

Chinese Prosperity and its Aesthetic of Vulgarly

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I would like to thank the China Academy of Art for inviting an outsider like me to this conference so that I could cross disciplinary boundaries to share some of my ideas about social and cultural change as well as art/aesthetic education.

The theme of this session is “difference as resource.” In Taiwan where I have spent most of my life, “difference,” more often understood as “differentiation,” has developed into an affectively charged and heavily manipulated concept through years of political strife over ethnic politics and then gender politics. Social movements and theoretical constructions converge on the concept of “difference;” global economic restructuring in recent years have further rotated the fate of Taiwan from prosperity to stagnation and hence transformed “difference” into a focal point of felt loss and resentment that made any hope of finding commonalities increasingly dismal.

“Difference” could be a reflection of fundamental contradictions under given historical conditions; it could also be simply a feeling of divergence that rises from meeting with unfamiliarity, dissimilarity, or incomprehensibility. Yet, embedded in historical and social realities of existing politico-economical powers and ambitions, the felt sense of divergence often carries implications of high and low, superior and inferior in hierarchical positioning or posturing. This implicit or explicit differentiation makes cross-cultural collaboration into possible occasions of assimilation and incorporation as well as moments for contestation and resistance. How to dismantle this hierarchical differentiation and soften the accompanying tension, creating opportunities for both sides to find ways of reaching peaceful coexistence and cooperation, is not only the focus of this conference but the continued goal of all of us in this age of growing unrest.

I have chosen to use a very local phenomenon in China as entry point into my thoughts on cultural differences, the tension therein, and possible communication and integration. Hopefully, my argument may also afford implications for thinking across cultures.

From-the-Soil (“*Tu-Wei*”) Aesthetics of Vulgarly

The prosperity that we are witnessing in China today carries its own specificities that pose new challenges for art/aesthetic education. One of the most prominent and controversial developments may be what has been referred to as “the radical democratization of cultural production,” and the (blatantly non-modern, non-western) aesthetics of vulgarity (“*Tu-Wei*”) that has evolved along with it. In fact, with China’s affluence as its basis, information technology as its carrier, and network flow or likes/hits as its prime value, recent blowouts in popular culture cannot help but raise social anxiety and controversy.

For a lack of better translation, I have adopted the English term “vulgarity” to stand for the Chinese term “*Tu-Wei* (literally “taste of the soil”).” The word

vulgarity may have aptly captured the low status of “*Tu-Wei*” subculture and the social disdain it suffers, but vulgarity fails to include reference to *Tu-Wei*’s origin as detailed in Professor Fei Xiao-Tong’s classic work *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (1947): that is, *characteristics derived from a rootedness in the soil (Tu), the organization of the Chinese society, and its general way of life*. Of course, by now, cultural dissemination and market activities have already saturated and hybridized the meaning of “*Tu*,” from originally a position clearly in opposition to the urban, the Western, and the modern, to now complicated and layered meanings that are hard to identify, to be loosely described as “vulgarity” in the present paper.

Since 2015, the aesthetic taste of the general public has been an annual focal point of discussion on Chinese intellectual websites. Netizens take pleasure in displaying and roasting photos of various vulgar-looking new buildings, horrific interior designs, shockingly straight-forward signs, ugly children’s playground facilities, over-lusciously decorated TV dramas, and shoddy artistic creations that are unrelentingly parading the pride of the Chinese nouveau-riche. While the camera pulls these items out of their immediate contexts to highlight their grotesqueness and eccentricity, the media—much in the spirit of the 2008 barrage upon the phenomenon of Shan-Zhai (counterfeit) products and cultural phenomena—launch fierce attacks on such glaring displays of the upstart. Both waves of attack express a similar resentment and disgust for disgraceful performances of the crude and the vulgar that are seen as denting Chinese efforts to achieve global respectability.

