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Lessons in Equality: From Ignorant Schoolmaster to Chinese Aesthetics

Abstract: The postponement of equality is not only a recurring topic in Jacques Rancière's writings, but also the most defining feature of modern Chinese aesthetics. Particularly in the period after 1980's, when the country opened its doors to Western ideas, Chinese aesthetics extensively played a subordinate role in an imbalanced knowledge transfer, in which structural inequality was only reinforced. Aesthetics in China plays an important role and is expected not only to interpret literature and art, but also to help building a harmonious society within globalized world. This is the reason why some commentators – Wang Jianjiang being one of them – point out that it is of utmost importance to eliminate this imbalance and develop proper Chinese aesthetics. Since the key issue in this development is the problem of inequality, an approach developed by Jacques Rancière, “the philosopher of equality”, is proposed. Even though Rancière wrote extensively about literature, art and aesthetics, in order to confront the problem of Chinese aesthetics, it seems that a different approach, found in his repertoire, could prove to be more fruitful. In 1987, he published a book titled *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which contributed to his ongoing philosophical emancipatory project, and focused on inequality and its conditions in the realm of education. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, nonetheless, stretches far beyond the walls of classroom or even educational system, and brings to the fore political implications that cluster around the fundamental core of Rancière's political philosophy: the definition of politics as the verification of the presupposition of the equality of intelligence. Equality cannot be postponed as a goal to be only attained in the future and, therefore, has to be considered as a premise of egalitarian politics that needs to operate as a presupposition.

Keywords: China, aesthetics, pedagogy, equality, interculturality, Jacques Rancière, Joseph Jacotot

Part I

Aesthetics in China has a long and diverse tradition. During most of the history of the country it played a significant role in Chinese society. Even though some commentators point out that Chinese aesthetics wouldn't even exist without Western influence, and that aesthetics as a discipline was not constituted before the beginning

of the 20th century,¹ aesthetic concerns were integrally intertwined with social and political issues, ethics and metaphysics throughout the classical period.

One of the defining features of ancient Chinese philosophy is the concept of immanence.² The epistemological equivalent of this concept is conceptual polarity, which leads to understanding the universe without the need for transcendence, dualism, or conclusiveness. Instead of focusing on an absolute and final truth, ancient Chinese philosophers emphasized balance and harmony within the dynamic and ever-changing world. Even though several millennia have passed since the oldest Chinese classical philosophical text, *The Book of Changes*, started to influence generations of thinkers, the concept of *change* still remains influential. Today's globalized world changes even faster than it did in the past, and Chinese society changes probably even more radically and profoundly.

In this complex and overwhelming process, not all of the changes are constructive and encouraging, and some commentators have recently started to express their concern and point out the most problematic aspects of this change. One of those, who focused also on the role of aesthetics and philosophy in this context is Wang Jianjiang, who in the last couple of years probably most extensively covered this topic. In his article entitled "The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*. The Example of Chinese Aesthetics";³ Jianjiang begins with the following observation:

Compared with the rapid development of Chinese economy, which is the leading one in the world, modern philosophy and aesthetics in China are in a position that is subordinate to the West. [...] Compared with its rapid economic growth, China has not achieved comparable positions in philosophy, the humanities or the social sciences.⁴

Instead of balance and harmony, the process of transformation of Chinese society within a broader context of globalization, brought inequality. There are at least two inequalities at stake here. Not only is the Chinese academia inferior when compared internationally, or, specifically, to the West, but also, in China itself, there is "severe imbalance between Chinese culture and Chinese economy".⁵ Both inequalities, according to Wang, play an important role in Chinese society and they should not be taken for granted. But also, and more surprisingly, "this situation is most visible in the research of aesthetics".⁶

¹ Jianping Gao, "Sto let kitajske estetike – oris [A Century of Chinese Aesthetics]," *Filozofski vestnik* 27, 1 (2006): 103.

