

Slavoj Žižek's Reception in China: From Academic Discourse to Popular Culture

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Abstract: Since gaining prominence in the West as a post-Marxist with the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989, Slavoj Žižek has achieved widespread recognition both in the West and in China. Despite some controversy, his status as a world-class thinker is well-established. The phenomenon known as Žižek Fever shows no signs of abating in either the West or China. When Žižek's theories travel to China, they often manifest differently due to the unique characteristics of China's contemporary political environment, academic trends, ideologies, and value orientations. Žižek enjoys different positions within China's philosophical and humanities circles, as well as among the general public outside the academic community. As a symptom, which reflects the truth of the subject's desire, Žižek's reception in China reveal specific truths of China itself.

Keywords: Žižek, China, philosophy, Marxism, humanities

Slavoj Žižek (1949-), a prominent figure in Western intellectual circles since his rise to fame in 1989 with the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, has become a phenomenon. He is known by various titles such as the “Elvis of cultural theory,” “the most dangerous philosopher in the West,” “the academic rock star,” and “the celebrity intellectual.” In 2010, *The Guardian* noted, “Žižek is to today what Jacques Derrida was to the 80s: the thinker of choice for Europe’s young intellectual vanguard.”^① Žižek is not only a philosopher and scholar but also a renowned public intellectual. His theories have become subjects of academic study, and he himself has become a notable spectacle both within and outside the academic world due to his unkempt appearance, non-academic language style, and frequent media appearances. Since his introduction to China in 1999, Žižek has been an indispensable name in contemporary Chinese philosophy and humanities. What’s more, his influence extends beyond Chinese academia, resonating with young Chinese audiences as well. Reflecting on the Žižek fever in China involves examining the journey of Žižek and his theories within China and how their reception differs from that in the West due to China’s unique historical, political, academic, ideological, and value contexts. This study views the Žižek fever in China as a historical and cultural phenomenon, aiming to interpret the various receptions of Žižek within China’s philosophical, humanities, and public spheres.

1. Žižek’s Rise to Fame in the West

^① Sean O’Hagan, ‘Slavoj Žižek: Interview’, *The Observer*, 26 June 2010, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jun/27/slavoj-zizek-living-end-times>.

Before delving into Slavoj Žižek's reception in China, it is essential to examine his journey and acceptance within the specific historical and cultural context of the West. Understanding this background provides a foundation for analyzing his international rise to prominence and the factors that facilitated his success. From an unknown scholar to a celebrated intellectual, Žižek's academic path was far from smooth. Before his breakthrough with *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989, Žižek's academic endeavors in France were particularly challenging. In 1981, Žižek earned his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Ljubljana and subsequently moved to France to study psychoanalysis under Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's son-in-law. In 1985, Žižek completed a second doctoral degree at Paris 8 University. However, the publication of his dissertation was rejected by Miller. Eventually, Žižek managed to publish his work *Le plus sublime des hystériques: Hegel passe* with a relatively small publisher, Les Éditions Érès, outside the core psychoanalytic circle, but it did not gain much traction either academically or publicly. Žižek's major breakthrough came with the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in London in 1989. Despite its significant overlapping with his earlier work, this book received considerable acclaim and quickly achieved legendary status.^① This marked a significant shift in Žižek's academic focus towards the English-speaking world and English-language publications.

Eliran Bar-El explained Žižek's failure to gain academic and public resonance in France through the misalignment between the traditions and preferences of the French intellectual community and

^① Cf. Jagna Oltarzewska, "So Much Depends on Circumstances". Žižek in France', *Études Anglaises*, *Études anglaises*, Vol. 58, No. 1, pp.55.

Žižek's theoretical style. He highlighted several key reasons: Objectively, the French intellectual community is populated with prominent figures, and the long-established tradition of philosophy and psychoanalysis presents a barrier for outsiders and newcomers like Žižek. In terms of psychoanalytic tradition, Lacan's theories are closely linked to clinical practice in France, and Žižek's mentor, Miller, positioned Lacan as a theorist of clinical psychoanalysis. In contrast, Žižek's interpretation of Lacan aligns with Marx and Hegel, serving his political critique of contemporary culture, which displeased his mentor and was not well-received by the French public. Furthermore, the failure of the May 1968 movement led to growing dissatisfaction with Marxism as a solution to French capitalist problems, combined with the anti-Hegelian tendencies of French post-structuralists, making Žižek's Marxist stance and intent to revive Hegel appear countercurrent. Additionally, the French academic community and public are accustomed to traditional academic writing, and Žižek's style of blending philosophical thoughts with psychoanalytic concepts was not welcomed by French academia and the public.^① These factors prevented Žižek from being clearly categorized and recognized in France, hindering his success.

It was not until the endorsement of Ernesto Laclau, who positioned Žižek as a post-Marxist and facilitated the publication of his works in English, that Žižek began to make an impact in Anglo-American humanities. In my view, compared to the cold reception in France, Žižek's success in the Anglo-American academic world can be attributed to a combination of factors: the rise of post-Marxism provided Žižek with a clear academic positioning and identity, the

^① Cf. Eliran Bar-El, "If at First You Don't Succeed": Why Žižek Failed in France but Succeeded in England', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol.72, No. 2, pp.412–25.

intellectual and theoretical gaps in Anglo-American humanities created a demand for theorists like Žižek, and the influential Laclau not only provided valuable publishing resources but also wrote prefaces that increased Žižek's visibility and recognition.

In 1989, the year Žižek gained fame with his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, was also a period marked by the upheaval in Eastern Europe, the destabilization of the Soviet Union, and the global decline of communist politics. This period brought about a crisis in Marxism and Western Marxism, while also fostering the development of post-Marxism, which integrates Marxism with contemporary "post" theories such as post-structuralism and postmodernism. Sean Homer pointed out that "In a sense, Žižek's work could not have been translated at a more opportune moment. In Eastern Europe, the historic collapse of 'actually existing socialism' and the break-up of the Soviet Union were gathering pace, while in Western Europe the final demise of Western Marxism seemed assured if not already complete. The intellectual currents of postmodernism and post-Marxism were at their most vitriolic and triumphalist."^① On one hand, Žižek's background as an Eastern European who had experienced real socialism piqued the Western world's curiosity about this intellectual from a former socialist state and his views on communist politics. On the other hand, Žižek's mastery of Western popular culture and his eclectic writing style, which aligns with postmodernist formalism, often mislead readers to perceive him as an anti-system thinker.^② Compared to his inability to be categorized and recognized in France, Žižek found a clear and academically relevant positioning as a post-Marxist in the English-

^① Sean Homer, *Slavoj Žižek and Radical Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2016, p.13.

^② Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008, pp.xiii–xiv, p.xiv.

speaking context. Despite the divide between the British empiricist Anglo-Saxon tradition and the speculative continental philosophy, which led some philosophers to reject Žižek's dialectical style of cultural theory,^① the literary departments in the UK and the US were more inclined towards continental philosophy. Additionally, the scarcity of native humanities scholars created a demand for theoretical enrichment. Consequently, the Anglo-American intellectual scene, unlike the well-established and crowded French intellectual world, was more receptive to non-traditional theorists like Derrida and Žižek. Finally, Žižek's success was significantly aided by Ernesto Laclau. In 1985, Laclau gained prominence with the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* by the internationally renowned leftist publisher Verso. Subsequently, Laclau and his wife collaborated with Verso to edit the Phronesis series, aiming to foster dialogue between post-structuralism and leftist political theory. Recognizing Žižek's originality, Laclau published Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in the Phronesis series and wrote the preface himself. In it, he highly praised the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis, represented by Žižek, as one of the most innovative and forward-looking theoretical projects in the current European intellectual landscape. He also remarked that *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is an excellent read for those interested in seeking new theoretical perspectives to address the challenges of constructing democratic socialism in the post-Marxist era. Unlike the challenges Žižek faced in France, where he lacked the support of his mentor and access to quality publishing resources, in the English-speaking context, he benefited from Laclau's endorsement and

^① Cf. Paul A. Taylor, 'Žižek's Reception: Fifty Shades of Gray Ideology', in *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader*, ed. Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp.15–25.

high-quality publishing resources, ultimately leading to his success in the Anglo-American intellectual world.

Even now, Žižek's situation in France remains awkward. As Bar-El points out, "This rejection endures even today in a context where Žižek has been published in roughly 20 languages, but still lacking a resonance with contemporary French intellectual circles."^① Why do similar works remain lukewarm in France while becoming legendary in the UK and the US? As Žižek himself frankly said, "So much depends on circumstances."^② The nearly two-decade-long Žižek fever in China similarly relies on the unique political, academic, and ideological context of contemporary China.

2.The Decade of Absence in Chinese Research on Žižek

Despite gaining fame in the West in 1989, Žižek's introduction to Chinese academia was delayed by a decade. It was not until 1999 that Wang Fengzhen, a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published an article titled "Žižek: A New Star in the Field of Criticism" in the third issue of the journal *Foreign Literature*, marking Žižek's first introduction to mainland China. As Žižek mentioned regarding the logic of difference, "the lack itself functions as a positive feature."^③ Compared to the explosive growth of Žižek studies in China in the 21st century, this ten-year gap is a testament to a certain truth.

The decade-long gap in Žižek studies in China can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, although Žižek's prominence was increasing in the 1990s, he had not yet achieved the iconic status of figures such as Foucault or Derrida. As the title of Wang Fengzhen's

^① Eliran Bar-El, "'If at First You Don't Succeed': Why Žižek Failed in France but Succeeded in England", *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol.72, No. 2, pp.412-25.

^② Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, Cambridge: Polity, 2004, p.40.

^③ Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*, London: Penguin, 2014, p.24.

article suggests, Žižek was still considered a “new star” in the field of criticism at that time. Secondly, during the 1990s, Chinese philosophy and humanities were characterized by their own unique trends and rhythms, leaving limited room to focus on this emerging figure.

In the 1990s, the intellectual background of Chinese philosophy was marked by the academic dissemination and study of Western Marxism. Although Western Marxism had concluded with the failure of the student movements in the May 1968 events, it experienced a “revival” in China during the 1980s and 1990s. Starting from the late 1970s, the trend of Western Marxist thought began to flow into China after Mao’s death. This attention was driven not by theoretical awareness but directly by the political realities of the time.^① With the translation and publication of works by Western Marxist thinkers such as Lukács, Gramsci, Marcuse, and Sartre, Western Marxism quickly became popular within and outside Chinese philosophical circles. This period witnessed a surge of debates on reconstructing the Marxist philosophy, triggering a nationwide wave of discussions on Western Marxist philosophy.^② This phenomenon even led to challenges against the official ideology—Chinese Marxism. Discussions on ideology became subdued after the Tiananmen crackdown on June 4, 1989. It turned out that “Chinese intellectuals now approach Western Marxism in a solely academic way and within an orthodox Marxist framework. The ‘political’ element has been conspicuously absent from the studies of Western Marxism; only the

^① Cf. Xu, Chongwen 徐崇温. 1999. *Xu Chongwen Zixuanji* 徐崇温自选集 [Selected Works of Xu Chongwen]. Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House. P.1.

^② Wang, Yuchen 王雨辰. 2002. *Dangdai Xifang Makeshizhuyi Zhaxue Yanjiu Zai Zhongguo: Wenti·Chulu·Yiyi* 当代西方马克思主义哲学研究在中国：问题·出路·意义 [The Study of Contemporary Western Marxist Philosophy in China: Problems, Solutions, and Significance]. *Makeshizhuyi Zhaxue Yanjiu* 马克思主义哲学研究 (Collected Essays), Page 160.

‘academic’ element remains.”^① At the same time, the focus of Chinese researchers shifted from existentialist and humanist Marxism to issues of modernity and social critical philosophy. Post-1990s China entered an era characterized by “economic man” where problems of modernity became apparent: materialism in social life, ecological destruction, moral decay, and spiritual alienation, alongside the dominance of instrumental rationality. The critiques offered by Western Marxism—scientific-technological rationality, cultural ideology, and ecological issues—were timely and relevant for addressing the social problems during China’s period of social transformation, providing significant insights for tackling these issues.

In the context of the Western Marxism trend of the time, it becomes clear why Žižek did not receive significant attention from Chinese philosophers in the 1990s. During the “economic man” era, the Chinese philosophical community focused more on the critical aspects of Western Marxism rather than post-Marxism, which emerged from the failure of global socialist movements and advocated for radical democracy. This created a disconnect with international intellectual trends, making it difficult for Chinese scholars to engage with one of the prominent figures of post-Marxism. Moreover, Žižek appeared as an “outlier” both in his ideas and style, making it challenging to position him as an orthodox successor of Western Marxism. Intellectually, Žižek combined late Lacanian psychoanalysis with German Idealism, particularly Hegelian philosophy, which did not align with the Chinese philosophical critique of modernity as a totalizing concept.

^① Cf. So Wai-chor, ‘The Adventures of an Ideology: Western Marxism in Post-Mao China’, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol.29, No. 3, pp.23–33.

Stylistically, Žižek’s unconventional writing, characterized by extensive references to popular culture, clashed with the elite, serious tone, and cultural industry critique prevalent in Western Marxism.

Within the broader context of the modernity critique, the absence of Žižek’s influence in 1990s China can also be attributed to the simultaneous rise of postmodernism in both Chinese and Western humanities. The cultural atmosphere in China during the 1990s was in sync with the West, characterized by the rise of postmodernist thought. Unlike the methodological constructivism of the 1980s, the 1990s emphasized the deconstruction of values. Grand narratives of progressive development were replaced by deconstructive discourses, with figures like the “Yale School,” French deconstructionists Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, and Roland Barthes becoming the leading intellectuals of the era in China. Their discourses on deconstruction, subversion, rebellion, desecration, and marginalization became prevalent writing strategies and traps.^① Although Žižek’s writing style and form appeared postmodern, his core ideas were not aligned with postmodernism. In his seminal work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek placed Lacan within a rationalist framework, opposing the classification of Lacan within the “post-structuralist” domain, and argued that “Lacanian theory is perhaps the most radical contemporary version of Enlightenment.”^② This fundamental inconsistency with postmodernism and poststructuralism meant that Žižek did not have a place in the wave of postmodernist thought in China during the 1990s.

