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Equalisation as difference: Zhang Taiyan's Buddhist-Daoist response to modern politics

Since the late 1980s, scholars have viewed China's progress towards market capitalism with great optimism, but in the last ten years intellectuals, both in China and abroad, have begun to voice reservations. Critics have pointed out China's growing problems of income inequality, unemployment and environmental degradation. In this context of critical reflection, Viren Murthy argues that the work of the late Qing intellectual Zhang Taiyan is especially meaningful.

Viren Murthy

During a period in Chinese history when most intellectuals were supporting ideologies related to modernisation, such as social evolution, Zhang constantly drew on Buddhism and Daoism to express criticisms. Given that throughout the 20th century, and even today, both the Chinese government and Chinese intellectuals have generally endorsed some version of modernisation as a political and economic goal, Zhang's writings have an uncanny contemporary relevance.

Scholars have generally interpreted Zhang's thought in terms of indigenous contexts, but I contend that Zhang's philosophy, and the late Qing ideology to which he responded, follow a larger global pattern. Specifically, that Zhang's thought has similarities with that of critics of German idealism, such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and that we can explain such conceptual affinities with reference to the common context of global capitalism. Georg Lukács links the principles of German idealism to the social forms of capital, and provocatively contends that modern philosophers often mistake historically specific aspects of the structure of capitalism for universal forms of consciousness.¹ German idealists posit a transhistorical movement of consciousness that realises itself in modern institutions such as the state. Nietzsche and Schopenhauer attack this structure of consciousness from an abstract perspective. To counter Hegel's idea of the teleological movement of Spirit, they argue that consciousness and history is a wild interplay of drives or the will. They eventually aim to overcome this blind progression of history and put forward some type of alternative. There is a similar antinomy between optimistic and pessimistic visions of history in late Qing China. Specifically, the majority of intellectuals during the early 20th century endorsed some version of history as a progressive movement and Zhang Taiyan developed a critique of this view from Buddhist and Daoist perspectives. Following Lukács, one can conclude that both sides of this debate respond a-historically to transformations of capitalist modernity, since each group presupposes some type of transhistorical ontological movement, which becomes their foundational standpoint.

From imperial power to global player

To understand the above philosophical debate in the context of early 20th century China, we must note how intellectuals were shaped by, and responded to, their rapidly changing environment. Social and intellectual life in the late Qing was influenced by widely circulating discourses of modern philosophy and the concrete forces of the global capitalist system of nation-states. After

a series of defeats in wars during the late 19th century, the Qing Empire and late Qing intellectuals began to think of ways to transform China into a nation-state that could compete in the global capitalist system. The modern state and economy entail a host of categories from citizenship to equality and intellectuals began to re-orient their learning and writing towards these new concepts.

Until the late 19th century, Chinese intellectuals were largely trained in traditional classics and they aimed primarily at becoming bureaucrats or functionaries in the imperial government. However, in the midst of national crisis, they began to use their knowledge creatively to envision a passage from imperial to modern institutions. In this context, not only would intellectuals search outside of the canonical Confucian tradition and mine Buddhists and Daoist texts for resources, they would also invoke the philosophies of Kant and Hegel to create hybrid theories of modernisation. Late Qing scholars from a number of different political perspectives often drew on Western philosophy along with traditional ideas to create new concepts adequate to the task of modern nation building.

One such new concept, which reformers, revolutionaries and anarchists generally endorsed, was the universal principle (*gongli*). The universal principle refers to a concept or movement, such as the ethical principle of citizenship or a process of social evolution, which subsumes particular things or actions. Intellectuals applied this principle to both the realms of science and



Zhang Taiyan.

ethics. Thus, references to the "universal principle of science," "the universal principle of morality" and the "universal principle of evolution" are found in late Qing texts. The principle of evolution is particularly important, since, despite political differences, reformers, revolutionaries and anarchists often presupposed some vision of history as progress.