² Cf. Nahum Brown & William Franke ed., *Transcendence, Immanence, and Intercultural Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

³ Wang Jianjiang, "The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*. The Example of Chinese Aesthetics," *Filozofski vestnik* 37, 1 (2016): 157–78.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*

To recognize why the research of aesthetics plays a particular function in this context, one has to understand the role that aesthetics plays in contemporary China. Namely, as Jianjiang explicitly states, aesthetics in contemporary China has a very important function; it is “endowed with special ideological form.”⁷ The role that aesthetics plays in China is thus strikingly different from its expected role in the West, where it is more or less marginalized, together with philosophy and humanities in general, not only in relation to society, but also to other sciences within the academia:

Aesthetics in China is also expected to exert a huge impact on the society, such as helping to build a harmonious society, to create a second nature and to guide literature and art.⁸

In China, according to Jianjiang, “[e]ducating the public through aesthetics is considered to strengthen the soft power of the country by beautifying objects, deepening the scientific studies and improving people’s living standards.”⁹ The difference is striking, since in the West, aesthetics definitely was expected to play a similar role in the past, most notably during the Enlightenment period and especially in Kant’s and Schiller’s view. In the second part of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first, however, this ‘aesthetic mission’ was largely forgotten and the function of aesthetics was, to put it plainly, often reduced to offer assistance to advertising business and consumerism. Or, in another words, its role was not to build harmony, but uniformity and conformity.

There are obviously at least two interpretations of the aforementioned situation. The first (and deterministic) one is to state that technological and economic development leads to the necessary denigration of humanities, and especially philosophy and aesthetics. Such interpretations are not so uncommon, at least in the West, nevertheless, as pointed out by Jianjiang, in Chinese context they are definitely not acceptable, and consequently the solution to the pressing inequalities must be found:

Eliminating the imbalance is essential for China to pursue development further, but the emergence of a new balance is not possible without the establishment of *Zhuyi* and schools.¹⁰

The above assertion can only be properly understood within the history of Chinese aesthetics, but above all within its development in the twentieth century. As already mentioned, Chinese aesthetics in its modern form was established in the beginning of the twentieth century. Wang Guowei and Cai Yuanpei, who are considered its founders, followed the path of Kantian aesthetics and above all the principle of *interestedness and disinterestedness*. In this sense, the first decades of was Chinese

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 33.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 31.

aesthetics were predominantly occupied with formal questions and ideological struggle was not present until 1930's.

The second important period in Chinese aesthetics, known also as “the Great Debate on Aesthetics” or “a hundred schools of thought” came into being in 1950's. Even though the problem of *interestedness* remained in aesthetics a *fil rouge*, in this period the most important questions were related to the ideological divide (class struggle, or, bourgeoisie vs. proletariat) and the basic philosophical dilemma or struggle was between idealism and materialism. The great debate resulted in four aesthetic schools: subjectivist idealist aesthetics (Lv Ying and Gao Ertai), objectivist materialist aesthetics (Cai Yi), dualist aesthetics (Zhu Guangqian) and practical aesthetics of Marxism (Li Zehou).

The third important period in Chinese aesthetics followed the opening up of the country in 1980's. As several Chinese commentators pointed out, this “aesthetics boom” was different from that of the 1950's. Even though it did not bring much of a surplus value, because the main issue was (the more or less naive) distinction between idealism and materialism, it developed four distinctive schools that were actually schools of Chinese aesthetics. The aesthetics movement in the 1980's did not open a great debate and no new aesthetics schools followed. Instead of debate, the result was *aphasia*: “Western aesthetic discourse became the discourse of Chinese aesthetic researchers, with the Chinese aestheticians suffering from ‘aphasia.’”¹¹

If the initial period of aesthetics in the beginning of the twentieth century was mainly interpreted as an introduction of Western and mainly Kantian aesthetics into China, and therefore did not result in a specifically Chinese form of aesthetics, then the great debate from the 1950's with the first schools of aesthetics, was seen as a step forward. The problem was, however, that its most important achievements remained confined to Marxism and more or less to the “materialism vs. idealism” dichotomy. In both cases the proper Chinese aesthetics did not bring satisfactory outcomes.

As pointed out by Wang Jianjiang, with the aesthetics boom, starting in the 1980's, not much in this meaning has actually changed. The most remarkable feature of Western aesthetics entering China was “the intensive bombardment of ‘-isms’ (*Zhuyi*)” and the related uncritical acceptance of various Western aesthetic ideas, theories, movements, and schools. The common name proposed to designate this ‘syndrome’ in Chinese was *Zhuyi*:

Zhuyi in modern Chinese means the expression of theory, the cohesion of thought, a sign of value and the guiding principle and slogan of action.¹²

Moreover, according to Wang, *Zhuyi* in modern Chinese is also related to *-ism* in English:

¹¹ Ibid, 12.