^① Wang, Yuechuan 王岳川. 1999. Zhongguo Jiushi Niandai Huayu Zhuanxing de Shencheng Wenti 中国九十年代话语转型的深层问题 [The Deep-seated Issues of Discourse Transformation in China in the 1990s]. *Wenxue Pinglun* 文学评论, no. 3, p.75.

^② Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Second Edition (London New York: Verso, 2008), xxx.

Due to the unique rhythm of Chinese philosophical and humanities circles, Žižek, a rising star in Western intellectual circles, did not attract significant attention from Chinese scholars between 1989 and 1998. However, the concurrent introduction and study of Western Marxism and postmodernism in China during that period laid the intellectual and knowledge groundwork for the eventual reception of Žižek's ideas. Today, research on Žižek in China is markedly different. From a disciplinary perspective, it is concentrated in five main fields: philosophy, film studies, political science, literary theory, and Marxism. This distribution aligns with the multifaceted nature of Žižek's thought, which attracts scholars from diverse academic backgrounds. It is important to distinguish between the introduction and study of Žižek in Chinese philosophical and humanities circles. These two domains have different academic backgrounds, approaches to Žižek's thought, and value orientations, necessitating separate explanations and interpretations based on their respective contexts. Additionally, the phenomenon of Žižek fever among the younger Chinese populace is a notable trend worthy of attention.

2. Žižek in Chinese Marxist circles: From Ideologist to Radical Leftist

Unlike in Western philosophy departments, where Žižek was often overlooked and relegated to the field of literary studies as a postmodern cultural critic,^① his thought has received enthusiastic attention from Chinese philosophy scholars. There are two pivotal moments in the reception of Žižek in China: 2004 and 2008. During

^① Žižek himself has expressed strong objections to this characterization, stating, "hat really makes me mad when I read critical (and even some favorable) reactions to my work is the recurring characterization of me as a postmodern cultural critic – the one thing I don't want to be. I consider myself a philosopher dealing with fundamental ontological questions, and, furthermore, a philosopher in the traditional vein of German Idealism." Cf. Slavoj Žižek, 'Slavoj Žižek on What Really Makes Him Mad', OUPblog, 17 September 2019, <https://blog.oup.com/2019/09/slavoj-zizek-on-what-really-makes-him-mad/>.

these periods, Žižek's positioning shifted from being an ideologist within the post-Marxist trends to a representative of the Western radical left in the context of the sinicization of Marxism.

In 1999, Chinese humanities scholar Wang Fengzhen first introduced Žižek to the Chinese academic community. However, as Wang admitted, "due to a lack of research and relevant materials,"^① the article did not clearly position Žižek within the Chinese academic context and thus did not immediately spark a wave of Žižek studies. The true Žižek fever in China began in 2004, when Zhang Yibing of the Philosophy Department at Nanjing University introduced Žižek within the theoretical framework of "post-Marxist trends."

Compared to the lack of translations of Žižek's works in the 1990s, the period from 2000 to 2004 saw the publication of several important Chinese translations of his works. In 2002, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and the edited volume *Mapping Ideology* were published in Chinese. In 2004, several of Žižek's major works were translated and published, including *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (co-authored with Butler and Laclau), and the selected essays *The Grimace of the Real: Selected Writings of Slavoj Žižek*. By this time, the Chinese philosophical community had accumulated substantial research on Western Marxism during the 1980s and 1990s, and was theoretically and intellectually prepared for the latest developments in international Marxist studies.

^① Wang, Fengzhen 王逢振. 1999. Qizeke: Piping Jie de Yi Ke Xinxing 齐泽克: 批评界的一颗新星 [Žižek: A Rising Star in the Field of Criticism]. *Waiguo Wenxue* 外国文学, no. 3.

Similar to Laclau's role in the UK, Zhang Yibing leveraged his academic standing and clear positioning of Žižek within the post-Marxist trends to ignite the wave of Žižek studies in China. In 2001, Zhang Yibing pointed out the need for a paradigm shift in the study of Western Marxism. He stated, "We must identify the historical end of Western Marxism and construct a new pattern of coexistence among postmodern Marxism, post-Marxist trends, and late Marxism to reassess the latest developments in international Marxist philosophy."^① Zhang Yibing distinguished between these three categories, arguing that the positions of postmodern Marxism, such as ecological Marxism and feminist Marxism, are actually anti-Marxist. In contrast, the post-Marxist trends represented by figures like Deleuze, Baudrillard, and late Derrida are compatible with the mainstream of postmodern thought initiated by Barthes, Lacan, and Foucault. For him, these are not true Marxism but rather a sharp rightward turn of Western Marxism in a postmodern context. According to Zhang, only late Marxism, represented by figures such as Harvey, Hardt, Negri, Jameson, Eagleton, and Derrida, truly adheres to Marxist principles.^{②③}

From 2004 to 2005, Zhang Yibing published eight articles related to Žižek, including five in-depth textual analyses of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Within the new pattern of coexistence among postmodern Marxism, post-Marxist trends, and late Marxism, Zhang positioned Žižek within the post-Marxist trends characterized by

^① Cf. Zhang, Yibing 张一兵. 2000. Xifang Makesizhuyi, Hou(Xiandai) Makesi Sichao he Wanqi Makesizhuyi 西方马克思主义、后(现代)马克思思潮和晚期马克思主义 [Western Marxism, Post(modern) Marxist Trends, and Late Marxism]. *Dangdai Guowai Makesizhuyi Pinglun 当代国外马克思主义评论 (Collected Essays)*.

^② Cf. Zhang, Yibing 张一兵. 2000. Xifang Makesizhuyi, Hou(Xiandai) Makesi Sichao he Wanqi Makesizhuyi 西方马克思主义、后(现代)马克思思潮和晚期马克思主义 [Western Marxism, Post(modern) Marxist Trends, and Late Marxism]. *Dangdai Guowai Makesizhuyi Pinglun (Collected Essays) 当代国外马克思主义评论*.

^③ Cf. Zhang, Yibing 张一兵. 2005. He Wei Wanqi Makesizhuyi? 何为晚期马克思主义? [What is Late Marxism?]. *Nanjing Daxue Xuebao (Zhexue, Renwen Kexue, Shehui Kexue Ban) 南京大学学报(哲学·人文科学·社会科学版)*, no. 5.

