Keywords of Post-Tiananmen Intellectual Discourse:

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In This Presentation

❖ The “debate on the spirit of the Humanities” (人文精神討論): What it was about and why it matters
❖ My approach and objectives
❖ The theme of “change”
❖ The theme of “choice”
Topic and Approach
The Debate

- 1993-1995
- From Shanghai to Beijing and nationwide
- Participants: "Humanists", university professors (and literary authors). Scholars? Intellectuals?
- Self-reflection: What does it mean and entail being a 人文学者／知識份子？Why and what for?
Relevance

- Response and interpretation of a crucial phase: 1989 and 1992
- Self-understanding “in progress” and debated
- Last gasp of old-style intellectual debate before the Internet revolution
Questions

❖ What constituted the core issue at stake in the debate?
❖ How did participants conceptualise and discuss it and its context?
❖ Which ethical values and political standpoints emerged?
❖ What does it reveal about the relations between these individuals and the state, the market economy, and the “nation”?
❖ What issues and categories dominate the worldview of China’s humanists?
Methodological Approach

❖ A definition of “discourse” from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): discourse as the semiotic moment in the dialectics of social practice (Chouliaraki & Fairclough).

❖ Problem-oriented and interdisciplinary perspective of CDA (i.e. “pluralist” approach to interdisciplinarity).

❖ “Discourse-Historical Approach” (Reisigl & Wodak): triangulation of close reading, critical theory and historical contextualisation.
Methodological Approach

❖ Key questions of the Discourse-Historical Approach: How are persons, events and processes referred to linguistically? What characteristics are attributed to social actors, events and processes? What arguments are employed? From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?

❖ Focus of DHA: argumentative contradictions; critique of established narratives e.g. on nation and the state; ideology and power.
Methodological Approach

- Corpus of a hundred texts from the debate
- Qualitative approach to analysis – *but there is credibility in numbers.*
- Additionally: interviews with former participants
CDA: "Discourse as element in social practice and power relations"

Discourse-historical approach: Triangulating discourse, historical context, and theory

Keywords

Cluster 1: Change (Part II)
Cluster 2: Choice (Part III)
Cluster 3: World (Part IV)

Fig. 1  Diagram of the analytical methodology and structure.
Fig. 2 The “Change” cluster (Part II). Dotted lines link keywords that the work touches upon, but does not discuss individually.
Fig. 3 The “Choice” cluster (Part III).
Fig. 4  The “World” cluster (Part IV)
Change
Change

- Prominence of the discourse of change
- All agreed that a rapid and profound transformation was ongoing
- Problem: quality, direction and agents of “change”
“In midst of breakneck socio-cultural change, existing societal relations are thrown into chaos, the relatively well-defined outlook people used to have on life and existence falter and transform, their previous understanding of the meaning and purpose of life is shattered. A doubt about the meaning of existence has risen from the depths of consciousness. The sense of terror, oppressiveness, crisis, decline and emptiness that comes from being thrown into a fathomless and boundless foreign territory is spreading.”

Zhu Liyuan 朱立元 (1994: 55)
Widespread representation of such process as inevitable and agent-less
  - metaphors of change as natural phenomenon (e.g. 潮)
  - use of passive constructions without agents
  - use of nominalisation of change
Nominalisation of Change

- 化 compounds used as nouns
  - 市場化
  - 商品化
  - 世俗化
  - 現代化
Choice
Choice

- Individual choice

- “Facing the big tide of the commodity economy, where has the intellectuals’ spirit of the Humanities gone? How should the intellectuals find their place in society and pursue their enterprise in today’s life?” (Chen Sihe 陳思和)

- Issue of **freedom** (“Should a moral imperative bind all humanist intellectuals?”) and **independence** (from economic as well as political constrains)
Metaphors of Choice

- 廟堂: intellectual as adviser to the power holders
- 書齋: "retreating" to "pure scholarship"
- 廣場: political engagement, "rallying the people"
- 下海 (not necessarily by leaving the academia)
- 殉道: "martyrdom"
Although they [i.e. Confucius’ students] roamed the states asking to be employed as officials, they entered the court (廟堂) bringing their own intellectual ideals and scholarly tradition. They were not interested at all in what the ruler required. They simply told the ruler what he ought to do and hoped, by persuading him, to bring the values of moral orthodoxy (道統) into practice.
The spirit of the Humanities can shine and spread only when it stands in contrast to society’s worldly (世俗) pursuit of utility.

人文精神只有與世俗的社會功利需求相對抗，才能得到彰顯和闡揚。

Fei Zhenzhong 費振鐘 in Zhang Rulun et al. (1994: 5).
The ruling class needs the dimension of Confucianism that puts scholarship at the service of government (經世致用) in order to hold society together. However it does not need a “principle” (道) that places itself above the ruling class and that can analyse their actions and determine whether they are legitimate. Alternatively, the ruling class interprets such a “principle” in a way that suits its goal of domination. This thing that is crippled and interpreted – this is probably the spirit of the Humanities.

統治階級需要儒家經世致用的一面來維繫社會，卻不需要凌駕於統治階級之上的、能檢驗合理與否、正義與否的「道」，或者對這個「道」進行符合自己統治目的的解釋，這種阉割和被解釋的東西，可能便是人文精神。

Wang Binbin 王彬彬 in Wu Xuan et al. (1994: 68)
The Nation

- Shared “value” among all participants
- Sense of duty towards the country/hope in China’s rise
- The patriotic argument is very flexible: Is the moral concern a patriotic concern (values=greatness)? Or does it belittle China?
Concluding Remarks

❖ Re-examination of the relationship between culture and power in the crucial phase that followed the 1989 crackdown and the post-1992 roll-out of a new wave of market reforms.

❖ Issue of the heteronomous aims* of humanist scholarship and tolerance among intellectuals.

❖ * Political aims, economic imperatives… But how about the concern with “social morality” and the nation?
Thank you

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