¹² Ibid, 35.

Zhuyi designates a systematized, theorized and influential thought or proposition of a specific idea, aim and doctrine related to the objective world, social life and academic issues, while ‘-ism’ refers to any distinctive doctrine or practice, system or movement.¹³

Some commentators have noticed that an accurate translation of *Zhuyi* and –ism is difficult to achieve,¹⁴ however, this seems to be only one of the open issues that will have to be analyzed suitably in some other context. The other significant issue is the distinction between high- and low-level *Zhuyi*. Namely, some were developed spontaneously, and can be regarded primitive or low-level, whereas others were conscious and original, and can therefore be regarded high-level *Zhuyi*. The latter had exerted a strong impact on people and society, or, on the other hand, had strongly influenced Chinese humanities and especially aesthetics, and these are the only ones that should be properly labeled *Zhuyi*.

This distinction between high-level and low-level *Zhuyi* seems very important, but again not at all unambiguous as it appears at first glance, as just a couple observations can show. Wang Jianjiang has claimed, for example, that Mao Zedong’s thought cannot even be called *Zhuyi*. Nevertheless, Maoism was, at least for some time, an important political movement in the West, and some philosophers called themselves Maoists (e.g. Alain Badiou). Moreover, in 1968, when students in Paris revolted, they tore apart the city carrying banners that read “Marx/Mao/Marcuse”.

On the other hand, many Western -isms, at least in the arts, got their labels from critics, who used them in a pejorative sense, even though they now fall into the category of highly appreciated art. This was the case with impressionism, cubism, fauvism and so on. Moreover, some influential theoretical movements, or “great -isms”, as Jianjiang termed them, got their names due to bureaucratic needs within academic world. The term deconstruction has never been used by Jacques Derrida; post-structuralism was developed within the American university system to designate a range of French thinkers who would probably never call themselves post-structuralists; post-modernism, after a brief period of being a fashion, turned to a depreciatory label.

By pointing out those examples, I wish to show the importance of the concept of *Zhuyi*, not only in the context of Chinese aesthetics, but also within Western philosophy and humanities. It seems that some important issues regarding Western -isms could more adequately be addressed through *Zhuyi*. However, in order to do so, it appears that only arguments about the meaning and definition of *Zhuyi* and its relation to Western -isms would not suffice. I thus wish to propose another, more radical way, taken from the ‘philosophy of equality’, developed by Jacques Rancière.

¹³ Ibid, 31.

¹⁴ Cf. Aleš Erjavec, “*Zhuyi*: From Absence to Bustle? Some Comments to Jianjiang Wang’s Article ‘The Bustle or the Absence of *Zhuyi*’”, *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 13 (2017): 111-121. doi: 10.25038/am.v0i13.189

Part II

French philosopher Jacques Rancière (b. 1940) is considered one of the most influential contemporary authors writing on the subject of aesthetics and therefore someone who could conceivably be a point of reference in the debate about its future as well. Moreover, as predominantly a political philosopher, and, as some called him, “the philosopher of equality”,¹⁵ he seems to be a suitable author to consider issues of dominance, hierarchy and inequality. Besides, Rancière exemplifies that one never knows when one’s own individual intellectual project might become a school or a movement.

Even though he has been writing and publishing steadily for more than half a century, it is only relatively recently that Rancière has risen to public prominence at first in France and that his impact has begun to be felt in English-speaking academic world.¹⁶ In particular, within the last decade this meant several high-profile conferences and a number of journal special issues devoted to his thought, translations of his work into a number of other languages, and so on. English-speaking authors and editors dealing with his work struggled to derive an adjective from his name to point to a broader meaning of his work, or simply categorize it. Some of them therefore started to use the designation ‘Rancierian’.¹⁷