“impossibility.” Zhang argued that Žižek used Lacan to achieve a comprehensive integration of Marx^①, and summarized Lacan’s late philosophy, centered on the Real, as the “truth of the impossible existence.”^② This interpretation led Chinese philosophers and humanities scholars to focus on Žižek’s ideological thought. In 2007, Nanjing University invited Žižek to speak at the international academic symposium “The Cultural Significance of Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory,” where Žižek delivered a keynote speech titled “From Freud to Lacan.”^③ During this period, Žižek was primarily viewed in China as the Marxist successor of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Given that the post-Marxist trends are viewed by Chinese as not true Marxism, but rather a rightward mutation of Western Marxism within a postmodern context, Žižek, positioned as a member of these post-Marxist trends, is naturally considered “not sufficiently Marxist.” His approach of using psychoanalytic theory to fully integrate Marx is also not seen as orthodox Marxist. Under this premise, Chinese research on Žižek has taken two main directions. On one hand, scholars have followed Zhang Yibing in studying Žižek’s ideological theory and delving into Lacanian psychoanalysis. On the other hand, there has been a persistent critical distance from Žižek’s perceived departure from orthodox Marxism. Criticisms have focused on Žižek’s excessive critique and insufficient construction,

^① Cf. Zhang, Yibing 张一兵. 2004. Qizeke: Lakang Dui Makesi de Quanmian Jiegua 齐泽克：拉康对马克思的全面接管 [Žižek: Lacan's Comprehensive Takeover of Marx]. *Jianghai Xuekan* 江海学刊, no. 5.

^② Cf. Zhang, Yibing 张一兵. 2005. Bukemeng de Cunzai zhi Zhen——Wanqi Lakang Zhexue Sixiang Pingshu 不可能的存在之真——晚期拉康哲学思想评述 [The Truth of Impossible Existence: A Review of Late Lacanian Philosophy]. *Xueshu Yuekan* 学术月刊, no. 1.

^③ Cf. Xia, Fan 夏凡. 2007. “Lakang Jingshen Fenxi Lilun de Wenhua Yiyi” Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui Zongshu “拉康精神分析理论的文化意义” 国际学术研讨会综述 [Review of the International Symposium on “The Cultural Significance of Lacan's Psychoanalytic Theory”]. *Nanjing Daxue Xuebao (Zhaxue-Renwen Kexue-Shehui Kexue Ban)* 南京大学学报(哲学·人文科学·社会科学版), no. 5.

his alleged idealism, and the lack of practical relevance in his theories.

Compared to the recent diversity of themes and fields covered in Chinese Žižek studies, early research was relatively narrow and focused primarily on his critique of ideology and psychoanalytic methods. Zhang Yibing's analyses of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* played a significant leading role in this initial phase. Moreover, the complex intellectual landscape of post-revolutionary China heightened academic interest in ideology theory. As Zhang Yibing noted during his 2007 dialogue with Žižek at Nanjing University, "After China introduced the Western market economy in the mid-1990s, commodities and market exchanges profoundly changed Chinese social life. Consequently, Western liberalism and Western culture have become closely aligned with this market model." However, "the dominant national mainstream ideology remains Marxism," making Chinese ideology "a very complex multifaceted entity."^① In this context of coexisting pluralistic and conflicting ideas, Žižek's critique of cynical ideology—"they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it"—helps people understand and navigate the confusions of their time. This phase of Žižek studies in China reflects a contradictory mindset: on the one hand, there was a desire to align with international intellectual trends and seek fresh theoretical resources to understand and explain domestic social phenomena; on the other hand, there was a need to maintain a critical distance rooted in local Marxist positions.

^① Zhang, Yibing 张一兵, and Slavoj Žižek 斯拉沃热·齐泽克. 2018. "Di Er Ci Tianzhen Zhong de Jijin"——Zhang Yibing yu Žižek Duihua "第二次天真中的激进"——张一兵与齐泽克对话 [The Radical in the Second Naivety: A Dialogue between Zhang Yibing and Žižek]. In *Zhaoliang Shijie de Makesi: Zhang Yibing yu Žižek, Harvey, Negri Deng Xuezhe de Duihua 照亮世界的马克思：张一兵与齐泽克、哈维、奈格里等学者的对话* [Illuminating the World with Marx: Dialogues of Zhang Yibing with Žižek, Harvey, Negri, and Other Scholars], Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, pp. 5–6.

This ambivalence characterized the early reception and study of Žižek's work in China.

The second significant milestone in Chinese Žižek studies is 2008, when Žižek was newly positioned as a representative of the Western “radical left.” This shift was closely related to Žižek’s own “communist turn” amidst the capitalist crisis and the new stage of Marxism’s sinicization in China’s academic environment. If the impression of Žižek in the 1990s was primarily “cultural,” the Žižek of the 21st century became more distinctly “political.” Despite initially entering the Western intellectual scene as a post-Marxist, Žižek quickly diverged from his post-Marxist colleagues, radicalizing his political conclusions and calling for the complete rejection of the liberal democratic system rather than reforms within its framework. His commitment to a communist stance and his determination to reshape political imagination became more pronounced after the 2008 global financial crisis.^①

Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher identify the historical context behind Žižek’s shift from radical democracy to “revolutionary vanguardism.” Between 1989 and 2000, as liberal democracy and capitalism surged forward, post-Marxist theories advocating radical democracy faced practical challenges and succumbed to liberal ideology, with democracy and the market becoming the limit of all possible political action. After 2001, the “victory of capitalism” and the “victory of liberalism” revealed their violent and dark sides during the “War on Terror.” For Žižek, this signified the need for something beyond democracy, akin to a new

^① For Žižek, each crisis—be it the European refugee crisis, Brexit, or the COVID-19 pandemic—represented an opportunity to realize communism, prompting him to call for redefined national sovereignty, global cooperation, and the achievement of communism. In this context, the Chinese academic community began to view Žižek not just as a cultural critic but as a political theorist advocating radical leftist ideas.

socialist revolution.^① Sharpe and Boucher describe this as “revolutionary vanguardism,” but it can be seen as essentially the communist cause—a notion Žižek formally embraced only after 2008.

In 2008, the global financial crisis triggered by the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States exposed the absurdity of Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis and led to a resurgence of leftist thought in the West. This crisis highlighted the vulnerabilities of capitalism, sparking a renewed interest in leftist theories, although not necessarily leftist policies. Within this context, Western academia witnessed a surge in “Marx fever” and “communism fever,” calling for a return to leftist traditions and ideas. While the crisis created favorable conditions for the spread of leftist ideologies, the liberation of thought remained a significant challenge. On the one hand, prejudices against communism persisted following the failures of 20th-century communist experiments. On the other hand, capitalist liberal democracy continued to dominate global politics, so entrenched and pervasive as an ideology that most people found it difficult to even imagine an alternative system. In this context, Žižek’s mission in his communist project is to liberate people’s thinking. In 2008, Žižek radicalized his stance, declaring himself a communist and a dialectical materialist, and calling for a broad cultural and political revolution.^② His publication that year, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, was seen as a significant leap in political faith, establishing the identity necessary

^① Cf. Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p.6.

^② Cf. Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p.1.

for communist re-education in the current political climate.^① Since 2009, Žižek and Alain Badiou have led global Marxist conferences centered on “the Idea of Communism,” using their influence to fuel a global communist resurgence. In 2011, Žižek delivered a speech at Zuccotti Park in New York to the members of the Occupy Wall Street movement, reminding them that the marriage between democracy and capitalism was over and urging them to fight for the commons. Communism has increasingly become a central keyword in Žižek’s works. Žižek’s radical anti-democratic stance, his call to “return to Lenin,” and his push for the realization of communism have made him a prominent and outspoken figure within the Western left, distinct from post-Marxism and other liberal leftist ideologies. This bold position has set him apart, highlighting his commitment to a revolutionary vision that challenges the prevailing liberal democratic order.