Zhang Taiyan's attitude to this principle changes depending on the period. From 1900-1903, he endorses the universal principle and some type of evolutionary vision of the world in the context of his anti-Qing Dynasty writings. However, in 1903 Zhang was convicted of writing seditious essays defaming the emperor and he was sentenced to three years in prison. In jail, Zhang avidly read the sutras of Yogacara Buddhism and later claimed that it was only through reciting and meditating on these sutras that

he was able to get through his difficult jail experience. When he was released from jail in 1906, Zhang went to Tokyo to edit the famous revolutionary journal, *The People's Journal (Minbao)*, and in this journal, he developed a new philosophical framework largely critical of dominant intellectual trends.

During the years 1906-1910, often referred to as Zhang's *Minbao* period, he addressed both the reformers and the anarchist's ideologies, claiming that they were insufficiently self-reflective. Following Kant, Zhang attempts to return concepts and the world of experience to their conditions of possibility; however, he understands conditions of possibility in Buddhist terms, namely as the karmic fluctuations of the seeds in *ālaya* consciousness (the storehouse consciousness). By drawing on Yogācāra Buddhism, Zhang develops a vision of history as an unconscious process of drives. According to Yogācāra Buddhism, the storehouse consciousness, which is the highest level of consciousness, contains a number of seeds which initiate a type of historical process. Dan Lusthaus interprets the effects of karmic seeds as historicity and stresses the organic metaphor of seeds. He explains that just like plants, karmic experiences develop from unseen roots, which stem from seeds.² As we act in these experiences, we unconsciously plant new karmic seeds and so a cycle of the interplay between past, present and future continues. In his 1906 essay, *On Separating the Universal and Particular in Evolution*, Zhang uses this framework to explain Hegel's philosophy of history. In short, he claims that what Hegel describes as

a triumphant march of spirit is really a degenerative disaster created by karmic seeds. He then combines Buddhism and Daoism to describe a world outside of this karmic progression of history.

Pushing language to its limits

Zhang develops this philosophical alternative in a number of essays during 1906-1910, but he expressed this philosophy most completely in what many take to be Zhang's masterpiece "An Interpretation of a 'Discussion on the Equalization of Things,'" published in 1910. In this text, Zhang uses Yogācāra Buddhist concepts to understand the ancient Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi. Zhang pushes language to its limits to express an ideal that escapes the conceptual categories associated with karmic history and points to a world of difference and a new affirmation of singularity. In so doing, he brings Buddhist, Daoist and Western ideas of equality together in a unique manner. More specifically, Zhang constantly gropes for a way to express something beyond mundane concepts. Thus he contends that Zhuangzi's conception of "equality" involves making distinctions without concepts:

"Equalizing things" (*qiwuzhe*) refers to absolute equality (*pingdeng*). If we look at its meaning carefully, it does not simply refer to seeing sentient beings as equal ... One must speak form (*xiang, laksana*) without words, write of form without concepts (*ming*) and think form without mind. It is ultimate equality. This accords with the "equalization of things."³

The above passage may seem opaque, but given that Zhang explicitly opposes his philosophy of equalisation to Hegel's teleological vision of history, it is possible to interpret him as searching for a concept of difference free from conceptualisation, a gesture we may find in Gilles Deleuze's philosophy. In particular, in Deleuze's interpretation of his compatriot Henri Bergson, he distinguishes difference from determination. According to Deleuze, Hegel's dialectic represents a linear movement because his idea of difference is exterior to the thing itself and hence inevitably involves both determination and contradiction. We see this in a number of the antinomies that pervade his thought such as the opposition between being and nothing, or between particularity and universality. Deleuze clearly attempts to draw on Bergson to think his way outside such oppositions and claims that in Bergson's view "not only will vital difference not be a determination, but it will rather be the opposite – given a choice (*au choix*) it would select indetermination itself."⁴ Were it merely indetermination, Hegel could retort that in essence Bergson is simply unable to think difference and thus the phrase "given a choice" is crucial. Ideally, we should not choose between determi-



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nate and indeterminate, but from our usual conceptual grid, we can only see “vital difference” as indeterminate. To express this paradoxical determination, Zhang cannot stop at leaving words, concepts and mind. He affirms some type of mark made in this non-conceptual space by form (*xiang, lakshana*).

