

Aesthetics Problematics in Chinese and Neo-Marxism: Between Art and Politics

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The article reveals the features of the formation and functioning of aesthetic research in such two areas of Marxism as Chinese and Frankfurt Schools. Proved that in China, culture and the cultural revolution are inextricably linked with the Marxist projects of critiquing capitalist modernity and building alternative modernity. Aesthetics and culture also were at the center of attention in Chinese Marxist circles. In this respect, the diverse practices and designs of Chinese Marxism are similar to those of Western Marxism or an equally distinct variety of Euro-American Marxist intellectual enterprises. Aesthetic Marxism in China had a dual mission – to criticize the internal contradictions of revolutionary hegemony and to offer a constructive vision of culture in a post-revolutionary society. This is the value of Chinese aesthetic Marxism, the implications of which go beyond China proper in the world of global cultural criticism. Moreover, being non-Western, Chinese aesthetic Marxism deliberately questioned the inherent Eurocentrism of Marxism. If this Eurocentrism is to be challenged and problematized, the questions posed by Chinese aesthetic Marxists cannot be ignored. It was revealed that the representatives of Western Marxism, represented by such thinkers of the Frankfurt School as Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, saw the disclosure of the meaning of art and aesthetic research in general due to the fact that rational thinking initially has a drawback – it is repressive, associated with domination and the will to power. In contrast to this, true art, according to European neo-Marxist philosophers, expresses the truth of human existence in harmonious unity with nature, when a person does not oppose himself to it with his consciousness, but becomes like it and its creative forces.

Keywords: aesthetics, Marxism, Chinese Marxism, Neo-Marxism, culture, art, cultural revolutions

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Introduction

At first glance, it seems that Marxism put purely economic, political, and socio-philosophical tasks at the center of its attention. Whereas such an area of philosophical knowledge as aesthetics, most likely, should have been “in the shadow” of thinkers who worked in line with Marxist philosophy. However, both Chinese and Neo-Marxism shows and proves just the opposite – aesthetics has served and continues to serve as a powerful factor for the implementation of certain ideas and principles that come from the works and concepts proposed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Scientific research by Western and Chinese historians of philosophy became the basis of our research. However, we cannot see in their comparative analysis the functioning of aesthetics in Chinese and Neo-Marxism. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to analyze the peculiarities of the formation and development of aesthetics studies in such areas of Marxism as Chinese and Frankfurt schools.

It can be emphasized that there are a number of fundamental studies of understanding aesthetics issues in Chinese and Neo-Marxism – Rodrigo Duarte (2005), Friedemann Grenz (1983), Herbert Kaiser (1983), Volker Kaiser (2005), Hartmut Scheible (1983), Chest Thies (2005), Chengbing Wang and Michael Peters (Wang & Peters, 2021). The methodological basis of the study was research conducted in the framework of reception studies, as well as comparative philosophy. This was facilitated by the scientific works of Ukrainian researchers Sergii Rudenko and Yaroslav Sobolievskiy (Rudenko & Sobolievskiy, 2021; Rudenko et al., 2021). At the same time, we cannot find a comparative analysis of the topic under study. Therefore, for a comprehensive and systematic consideration of the aesthetics problematics in these areas of Marxism, it would be conceptual, in our opinion, to single out two of the following aspects:

- 1) Features understanding the role of art in Neo-Marxism’s aesthetics studies;
- 2) Specific formation and current state of aesthetics studies in Chinese Marxism.

Let us consider each of them further in more detail.

Meaning and significance of art in Neo-Marxism’s aesthetics studies

If we talk about neo-Marxism, then first of all we are talking about the so-called Frankfurt School. Frankfurt School – critical theory of modern (industrial) society, a kind of neo-Marxism. The main representatives are Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, from the *second generation* – Jürgen Habermas, and Oskar Negt. The term *Frankfurt School* is a collective name applied to thinkers associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main; the representatives of critical theory themselves never united themselves under this name. In its search, the Frankfurt School is associated with Marxism, but “critical” Marxism, adapted because at the center of its philosophy is the criticism of rational reason and even the entire dialectic of the Enlightenment, which underlies the European spiritual culture of modern times.