If, prior to this period, Žižek could be characterized as a psychoanalyst of the zeitgeist—embodying Lacanian psychoanalysis, utilizing popular culture, and rooted in Marxism, diagnosing without prescribing—then after the financial crisis, Žižek shed much of his psychoanalytic and pop culture façade, opting for direct, tangible political engagement. He rallied under the banner “Demand the Impossible!” and, alongside radical leftists like Badiou, critiqued the liberal democratic political system of capitalism, arguing that struggles and critiques within the democratic framework ultimately seek a more moderate form of capitalism. In this period, Žižek pursued politics as the “art of the impossible,” anticipating the occurrence of events and actions. He aimed to

^① Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, ‘Introduction: “Žižek’s Communism” and In Defence of Lost Causes’, *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol.4, No. 2, p.3.

“rewrite the rules of what is and isn’t possible, what is and isn’t realistic,”^① essentially attempting to reshape the political imagination towards communism. This shift marked a significant transformation in Žižek’s approach, from a critical theorist diagnosing societal issues through the lens of psychoanalysis and popular culture to an active political figure advocating for radical systemic change.

Amid the impact of the financial crisis and the exposure of systemic flaws in the capitalist development model, Marxism, as a major discipline in China, embarked on a new phase of its Sinicization. Previously, Chinese scholars had positioned Žižek as a postmodern Lacanian, not sufficiently Marxist, and grouped him with theorists of postmodernism like Debord, Baudrillard, and late Derrida. However, contemporary Chinese scholars now see Žižek aligned with radical leftist theorists such as Badiou, Agamben, Rancière, and Hardt. His bold declaration of communist ideals and his critique of Western liberal democratic hegemony are perceived as radical stances, making Žižek a significant reference point for the sinicization of Marxist theory and sparking a renewed wave of Žižek studies in China. This renewed interest is most evident in the proliferation of National Social Science Fund projects focusing on Žižek since 2008. Numerous projects have emerged, including “Žižek and Marxist Thought Studies” (Han Zhenjiang), “Žižek’s Cultural Critique of Contemporary Capitalism” (Yu Qi), “Philosophical Critique from Žižek’s Psychoanalytic Perspective” (Yan Zesheng), and “Philosophical Thought of Slavoj Žižek” (Li Xixiang), among others. These projects highlight the growing recognition of Žižek’s

^① Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*, London, New York: Northwestern University Press, 2009, p.xvii.

contributions to contemporary philosophical and political discourse within China.

However, Chinese Marxist philosophers often have an ambiguous and divided attitude towards Žižek. On one hand, Žižek is perceived as a misunderstood and imaginary “Other” used to establish their own identity—a Marxist ally of China in the Western world. His exposure of the crises of Western capitalism and criticism of liberal democratic systems partially overlap with the targets of Chinese Marxist critique. On the other hand, China’s “resonance” with Žižek is a wishful “misrecognition,” as the contexts and goals of their critiques of capitalism differ significantly. Moreover, despite the fervor for Žižek studies in China, Chinese philosophers never respond to Žižek’s views and criticisms of contemporary Chinese politics, such as his critique of China’s authoritarian capitalism^①. In October 2021, the “Academic Symposium on Žižek’s Philosophical Thought” hosted by Nanjing University was canceled before the conference. According to online sources, Žižek was banned from speaking and the conference was canceled due to “political reasons.”^② In summary, despite appearing as allies and “comrades,” Žižek will never truly become an “insider.” By critiquing Žižek as an “Other,” such as criticizing him for “deviating from classical Marxism” or for “only explaining the world rather than changing it,” Chinese scholars attempt to affirm the superiority and central status of China’s official philosophy—Marxism with Chinese characteristics—through their differences with Žižek’s theories.

^① ‘Slavoj Žižek: Will Our Future Be Chinese “Capitalist Socialism”?’ , RT International, accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/441873-china-socialism-capitalism-zizek/>.

^② Cf. Ming Pao News 明報新聞網. 2021. “Yi She Zhengzhi Nanjing Daxue Zhexue Yantao Sha Ting 疑涉政治 南京大学哲学研讨煞停” [Suspected Political Issues: Nanjing University Philosophy Symposium Halted]. Ming Pao News, October 30, 2021. <https://news.mingpao.com/pns/%e4%b8%ad%e5%9c%8b/article/20211030/s00013/1635530983529/%e7%96%91%e6%b6%89%e6%94%bf%e6%b2%bb-%e5%8d%97%e4%ba%ac%e5%a4%a7%e5%ad%b8%e5%93%b2%e5%ad%b8%e7%a0%94%e8%a8%8e%e7%85%9e%e5%81%9c>.

3. Žižek in Chinese Humanities Circles: The Master in the “Post-Theoretical Era” and Model for the Internationalization of Chinese Literary Theory

In contrast to the last century when theory propelled real political movements, as Terry Eagleton pointed out at the beginning of *After Theory*, the golden age of cultural theory is long past.^① The pioneering works of theorists like Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida are now many years behind us. Wang Ning proposed that with Derrida’s death in 2004, contemporary philosophy and humanistic thought have entered a “post-theoretical era.”^② The post-theoretical era is characterized by the fall of the grand Other and the rise of the little other. The all-encompassing unified theory is being challenged, and deconstructive theory permeates various theoretical trends. Small narratives and marginal discourses have emerged, making research subjects and value judgments more diverse.

Is Žižek considered a new master in the “post-theoretical era” following Derrida? An awkward fact for Žižek is that, despite his resistance to the non-ideological and non-political nature of “post-theory,” and even his critique of contemporary cultural studies as the ultimate expression of the cultural logic of global capitalism,^③ and his efforts to restore the critical edge of Theory, he is primarily positioned within Western humanistic thought as an outstanding postmodern cultural theorist and cultural critic. This outcome might be related to Žižek’s “not serious enough” writing style. Terry Eagleton describes Žižek as “a formidably erudite scholar well-

^① Cf. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, London: Penguin, 2004, p.1.

^② Wang, Ning 王宁. 2009. “‘Hou Lilun Shidai’ de Wenxue yu Wenhua Yanjiu ‘后理论时代’ 的文学与文化研究” [Literature and Cultural Studies in the ‘Post-Theory Era’]. Beijing Daxue Chubanshe 北京大学出版社, p. 4.

