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# Western Influences on Chinese Education in Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Study of Chinese Responses to Western Art Theory about the Image

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## 1 Introduction

This thesis examines the influences of 20th-century Western art theory on contemporary Chinese education in visual culture at the college level. More specifically, it investigates the Chinese misreading of modern Western art theories. Below is a part of this study, which presents an analysis of an interview.

The interviewee, Dr. C.C. Wang, is a lecturer of art history at Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, China. He is a well-known translator of Western art theory, in particular, a Chinese translator of Arthur Danto.

In order to prepare for the interview, I e-mailed Dr. Wang some preliminary questions in advance for basic information about his teaching, translation, and research. Based on his answers, I worked out a set of further questions for the interview, which consisted of both general and specific questions. The general ones aimed to construct a context and the specific ones, to examine some key issues in detail. The main purpose of this interview was to draw out the interviewee's opinions about Western influences on contemporary Chinese education in visual culture.

## 2 Summary of the Interview with keywords coding the topics

### **(1) Localization: Western theory is no longer truly Western in China.**

Dr. Wang said that he purposefully employed Western art theory such as the late 20th-century American art criticism of Arthur Danto in his teaching. According to him, however, it was not easy to draw a line between Western theory and Chinese theory, since Western influence has been integrated into traditional Chinese aesthetics in education in visual art since the late 1970s. For instance, when discussing the aesthetic change in the new architecture in Beijing, Dr. Wang used the term “modernity” to approach this topic. The term came from contemporary Western critical theory but has been localized in China today. In this case, his approach was not necessarily Western, nor Chinese, as there is no clear border line separating the two. Dr. Wang discussed an example of a building that illustrates a mixed aesthetic, the CCTV headquarters building in Beijing, designed by contemporary Dutch architect, Remment Koolhaas, and completed in 2008.

### **(2) Chinese First: Understanding Chinese art and culture is the precondition to encountering Western influence.**

Dr. Wang considered that Western art theory was beneficial to the development and reform of Chinese education in visual culture, because the West (Western European and North American countries) was highly developed and China was not yet so developed. Therefore, there was much to learn from the West. However, if the students embraced Western theory with empty minds, they might have no idea about what to learn from the West, and they might not even understand Western ideas. In order to understand the West and find out what they needed to learn, they should first understand traditional Chinese art theory and culture, such as the Confucian and Taoist based aesthetics. According to Dr. Wang, this is a preparation and precondition to meeting with Western influence.

### **(3) Hidden Source: Exploring Western concepts behind Chinese issues.**

In his teaching of contemporary Chinese art, as well as art history and art theory, Dr. Wang has explored Western concepts behind Chinese issues. According to him, contemporary Chinese art is deeply influenced by Western art and art theory, and today’s Chinese education in visual culture at the college level is influenced by Western concepts. Many important and immediate issues in Chinese art and education are related to certain Western concepts, such as modernism, abstraction, formalism, and so forth. In his opinion, those who have a historical sense will never ignore the Western concepts behind Chinese issues when teaching contemporary Chinese art.

**(4) Today's Perspective: Contemporary concepts in interpreting old masters.**

Discussing this topic, Dr. Wang stated that Chinese scholars should employ Western contemporary concepts to interpret old masters, both Western and Chinese, although those masters might not have even thought of certain contemporary issues when they created their works. For instance, Wang noted that, when Velázquez painted *Las Meninas*, he did not have the Foucauldian ideas of “gaze” and “representation” in his mind. However, if Chinese scholars bear the two concepts in mind when discussing Velázquez, they will have a deeper understanding of this painting, and will make more sense of its meaning from today's perspective. So they will be able to raise issues like the social role of women and the power of domination. In this case, students will find something new in the old works. Dr. Wang called such a Foucauldian perspective a sort of brain storm.

**(5) Mistranslation: A big problem in understanding Western art theory.**

Dr. Wang pointed out the issue of misreading in students' understanding of Western art theory. He said when he read Chinese translations of Western art theory he was often frustrated because sometimes he could not understand the author. For example, when he read Arthur Danto in Chinese translation he found Danto logically contradictory at times. So he checked the book in the original English and found that the contradiction came from mistranslation. Dr. Wang remarked that the real problem at this point was that most Chinese readers were not aware of the translation mistakes because they were not able to read or to verify the translation in the original. Therefore, certain issues remained either not understood, or simply misunderstood. In Dr. Wang's opinion, this was not healthy for the students, nor was it healthy for Chinese education in visual culture.

**(6) Visual Cultural Study: Today's theory about image is beyond visual art.**

To the Chinese art world, some of the most influential Western art theories of today are the theories about images, such as the picture theory of W.J.T. Mitchell. In Dr. Wang's opinion, in the context of contemporary cultural study, Chinese art educators should understand that new theory is not limited to visual art. In other words, today's study of visual art should not be limited to visual art itself, but should be related to mass media, visual advertisement, cinema, TV, internet, and the like. In this way Chinese educators could better understand art in the context of visual culture and globalized culture of today.