“The disclosure of the meaning of art and generally aesthetic studies in the context of the works of thinkers of the Frankfurt School is due, emphasizes *Rodrigo Duarte*, to the fact that rational thinking initially has a defect – it is repressive, associated with domination and the will to power because its meaning lies in the mastery of an object separate from the subject and opposed to it, including nature (including the nature of man himself). This means that it is always overwhelming. Rationality penetrates human society and turns it into a collective of exposed anonymous people. Each person only seems to be a person, but in reality, he is

a pseudo-individuality. Instead of a rational man, it is necessary to produce a real man. To do this, it is necessary to throw off from our consciousness and from our ego, in general, the shackles of those forms of thinking, remaining in which we are doomed to reproduce society” (Duarte, 2005: 178). Art must do this.

Genuine art expresses the truth of human existence in harmonious unity with nature when a person with his consciousness does not oppose himself to her but becomes like her and her creative forces. This harmony of man and nature is realized at the earliest stages of history. And true art should revive the spirit of that time, it becomes, as it were, a «search for lost time». And from these positions of the search for memory, we must consider the entire modern civilization.

“But the truth, *Chest Thies* writes, proclaimed in this way must seem absurd to a person brought up in banal culture. Therefore, a form of contemporary art adequate to its tasks is the art of the absurd. Such art is inevitably doomed to loneliness, to conflict with the mass public. The romantic position of an unrecognized, incomprehensible, persecuted artist is the only possible one for those who work in line with such art. Therefore, its inevitable social form is elitism, which means that true art is in conflict with the concept of work as such. His works should no longer be works of art in the exact sense of the word but should be a means of its negation, and destruction. A real work of art is always «on the verge», it seems to balance between existence and imperfection. Art must model the evolutionary process of the destruction of rational reality, but model it not in the field of images, but in its own material architectonics. Schoenberg’s atonal music, as well as experiments with non-objectivity in painting, can be considered an example of such art”. (Thies 2005, 193)

Let us note here that it is an art that is most important for us, as the most open sphere, where the very negation that interests us manifests itself most fully. Not for nothing, for example, for the same Nietzsche, the only salvation from the human (that is, false) is beauty, the main, probably, artistic and aesthetic category. Even in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer say “that humanity had to inflict «something terrible» on itself in order for the self to arise, «the self-identical, purposeful, masculine character of man», and something similar is still repeated in everyone’s childhood. The desire to concentrate is inherent in the «I» at all stages of development, and always with the blind determination of this, «I» was the temptation to lose it. Narcotic intoxication, which is ready to pay for the euphoria associated with bringing the self into a suspended state with sleep-like death, is an ancient social institution; it mediates between self-preservation and self-destruction and is the attempt of the self to outlive itself. The fear of losing one’s self, and with it the boundary between one’s own and someone else’s life, timidity in the face of death and destruction go hand in hand with the promise of happiness, each time threatening civilization” (Kaiser, 2005: 205). This is exactly what true art should remind a person, but the truth that it reveals to the world turns out to be terrible for the rationalistic world because it reveals a different, human, and not natural negativity, which is the «new blood» of art. This is especially evident in the context of neo-Marxist reflections on music.

For example, in *Philosophy of New Music*, Theodor Adorno notes that “the inexpressible and non-objective musical element, which, starting with Schopenhauer, was taken from music by irrationalist philosophy, made this art form inaccessible to the ratio of venality... however, as soon as industrial management all cultural goods have developed into a kind of totality, it also acquires power over aesthetic nonconformist art ... radical music in the era of late industrialism found itself in complete isolation” (Adorno, 2006: 45-46).

