Wei Zhang

THUS SPEAKS MR. NOBODY: BRECHT'S *STORIES OF MR. KEUNER* THROUGH THE LENS OF CLASSICAL CHINESE DIALECTICS

Abstract. This essay presents a refreshing reading of Bertolt Brecht's *Stories of Mr. Keuner* through the lens of classical Chinese dialectics. Through careful analysis, I uncover not only interesting resonances between Brecht's stories and classical Chinese philosophy but also intriguing dialectic tensions between individual and clusters of stories in the collection, and between Brecht (the man, the artist, and his dramatic oeuvre) and Mr. Keuner (Mr. Nobody), his philosophical alter ego, as the titular character dialogues with his many interlocutors on momentous issues such as knowledge, power, justice, fatherland, and more.

While still a budding artist in the 1920s, Bertolt Brecht was a ravenous reader of classical Chinese philosophy (as well as poetry) through German translations such as Richard Wilhelm's of Confucius and Alfred Forke's of Mozi (Mo Tzu).[1] As a result, Chinese philosophy infused Brecht's thinking about the relationship between social systems and individual behavior, as embodied in his work with epic theater and *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect) as well as his creative oeuvre, such as *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*,[2] and *Stories of Mr. Keuner*. The latter, unlike Brecht's dramatic works, has not garnered any serious scholarly attention.[3]

Written over a period of more than twenty years, from the second half of the 1920s to the early 1950s, some extrapolated from his theater projects and reworked so they could stand alone, some written as original pieces, *Stories of Mr. Keuner* offers a total of eighty-six "stories,"

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or rather, anecdotes, aphorisms, and parables. The titular character of the collection, Mr. Keuner, the name possibly derived from the German word *keiner* (no one), can be seen as a Mr. Nobody, or rather, Everyman. He is a father ("The role of feelings"); a son ("On having a stance"); a boyfriend/lover ("Extravagance" and "Mr. Keuner and the actress"); a teacher, possibly in the sense that Confucius and Socrates were teachers ("Measures against power," "Praise," "About truth," and "The thinking man and the false student"); teacher/lover to a woman student ("A question of guilt"); a neighbor ("Serving a purpose"); a host ("Hospitality"); a guest ("On the disruption of 'one thing at a time'" and "Sense of justice"); and a friend. He is the sum total of all these and more.

Above all, Mr. Keuner philosophizes a lot, without the clumsy posturing and pretentiousness of an academic or a scholarly professor.[4] In a way we can see Mr. Keuner as Brecht's surrogate and philosophical alter ego of sorts (I am wary, of course, of the fallacy of confusing the fictional character with his creator) who speaks his mind as he journeys and sojourns from his "fatherland" (East Germany) to exile (Prague, Zurich, Paris, Copenhagen, Paris, Moscow, New York, London, and so on) and back to his fatherland, assuming whatever persona he sees fit and necessary along the way.

What results is a collection of "stories" written in "a very laconic, lapidary" and "enigmatic" style (Chalmers, p. 99) that glimmers not only with the acuity of a mind well versed in the author's native Western philosophy but also with the wisdom of the classical Chinese philosophy Mr. Keuner invokes directly in "Originality" and "The administration of justice." In this essay I will try to shine some light on the interesting resonances between *Stories of Mr. Keuner* and classical Chinese dialectics and the dialectic[5] synergies, as well as tensions between individual stories in the collection and, for that matter, between Brecht (the man, the artist, and his dramatic oeuvre) and Mr. Keuner, as the titular character dialogues (in a more Confucian than Socratic manner[6]) with his many interlocutors on such important issues as knowledge, power, justice, fatherland, and more.

I

Brecht's idea of the dialectic is mostly shaped by the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, who theorizes that history, society, and people develop because of an opposition between a thesis and an antithesis, whose relationship is defined by contradiction.[7] From 1922 to 1931, Brecht

embarked on a systematic study of Hegelian dialectic and came to understand the social contradictions, struggles, and crises of his time, especially the contradictions hidden in the deep stratum of a changing and uncertain environment.[8] During the last few years of his life, Brecht went so far as to compile his entire theatrical theory under a new label of "dialectical theatre."[9] Although what shaped Brecht's political philosophy and the mind that created his creative oeuvre was, primarily, the philosophical thought and work of the West—his fatherland, so to speak—Brecht's inquisitive quest led him well beyond the confines of Western learning to the East for ideas and inspirations, especially, as noted above, through voracious reading of German translations of classical Chinese philosophy.