At about the same time, smart phones, communication software, short-form mobile video platforms quickly integrated and spread through the market. As tools of cultural production become readily accessible and affordable, multitudes throw themselves into the production of short-form mobile videos that feature their daily lives and common fantasies. Using all their imagination to display their wits, wisdom, and creativity, they created and uploaded numerous outlandish short videos that left audiences cursing but laughing and continuing to watch at the same time. Although this form of cultural production has suffered much scrutiny and purification because of the hyping, the lewdness, and the falsification often involved, it still grew into a massive new phenomenon.

The media of course are interested in this fashionable phenomenon. In 2018, a special issue on vulgarity culture was published by a popular weekly journal. One article that claims to “conduct an appreciation of vulgarity” points out that the vulgar short form mobile videos that filled TikTok, Kwai, and Weibo came mainly from marginal populations located in remote magistrates and townships as well as the edge of cities where the populations are limited in their aesthetic acculturation and outlook but have become infatuated with city-folk lifestyles due to media saturation. The article then claims: “*Vulgarity is the extension of native-soil consciousness in modern China that has mutated into an expression of fun of life, personal style, and cultural atmosphere.*” Notwithstanding, the sweeping influence of vulgarity culture gave rise mostly to social anxiety. At the end of 2018, another influential weekly journal put out an article titled “Vulgar Tastes are Destroying Our Next Generation.” The article collected and featured the most unbearable visual images of vulgar cultural productions in an effort to arouse disgust and antipathy through evoking traditional Chinese values on the education of their young. In spring of 2019, another special issue titled “Society of Low Sense of Beauty” came out. Though reserving the possibility of some sense of beauty and stressing that different social groups have

their own aesthetic standards that are “derived from real life” with “their own original vitality,” hence their “aesthetic deficiency” should be “tolerated,” the special issue asserts that the ill effects of this aesthetics of vulgarity has already spread across China. One article titled “The Ten Illnesses of Chinese Aesthetics” in the special issue describes how this fashionable Chinese aesthetics encourages outrageousness and eccentricity, to the extent that people no longer feel shame for, and instead take pride in, their own ugliness, vulgarity, and stupidity. Such habits, the article says, will influence the development of people’s character, making them “feel antagonistic toward patience, depth, and thoughtfulness,” and making them “loathe the value of hard-work, learning, and continuous development.”

These last few points also constitute the main concern of educators. After all, as vulgar tastes seep into daily life, and likes and hits and flows further add to the attraction of such low styles, it is believed that the sensibility and temperament of our students may move further and further away from what higher art education aims at.

Politically Correct Civilizing Process

The energy that motivates this aesthetics of vulgarity derives from the sense of entitlement that has grown with the rise of China. The nation has consistently emphasized the collective strength and solidarity of the people as a whole, so, with the rise of China, even people in remote communities are feeling a new sense of pride and confidence, and, with the help of readily available technology, they turn their life realities and fantasies into short form mobile videos, not only to amuse and entertain themselves, but also hoping their self-expressions would be appreciated and affirmed. Of course, economic gains constitute another powerful incentive.

Yet, as the nation grows strong, overturning a century of humiliation, China’s international status and role are also enhanced, which gives rise to a civilizing vision that targets being recognized and admired by the international community, infused with the traditional belief that “the rich shall be good-mannered,” and takes the international arena as the site for its performance. This desire happens to converge with growing Western efforts to disseminate universal values such as equality, civility, order, constraint, etc. globally. The result is a rigidified civilizing process that demands politically correctness and uniform absolute standards and requirements for civilized behavior, leaving local cultural performance and life practices at the mercy of severe scrutiny and criticism.