In other words, radical music (for Adorno it is Schoenberg and his followers), which is the very “new blood”, is suppressed by “organized society.” «Organized society» is the triumph of rationalization that subjugates the individual. At the same time, it is also the complete domination of alienation over the human personality. It excludes all social activity of people, dividing them, «atomizing», destroying all human ties, and asserting in their place connections alienated and «reified», that is, inorganic for the human personality and preventing true communication of individuals. It creates a powerful «industry of culture», which fills all the free time of each person only to use the illusion of freedom that has arisen to suppress the individual in him in favor of the state-ideological. The main means of creating such an illusion is art, which thus turns into a false consciousness, an ideology. That is why Adorno appears here as a critic of art, and, above all, of music. In music, two aspects should be distinguished: cognitive (recreation of real social contradictions) and ideological (the desire to veil these contradictions), naturally, these aspects are mutually exclusive.

- a) the first aspect ensures that it reproduces the truth of the social state;
- b) the second, on the contrary, serves to create the illusion of society about itself.

The ideological side of music reflects the desire of a rationalistic society to present itself in the form of a new, moreover, natural and harmonious totality, while its cognitive aspect continues to express insoluble contradictions – unnaturalness and disharmony.

Now, having clarified these points, we can move on to considering the views of another representative of the Frankfurt School – *Herbert Marcuse*, who is interesting to us for his more radical views, as well as the fact that his books were extremely popular among the youth of that time. What Adorno called «organized society» Marcuse calls «repressive civilization», its trouble is in the dominance of science, the mechanization of consciousness, from which aesthetic and ethical (that is, universal) categories are forced out: “If Good and Beauty, Peace and Justice are not deducible either from ontological or from scientific provisions, then their universal significance and reality cannot receive a logical justification. In terms of scientific reason, they remain a matter of preference, and no resurrection of Aristotelian or Thomistic philosophy for the justification of values by scientific rationality is a priori rejected by scientific reason. The unscientific nature of these ideas fatally weakens their opposition to existing reality; ideas become just ideals, and their concrete content evaporates into an ethical or metaphysical atmosphere” (Marcuse, 2006: 198).

This is due to the fact that a critical attitude to reality is just as ousted from consciousness as the opposition is ousted from society, the natural balance is disturbed and replaced by an artificial balance, while “we silently accept the need for the peaceful production of means of destruction, brought to wasteful consumption, education and education that prepares for the defense of what deforms both the defenders themselves and what they defend” (Marcuse, 2006: 15). A contemporary of Herbert Marcuse, Konrad Lorenz, connects this with the loss of the natural instinct for self-preservation and brilliantly describes in his book *The Eight Deadly Sins of Civilized Mankind*, where the last and worst sin is the invention, storage, and production of nuclear weapons. We give this example to show that the ideas of the Frankfurters were not mere inventions of whimsical minds, after two world wars and the Caribbean crisis, something had to change in the minds of people. Therefore, Marcuse’s ideas about a new social revolution do not seem so wild at all.

Features of aesthetics studies in Chinese Marxism: between culture and politics

In the Chinese Marxism case, there are a number of difficulties. So, for western audiences, Chinese aesthetic Marxists may seem not only derivative, but outdated: as discussed earlier, they were inspired by classical German philosophy and the writings of Marx, and their theoretical discourse is filled with terms such as the “essence of beauty”, “humanization of nature”, “final realization of the human essence”, etc. These phrases are generally dismissed as «metaphysical» and «essentialist» among contemporary scholars in the United States and Western Europe who are interested in Marxism and cultural criticism.

Hence, Chinese aesthetics forms an essential part of this historical struggle with Western thought, although at the same time it absorbed elements of Western aesthetic thought and not only Marxist thought. For example, in the article, *The Spreading and Influence of German Aesthetics in China*, Liu Gangji showed that modern Chinese aesthetics had been largely formed by dealing with the German tradition of aesthetics. Because of the enormous problems of translation, this tradition of aesthetics – from German idealism to Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger – was received in China with a phase shift of about 100 to 150 years. Due to this background, it is not surprising that the discourse of Chinese aesthetics of the 20th century was largely shaped by the categories and questions of German philosophy of the 18th and 19th centuries. The rather rigid reception of Marxism only reinforced this tendency (Pohl, 2018: 338).

Another problem with Chinese aesthetic Marxists is that their language is generally abstract and philosophical, and refers more to German and continental European thought than specifically Chinese. This creates another obstacle for Sinology in the West. To a China specialist, this aesthetic debate may seem unattractive, as an officially sanctioned ideological rehearsal of Marxist-Leninist doctrines, is hardly useful for analyzing political reality in China.