Classical Chinese dialectics[10] can be traced as far back as the twelfth century BCE, when *Yijing* (*The Book of Changes*), a foundational text of Chinese philosophical thought and the first of the Five Classics (*Wujing*) of Confucianism, came into being. Its intricate system of trigrams (*bagua*) and hexagrams used to divine future events (which can be quite perplexing to scholars and laypeople alike) aside, *Yijing* embodies a dialectical, cosmological view of the world that influences Chinese minds to this day: the ultimate, absolute, infinite reality, cause, or principle of the world is *Taiji* (Tai Chi), or *Dao* (Tao, the Way). From this never-changing yet ever-changing ultimate nothing/everything originates yin and yang—yang: heaven, sun, light, active, positive, male, firm, strong, and so on; yin: earth, moon, shade, passive, negative, female, yielding, and so on—which forms an open, interfusing, interdependent, and complementary organic whole. This organic whole has neither beginning nor end; it is a constant flow that keeps renewing itself and permeates everything; this constant, cosmic flow contains no distinction "between the natural realm and the human realm, an observing subject and an observed object, and the inner world and the outer world. Everything is part of a totality, a group dance that never stops" (Hon).

From this early dialectical view of the world developed two distinct yet complementary systems of thought and belief, Daoism (Taoism) and Confucianism. The former focuses on self-cultivation as a personal and inner fulfillment so as to follow Dao, the cosmic forces (as described above), without trying hard to resist or change their courses. The latter focuses on self-cultivation as a moral and public duty so as to follow Dao in playing one's role in family, state, and the whole world (under Heaven). Daoism, as founded by and associated with Laozi and Zhuangzi, emphasizes the harmonious relationship between humans and nature

and, as expressed in *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*, another foundational text of classical Chinese philosophy), is concerned with how Dao finds expression in "virtue" (*de*) through "naturalness" (*ziran*) and "nonaction" (*wuwei*).[11]

II

This Daoist dialectic view of cosmic whole, of "naturalness" and "nonaction," is reflected in several pieces in *Stories of Mr. Keuner,* such as "Form and content," "Of the bearers of knowledge," and "Mr. K. drives a car." In "Form and content," Mr. Keuner uses the analogy of gardening (a favorite trope used by Laozi, Zhuangzi, Confucius, and other ancient Chinese sages to make their points) by way of commenting on the duality of content and form in a work of art. In this (negative?) analogy, a gardener asks Mr. Keuner to use a pair of shears to trim a laurel tree so it will have the form of a sphere. Mr. Keuner works on the tree right away, pruning all the wild shoots, and when he finally succeeds in lopping the tree into a spherical form, it has become too small for the original purpose of trimming (to be hired out for celebrations). Naturally, the gardener is not too pleased: "Good, that's the sphere, but where's the laurel?" (*S*, p. 24).

Form and content, Mr. Keuner seems to be saying, are inseparable, interfusing, and complementary to each other. When an artist thinks and works like a philosopher, trying too hard to get across some point (content) through the art (form) he wants to create, what he ends up creating is not good art because good art, Mr. Keuner implies through this story, should be a harmonious unity of the tensions between form and content and therefore is an organic whole. Gifted and inspired artists should not try too strenuously because great art, the perfect union of content and form, comes to them naturally and spontaneously.

This philosophy of art, as expressed in the gardening trope, is consistent with what Mr. Keuner, in the very first piece of the collection, says to the philosophy professor who professes his wisdom a bit too "uncomfortably." The professor displays too much "stance," Mr. Keuner complains, and too little "substance": "I see you walking clumsily and, as far as I can see, you're not getting anywhere. You talk obscurely, and you create no light with your talking. Seeing your stance, I'm not interested in what you're getting at" (*S*, p. 1).

So, what should someone who has substance, wisdom, and indeed knowledge do? Here is what Mr. Keuner has to say in "Of the bearers of knowledge": "He who bears knowledge must not fight, nor tell the truth,

nor do a service, nor not eat, nor refuse honors, nor be conspicuous. He who bears knowledge has only one virtue: that he bears knowledge" (*S*, p. 5). In response to a question from a "false student," Mr. Keuner says, "The stupid man expects much. The thinking man says little" (p. 79).

The Chinese feature or flavor in this philosophical "stance" with regard to knowledge is so visible that it is hard to miss. It appears to be directly indebted to Laozi's concept of wuwei, typically translated as "nonaction," although wuwei does not mean total inaction; rather, it can be construed to mean "nonassertive action," "noncoercive action," or "effortless action." Indeed, the concept of wuwei has also been interpreted "as a contrast against any form of action characterized by self-serving desire."[12] This understanding of wuwei as effortless, natural, spontaneous action is reflected in what Mr. Keuner says about "the thinking man" in "Organization": he "does not use one light too many, one piece of bread too many, one idea too many" (*S*, p. 2).

Where does the knowledge of "the bearer of knowledge" come from? Is it something innate, something he was born with? Is it something he acquires through wuwei, or through conscious, strenuous efforts to learn and study? In "Socrates," Mr. Keuner, after reading a book about the history of philosophy, shows his displeasure with philosophers who try "to describe all things as fundamentally unknowable," more particularly the logic of Socrates's "arrogant assertion" that he knew that he knew nothing: "One might have expected that he would add to his sentence: because I, too, have studied nothing. (In order to know something, we have to study)" (*S*, p. 41).