^③ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kiesłowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*, First Edition (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 2.

versed in Kant and Heidegger who also has a consuming passion for the everyday.”^① Žižek acknowledges that the numerous examples from cinema, popular culture, jokes, and political anecdotes in his works often push the boundaries of good taste, leading reviewers to describe his style as “postmodern.”^② Despite Žižek’s frequent emphasis that the cultural examples in his works are merely bait to attract readers to his philosophical ideas and his desire to downplay his “cultural” aspect, this often backfires. Žižek continues to be labeled in the West with titles he detests, such as “the Borat of philosophy,” “the Elvis of cultural theory,” and “the world’s hippest philosopher.”^③

Contemporary Chinese humanities scholars have kept pace with the “post-theoretical era” in the West. The impact of Žižek on China’s humanities circles can be summarized in two main aspects: 1) positioning him as a master of theory; 2) recognizing him as an expert in specific areas in the context of post-theoretical era. Unlike the critical and politically oriented stance of Chinese philosophers towards Žižek, the humanities field in China embraces a more inclusive and diverse perspective on his work. Overall, as Lu Tonglin points out, apart from doubts about Žižek’s understanding of China and skepticism towards his works on China, Chinese scholars generally have a high acceptance of his theoretical works.^④ Some scholars (such as Han Zhenjiang, Kong Ming’an, Wu Guanjun, Zhao Chun, etc.) focus on Žižek’s philosophical thoughts, viewing him as a master akin to Lacan and Hegel and considering his ideas as the

^① Terry Eagleton, ‘Terry Eagleton Reviews Trouble in Paradise and Absolute Recoil by Slavoj Žižek’, *The Guardian*, 12 November 2014, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/12/terry-eagleton-trouble-in-paradise-absolute-recoil-zizek-review>.

^② Slavoj Žižek, *The Žižek Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p.viii.

^③ Katie Engelhart, ‘Slavoj Zizek: I Am Not the World’s Hippest Philosopher! | Salon.Com’, 29 December 2012, https://www.salon.com/2012/12/29/slavoj_zizek_i_am_not_the_worlds_hippest_philosopher/.

^④ Cf. Tonglin Lu, ‘Guest Editor’s Introduction’, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Vol.19, No. 3, pp.617–25.

beginning of a “new theoretical foundation after post-structuralism” and an important new pillar in theoretical circles. They reconstruct his theoretical system using key concepts from Žižek’s thought (such as parallax, the Real, death drive, subject, event, action, etc.) and hope that his ideas, as a branch of contemporary Western literary theory, can inject new vitality into Chinese humanities. Another group of scholars, including Hu Shun, Dai Yuchen, Chen Linxia, and Liu Xinting, focus on Žižek’s ideas in ecology, posthuman subjectivity, cyberspace criticism, and film criticism within the “post-theoretical era.” Their work aligns with current research trends like ecological criticism, posthumanism, visual culture construction, and aesthetics, reflecting the era’s characteristic of the coexistence of theoretical diversity and multiple discourses. In the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural context of the post-theoretical era, Žižek, who follows hot topics and is keen on cross-border issues, undoubtedly serves as a significant intellectual resource, providing a fresh perspective from a world-class thinker on these topics. Furthermore, some scholars (such as Zhou Zhiqiang) propose the idea of “Žižek as a method,” focusing on his methodological approach to cultural studies, thereby applying and analyzing Žižek’s insights within cultural research and criticism.

Compared to the relatively closed and internationally less influential field of Chinese philosophy, the Chinese humanities have a more conscious awareness of engaging with the world and dialoguing with the West. They do not shy away from academic exchanges and theoretical debates with Žižek on issues concerning China. In 2011, Chinese-Canadian scholar Tonglin Lu edited a special issue titled “The Chinese Perspective on Žižek and Žižek’s

Perspective on China” in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*.^① In this issue, Lu herself, Chinese-American scholar Liu Kang, and Chinese scholars Zhang Yiwu, Yang Huilin, and Lo Kwai-Cheung (Hong Kong) published articles discussing Žižek and contemporary political, social, and cultural issues in China. The issue also included two articles by Žižek and a response to Liu Kang’s article. According to the four stages of Chinese humanities research proposed by Wang Ning—“following others,” “speaking with others,” “speaking against others,” and “proposing new viewpoints and leading international colleagues in discussion”^②—this represents a successful attempt at the internationalization of Chinese humanities by engaging in a phase of “speaking against” with Žižek.

However, leveraging global interest in Chinese issues and “speaking against” Žižek does not satisfy the ambitions of Chinese humanities scholars. Despite China’s leading economic status, it lacks a groundbreaking and internationally influential figure in the humanities like Žižek. Žižek, from a former Eastern European socialist country, transcends the identity politics of Western academia. He is seen “not just as a scholar and theorist from a small nation in the non-Western camp, but as a non-Western voice that can represent the international mainstream.”^③ This contrast

^① ‘Chinese Perspective on Žižek and Žižek’s Perspective on China’, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Vol.19, No.3.

^② Wang Ning believes that “Chinese humanities research has undergone and is undergoing four stages: The first stage is ‘following others,’ which means that for the past century or more, Chinese humanities scholars have been dedicated to introducing Western theories and writings, to the extent that they have neglected to introduce their own thoughts and academic works to foreign audiences. The second stage is ‘speaking alongside others,’ where, after many years of being students, we have finally caught up with our teachers and can discuss issues with them on equal footing. The third stage is ‘speaking against others,’ where, while discussing alongside our teachers, we identify some errors and imperfections in their theoretical viewpoints and boldly raise questions and criticisms. The fourth stage is the stage of our gradual maturity, where we are fully capable of proposing entirely new viewpoints, sparking discussions and even debates, with the aim of leading our international colleagues in these discussions. This is particularly applicable to the field of comparative literature research.” Cf. Wang, Ning 王宁. 2022. “Wang Ning: Goujian Zhongguo Bijiao Wenxue de Xueshu Huayu 王宁: 构建中国比较文学的学术话语” [Wang Ning: Constructing the Scholarly Discourse of Chinese Comparative Literature]. Chinese Social Sciences Network 中国社会科学网, March 9, 2022. https://www.reileurope.com/wx/wx_yczs/202203/t20220309_5397777.shtml.

^③ Wang, Ning 王宁. 2015. “Hou Lilun Shidai Zhongguo Wenlun de Guojihua 后理论时代中国文论的国际化” [The Internationalization of Chinese Literary Theory in the Post-Theory Era]. *Zhongguo Gaoxiao Shehui Kexue 中国高校社会科学*, no. 1, p. 112.

stimulates Chinese scholars who have long relied on Chinese issues to gain international recognition. As Wu Guanjun notes, “Žižek’s current academic influence sharply pierces the consensual framework that has dominated Chinese academia for decades: that scholars from the Third World can only gain international influence by defending ‘local knowledge,’ interpreting ‘native culture/civilization,’ analyzing ‘regional issues,’ and adhering to ‘particularist discourse.’”^① In 2015, Wang Ning, reflecting on the “Žižek phenomenon,” expressed expectations for Chinese scholars: “This undoubtedly serves as an inspiration for Chinese scholars and theorists striving to make their voices heard on the international stage. As scholars proficient in both Chinese and Western academic traditions, and capable of writing in English, why can’t Chinese scholars achieve this?”^② Žižek, like a catfish among sardines, represents both a challenge and an encouragement to Chinese scholars. The interest and curiosity towards Žižek in the Chinese humanities are not merely theoretical but stem from a desire to enhance China’s academic influence and secure a place in the international mainstream.