However, aesthetics assumes a special place in China grappling with Western thought. First, aesthetics, particularly in its early modern phase, constituted a realm relatively free of politics. For this reason, it attracted the Chinese to explore freely and without political restraint, occidental thought. Second, the philosophy of art as part and parcel of aesthetics offered, as already mentioned, many ways of linking up with China's own tradition.

This is important because other than the mainstream of Chinese traditional social and political thought, particularly Confucianism – this part of the Chinese tradition had not been discredited by the reception of Western ideas and the radical anti-traditionalism of the May Fourth period. Quite on the contrary, when the Chinese at the beginning of the 20th century began to define their place in relation to the West, they understood their own culture as an essentially aesthetic one. In their monumental *History of Chinese Aesthetics* (Zhongguo meixue shi 中国美学十五讲), Li Zehou and Liu Gangji marked as the last and most important characteristic of traditional Chinese aesthetics the idea that an aesthetic consciousness was regarded as the highest and noblest consciousness to be attained in life (Pohl, 2018: 337). Therefore, the encounter with Western thought offered the Chinese, on the one hand, a range of fascinatingly new ideas (such as the category of the tragic or Hegel's grand system) and, on the other, to look for familiar concepts which could be aligned with their own tradition.

Particularly Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), the president of Peking University during the May Fourth period, felt motivated to this twofold endeavor. He was instrumental in formulating the idea of the mentioned cultural-aesthetic self-understanding of the Chinese. Through his studies

in Germany, he was familiar with occidental philosophy, particularly with Immanuel Kant. He regarded Western man as largely shaped by religion, whereas for China he held aesthetics (a combination of ritual, art, and ethics) to be the functional equivalent to religion in the West. For this reason, he demanded modern China «aesthetic education in the place of religion». As China was in the process of re-install aesthetic education in schools, one can see that his ideas are still reverberating there (though he failed with his attempts in his own time).

Kang Liu emphasizes: “Hence, when comparing Chinese Marxist debates about aesthetics and Western Marxist aesthetic theories, another factor is the nature of aesthetic discourse and cultural critique. The aesthetic debate (1956–1964) “should be understood within the context of the complex process of establishing a socialist hegemony and modernizing the economy. First of all, the debate was to serve the objective of disseminating Marxism in China’s intellectual circles. Second, the emphases in the debate on cultural reconstruction, practice in material life, and the utopian vision of a “humanized nature” were linked to the project of modernization. In order to ensure a socialist hegemony, Mao launched continued campaigns to promote Marxism, and criticize «bourgeois and feudalist» ideas. Aesthetics proved to be a resilient spot within China’s cultural arena, then filled with tension. As a field of inquiry, aesthetics is inextricably connected to literature and the arts. Yet its discourse is more philosophical than practical, and thus, it is distanced from literary and art criticism. This distance, however tenuous and fragile in China’s volatile circumstances, made aesthetic discussions less vulnerable to political interference. Moreover, aesthetics in China has been associated with the May Fourth legacy, and its German origin also has special appeal to Chinese revolutionaries due to its relationship with Marxism. At first, Mao and his cultural bureaucrats saw the need to engage in a Marxist critique of aesthetics as a predominantly «bourgeois» discourse. And for the sake of studying Marxism, discussions of Marxist aesthetic theories were encouraged” (Kang, 2010: 122).

Based on this, culture and the cultural revolution are inextricably linked with the Marxist projects of critiquing capitalist modernity and building alternative modernity. Aesthetics and culture were at the center of attention in Chinese Marxist circles. In this respect, the diverse practices and designs of Chinese Marxism are similar to those of Western Marxism or an equally distinct variety of Euro-American Marxist intellectual enterprises. But apart from a partial understanding of Maoism, Western Marxists knew little about what their Chinese counterparts were doing in a different context. Thus, while it is generally believed that Maoism changed the way Europeans thought about Marxism, by comparing Chinese aesthetic Marxism and Western Marxism, we can get an idea of the historical development of modern Marxism.