**(7) Cross-Culture: Testing Western art theory.**

Speaking about his teaching practice, Dr. Wang said that in order to help students better understand Western art theory, he used not only Western art as examples to illustrate or

explain the theory, but also Chinese art. According to him, it was easier for students to explore Chinese art and aesthetics first, and then approach Western art theory from a Chinese perspective. In other words, Chinese art and aesthetics could support Western art theory, -- and similarly, one could also use Western art theory to understand Chinese art.

In my thesis I examine deliberate misreadings, which is a purposeful manipulation, an intentional misinterpretation and misleading. This is often done by those seeking to create a modern Chinese identity in education by adopting the appearance of modern Western art theory. In other words, the main purpose of deliberate misreading is to construct a Chinese approach to art as a part of the search for China identity in education in visual culture. I understand these misreadings as symptomatic of the “anxiety of imitation,” which means that Chinese art educators feel the need to go beyond simply parroting Western art theory in order to establish their own theory for education in visual culture. For this purpose I coded the interview transcript for these key terms used by Dr. Wang in the interview: “localization,” “Chinese first,” “hidden sources,” “today’s perspective,” and “cross-culture.”

### 3 Analyzing “Localization” and “Chinese First”

“Localization” and “Chinese first” are linked to deliberate misreading that Dr. Wang discussed in the interview. According to Dr. Wang, “Chinese first” is the precondition for localizing Western influence. In order to illustrate this Dr. Wang compared Western-influenced new architecture in Beijing, constructed in the recent decade before the 2008 Olympic Games, to traditional Beijing architecture. Below is an excerpt from the interview on this subject.

**Duan:** In your teaching practice, what is the process of your discussion of a certain Western concept on art? Please give examples.

**Wang:** When I taught an advanced course on History and Criticism of Art at CAFA to undergraduate students, I did not start with the beginning of art history chronologically, because I had to re-structure the course outline and re-organize my class due to the lack of sufficient time for lectures, and because of a new idea about how to teach this course. I started from today, in China, with Beijing architecture. I started with a comparison between the Western-influenced new architectures and the old ones in Beijing. The new ones include the CCTV headquarters building designed by Remment Koolhaas, the Olympic stadium Bird-Nest, and the Water-Cube as well, the National Opera House, and the Beijing West Railway Station, among others. The old ones include the city walls, the traditional courtyards, and so forth.

Juxtaposing these architectures of different times and styles, I actually gave students a chance to face a visual challenge. To those who study art history and art criticism, such a challenge is helpful for them to understand contemporary art. So, offering a challenge is my new idea.

**Duan:** How did you make it challenging? Introducing students to certain Western theoretical concepts, or Chinese concepts?

**Wang:** Yes, but not necessarily defined as Western or Chinese. For instance, comparing the new and old architectures, I focused on the issue of modernity. For sure you could say that this concept came from the West. However, within the framework of the changing society of China today, almost everyone is trying to catch up with change. The nation needs changes, the people need changes, and change is a timely pursuit. I pursue a personal development for my professional career, this is also a change. Why did I start teaching this course with Beijing architectures? Because modernization is a big change to old cities like Beijing, which indicates the change to national identity, not just a change to the urban landscape alone.

**Duan:** In other words, in your teaching, you adopted the concept “modernity” to look at Beijing, an ancient city, and to discuss the change in Beijing from old to new. Don’t you think this is a look at Chinese issues from a Western perspective, although this is not the only perspective?

**Wang:** It might be so, however, I didn’t intentionally take a Western stance in looking at Chinese issues. Beijing architecture could be regarded as a representation of Chinese culture, old and new. In this sense, the discussion of the changing urban landscape in Beijing is not a simple issue to the students. In order to demonstrate the course of urban change I discussed old photos of old Beijing in the terminology of iconology, in comparison with the photos of the “Ten Grand Buildings” of the 1950s and the images of the new architectures of today.

**Duan:** Regarding employing the theory and methodology of iconology, how do you think modern Western art theory could be beneficial to the visual cultural education in China, how could it help the development of today’s Chinese art education?