According to Mr. Keuner, one has to study to know that one knows nothing. Knowledge comes from studying the cosmic flow of things, or the traffic flow, for that matter, as Mr. Keuner muses in "Mr. K. drives a car." If he wants to learn to drive one car, Mr. Keuner says, he has to learn to drive two cars well, his own and the one in front: "Only when one observes what the driving conditions are for the car in front and can judge the obstacles it is facing does one know how to proceed with regard to that car" (*S*, p. 51). The traffic flow, as the cosmic flow, is both predictable and unpredictable, and ever changing and unchanging. A good driver has to be alert all the time, both keeping up with and keeping a safe distance from the car in front and the car behind (and on a multilane expressway, the cars to the left and right, too), ready to adjust the speed and even make an emergency response.

What should one do if one has gained good knowledge of the flow of things and become a "bearer of knowledge"? In "Two drivers," Mr. Keuner once again uses the driving analogy to make a point, in this

case, about the approach of two theater directors. Mr. Keuner compares one director to a driver who "has the traffic regulations at his fingertips, obeys them, and is able to use them to his own benefit": "He is skillful at racing forward and then maintaining a normal speed again, going easy on the engine, and thus he makes his way carefully and boldly between the other vehicles." Another driver that Mr. Keuner knows, in contrast, is more interested in "the traffic as a whole" than his own route because he regards himself as "a mere particle" of the whole: "He does not take advantage of his rights and does not make himself especially conspicuous. In spirit he is driving with the car in front of him and the car behind him, with constant pleasure in the progress of every vehicle and of the pedestrians as well" (*S*, p. 55).

The first driver uses his knowledge of the traffic flow consciously and strategically, adapting and adjusting opportunely to race ahead and gain advantage. The second driver, being a "mere particle" of the whole, like all the other "mere particles" that constitute the "whole" at any moment on any day, is both random and systemic, incidental and designed—if the traffic, of which he is an organic part, can flow at all. He is much more easygoing; he goes with the flow, literally, and does not try to change speed and overtake any other car in front of him, which in turn would alter the traffic whole.

Which approach is superior? Or rather, of which approach by the two drivers (or theater directors) does Mr. Keuner approve? He does not say explicitly, although his preference for the "constant pleasure" of going with the flow is more than implicit.

Nonetheless, one wonders what Mr. Keuner would say if one of his students, in a moment of Socratic, dialogic inquisitiveness, were to ask him about a certain theater artist named Bertolt Brecht who chooses not to go with the long flow of the Aristotelian theatrical tradition (which emphasizes the mimetic, the emotive, and so on) and enjoy the ride but instead chooses to go against the flow and create what he calls "non-Aristotelian drama," that is, epic theater, which is centered on the principle of *Verfremdungseffekt*. To go with flow or to go against the flow? If this were the question put to Mr. Keuner, he would perhaps wink, shrug his shoulders, and say that the answer is not "either or," but "both and." As a matter of fact, Mr. Keuner is taken aback and turns pale when someone meets him again after a long while and greets him with: "You haven't changed a bit" (*S*, p. 20).

III

For Brecht—who lived through the First World War (avoiding conscription by enrolling in a medical course at Munich University), the Second World War (fleeing Germany soon after Adolf Hitler came to power and was exiled from city to city in Europe and then the United States), and the early days of the Cold War (especially after returning to the "fatherland" in 1949)—the question of justice must have loomed large in his mind, or in the mind of his philosophic alter ego, Mr. Keuner. As a citizen philosopher, Mr. Keuner does not pursue the question in a fully Socratic manner, which would perhaps take a total of ten books of the *Republic* to parse and unpack and would end, among other things, in the poet being exiled because, Plato claims, poets are imitators who are "thrice removed from the king and from the truth."[13] Once again, Mr. Keuner uses analogy, a favorite trope of Chinese sages from antiquity, to ponder the momentous question of justice in stories such as "If sharks were men," "Mr. K.'s favorite animal," "Measures against power," "The helpless boy," "Sense of justice," and "Servant or master."

"If sharks were men," Mr. Keuner says, in answer to a question posited by his landlady's little girl (in a mock-serious tone reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal"), they would be really nice to the little fish: building them enormous boxes in the ocean, feeding them all kinds of lovely food, taking care of their physical and psychological well-being, providing them with fun-filled and morally sound schooling, and so on. Why? So the little fish would know that "it would be the best and most beautiful thing in the world" if they sacrificed themselves to the sharks "cheerfully" (*S*, p. 45).