Zhang attempts to think of an equality that avoids the contradiction between the universal and the particular, or the antinomies between sameness and difference, which he sees in German idealists. In Zhang’s view, it is not mere thought that produces conceptual antinomies; rather, through our karmic actions, we generate a conceptual framework, which confronts us as a type of inescapable logic. Zhang compares the conceptual framework that people create through karmic action to Kant’s categories and when he attacks this framework, he reproduces a basic structure we see in the pessimistic critiques of German idealism. Rather than grounding concepts such as the universal principle in a historically specific social formation, Zhang links contemporary ideological trends to the transhistorical dynamic of karmic action.

However, Zhang’s philosophical significance shines through when placed in the intellectual history of 20th century China. Throughout the 20th century, and even today, most Chinese intellectuals presuppose some version of evolutionary history. The Chinese communists institutionalised such a reading of history and then during the 1980s and 1990s, intellectuals would often criticise Chinese communism using a similar model of history. For example, they claimed that Chinese communism represented China’s failure to modernise. From the mid-1990s, however, a growing number of intellectuals such as Wang Hui and Sun Ge, have drawn on the legacy of Zhang Taiyan, and those who develop the critical dimension of Zhang’s thought, such as his student Lu Xun, to question the legitimacy of contemporary capitalist society. These

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intellectuals, however, face a problem that Zhang could never adequately conceptualise, namely how to translate theory into a historical practice that transforms the global capitalist world. ◀

Suggestions for Further Reading

The literature on Zhang Taiyan is immense, especially in Chinese and Japanese, I include here only a short sample.

Western Languages

1. Wang Hui, “Zhang Taiyan’s Concept of the Individual and Modern Chinese Identity,” in Wen-hsin Yeh, ed. *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 231-259.
2. Shimada Kenji, *Pioneers of the Chinese Revolution*, Joshua Fogel trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990)
3. Wang Young-tsu, *Search for Modern Nationalism: Zhang Binglin and revolutionary China; 1869-1936*, (London: Oxford, 1989).
4. Eveline Ströber, *Von der Evolution zur Erlösung: Zum Frühen Philosophischen Denken Chang T'ai-yens (1868-1936)* (Doctoral Dissertation, Bonn, 1990).

Chinese and Japanese

1. Wang Yuanyi, “Duli Cangmang: Xinhaigeming Qian Zhang Taiyan de Jijin Sixiang jiqi Wutuobang yu Fan Wutuobang Xingzhi” (Independent and Boundless: Zhang Taiyan’s Pre-Republican Revolution Writings and its Utopian and Anti-Utopian Dimensions) (*Intellectual Inquiry* Vol. 10

He Zhaotian ed., 2003), 419-453.

2. Kondo Kuniyasu, “Shō Heirin no kakumei shisō no keisei” (The Formation of Zhang Binglin’s Revolutionary Thought) in *Chūgoku kindai shisōshi kenkyū* (Tokyo: Keiso shobo, 1981)
3. Takada Atsushi, *Shingai kakumei to Shō Heirin no seibutsu ronshaku* (The 1911 Revolution and Zhang Binglin’s “Interpretation of the Equalization of Things”), (Tokyo: Kenbun shuppan, 1984)

Notes

1. Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (HHC), Rodney Livingston trans. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1971) 110-111.
2. Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch’eng Wei-shi lun* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002) for the link between karmic seeds and history see, 25 and 179. For a discussion of the plant metaphor, see 193-194.
3. Zhang Taiyan, “Qiwulun shi,” in *Zhang Taiyan quanji* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1980) vol. 6, 1-59, 4.
4. Gilles Deleuze, “La conception de la différence chez Bergson,” *Etudes Bergsoniennes*, 1956, 92. “Bergson’s Concept of Difference” Melissa Macmahon trans. in *The New Bergson*, John Mullarkey ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) 50 trans amended.

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