Even though Rancière wrote extensively about literature, art and aesthetics, in order to confront the problem of Chinese aesthetics, it seems that a different approach, found in his repertoire, could prove to be more fruitful. In 1987, he published a book, which contributed to his ongoing philosophical emancipatory project, and focused on inequality and its conditions in the field of education. As pointed out by Yves Citton, this short book, entitled *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and subtitled *Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*,¹⁸ is experimental (it is, actually, a thought-experiment, but also an ‘intellectual narrative’), provisional (proposed theory still awaits full development), conceptually fragile, and argumentatively problematic (because it thrives on a paradox).¹⁹

The main protagonist of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is a teacher named Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840). Jacotot, who had previously been a soldier, administrator and deputy, was exiled from France after the Restoration of Monarchy in 1815, but eventually found a new occupation as a lecturer in French literature at the University of Louvain in the Netherlands. The situation in which he found himself there in 1818 was, however, rather specific. His students did not speak French, and he spoke no

¹⁵ Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity Press, 2010), vii.

¹⁶ The first book-length study by a single author devoted entirely to Rancière was published only in 2010.

¹⁷ It is interesting to note, though at the moment of writing this text, my text editor already recognizes the word ‘Rancierian’, but still underlines ‘Rancière’, because it is not a part of its vocabulary.

¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Yves Citton, “‘The ignorant schoolmaster’: knowledge and authority,” in: *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranty (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 26.

Flemish. Therefore, he was unable to teach them anything in an ordinary way, that is, by explaining. Between the teacher, who's position within a school system was that of a (school) master that possesses knowledge, and students, who by definition are without knowledge i.e. ignorant, existed a rupture that Jacotot was not able to fix through the standard education procedure. Because they had no common ground (they literally did not understand each other), he could not teach them at all that way. Therefore, to proceed, "the minimal link of a *thing in common* had to be established between himself and them."²⁰

Jacotot found a solution to this problem. He gave his students a bilingual version of an influential book by Francois de Fénelon: *Telemachus, son of Ulysses* (1699),²¹ and told them to learn French by figuring out this text in its original language with the help of the Flemish translation.

He had given no explanation to his 'students' on the first elements of the language. He had not explained spelling or conjugations to them. They had looked for the French words that corresponded to words they knew and the reasons for their grammatical endings by themselves. They had learned to put them together to make, in turn, French sentences by themselves: sentences whose spelling and grammar became more and more exact as they progressed through the book; but, above all, sentences of writers and not of schoolchildren.²²

Students' accomplishments took Jacotot by surprise, or so we are told, and mastered the foreign language enough to write essays about the book in French, and reached a very decent level of written expression, higher even than the students, whose French was their mother tongue.

This practical achievement was the start of a philosophical experiment, which was leading to an intellectual revolution. From the empirical demonstration in which his students showed that they managed to learn French without any form of explanation, Jacotot started building a radical reformation of all pedagogical methods under the title of "Universal Teaching" (*Enseignement universel*).

Joseph Jacotot applied himself to varying the experiment, to repeating on purpose what chance had once produced. He began to teach two subjects at which he was notably incompetent: painting and the piano. [...] The experiment seemed to him sufficient to shed light: one can teach

²⁰ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 2.

²¹ Fénelon's *Telemachus* was the most widely read book of the 18th century, influencing Montesquieu and Rousseau among other. It tells a story of the moral and political education of Telemachus, son of Ulysses, by his tutor Mentor. It is the story of the transformation of an egoistic young man into a model ruler. Cf. Francois de Fénelon, *Telemachus, son of Ulysses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²² Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 3–4.

what one doesn't know if the student is emancipated, that is to say, if he is obliged to use his own intelligence.²³

On the other hand, every human being must also necessarily be capable of learning by himself (through trial and error, for example). This is how all of us learned our mother tongue. This approach has yet another important implication: the teacher's main function is not to transmit content (he doesn't possess the knowledge, and therefore cannot give it to the students), but to influence and mobilize the students' will. Jacotot's role as a teacher was not an explication (i.e. of the rules of French grammar), but a series of commands: "Read this book! Pay attention to these words!"