In this shark-ruled, authoritarian world, the little fish would learn to be obedient; to guard against any Marxist class consciousness in oneself or any other little fish. Sharks, the big, powerful ruling classes, would wage wars against one another by having their little fish kill each other. The sharks' rule would be so absolute and ubiquitous that all forms of art, such as painting, gardening, theater, and music, would feature and celebrate sharks and nothing else. The one and only religion allowed in this reign of terror would be to teach the little fish to accept their fate and their place in the world: sharks' stomachs. "In short," Mr. Keuner sums up, with bitter tongue-in-cheek humor, at the end of a long, extended analogy (six hundred forty words in English translation, possibly the longest piece in the collection): "If sharks were men, they would for the first time bring culture to the ocean" (*S*, p. 47). It would

be the "culture" of a fascist society with no equality, no dignity, and no individuality for the little guys; where no thought or action challenging the absolute reign of terror would be tolerated.

"If sharks were men" draws a perfect picture of a world that Brecht, its creator, was both trapped in and exiled from; where the big and powerful, whether nations, groups, or individuals, dominate over and prey on the small, the weak, and the vulnerable. In this mock-serious yet impassioned protest against fascism, authoritarianism, and capitalism, and indictment of a world twisted by prejudice and brutality, one can hear not only the longing for a more just, more egalitarian (if not exactly utopian) society that goes back to well before Plato's *Republic* but also echoes from classical Chinese philosophy such as Mohism. In contrast to the Confucian ideal of *ren* (humanity) centered on love of one's family and proper social order (father and son, husband and wife, teacher and students, king and ministers), Mohism, as founded by Mozi (Mo Tzu), believes in and promotes an ideal of *jianai* (universal love) that disregards social distinctions and relationships and embraces the implicit ideal that everyone's happiness is accorded equal importance.[14]

How should the big and powerful and the small and weak get along? Laozi, for one, advocates peaceful coexistence between nation-states and individuals. As Laozi sees it, if a big and powerful nation-state can be modest and tolerant without bullying the smaller and weaker nation-state, it can receive the latter's admiration and support: "The great state only wishes to unite men together and nourish them; a small state only wishes to be received by, and to serve, the other. Each gets what it desires, but the great state must learn to abase itself."[15]

Apparently, big and powerful nation-states are created more equal in this not truly egalitarian vision of a world. Indeed, this kind of peaceful coexistence is predicated on the benevolence of the big and powerful, as exemplified by Mr. Keuner's favorite animal, the elephant, that "combines cunning with strength"—not the small "poultry" cunning, but big intelligence and wisdom in a big body, a combination that enables the elephant to "carry out great enterprises" (*S*, p. 31). The elephant, as envisioned and personified by Mr. Keuner, has all the virtues one would expect from a great leader: big yet fast, nimble, and versatile; both loved and feared, as well as formidable, good-natured, good-humored, gentle, loving, and kind (especially to children and other small animals). In Mr. Keuner's favorite animal we find a perfect union of power and intelligence, body and mind, and indeed yin and yang. If an elephant is attacked by an enemy such as a shark (or a lion), it is not a case of

"the brilliance of the minute," as philosophized by Laozi; rather, it is a case of the brilliance of the big and smart and the even mightier overcoming "the hard and strong."[16]

What should one do when facing an enemy as hard and strong as the shark or lion, especially when one is not as big and powerful as an elephant? Mr. Keuner gives several options that seem to create some dialectical tensions. Sometimes, under certain circumstances, one has to choose not to take on the enemy and fight, as illustrated in "Measures against power." In this piece, Mr. Keuner, when speaking out against power, is confronted by none other than Power himself. What should he do? He chooses to back down—for now: "I was speaking out *in favor of* Power" (emphasis added), he tells Power. When later he is confronted by his students about his "backbone," Mr. Keuner replies: "I don't have a backbone to be broken. I'm the one who has to live longer than Power" (*S*, p. 3).

This clear-eyed, pragmatic, and "backbone"-less response when facing a formidable enemy is uncannily similar to the choice made by the title character in Brecht's *Life of Galileo* when threatened with torture by the Inquisition. Galileo, the Italian astronomer and physicist, who has both the knowledge and courage to champion heliocentrism and the theories of Copernicus, recants his "heretical" teachings because he is a man of the flesh too. In the last scene of the play, when, years later, his student Andrea comes to visit, the now much-greyed teacher under house arrest owns up that to be truly devoted to science takes true courage: "I betrayed my profession. A man who does what I did cannot be tolerated in the ranks of science."[17]

A few years after he wrote *Life of Galileo*, Brecht found himself facing a similar moral dilemma. In 1947, when McCarthyism began to sweep across the United States, Brecht was subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He was one of nineteen witnesses blacklisted who declared they would refuse to appear, yet changed his mind and complied. He was interrogated for twenty-six minutes; denied that he was a member of any communist party; "recanted," sort of, his Marxist beliefs ("I studied, uh, had to study [Marxism] as a playwright, I think, who wrote historical plays, I of course had to study . . ."); and perhaps outfoxed his interrogators with wit, humor, and feigned mix-ups of English and German—to the delight of those present and to the satisfaction of HUAC Chairman J. Parnell Thomas (R-New Jersey): "He's doing alright. He's doing much

better than the other witnesses that you [Robert E. Stripling, HUAC's chief investigator] brought here."[18]