Actually, the academic career of Slavoj Žižek could exemplify Wang Ning’s “four stages” theory of the internationalization of Chinese humanities. Early in his career, Žižek’s translations of texts by Lacan, Freud, and Althusser can be seen as “following others.” Joining the ranks of Anglo-American post-Marxism represents the stage of “speaking with others.” Subsequently, in debates with post-

^① Wu, Guanjun 吴冠军. 2014. “Dongfang Zaobao | Wu Guanjun Tan Qizeke he Tade Lundi 东方早报 | 吴冠军谈齐泽克和他的论敌” [Oriental Morning Post | Wu Guanjun Discusses Žižek and His Opponents]. November 3, 2014. <https://www.ecnu.edu.cn/info/1094/56771.htm>.

^② Wang, Ning 王宁. 2015. “Hou Lilun Shidai Zhongguo Wenlun de Guojihua 后理论时代中国文论的国际化” [The Internationalization of Chinese Literary Theory in the Post-Theory Era]. *Zhongguo Gaoxiao Shehui Kexue* 中国高校社会科学, no. 1, p. 112.

Marxist scholars like Laclau and Butler, Žižek radicalized his political conclusions, embodying the phase of “speaking against others.” Now, advocating for a “return to Lenin” and leading the left-wing theoretical discourse on communism, Žižek is in the fourth stage of “leading others.” Žižek, hailing from the small and sparsely populated Slovenia, has won great renown for his country in the realm of ideas.^① He serves as a model for Chinese scholars aspiring to internationalize Chinese literary theory. While Chinese scholars can gain international attention through elucidating Chinese issues, their influence will be significantly limited if they stop at this step. Žižek’s career shows that Chinese scholars need to actively engage in Western theoretical debates, boldly engage in direct dialogue with Western theoretical giants, and present their insights on issues of common concern. Žižek did not confine his research to the cultural, literary, and political realities of the Balkans. Instead, he targeted Western popular culture and hegemonic politics, directly engaging with classic theories from Lacan and Hegel, offering insights that are often more profound than those of Western scholars. As Žižek himself said, “if, as a philosopher, you really articulate the spirit of the time, the result is popularity.”^② The lesson for the Chinese academic community and the “Chinese School” from Žižek’s case is that Chinese scholars need to ground themselves locally while having a global vision. They should propose questions that are original to China but are also of interest to the international academic community. As Wang Ning aptly put it, “In international contexts, we should not only speak on Chinese issues but also voice our opinions on universally significant issues that concern all of

^① Rebecca Mead, ‘The Marx Brother: How a Philosopher from Slovenia Became an International Star’, *The New Yorker*, 5 May 2003.

^② Engelhart, ‘Slavoj Zizek: I Am Not the World’s Hippest Philosopher! | Salon.Com’.

humanity.”^① To sum up, beyond being introduced and studied as the master in the “post-theoretical era,” Žižek offers a unique inspirational significance for the internationalization of Chinese humanities scholarship.

5. The Anti-Establishment Star Intellectual in the Internet Age

In the West, Žižek’s influence has crossed over into mainstream culture, earning him the title of “a thinker of choice for the internet generation.”^② Through various media forms, Žižek has brought theory out of the academic ivory tower and into the public sphere, making it both entertaining and provocative. Moreover, his distinctive “unserious” image contributes to his appeal; Bar-El describes him as the “anti-intellectual intellectual,” with a persona reflected in his eccentric appearance and behavior, such as his disheveled beard, constant nose-sniffing, and casual dress.^③ Žižek’s approach to theory as non-academic and his non-mainstream personal image make him a highly discussed figure outside of academia, garnering significant popularity. However, Žižek himself is not entirely satisfied with the true impact of his popularity. He has expressed frustration, saying, “People say, ‘He’s funny, go listen to him, but don’t take him too seriously.’ And this sometimes hurts me a little bit because people really often ignore what I want to say.”^④ From Žižek’s perspective, his theories have not been given due attention despite his growing fame; people seem more interested in his persona than his ideas. Through the dissemination of his

^① Wang, Ning 王宁. 2022. “Quanqiu Renwen yu Zhongguo Xuezhede Gongxian 全球人文与中国学者的贡献” [Global Humanities and the Contributions of Chinese Scholars]. *Yishu Guangjiao 艺术广角*, no. 3, p. 15.

^② Sean O’Hagan, ‘Slavoj Žižek: A Philosopher to Sing About’, *The Guardian*, 13 January 2013, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2013/jan/13/observer-profile-slavoj-zizek-opera>.

^③ Eliran Bar-El and Patrick Baert, “‘The Fool’ Revisited: The Making of Žižek as Sacrificial Public Intellectual”, *Cultural Sociology*, Vol.15, No. 4, p.551.

^④ Mike Bulajewski, ‘Getting a Grip on Slavoj Žižek (with Slavoj Žižek)’, *JSTOR Daily*, 27 June 2018, <https://daily.jstor.org/getting-a-grip-on-slavoj-zizek-with-slavoj-zizek/>.

“performative” style, Žižek has gained fame on the internet, but in the process, he has also been commodified. Some scholars even argue that Žižek is in collusion with contemporary capitalism: “With the prevailing capitalist order aware that it is in trouble but unable to conceive of practicable alternatives, Žižek’s formless radicalism is ideally suited to a culture transfixed by the spectacle of its own fragility.”^① In this interpretation, Žižek becomes an accomplice to capitalism, and his theories degrade into a performative stance of opposition.

The Žižek fever among young people in China superficially mirrors the popular fascination with Žižek outside of the Western academic sphere, but the underlying reasons differ significantly. On Chinese internet platforms, Žižek is often seen as an anti-establishment star intellectual, with his leftist and Marxist political inclinations being selectively overlooked. This phenomenon is closely related to the translation of Žižek’s works in China. Currently, out of nearly 50 books authored by Žižek, only about 20 have been translated and published in China. This indicates a selective translation of his works. The translation of Žižek’s works into Chinese began in 2002 with Ji Guangmao’s translation of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Since Žižek’s writing career spans over 30 years, from 1989 to the present, the translation of his works in China has also been ongoing for over 20 years, with new translations of his books being published almost every year. However, it is regrettable that the focus of these translations is predominantly on Žižek’s pre-2009 works. As Žižek has become increasingly politically engaged and radicalized, especially after his

^① John Gray, ‘The Violent Visions of Slavoj Žižek’, *The New York Review of Books*, 20 November 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151120004119/http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jul/12/violent-visions-slavoj-zizek/>.

“communist turn,” the translation efforts in China have largely remained focused on his earlier works, which integrate Lacanian psychoanalysis and popular culture, rather than his more recent and politically charged writings. Several reasons could account for this phenomenon. First, the Chinese translation and publishing industry prioritizes popular appeal over academic research needs. Although Žižek’s political messages are strong, most readers are drawn to his works for their entertainment value rather than for resonance with his political ideologies. Žižek’s earlier works, which extensively cover popular culture, are undoubtedly more eye-catching to these readers. Second, Žižek’s tracking and commentary on current political events often lose their relevance quickly due to the fleeting nature of news. This diminishes their long-term market value, making publishers less inclined to invest in translating these works. Finally, in terms of the quality of his works, the author believes that Žižek’s contributions to philosophy and cultural studies exhibit greater originality and depth than his political writings. Žižek himself has admitted, “I think that my philosophical books are much superior. My more political writings like *The Courage of Hopelessness*, *Against the Double Blackmail*, and so on, these are things that I myself don’t fully trust. I think I’m writing them just to say something that I always expect somebody else should have said.”^①

In contemporary China, the popularity of Slavoj Žižek among young people mirrors the fascination he garners outside the Western academic sphere, yet the underlying reasons differ significantly. On popular Chinese social media platforms such as

^① Bulajewski, ‘Getting a Grip on Slavoj Žižek (with Slavoj Žižek)’.