The most widely-known example in recent years has to do with the ethnically based practice of eating dog meat. In city life in an affluent society, dogs no longer play the practical roles of safe-guarding the house or helping with hunting, and turns toward becoming house pets that provide intimacy and company in this world of lonely individualism. Yet when the media features sensational reports on the Dog Meat Festival in GuangXi province or the dog meat restaurants of northeast provinces, people who had lived in peace in separate communities suddenly found themselves opposed to each other. Under the universal banner of animal protection, pet lovers treat the dog meat eating custom as a national shame to be eradicated. The difference between city and country lives is then presented as class difference, and further invested with delicate emotions that surround the national image and reputation. As the controversy widens, a stronger sensitivity toward animal (pet) protection is developed: any action or discourse deemed not living up to the spirit of caring for pet animals will be severely scrutinized. As the criticized practice is

considered outright backward and cruel, and the stigmatized population lacks reasonable defense in the face of heavy international pressure, social laceration grows deeper and wider.

When different values come face to face with one another, they could peacefully conduct acts of learning about each other, negotiating their differences, and understanding each other's world, hence turning differences into dialog and coexistence. Yet the contemporary civilizing tendency harbors a sense of superiority and self-righteousness that polarizes the differences by assuming for itself a position of champion for justice, while treating the other party as having violated an unacceptable moral aberration. The polarization then justifies relentlessly lashing out against the unfit Other. Such a civilizing tendency is naturally inhospitable to the vulgar culture that is clearly base, provincial, and unrestrained. Likewise, it has little patience in behaviors such as crowding or cutting in line, and overlooks the reality of the Chinese society where the huge density of population and the need to maintain efficiency in transportation cannot afford the ease and the luxury of slowly waiting in line. It resents the noisy seniors whose voices disturb the beauty and tranquility of scenic spots and refuses to look into the unstoppable expressions of excitement and contentment of that generation that had suffered almost endless difficulties and limitations to reach this day of better life and fun.

The stern harshness of the civilizing tendency gains even more strength and legitimacy when it comes to gender and sex-related issues eagerly promoted by the West in recent years. Fear and detestation of violence in this age of peace, desire for equality in this age of liberty, inhibition of desires and flirting in the years of progressiveness—all are now concentrated on gender and children-related issues, resulting in an increase of force for regulation and policing in the name of prevention of sexual harassment and sexual assault, and safeguarding safety and equality. From daily life to arts and literature to teaching and education, more and more surveillance measures and even legal structures are being installed and applied both in real space and virtual space, and in the name of the good cause of “protection of the weak.” This hyper sensitivity toward political correctness, as exemplified in the #Metoo movement, cannot help but leave an ever-shrinking space for any intellectual or creative work.

In China today, the aesthetics of vulgarity and the civilizing tendency, though opposed to and segregated from each other, actually share a common basis of affects and motive force: they both aspire to rise above, to supersede, to be recognized, to be appreciated, and to be admired. The aesthetics of vulgarity harbors an envy and emulation of the civilizing tendency, though overshooting or crude copycatting usually results. On the other hand, the civilizing tendency, when faced with vulgar subjects or practices that fall short of discreetness, gracefulness, and depth, often replies with proud contempt and censure. This differential response not only lengthens the chain of humiliation, but also prepares an utterly inhospitable environment for the vulgar. The opposition and competition between the vulgar and the civilized naturally impact upon the sensibility and habits, motivation and quality of art students, bringing a new challenge to higher art education.

Changing Positions

Faced with the division between high and low cultural tastes, many would call

for more aesthetic education and cultural polishing, so as to raise the low toward the high. But why is it always the low that is required to better itself through emulating the high? Unilaterally demanding that the low move toward the high is to deny the value of the feelings and experiences of the millions of senior farmers in the countryside and millions of young people working in the cities. And to do that in this day of overall prosperity is to say that the marginal populations do not deserve the channels of self-expression or the good life that is now upon them.

When different aesthetic tastes and ideas of civility confront each other, what is needed is of course not the seemingly progressive but actually hollow discourse of “diversity” or “respect,” but genuine efforts to achieve sincere recognition. In that sense, space and time and resources need to be allowed for the underprivileged aesthetics of vulgarity, so that both sides have a chance to learn about each other’s lived history and realities at the moment, that the dreams, values, feelings, and visions of both sides could be appreciated, and that both sides could understand and appreciate the other’s aesthetics and ideas of civility. This will be a necessary process for getting to know our society better and maintaining peaceful coexistence among various groups.

