech and speech cannot exhaust ideas.” Two levels of lack are described here. Speech is not exhaustive enough, but writing is even less exhaustive with respect to a pole of plenitude called *yi* (意). These are the thoughts or ideas of the sages (*sheng ren* 聖人). The whole text is concerned

with the question whether *we* are able to see (*jian* 見) these ideas. And there seems to be some hope. In a sequence of five sentences, each of them with *jin* as its semantic center, the text tells us how the sages took care to make the plenitude exhausted by their *yi* accessible, at least to those who try. The different symbolisms of the *Yijing* are linked into a sequence, and all of them together are strong enough to overcome the gap of exhaustiveness. The sequence ends with the phrase *jinshen* (盡神), exhausting spirit.

I read this text as one of the many texts that could be presented here to document or at least illustrate my first point. Although the text is discussing different symbolisms, we certainly can say that these symbolisms—speech, writing and others—correspond to different levels of awareness. The difference between these levels is conceived as a distinction between different degrees of being exhaustive. In Western intellectual discourse, the difference between levels of awareness is tied to the distinction of whether or not being aware of the origin. Awareness of the origin would mean to know the blueprint of the specie's original, true or authentic path through history. With this blueprint in hand, a yardstick is supposed to be available to realize and to judge which elements of a given state of affairs do belong to that path and which do not. Without such a yardstick, this distinction seems to be meaningless or arbitrary. The lack that characterizes a lower level of awareness is conceived as absence of that yardstick, the completeness of a higher form of awareness is understood as being in the possession of it. It can easily be seen that the two paradigms of conceiving different levels of awareness sketched here belong to different worlds. If there is a yardstick, a blueprint, a path, an origin, a defined direction, the rhetoric of exhaustiveness is out of place. Either we are aware of the blueprint or we are not. We may say, of course, that a given state of affairs does or does not exhaust the blueprint. However, in order to say something like that, we again have to be aware of the blueprint.

Knowing that the rhetoric of exhaustiveness is not compatible with the way different levels of awareness are conceived in Western intellectual discourse, we do not exactly know yet what it means to conceive this difference otherwise. What is it, that is more or less

exhausted by different levels of awareness? According to the text, it is *shen*. What is *shen*? It is what is more or less exhausted by different levels of awareness. That, undoubtedly, is a circle. Not necessarily a bad one. I will continue the discussion of this together with my second point.

Within Western intellectual discourse, taking charge means to intervene into a situation under the guidance of the mentioned blueprint. It means to bring back the species onto its authentic path and then keep it there. To show that the paradigm of taking charge suggested by Chinese thought is markedly different from this one, I want to briefly discuss—quite randomly chosen, again, close to any major term of Chinese thought could be used here — the term *yang* (養) or *yangsheng* (養生) as we find it in the *Yangsheng zhu* (養生主) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (莊子). The term is usually translated as *nourishing life*. What this term has to say in the present context can be highlighted by taking the Greek terms *techne* and *physis* as understood by Aristotle as a background.⁷

Both terms try to answer the question: How does or did a certain entity come into being? This question cannot be answered for all entities in the same way. The chair comes into being when the carpenter is building it, the tree comes into being when the seedling is growing into a tree. In the first case, the term *techne* applies. The carpenter intervenes into the wood and forms it into a chair. Doing so, he is guided by the blueprint of a chair in his mind. This form of intervention is *techne*. The paradigm of intervention or action corresponding to Western intellectual discourse has been molded along these lines. *Yangsheng*, nourishing life, certainly does not mean this paradigm. Let us turn to the growing tree. The tree, growing out of a seedling, does not come into being by *techne*. Aristotle calls the *arche* that makes it grow the *physis* of the tree. Growing is one form of *kinesis*, of change and development. What comes into being like a growing tree, without something or someone intervening from the outside, does have the *arche* of change and development within. This *arche* within is its *physis*.

As *yangsheng* is not *techne*, we may try to relate the term to *phy-*

sis. A tree needs water and nourishment to grow. Providing what is required to come into being by *physis*, is that *yangsheng*? The term *physis* in Aristotle is inseparable from the term *telos*. Again we have a blueprint here, although in the case of *physis* it is a blueprint within. Offering nourishment to the tree will help it to grow into a stronger and larger tree, but it will always develop according to the blueprint written within. This form of taking charge, corresponding to agriculture and *cultura* in its literal sense, is not *yangsheng* either. Taking charge in the sense of *yangsheng* would be something between *techne* and cultivation in the sense of *cultura*. It is not *techne*, because it does not mean any intervention from the outside, and it is different from cultivation in the narrow sense of the term because it is, negatively speaking, nevertheless intervening into the blueprint.