**Wang:** It would surely help. The development of China in modern times is behind the development in the West. In the highly developed West, many people have a strong sense of protecting their cultural heritage, such as old buildings. In China, on the contrary, this sense is not strong enough. What’s more, due to political reasons, Chinese cultural heritage was heavily damaged during the period of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s through late-1970s. In the West, although Europe experienced two world wars in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and

because of the destruction caused by the wars, people have a strong sense of value for their cultural heritage. Such a sense is particularly meaningful to the Chinese people today, because for the purpose of today's urban development, we are demolishing the old architectures, and destroying our ancient culture. In this sense, we have a lot to learn from the West. Most of the students in my class will go to Europe, Glasgow in the UK, to continue their study in an exchange program. It is very important for them to understand such current Chinese issues. Prepared with Chinese knowledge and equipped with Chinese experience in advance, they will be able to better understand the West, figure out what they really need to learn and study, and figure out what to do in the future when they return to China.

This section of the interview transcript is coded with keywords "localization" and "Chinese first," referring to Chinese contextualizing Western theory and Chinese preparation for the contextualization. Not only did Dr. Wang promote localization as an idea, but also practiced localization in his teaching. As for the relationship between "localization" and "Chinese first," according to Dr. Wang, it is a relationship of "end and means." The purpose of promoting "Chinese first" is to reach the goal of "localization," while "Chinese first" is the precondition to "localization."

Examining Dr. Wang's discussion of Beijing architecture and cultural heritage in relation to the discourse context, I stress the importance of interaction between the use of language and the social environment of current Chinese cultural trends, which could disclose the intended and implied meanings of Dr. Wang's words in this interview. Analyzing the discourse of this interview, I would also go beyond the individual words and expressions, and contextualize them in an historical, social and cultural framework. Briefly speaking, in the 1980s, learning from the West was the priority for the development of Chinese education in visual art. In the 1990s, Westernization in Chinese education in visual art was deepened while the value of Chinese cultural tradition, such as Confucianism, was also recognized. Since the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, Chinese art educators have highly valued the importance of Confucianism and regarded it as a philosophical preparation to localize modern Western art theory for the development of Chinese art education. For instance, Dr. Teng Shouyao, a translator of Arnheim, organized a series of monographs "Studies in the Frontier of Art Education" in the beginning of the 2000s. One of the books in this series is *Confucianism and Art Education* by Nie Zhenbin. From a historical and sociological perspective Nie advocated the

importance of Confucianism in the development of Chinese education in visual art in the new millennium (Z. Nie, 2006, p. 4).

Why does Confucianism play a crucial role in the concept of “Chinese first”? After the Cultural Revolution the Chinese intellectuals, both traditional and Western-influenced, were disappointed with the Stalinist Marxism that dominated Chinese ideology from the late 1940s throughout the 1980s, because the promised ideal communist dream for a bright future did not come true. Instead, China experienced one of the worst period of turmoil in history during the Cultural Revolution, and Chinese intellectuals experienced one of the worst periods of suffering in history. Due to such a disillusion, the majority of Chinese intellectuals basically denied any socialist and communist value, and considered that there was no achievement in art education from the late 1940s to the 1980s. If there was anything ideologically valuable for Chinese art education during that period, it must have been the old tradition of Confucianism. In other words, regarding “Chinese first” in the terminology of Dr. Wang, it refers to traditional Chinese culture and ideology, not the so-called “Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism, and Mao Zedong Thought” that controlled education in China for more than three decades.

As for the topic of Dr. Wang’s conversation in the interview, I would summarize his classroom discussion of Beijing architecture as a comparison of the images of the old and new buildings, which disclosed the necessity to better understand the Western concept of protecting cultural heritage in the modern age. As for the issue behind this topic, my interpretation of Dr. Wang’s discourse is that, along with the change in Beijing urban landscape, it is necessary to change the way of thinking with regard to cultural heritage, and this change challenges the old way of thinking. As for the opinion of Dr. Wang, according to him, all students should understand Chinese cultural tradition before approaching Western art theory, this could help them to better understand and accept Western concepts. His main idea is that, for the Chinese students who study Western art theory, understanding Chinese culture is the precondition to understanding Western culture, and “Chinese first” is a way to localize Western art theory.

In terms of learning from the West for the development of art education in China, in recent years, scholars and art educators have recognized and accepted the idea of “Chinese first” as the precondition for adapting Western concepts. Due to the idea of “Chinese first,” when Chinese art educators study modern Western art theory, they take what they need, and, as a way of deliberate misreading, they also manipulate Western theory in their interpretation for pragmatic reasons. At this point, I would assume that Dr. Wang has implied a message: Chinese



needs are the criteria to filter Western influence, and Chinese needs are the basis for Chinese art educators to select what they want to learn from the West. Due to this pragmatic idea, deliberate misreading occurs.