Although Brecht did break his vow not to appear before HUAC, he did not name names and betray anyone, and he got to fly back to Europe right after the testimony, as he had planned. He did feel badly, though, and wondered if anyone would understand the quandary he was in as a mere "guest of the country," a foreigner, alone among strangers.[19]

As if to rationalize his "backbone"-less response to Power, Mr. Keuner, as Brecht's alter ego of sorts, tells the story in "Measures against power" of Mr. Eggers, who chooses not to say "no" to oppression and exploitation (in the form of an agent representing the ruler of the city who commandeers his residence, food, and service) until the time is right. He chooses to fight injustice with wuwei, nonaction; or rather, without direct, overt fighting. He chooses to kill the enemy not with a thousand cuts but with a thousand fattening meals a year for seven years. When the agent finally dies from having grown too fat from eating, sleeping, and giving orders, Mr. Eggers "wrapped him in the ruined blanket, dragged him out of the house, washed the bed, whitewashed the walls, drew a deep breath and replied: 'No'" (*S*, p. 4).

The stratagem used by Mr. Eggers in dealing with oppression and exploitation from the ruler's agent finds a distant echo in one of the hexagrams in *Yijing*, Hexagram 23 Peeling Off (剥卦, *bo gua*). As indicated earlier, *Yijing* has a labyrinth of hexagrams (sixty-four of them altogether), each consisting of two trigrams from a total of six lines. Each line is either broken, therefore yielding, and is called the yin line; or unbroken, therefore firm, and is called yang line. The yin lines and the yang lines are not good or bad in and by themselves, and they are interrelated, interfusing, and complementary in the totality of the cosmic whole.

Without getting further entangled in the hexagrams' "mind-boggling" formations, configurations, and possible divinations, suffice to say for the purpose of discussion here that Hexagram 23 Peeling Off has one unbroken yang line atop and five broken yin lines underneath. Interestingly, the Chinese character for peeling off is *bo* (剥), which has a "knife" radical on its right part. In addition to peeling off with a knife, *bo* also means corrosion (*shi*), to weaken and destroy gradually. In fact, *bo* and *shi* are often used together as a compound word*: boshi.* When applied to the sphere of politics and governance, this hexagram can be read as showing the danger of the weak (those yin lines) working from underneath slowly, bit by bit, and succeeding in overcoming the

strong (the single yang line atop). Reversely, if the strong atop—such as a ruler, forewarned of the danger or as good-natured and smart as the elephant invoked by Mr. Keuner—chooses to be benevolent to the weak underneath, stability and harmony will result.[20] In the story told by Mr. Keuner, Mr. Eggers uses the *bo gua* stratagem (albeit unwittingly), peeling off and corroding the physical and mental power of the ruler's agent every day for seven years, finally succeeding in ridding himself of the oppressor.

However, there is no guarantee that this stratagem will work in every situation. The scheme employed by Mr. Eggers in "Measures against power" works only insofar as Mr. Keuner's interlocutor does not ask any follow-up questions. A Thrasymachus, Glaucon, or Adeimantus (three of Socrates's interlocutors), or even a Ziyuan, Zigong, or Zilu (three of Confucius's well-known disciples), would have asked a few "what if" questions: What if Mr. Eggers had worked himself to death, literally, before the ruler's agent died? What if the agent, being fed and pampered in every possible way, chose to be engaged and active both physically and mentally every day so he would remain in good health? What if the agent, though fattening and weakening with each passing day and year, actually lived (and wielded his power and inflicted pain) for another seven or more years? Is justice still justice if it has to wait for an excruciatingly long time to be served, or if it is not served until it is too late for the oppressed to benefit from it?

Mr. Keuner appears quite aware of the limits of such a passive-aggressive stratagem, which sometimes entails putting up with injustice for a long time. In "The helpless boy," Mr. Keuner talks about "the bad habit of silently allowing an injustice suffered to eat at one," which would only lead to more injustice, rather than kicking and screaming as loudly as one could to protest. The boy in the story does not cry foul or call for help loudly enough for anyone to hear when a big lad comes and grabs one of the two dimes he has saved for the movies. A passerby comes along and pretends to comfort the sobbing boy. When he hears what has happened to the first dime, the passerby grabs the other dime because he assumes that the boy will not protest loudly enough for anyone to hear (*S*, p. 16).