A part of the *Yangsheng zhu* chapter forms the often quoted story of the cook slicing up the ox in such a perfect way that the knife never gets blunt. Commenting on this achievement, the cook says this:

When I first began to carve oxen, I saw nothing but oxen wherever I looked. Three years more and I never saw an ox as a whole. Nowadays, I am in touch through the daemonic in me, and do not look with the eye. With the senses I know where to stop, the daemonic I desire to run its course. (Graham 63f., Index III. 2–12)

The cook reaches perfection when he is not looking at the blueprint any more. Acting without this blueprint and without looking for it, he is able to exhaust the possibilities of the moment to the utmost. No blueprint can include all these possibilities, and the attempt of rewriting the blueprint again and again would keep the cook from exhausting possibilities as well. *Yangsheng*, if I understand this term correctly, means an activity that is helping *sheng* to exhaustively realize the possibilities of the moment, especially those just crystallizing and not yet foreseeable in the past. As the crystallization of possibilities depends to a considerable extent upon the competence of realizing possibilities, *yangsheng* might even be characterized as an

activity that intends to strengthen the competence of *sheng* to realize and thus to crystallize possibilities.

I do not think it is necessary to elaborate this further in the present context. The difference between the paradigm of taking charge suggested here and the one suggested by Western intellectual discourse is obvious.

5. A Discourse in the Making

It may be argued that the two points I tried to make in the last section are correct with respect to the heroic phase of Western intellectual discourse, but not any more with respect to its post-heroic phase. Contemporary debates indeed are primarily concerned with deconstructing blueprints or even the whole idea of a blueprint. And there has been for quite a while a growing literature that explores the analogy of this concern with Chinese thought by either rephrasing particular positions of Chinese thought in terms of postmodern theory—this term understood in the widest possible sense—or the other way round. Analogies certainly exist. The major difference remains. As has been pointed out already, Western intellectual discourse is essentially defined by the idea of the consciousness of the species, and this holds true for the post-heroic phase of this discourse as well. Chinese thought collides with that idea.

To the Chinese intellectual, the transition to the post-heroic phase nevertheless solves a problem. As long as the heroic phase lasted, taking part in this discourse, being an intellectual, meant fighting for the project of the species taking charge. As Chinese thought is alien to this project, being an intellectual could only mean criticizing the Chinese tradition because of that and completely turning away from it. Some took this option, and the consequences are well known. Today, this option belongs into the museum. As intellectual discourse is occupied with deconstructing the whole idea of representing the consciousness of the species and taking charge in its name, a tradition

alien to such a project right from the beginning clearly does not have any reason to hide itself. The whole question of how to reconcile Chinese thought with the discourse of the intellectual is gone. It would be a mistake, however, to say that Western intellectual discourse in its second phase has arrived at a position where Chinese thought, at least in its major achievements, always was. Putting it this way again would rely on a rhetoric that is tied to the idea of a consciousness of the species. It is my impression that most Chinese intellectuals are aware of that. When Chinese thought is occasionally characterized as *somehow postmodern*, this is quite likely meant as a hermeneutic bridge addressed to visitors or readers familiar with postmodern theory and not yet familiar with Chinese thought. The impressive success of postmodern theory in East Asia has to be seen in this context. Due to existing analogies, the reception of this body of thought provides a medium to work out an internationalized idiom for Chinese thought. A whole new discourse is in the making here, and the reception of postmodern theory will recede when this discourse has been sufficiently consolidated to go its own way. As the reception of postmodern theory seems to be in the process of reaching its ironic stage already, this decisive step will not take much longer.

Exciting times are ahead in East Asia, in intellectual terms—and otherwise too.

NOTES

¹ In a wider or more general sense, the discourse of the expert or the scholar may be called intellectual as well. What we are interested in here, however, is precisely a discourse different from these two.

² The story of this process has been told repeatedly. On its early phase see Todorov.

³ This is of course the concept of culture in the ethnological sense.

⁴ The dilemma of recognition has been recently discussed in various contexts, among them post-colonial theory and the debate on multi-culturalism. See Bhaba; Taylor.

⁵. See Schödlbauer and Vahland 31ff.

⁶. I am aware that the mere use of the term *Chinese thought* implies a level of generalization that may not be always justified. If I am not completely wrong, however, the two aspects I plan to discuss indeed are present in most schools and currents of Chinese thought.

⁷. The following discussion of the two terms is primarily based on *Physics* II/1. See Aristotle.

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