Bilibili, Douyin(Chinese Tik Tok), and Xiaohongshu, Žižek is portrayed as a prolific quote-spouting anti-establishment intellectual rather than a serious academic thinker. His films and interview clips, often focusing on relatable topics like anime, marriage, and political commentary, have been translated and shared widely, amassing significant viewership. As of July 2024, the most-viewed videos on Žižek on Bilibili include themes such as “Žižek Discusses Anime,” “Žižek’s Sharp Commentary on Marriage,” and his opinions on Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, each with over 300,000 views.

Prominent content creators like “未明子” with 639,000 followers and “潜在狗子” with 206,000 followers discuss and evaluate Žižek’s thoughts, contributing to his popularity. On Xiaohongshu, Žižek is dubbed “Pure Love Warrior” and “Nasal Philosopher,” with his comments on issues such as love and marriage resonating with young audiences. His influence in China’s youth, especially within artistic circles, is exemplified by a news headline: “On the Day Five People Made Headlines, Lead Singer Renke Was Reading Žižek at Writer Zhang Xiaozhou’s House.”^①

Overall, outside of the academic sphere, young people’s affection for Žižek in China is mainly based on two points. First, as Sophie Fiennes, the director who collaborated with Žižek on *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* and *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, noted, “He is very much a thinker for our turbulent, high-speed, information-led lives precisely because he insists on the freedom to

^① Zong, Cheng 宗城. “Wutiao Ren Shang Resou Natie, Zhuchang Renke Zhengzai Zuojia Zhang Xiaozhou Jia Li Kan Qizeke 五条人上热搜那天，主唱仁科正在作家张晓舟家里看齐泽克” [The Day Wutiao Ren Trended, Lead Singer Renke Was Reading Žižek at Writer Zhang Xiaozhou’s Home]. Tencent News, July 29, 2020. <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20200729A07FO900>. “Five People” is a folk band formed in 2008 from Haifeng, Guangdong, China. They became immensely popular after participating in the music variety show “The Big Band.” As of July 26, 2024, they have 1.157 million followers on Weibo.

stop and think hard about who you are as an individual in this fragmented society.”^① Žižek always addresses real-world issues, breaking down existing ways of thinking with non-academic, relatable language, which inspires the public. Also, the striking contrast between Žižek’s personal image and his scholarly identity leaves a strong impression. Besides his “eccentric appearance and mannerisms” mentioned earlier, Žižek often exhibits “astonishing behavior” in his videos, such as telling dirty jokes with a straight face or introducing his theories while half-lying on a bed, shirtless.

These actions, which do not conform to the image of a serious scholar, have led to Žižek being viewed as a “spectacle” by Chinese youth, who often watch and even parody him. The affection for Žižek, who opposes establishment and academia, itself reflects a rebellious spirit. If we consider Žižek’s “performative” style as a form of self-promotion, then he is undoubtedly successful, garnering admiration and attention from young Chinese fans as an anti-establishment star intellectual. However, from Žižek’s own ultimate perspective—hoping that people would engage with his profound philosophical ideas after enjoying his jokes—he is failing. Žižek’s concern, as expressed in the film *Žižek!*, is again validated in China: “My biggest fear is not that I will be ignored, but that I will be accepted.”^② On public discussion platforms outside academia, neither Žižek’s philosophical thoughts nor his Marxist and communist political ideologies are given due importance. The primary attention Žižek receives in China is superficial and sensational, limited to overly specific topics. The influence of Žižek’s theories is significantly less than the spread of his quotes and

^① O’Hagan, ‘Slavoj Žižek’, 13 January 2013.

^② *Žižek!* (Lawrence Konner, 2005).

image, failing to spark a deep, widespread intellectual enlightenment.

Lo Kwai-Cheung describes this phenomenon as “Žižek without Žižek” and “an obscene joke without the critical theory behind it,” asserting that Žižek has been depoliticized and stripped of his excess and radicalism in China.^① However, this perspective only captures the surface and misses deeper reasons: while Žižek appears as a popular cultural figure in China, this does not mean that he has been co-opted by capitalism as a comedian in the same way he has in the West. The “Žižek phenomenon” in China seems more like an active, spontaneous occurrence, related to the current ideological and value orientations of the Chinese populace. Žižek’s “failure” in interpellation in China reflects a disconnection and tension between the ideology identified with by the new generation and Marxism. While Marxism remains a fashionable ideology within Chinese official and academic circles, it lacks social recognition and does not align with the mainstream values of the general public, especially the youth. If the fondness for the “non-mainstream” Žižek is itself an expression of their rebellious and “niche” personality, then ignoring Žižek’s Marxist political stance becomes understandable. This creates an awkward situation for Žižek: people admire him but are unwilling to engage with his Marxist positions. This “mutation” of Žižek’s theory and persona in China is also a point of reflection to study Žižek from a Marxist perspective. It highlights the challenges of reconciling his radical political ideas with the prevailing ideological landscape among Chinese youth.

^① Cf. Kwai-Cheung Lo, ‘Sinicizing Žižek?: The Ideology of Inherent Self-Negation in Contemporary China’, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Vol.19, no. 3, pp.745.

Conclusion

As Žižek's trajectory from obscurity in France to fame as a post-Marxist in Britain reveals, the success of an intellectual largely depends on their environment. The nearly two-decade-long Žižek fever in China similarly relies on the unique political, academic, and ideological context of contemporary China. Between 1989 and 1998, due to the distinct rhythm of the Chinese philosophical and humanities spheres, Žižek, a rising star in Western thought, did not attract the attention of Chinese scholars. In a philosophical environment where Marxism serves as the master signifier, Žižek was introduced into China amidst the post-Marxist wave and was later positioned as a radical left-wing theorist following his "communist turn." On one hand, Žižek is perceived as a misrecognized imaginary other, used to establish the identity of Chinese Marxism; on the other hand, Chinese Marxist researchers affirm the superiority and centrality of Chinese Marxist theory through their critique of Žižek. In the Chinese humanities community, Žižek is simultaneously regarded as a new master of critique and an important intellectual resource for various trends and research hotspots in the "post-theoretical era." Žižek's success has also inspired Chinese scholars to actively engage in Western theoretical debates, propose their own theoretical constructs on fundamental issues, and gain attention from the international academic community. The "Žižek fever" extends far beyond academic research; among the general public, Žižek is accepted by the youth as an anti-establishment star intellectual rather than a Marxist theorist, with his Marxist stance often overlooked. While this may be a regret for Žižek, it also reflects the value orientations of the current Chinese populace, especially the younger generation.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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Data Availability

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