Mr. Keuner knows only too well that not everyone in the big wide world has as high a moral standard with regard to oneself as the dog in "Sense of justice." In this story the dog suffers from an acutely bad conscience because it knows that it has done something wrong (possibly having had an accident somewhere in the house) and wants to

be reprimanded, although its owner would have been clueless if Mr. Keuner had not noticed the guilty look in the dog's eyes and pointed it out to him (*S*, p. 56).

In "Servant or master" we do catch a glimpse of the kind of utopian society Mr. Keuner envisions, where people peacefully and happily coexist. This idealized, classless society has no such thing as "servant" and "master" because everyone is able-minded, able-bodied, self-sufficient, self-reliant, and therefore, all are completely free, autonomous beings: "Whoever attends to himself, attends to nothing. He is the servant of nothing and the master of nothing. . . . He gives no cause for others to attend to him; that is, attend to nothing and serve nothing that is not themselves, or are masters of nothing that is not themselves" (*S*, p. 89). Mr. Keuner, the citizen philosopher, laughs (wistfully or uneasily?) when he finishes because he knows that such a man does not and cannot exist, and that such a society (perhaps even more ideal than the Marxian ideal of "from each according to his ability; to each according to his needs") is utopian in the true, original sense of the term: noplace, nowhere, nonexistent anywhere in the world.

IV

Several pieces in *Stories of Mr.Keuner* also show the title character's concern with the dialectical tensions between appearance and reality, substance and style, external and internal—variations on the same theme of knowledge and duality of form and content discussed earlier—sometimes betraying his biases as he thus philosophizes. In "Success," Mr. Keuner gets into a debate of sorts with a companion about an actress passing by: the companion thinks that the actress "has recently become successful because she's beautiful" whereas Mr. Keuner thinks that the actress is "beautiful because she's become successful" (*S*, p. 29). Gender bias aside (one cannot imagine Mr. Keuner, or Brecht for that matter, making similar comments about a male actor), Mr. Keuner appears to make the point that beauty is more than skin deep and that real beauty shines from within, from a sense of success and accomplishment.

Gender bias raises its not-so-pretty head again in "If Mr. K. loved someone." When asked what he would do if he loved someone, Mr. Keuner replies that he would make a sketch of the person and "make sure that one comes to resemble the other." "Which? The sketch?" "No," says Mr. K., "the person" (*S*, p. 27). Here, when it comes to romantic love, Mr. Keuner appears to value the artistic representation of the person he

loves more than the person herself who is the inspiration for that artistic creation, apparently unconcerned about being exiled out of the idealized cities of Plato's *Republic* (and Brecht was already in exile anyway).

Mr. Keuner is not above the biased male gaze despite all the philosophy, knowledge, and wisdom in the world that he professes to possess. Whether Brecht set him up to ridicule, to admire, or simply to speak for him, Mr. Keuner once more shows his blatant gender bias in another story, "A question of guilt." A woman student of his complains about his "treacherous character," although, given the "laconic" style in which the story is told, we do not know the grounds on which the treachery complaint is based; perhaps Mr. Keuner not being a faithful or committed lover to her. Mr. Keuner's defense is the same lame excuse used by some (perhaps many) men when thus confronted: "Your beauty is too quickly noticed and too quickly forgotten" (*S*, p. 85). His offer to split the blame between the woman and himself sounds offensive even if it is sincere, and his attempt to change topic ("he reminded her of what was required when driving a car") and reassert authority sounds pathetic even in the context of the two stories discussed earlier that philosophize about car driving.

In "Who knows whom," Mr. Keuner is put in a Solomon-esque position to judge which of two women really knows her husband. The first woman, to support her claim that she knows her husband the best, catalogues all the different ways she knows him: she has lived with her husband for twenty years, sleeping with him in the same bed, eating every meal together, knowing almost everything about him, and so on. The second woman, however, is not so sure whether she knows her husband because she sees him only once in a long while; she knows very little about him, although he knows her concerns quite well; he eats the meals she prepares for him whether he is hungry or not; she has bandaged a wound of his once (is he an underground resistance fighter?):

> "When I call him a 'dark master' he laughs and says: If something is not there, it's dark, but if it's there, it's bright. But sometimes he turns somber at being addressed like this. I do not know whether I love him. I . . ."
>
> "Don't say any more," said Mr. Keuner hastily. "I can see that you know him. No human being knows another better than you know him." (*S*, p. 75)

Apparently, Mr. Keuner, the citizen philosopher, believes that whether one really knows someone is not a function of the length of time they have known each other; rather, it is a function of whether they are

connected at a deeper level; whether they truly care about each other; whether they truly care about what each other truly cares about, including their darkest fears.

Quite a few pieces in *Stories of Mr. Keuner* have an autobiographical dimension, possibly inspired by and reflecting the life of their author in exile, having to move from place to place and living among strangers. In "Unfamiliar accommodation," Mr. Keuner talks about a "tiresome old habit" of his when he finds himself staying at a place he does not know well: looking "for the exits from the house and nothing else": "I am for justice; so it's good if the place in which I'm staying has more than one exit" (*S*, p. 37).