Jacotot's approach worked, and this came as a surprise even to himself. His students were faster and better learners in comparison to other students, at least so we are told. How can we explain this result rationally? At the first sight, it seems that he (by chance) developed and applied a methodology that gave better results than the classical pedagogical approach. Nevertheless, argues Rancière, this is a false presumption: Jacotot's approach is much more radical, and creates "a rupture with the logic of all pedagogies".²⁴ The methods chosen to render the ignorant person learned may differ, they may be traditional or modern, active or passive, gentle or strict, and so on, and the efficiency of these methods can be compared. In this sense, one could compare the results of Jacotot's students with the results obtained through a traditional method. "But," as Rancière points out, "in reality there was nothing to compare".²⁵

The confrontation of methods presupposes a minimal agreement on the goals of pedagogical act: the transmission of the master's knowledge to the students. But Jacotot had transmitted nothing. He had not used any method. The method was purely the student's. [...] The comparison was no longer between methods but rather between two uses of intelligence and two conceptions of intellectual order.²⁶

It was, therefore, not so important to know which method enables students to learn French more or less quickly, since as Rancière reminds us, the goal set by Jacotot was not to find a better pedagogy, but something more fundamental: the problem of emancipation: "The rapid route was not that of a better pedagogy. It was another route, that of liberty."²⁷

Several implications follow from this insight. One of them is that, as proposed by some commentators, the title of Rancière's book could to be taken as a (utopian) promise:

²³ Ibid, 14–15.

²⁴ Ibid, 13.

²⁵ Ibid, 14.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

there may be a blessed day of Intellectual Emancipation when ‘ignorant’ people will be recognized as perfectly qualified schoolmasters; a day when children of human beings will have realized that they are intelligent enough to learn by themselves, without the need of any (superior) explicator, only with the commanding help (and encouragement) of their ignorant brothers.²⁸

Even though Jacotot himself did not get that far in his thought, and retained a position of a teacher within his Universal Teaching, this utopian promise, at least in some circles, turn out to be a real option.²⁹

There is yet another implication, and probably more disturbing, according to Rancière, that has to be taken into account. As Jacotot has proven empirically, the act of explication is in no way necessary to ensure proper learning (Jacotot himself did not and could not explain anything to his students). What role does explication therefore play in the process of education? The answer we get from Jacotot, and consequently from Rancière, is quite radical. Explication fulfils a very important function in the process of socialization, however not an emancipatory one. Quite the contrary: it teaches students that they are ignorant, and that they are incapable of escaping ignorance by their own means. Put another way, and exposing the full subversive potential of this assertion:

the true (if unconscious) function of all the generous, altruistic, philanthropic, enlightened and enlightening providers of explications is to instill a sense of inequality deep into the minds and souls of all the children of the Republic.³⁰

The true role of explication in the system of education has therefore nothing to do with French grammar, piano playing techniques, or with the importance of beauty and sublime in Kant’s *Third Critique*. Its role is to repeat monotonously and persistently that inequality always exists (some are knowable and some ignorant), and that without explications from a superior intelligence, one cannot learn anything.

Jacotot’s experiment thus brings to the fore a very discomforting assumption concerning education. No matter how progressive the institution, the program or the educator; no matter how honest and altruistic are their intents, the very act of transmitting knowledge through explication generates and perpetuates structural inequality (between explainer and explaineé). With each act of explanation, this structural inequality is reinforced, since in each act the educator – instead of contributing to student’s emancipation

²⁸ Citton, “‘The Ignorant Schoolmaster,’” 27.

²⁹ So called “hacker communities” are only one example, since a growing number of young people (at least in the USA) join learning communities in the field of computer programming and IT instead of studying at universities.

³⁰ Citton, “‘The Ignorant Schoolmaster,’” 28.

– reasserts his superiority over the him by acting as someone who has knowledge (contrary to the student, who is *always* in a position of someone who lacks it).

The Ignorant Schoolmaster, nonetheless, stretches far beyond the walls of classroom or even educational system, and brings to the fore political implications that cluster around the fundamental core of Rancière’s political philosophy: the “definition of politics as the verification of the presupposition of the equality of intelligence”.³¹ Implications of Jacotot’s gesture can be found on several levels, however, due to the relatively limited space here, we shall focus on the problem of “postponement of equality” in contemporary politics, and the solution proposed by Rancière.