#### 4 Further Analyses

**(1) Hidden Sources.** This is directly related to the sense of history. Dr. Wang is aware of the role of Western theoretical concepts behind the contemporary issues in Chinese art and education in visual culture. Tracing the influence of the hidden sources in his teaching of art history and criticism reveals that Dr. Wang has a good grasp of history, because the realization of Western influence on the development of Chinese art in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was historically conditioned. Without such an historical sense, it would have been difficult to imagine how Western formalism could have been so influential in China in the 1980s. After all, this was when postmodernism replaced formalism, and formalism had already lost its theoretical ground and academic priority in the West. In the 1980s, Western formalist theory was needed by Chinese artists and art educators, and was used as a workable and effective weapon in fighting against the politicized art and art education that was influenced by Soviet ideology which had dominated the Chinese education system from the late 1940s through the 1980s. Since the Chinese historical needs functioned as a temporal background that conditioned and allowed the influence of Western formalism to happen, then the notion of “Chinese first” does not refer to the knowledge of Chinese culture alone, but also refers to the Chinese needs. This is to say that the knowledge of Chinese theory helped students to better understand what the needs of China are, why they are needed, and how they can be acquired. In this case, all these together make the “localization” possible.

**(2) Today’s Perspective.** The reason to employ Western contemporary theory to interpret old masters, both Western and Chinese, is not only to historically localize Western art theory, but also to justify the localization as well. In the interview, Dr. Wang briefly talked about the interpretation of Velázquez’s painting *Las Meninas* from the perspectives of Panofsky, Foucault, and Lacan. As I looked at the text of my interview with Dr. Wang, I formulated two questions: Could we employ Western art theory to interpret traditional Chinese art of old masters? Could we use ancient Chinese masterpieces to test modern Western art theory for the purpose of localization? I would give an affirmative and positive answer to the two questions. Although in the interview I did not raise the two questions and Dr. Wang did not talk about them directly, I would infer that Dr. Wang may hold the same idea. Why is this so? Because the notion of “today’s perspective” in this interview played a similar role to “Chinese first,” and both are

crucial in supporting the notion of “localization.” In this regard, if “Chinese first” is a cross-cultural issue with an historical implication of Confucianism, then, “today’s perspective” is not only cross-cultural but also temporal with an historical implication as well. In other words, “today’s perspective” is complementary to “Chinese first” and is supportive to the idea of “localization.”

**(3) Cross-Culture.** According to Dr. Wang, the purpose of crossing the Chinese-Western cultural boundary is to help students in understanding Western art theory through reading Chinese art and art theory, and also support Western art theory.

## 5 Conclusion

Throughout my interview with Dr. Wang, he frequently used certain words and phrases, they were “localization,” “Chinese first,” “hidden sources,” “today’s perspective,” “cross-culture,” etc. Due to the centrality of these words and phrases in the interview, I regard them as keywords and use them to code the transcript. This is to say that the findings come from the topics of the interview, and the main findings could be coded with these keywords as well. Based on the above descriptions and analyses, I now elaborate and interpret the main findings synthetically, in accordance with the topics of the interview and the subject of this study.

Firstly, “localization” is a major issue, referring to what Chinese educators do with modern Western art theory and its influence on contemporary Chinese education in visual culture. Since Chinese educators recognize the importance of Western theory to the development of education in China, they have had various ways to embrace Western theory, and have employed Western theory in the teaching practice and education reform. This is a process of localizing Western theory, which promotes Western influence in China.

Secondly, “Chinese first” is an important way to localize Western art theory, or, it is the precondition to localize Western theory. Without “Chinese first,” the Chinese educators and students would not know what, why, and how they need to learn from the West. In other words, “Chinese first” is a preparation for embracing Western influence and for employing Western art theory. However, purposeful misreading is related to this issue, because Chinese educators could intentionally manipulate Western art theory to fit their needs.

Thirdly, “hidden sources” is also an issue about the preparation for embracing Western influence, which consists of two aspects. On the one hand, some issues in Chinese education in visual culture could be explained with the help of a Western art theory, and on the other, one needs a strong sense of history to see the relevance of Western theory to Chinese issues.

Fourthly, “today’s perspective” is complementary to the issue of historical sense, and it is also a preparation for embracing Western influence. Historical sense could help to form a part of context for Chinese educators to embrace Western theory, and today’s perspective could help to form another part of the context. In other words, localization is accomplished in the Chinese context. Meanwhile, it is also a process of re-contextualizing modern Western art theory in China.

Last, but not least, the key term of “cross-culture” demonstrates another dimension in localizing Western influence. If the issues of historical sense and today’s perspective form the context with a temporal frame, then, the issue of cross-culture form the context with a cross-regional frame. This is to say that the Chinese context for localizing Western influence is not one dimensional, but multi-dimensional, involving multiple considerations.

To sum up: Chinese educators in visual culture localize modern Western art theory for their own needs, and they project their expectations onto Western theory, and thus, purposeful misreading happens. In this sense, the process of localization could be regarded as a process of misreading, and conversely, purposeful misreading happens in the process of localization.

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