It is not clear whether by "justice" Mr. Keuner (or Brecht) intends it to have a meaning in a philosophical (Socratic) or a real-life sense, the author being a vocal antifascist after all. This habit of wanting to know where all the exits are reminds one of the strategic thinking employed in playing the millennia-old Chinese board game Go. We know for sure that Brecht played Go with Walter Benjamin during Brecht's exile in Scandinavia (*WB*, p. 58). At the opening of the game, one has to establish positions while thinking holistically and strategically many moves ahead, focusing attention on the overall arrangement as a measure of the subtle interplay between actual and imaginary situations. Such strategic thinking resonates with Sunzi's *The Art of War*, which, philosophically, is rooted in *Yijing* and the philosophy of Laozi.[21] Mr. Keuner's habit of knowing his exits also reminds one of the Chinese idiom *jiao tu san ku* ("A foxy rabbit has three hideouts"), a metaphorical way of saying smart people should, and do, anticipate the unforeseen in case things do not work out the way they have hoped.

One image of Mr. Keuner—or his creator, for that matter—that emerges from this collection of stories is of someone without a homeland; someone who remains a wanderer, a sojourner among strangers, and a citizen of the world. Although Mr. Keuner thinks living in any particular country, having a "fatherland," is unimportant because "I can go hungry anywhere," he is outraged by the rude treatment he receives at the hands of an enemy country's officer, so much so that he wants that country "to be wiped out from the face of the earth":

> "What made me," asked Mr. K., "become a nationalist for this one minute? It was because I encountered a nationalist. But that is precisely why this stupidity has to be rooted out, because it makes whoever encounters it stupid." (*S*, p. 9)

As a thinking man, and more important, as a humanist and citizen of the world, where he lives is not as important as whether hunger is rampant. Mr. Keuner himself may have enough to eat and has little risk of going hungry, and yet, as a matter of principle, "it is important that I am against hunger being the rule" (*S*, p. 11).

In 1949, sixteen years after fleeing Nazi Germany, Brecht returned to East Germany, where he, together with his second wife, Helene Weigel, established the Berliner Ensemble, which gave his students opportunities to direct his plays and himself opportunities to remount his previously successful plays such as *Mother Courage and Her Children, The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *Life of Galileo*. He was finally home, a place ideologically better aligned with his Marxist sociopolitical beliefs. He would, albeit reluctantly, voice his support of the crackdown on the 1953 construction workers' uprising out of "allegiance to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany" governing the country then,[22] having perhaps forgotten what Mr. Keuner said about sharks and elephants or the oracular significance of Hexagram 23 of *Yijing* if he had indeed read, via German translation, the foundational text of classical Chinese philosophy in his youth.

In "Apparatus and party," written after the death of Joseph Stalin, Mr. Keuner sings a different tune and speaks in defense of Power, referring to the state apparatus, and advises patience: given time, the system will grow and "add muscles, nerves, and organs" (*S*, p. 94) to the skeleton so it will perhaps serve the people better. Mr. Keuner acknowledges that it is "difficult to give those with whom one is angry"—in this case, those who criticize the East German government—"any advice." However, Mr. Keuner affirms, the guidance is "particularly necessary, because they are in particular need of it." This advice about advice sounds a bit discordant when juxtaposed with what he says about advice in "Signs of good living": "If we had a good life in our hands, we would indeed require neither great motives nor very wise advice and the whole difficult business of making choices would be at an end" (p. 71).

V

Of course, we should not hold against Mr. Keuner everything he said over a period of more than twenty years. After all, he advises, "Man cannot promise anything" because the one who promises and the one to whom the promise is given are constantly changing: "What does the arm promise the head? That it will remain an arm and not turn into a foot. Because every seven years it is a different arm" (*S*, p. 66).

Mr. Keuner goes so far as to say that even betrayal does not matter:

> If one man betrays another, are the one he betrays and the one to whom he gave a promise the same? As long as the man to whom something has been promised constantly finds himself in changed circumstances and therefore himself constantly changes in accordance with the circumstances and becomes another, how can a promise to him be kept, a promise that was given to another man?
>
> Nonetheless, Mr. Keuner does make one promise that he thinks he can keep: "The thinking man betrays. The thinking man promises nothing, except to remain a thinking man." (*S*, p. 66)

Knowing that he is a "mere particle" in the cosmic flow, timeless, boundless, that is constantly changing and unchanging, as described by the Chinese dialectical view of the world, Mr. Keuner seems to want to have it both ways: using his knowledge of the flow to race forward when needs and opportunities present themselves; weaving across lanes when necessary and if possible, albeit carefully and boldly, and in doing so cause other "particles" in the flow to change and adjust; or sitting back and enjoying the "constant pleasure" of going with the flow and not disturbing anything.