The “principle of equality of all speaking beings”³² forms, as already stated, the very core of Rancière’s philosophical thought, and assertions such as “everyone is of equal intelligence”,³³ emerge persistently through all his writings. The problem, however, lies in the fact that this equality can never be observed as such, and “we can never say: all intelligence is equal.”³⁴ Instead, manifestations of intelligence (such as IQ) are measured and categorized according to momentary particular needs. Consequently, in (progressive) political agendas equality is presented as a goal to be achieved in the future (but actually impossible to fully achieve), rather than as a premise on which to build an egalitarian society.

In Rancière’s writings, the postponement of equality forms a recurring topic, since it is regarded as the main trap of progressive politics. Its most elementary characterization, however, is to be found in Jacotot’s model, or, to be precise, in its reversal (i.e. in the Learned Schoolmaster, or, as Rancière put it, in “The Old Master”).³⁵ Through an act of explication, the teacher (The Old Master) drives the student to accept to submit his (lower) intelligence to his (higher) understanding today, in order to be his equal tomorrow. Jacotot, however, knew better. He realized that knowledge is not necessary for teaching, nor is explication necessary for learning. Explication, he pointed out, is *the myth* of pedagogy. Rather than eliminating incapacity, explication, in fact, creates it through the postponement or delay (“in the next lecture”, “a little later”, “a few more explanations and you’ll see the light”, etc.).

The political consequences of this temporal structure are, however, much broader. The pedagogical fiction erected within the fiction of the whole society, and the pedagogical myth “would become the whole nineteenth-century myth of Progress [...] The pedagogical myth divides the world into two: the knowing and the ignorant, the mature and the unformed, the capable and the incapable.”³⁶ It works by represent-

³¹ Ibid, 29.

³² Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 31.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “The Old Master” appears in the English translation (Kristin Ross) of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, whereas Rancière uses originally “la Vieille”, which refers semantically to “the old (explanatory) method”, but which also means “The Old Woman”. Cf. Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, 28.

³⁶ Kristin Ross, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, xx.

ing inequality in temporal terms or in terms of velocity, such as “slowness”, “delay”, “backwardness”, “lag”, etc. As pointed out by Ross, it is precisely this temporal structure of the myth, working in the guise of the *ideology of progress* that relates the time of Jacotot with the time of Rancière and thus our own time:

Never will the student catch up with the teacher; never will the ‘developing’ nations catch up with the enlightened nations.³⁷

In this sense, as reading *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* suggests, not only the concept of progress, but also ‘democratization’ of the globe, is just another name for inequality.

Equality, however, cannot be postponed as a goal only to be attained in the future, argues Rancière, and, therefore, it has to be considered as premise to egalitarian politics that needs to operate as a presupposition. Equality, writes Rancière, is “not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a *supposition* to maintain in every circumstance.”³⁸ The slogan of those, who throughout history followed the path of emancipation, was hence not “One day we will be able to, ‘but’ Yes, we already can.”³⁹

The radical conception of intellectual equality which Rancière derives from Jacotot is therefore that of equality which must be presupposed, at the outset, in the pedagogical encounter, which must be declared and which must be verified in that encounter.⁴⁰ Or, as formalized in the following two theses by Alain Badiou:

1. Under conditions in which equality is declared, ignorance is the point at which new knowledge can emerge.
2. Under the authority of a master who lacks knowledge, knowledge can be a site of equality.⁴¹

It not difficult to see that, no matter how seductive and enchanting, Rancière’s account of Jacotot’s approach leaves open many questions and puts aside many details. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Davis Oliver, it is important to remember that “Rancière is not trying to devise a new curriculum or even a pedagogical programme [...], but rather [tries to show] that it is possible to glean from Jacotot’s pedagogical experiment the political potency of a new understanding of the nature of equality.”⁴²

This approach enables Rancière to present to his readers Jacotot’s (anti-explanatory) method without actually explaining it, verging, therefore, throughout on paradox. It does not mean, though, that it has no immediate practical consequences in present-day situations. Instead of explaining Jacotot’s system, Rancière is rewriting

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 138.

³⁹ Cf. Citton, “‘The Ignorant Schoolmaster,’” 32.

⁴⁰ Cf. Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, xy.

⁴¹ Alan Badiou, “Les leçons de Jacques Rancière,” in Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, 27.