This kind of moving closer to each other is not at all impossible as different cultural tastes often shift and change their positioning in response to emerging new conditions. For example, in 2018, a new TV show became a big hit as it mixed *bel canto* performances and popular songs through the transformation of 36 good-looking young *bel canto* singers into popular song idols in the course of the show. The show not only added substance and quality to popular entertainment but also created more exposure and hence market for the so-called high arts. Following in this trend, TV shows are now created to feature minority bands, professional dance troupes, acting competition shows, using elements from the growing idol culture or fandom culture that had never been considered worthy of the artists’ time. These shifts have not only created new audiences but also obscured the original hierarchy and division between different forms of performance arts.

Similarly, the culture of vulgarity and its most popular themes have also seen changes and developments. Low-key millionaires in dramas of reversal of fate may be common mammonist themes in vulgar short form videos, yet recently new adaptations are emerging to parody such drama by using politically incorrect showoffs of wealth, blatantly framed in self-satires that prompt reflections on the audience’s part. Furthermore, common people who make up the contributors to short form mobile video platforms do not necessarily stay the way they are. In fact, a recent gala event, put up by TikTok to advertize its success, presented many “TikTok video artists” alongside star performers. The identification of TikTok users as “artists” certainly encouraged users to continue to produce short videos of the TikTok style, hence leading to possible new stylistic changes in the process of publicity.

An Aesthetic Education Aimed at Social Integration

When the saturation of technology pushes the aesthetics and tastes of the common people into the face of the intellectuals, we cannot help but say: “*hic Rhodus, hic salta.*” (“Here is Chinese Rhodes, make your jump here!”) As elites, we intellectuals have the duty and the obligation to take the initiative to create connections with ordinary folks, and to promote the further transformation and integration of different cultural tastes and styles. In other words, the common

ground that we are seeking in cross-cultural collaborations cannot be uniformed aesthetic standards, sensibilities, or norms. Instead, to avoid the animosity or contempt that have been bred by recent geopolitical competitions, we need to apply the **same** concern, understanding, appreciation, and learning to the **different** socio-historical-affective contexts that have given rise to different aesthetics.

Since the days of the Chinese revolution, provincial or national forms of culture have been considered to be necessary nourishment for literature and the arts in new China. Obviously, vulgarity culture does not belong to provincial forms or national forms; it is simply and truly just vulgar and bastard. But what I am trying to say today is: “*Tu-Wei* (vulgarity) feels proud and self-important about its own performance and specificity in this age of Chinese prosperity, yet on the other hand, it harbors an admiration and aspiration for civilized modernity and urbanized West. This mis-recognition and mis-understanding of itself and others carry curious entanglements with the globalized civilizing project that is worthy of our attention. In addition, vulgarity culture has found itself dragged into the realm of geopolitics lately. Just two weeks ago on November 5th, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing on possible threat to U.S. national security by Tik Tok, the central platform for *Tu-Wei* (vulgarity) short form mobile videos, saying that TikTok has been collecting its US clients’ personal information, even data from US officials through the TikTok app. At this moment, vulgarity-infested TikTok has risen to the importance of Huawei in its delicate involvement in geopolitics and the clash of civilizations, that is all the more worthy of our further observation.

Different cultures learn to understand one another in interaction and co-existence—this is a very important and dynamic process of cultural integration, especially for this moment as China is plagued by powerful antagonisms and pressed by domestic problems. Faced with the aggressive expansion of civility by the West and the intellectual superiority and moral legitimacy of Western universal values—and let’s not forget the social unrest and laceration they have effected—at the present moment, how to recognize, understand, and live with the practices and the life world of *Tu-Wei* (vulgarity), how to promote the peaceful coexistence and communication/integration of various differences, is the mission of all intellectuals.

Thank you.