He is fully aware that he is not perfect. Once, asked what he is working on, Mr. Keuner replies: "I'm having a hard time, I'm preparing my next mistake" (*S*, p. 7).

Indeed, Mr. Keuner is a flawed citizen philosopher who tends to speak his mind offhandedly, giving out wise, witty sayings without having their underlying assumptions challenged by his interlocutors; he says something on any given day apparently without a care that he has said things about the same or similar topics before that may contradict what he says now. His male bias is more than apparent in several pieces in the collection. This "bearer of knowledge," however, has one virtue: he thinks. He tries to puzzle out things; and he not only bears knowledge but also takes the trouble to share it with the world (much against his own advice that "the bearer of knowledge" does nothing other than bear knowledge).

Reading *Stories of Mr. Keuner* through the lens of classical Chinese dialectics—not just individual stories in isolation, but clusters of them, and if possible, the entirety of the collection in the context of Brecht the man, the artist, and his dramatic oeuvre—we can feel its pulses of dialectical synergies as well as tensions. We can appreciate the power of

thinking and trying to puzzle out momentous issues such as knowledge, justice, love, and fatherland with a dialectical vision of the world in which all "particles," big and small, powerful and weak (sharks, elephants, little fishes, nobodies, and so on), each distinct and dignified in its own way, coexist in a harmonious whole. It is a beautiful vision that we can all share and strive for.

Hangzhou Normal University

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1. See Renata Berg-Pan, *Bertolt Brecht and China* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1979).

2. See Wei Zhang, *Chinese Adaptations of Brecht: Appropriation and Intertextuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

3. Walter Benjamin, for one, noted the "Chinese features" in Mr. Keuner; see Martin Chalmers, afterword, in Bertolt Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), pp. 103–4. See also Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship,* trans. Christine Shuttleworth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); hereafter abbreviated *WB*.

4. Bertolt Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner*; hereafter abbreviated *S*.

5. Without going into a long overview of the various definitions and theorizations from Socrates to G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx and so on, "dialectic," as used in this context, means tension between two or more interacting forces or elements. See also the next section of this article.

6. In most of the pieces in *Stories of Mr. Keuner*, only one or two rounds of asking and answering questions typically end with a "pronouncement" of sorts from Mr. Keuner. Some of the pieces are no more than one-sentence pronouncements.

7. David Barnett, "Dialectics and Contradictions*:* Marxism, Dialectics and Contradiction," in Brecht in Practice, online.

8. David Barnett, "Dialectics and the Brechtian Tradition: Some Thoughts on Politicized Performance," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* (2016): 6–15.

9. John Willett, "Editorial Notes," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 282.

10. This brief account of classical Chinese philosophy draws from Franklin Perkins, "Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, online, hereafter abbreviated *SEP*; *I Ching (The Book of Change),* ed. and trans. John Blofeld (New York:

Penguin Compass, 1965), hereafter abbreviated Blofeld; Tze-Ki Hon, "Chinese Philosophy of Change (Yijing)," hereafter abbreviated Hon, in *SEP*; and *Philosophy of Yi 易: Unity and Dialectics*, ed. Chung-ying Cheng and On-cho Ng (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing. 2009).

11. See *Tao Te Ching*, ed. Ya Se (Beijing: New World Press, 2011).

12. Alan Chan, "Laozi," in *SEP*.

13. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Walterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 254–68.

14. See Qianfan Zhang, *Human Dignity in Classical Chinese Philosophy: Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 143–72; and Mo Zi, *The Book of Master Mo*, ed. and trans. Ian Johnston (New York: Penguin Classics, 2013).

15. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. James Legge (English) and Gao Zhichao (vernacular Chinese) (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 2016), p. 91.

16. *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, 2nd ed., ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey (New York: The Free Press, 1993), pp. 28–29.

17. Bertolt Brecht, *Collected Plays: Five: Life of Galileo, Mother Courage and Her Children*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Methuen Drama, 1995), p. 101.

18. See "Brecht HUAC hearing (1947–10–30) transcript," (with audio), online.

19. Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 331.

20. This interpretation draws from Blofeld, pp. 132–33; Yin Chan and Zhen Quan, *Yijing de zhihui* [Wisdom of *Yijing*] (Lanzhou: Gansu Culture Press, 2004), pp. 272–82.

21. See Zhang Dongpeng, "Zhongguo zhexue yu weiqi zhi dao" [Chinese Philosophy and the Tao of Chinese Go], PhD diss., Shandong University, 2012; Freddie Rokem, "Dramaturgies of Exile: Brecht and Benjamin 'Playing' Chess and Go," *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 1 (2012): 5–19; and Sun Wu, *Sun Zi on the Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles (English) and Li Minghui and Liang Pingchuan (vernacular Chinese) (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 2018).

22. Stephen Parker, *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life* (New York: Methuen Drama, 2015), p. 568.