⁴² Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, 27–28.

and translating it into a language that we, the inhabitants of the twenty-first century, are able to understand.

Part III

The growing imbalance and inequality both perceived and actual, has become one of the most pressing challenges of contemporary globalized world. The case of contemporary China, in this context, is rather particular. On the one hand, the hasty development of Chinese economy diminished the inequality in economic terms, or even reversed the process in which China was falling behind the developed West, but eventually found itself in a leading position. On the other hand, however, philosophy, humanities, and social science did not manage to follow this process and particularly in case aesthetics, this inequality is not only progressively manifest, but also as pointed out by some, quite worrisome. Such is all the more so the case if one takes into consideration the importance that aesthetics is expected to play in the ideological sense and as the predominant force which should strengthen the soft power of the country.

As a brief glance at the history of the twentieth century shows, the postponement of equality is not only a recurring topic in Rancière's writings, but also the most defining feature of modern Chinese aesthetics. Particularly in the period after 1980's, when the country opened its doors to Western ideas, Chinese aesthetics extensively played a subordinate role of a student in an imbalanced knowledge transfer, in which structural inequality was only reinforced. Wang Jianjiang's description of the process that began in the 1980's is even more explicit:

Various introductions of Western aesthetic works involving '-isms' (*Zhuyi*) and different interpretations of "-isms" (*Zhuyi*) proved to be an irresistible trend. As a result, characteristics of Chinese aesthetics were neglected, its diversity was hidden, even its existence was made suspect. The premise of a dialogue between China and Western aesthetics was disappearing. [...] In particular, Western modernist and post-modernist aesthetics are transforming and shaping Chinese aesthetic concepts and ideals as well as artistic thinking.⁴³

As it has been shown by Rancière, this situation can only lead to further inequality that cannot be, even in the distant future, turned to equality. The proposed solution is thus radically different. It begins with equality, and in words of Rancière,

[t]his power of equality is at once one of duality and one of community. There is no intelligence where there is aggregation, the *binding* of one mind to another. There is intelligence where each person acts, tells what

⁴³ Wang, "The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*," 40–41.

he is doing, and gives the means of verifying the reality of his action. The thing in common, placed between two minds, is the gauge of that equality, and this in two ways. A material thing is first of all ‘the only bridge of communication between two minds.’ The bridge is a passage, but it is also distance maintained. The materiality of the book keeps two minds at an equal distance, whereas explication is the annihilation of one mind by another. But the thing is also an always available source of material verification [...] The examinee is always beholden to a verification in the open book, in the materiality of each word, the curve of each sign. The thing, the book, prevents cheating by both the ignorant and the learned.⁴⁴

Two generalizations are required in order to appropriately relate the above assertion to Chinese aesthetics and retain analogy. Individual minds and persons should be substituted with different approaches (e.g. Chinese and Western), and the book as a material thing with the object of aesthetic inquiry in general.

Beginning with the postulation of equality, and using ‘the material thing’ as a bridge of communication, this strategy instigates a development of Chinese aesthetics that can be understood as radically different from “the rampancy of *Zhuyi*” or the “aphasia” on the part of Chinese aestheticians.⁴⁵ The proposed model, initially developed by Joseph Jacotot in his classroom and for his students and generalized to become a political strategy by Rancière, demands a change of perspective. Explication in the sense of knowledge transfer can never result in equality. Only if equality is postulated at the outset is there any possibility for knowledge to develop.

It is obvious, though, that this is not an algorithm in which all the necessary steps are already prescribed – just follow them and you will reach your destination. It is, actually, far from that. No explanation can be given, because every explanation causes inequality. But, on the other hand, there is no need to explain. The key question is, as already indicated, not related to knowledge transfer (which Western *-ism* should Chinese aestheticians apply and when), but how to influence and mobilize their will in order to develop their own aesthetic approach (a specific *Zhuyi*). It is possible to imagine several scenarios in which the mobilization of the will comes from various loci. It could be external (following from global processes or even the state planning) or internal (coming from individual subjective intentions). In any case the locus of mobilization of the will does not play an important role as far as the principle of equality remains intact.

⁴⁴ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 32.

⁴⁵ Cf. Wang, “The Bustle and the Absence of *Zhuyi*,” 40.

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