Should the aesthetic only serve the negative function of critique? It makes sense for Marxists in the advanced capitalism of Western Europe and North America to insist on the negative, critical function of the aesthetic. Yet the Chinese aesthetic Marxists contended, in a different context, that the aesthetic holds out a constructive promise in a socialist society. Furthermore, this Chinese constructive view of the aesthetic is not merely a local and particular vision. By virtue of the fact that Chinese aesthetic Marxism is engaged in a Marxist discourse that is universalist and utopian, the constructive, rather than a negative function that they see in the aesthetic pertains to Marxist utopianism and universalism. It can be argued that a utopian vision lies at the heart of Western Marxist projects, however negative and critical they may appear. In contemporary China, a Marxist cultural politics is faced with the task of critiquing Mao’s instrumentalization and politicization of culture and aesthetics, as well as China’s local, national, and classical traditions. This Marxism will have to address the consequences of the global capitalism that deeply penetrates China today. The Deng and post-Deng era has greatly

exacerbated the ideological tensions and contradictions in China, and any Marxist critique cannot but confront Deng's legacy as well as post-Deng cultural and ideological contradictions. But there is also the positive, constructive aspect of the aesthetic. To be sure, this positive notion is eminently utopian. The positive, constructive utopian aspiration that Chinese aesthetic Marxism upholds deserves serious consideration. It had functioned effectively as a theoretical paradigm shaping much of the ferment in China in the 1980s. Moreover, as a humanist vision, it has a critical relevance to Marxism and socialism in general (Kang, 2000: 189).

Chinese aesthetics and Western Marxism create a theoretical space for critical intervention, reinforcing cultural politics. European and North American cultural politics contributed to the formation of an oppositional vision, focused mainly on the problems of domination and resistance, manipulation and self-government, consent and coercion in modern capitalist society. By contrast, aesthetic Marxism in China had a dual mission:

- a) to criticize the internal contradictions of revolutionary hegemony;
- b) to offer a constructive vision of culture in a post-revolutionary society.

Thus, China attempted to reposition itself in relation to postmodernity. Such a vested, entangled textual space unavoidably entailed a Chinese version of "schizophrenic discourse." It had to address the alienation of culture and the aesthetic as a historical consequence of its own revolutionary hegemony. This cultural and ideological alienation under socialism was exacerbated by a postmodern cultural production that infiltrated China as a result of the modernization drive and reform. And finally, the Cultural Reflection had to fulfill its self-imposed burden of seeking ways to reconstruct a modern and national culture, a task raised over and over again in China's modern history. Therefore, in the planning for the various disciplines in China, philosophy stands at the first level, and it is comprised of second-level disciplines, namely: Marxist philosophy, Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, logic, ethics, foreign philosophy, and philosophy of science and technology. Generally speaking, Marxist philosophy is one of the strongest second-level disciplines among all philosophical disciplines in Chinese colleges or universities (Wang & Peters 2021).

Conclusions

Thus, after analyzing the features and specifics of the formation and functioning of aesthetics studies in Chinese and Neo-Marxism, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. It was revealed that the representatives of Western Marxism, represented by such thinkers of the Frankfurt School as Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, saw the disclosure of the meaning of art and aesthetic research in general due to the fact that rational thinking initially has a drawback – it is repressive, associated with domination and the will to power. In contrast to this, true art, according to European neo-Marxist philosophers, expresses the truth of human existence in harmonious unity with nature, when a person does not oppose himself to it with his consciousness, but becomes like it and its creative forces.
2. In China, culture and the cultural revolution are inextricably linked with the Marxist projects of critiquing capitalist modernity and building alternative modernity. Aesthetics and culture also were at the center of attention in Chinese Marxist circles. In this respect, the diverse practices and designs of Chinese Marxism are similar to those of Western Marxism or an equally distinct variety of Euro-American Marxist intellectual enterprises. Aesthetic Marxism in China had a dual mission – to criticize

the internal contradictions of revolutionary hegemony and to offer a constructive vision of culture in a post-revolutionary society.

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