

critical zone 1

A FORUM OF CHINESE AND WESTERN KNOWLEDGE

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Introduction: Difference and Convergence in Globalization

Q. S. Tong and Douglas Kerr

Virtues of difference

It is customary nowadays to accept that a cross-national and cross-regional production of knowledge and the integration of academic communities are no longer just an idea or a desire, but a given and an experience. In the process of globalization, it is often claimed and believed that academics in the humanities are empowered by a new set of international conditions of possibility in critical articulation and intellectual engagement. Over the past two decades or so, there has been a gathering global awareness of the need to develop a more open worldview, and to engage more actively and productively with ideas and views from elsewhere, a global awareness that has rather fundamentally redefined our sense of what we are and what we do. However, to take it for granted that academics and scholars participate in and benefit from a global community of scholarship may indicate a certain idealism or even delusion on the part of our profession. For amid the globalizing forces, whether economic, political, or cultural, there remain conspicuous differences and divergences everywhere and at all levels, which separate, divide, or even antagonize scholarly communities, either because of differences in intellectual preoccupation and geopolitical commitment or because of discursive gaps among different traditions and systems of knowledge production. It is common for dialogues across regional boundaries on putatively common concerns to often take separate paths. In the perceived formation of an international community of scholarship, we are teased and thwarted, it seems, by discrepancies, incongruities, fissures, and communicational lacunae.

In the context of China, since its open-door policy in the late 1970s, there has been an overwhelming amount of interest in the developments of the Western humanities, in particular in contemporary critical theory or critical knowledge more generally. Almost all of the major works by leading Euro-American thinkers and cultural critics in the past fifty years or so have been translated into Chinese and reproduced in various forms: quoted and appropriated, circulated and perpetuated among scholars and students alike, until the freshness and novelty of their theoretical and critical articulations have been exhausted. A collective fatigue and intellectual languidness set in, but only for a short while, soon to be transformed into a discursive critical energy directed at reclaiming the lost voice of China in the global production of knowledge, and creating a system of knowledge that would bear distinctly Chinese characteristics and be irreducibly different from its Western counterparts.

Fredric Jameson has called attention to the differences between what he called “third world” intellectuals and their counterparts in the “first world,” primarily the U.S., in terms of their preoccupations and positionings. Among the former, asserts Jameson, “there is now an obsessive return of the national situation itself, the name of the country that returns again and again like a gong, the collective attention to ‘us’ and what we have to do and how we do it, to what we can’t do and what we do better than this or that nationality, our unique characteristics.”¹ “Third world” literature, for Jameson, reveals a remarkable self-consciousness of its close and innate link to a large social and historical discourse and is generally perceived and understood as a national allegory that documents collectively the political and social processes of the nation in question. In contrast, “first world” literature, as he sees it, is a heavily psychologized discourse that is detached from the public and rooted in the realm of private experience. Jameson’s postulations with regard to this distinction have not gone unchallenged, and the geopolitical configuration of today’s world can no longer be adequately understood and described in terms of the three-world categorization, which is a legacy of the Cold War era (Jameson’s article was published in 1986, three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall). However, his diagnosis of the dilemma of “third world” intellectuals in their project of narrating the self as “national allegory” directs our attention to a discursive emphasis on the defining role of “situational consciousness,” not just in literary production but also in other realms of cultural and intellectual experience. In this sense, Ahmad’s critique of Jameson would seem to have missed the point, even though his engagement with Jameson over such specific issues as global political configuration and national cultural particularities remains of interest.²

1. Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* (fall 1986): 65, 85.

2. See Aijaz Ahmad’s “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” in his *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London and NY: Verso, 1992).

What we have seen in China testifies to the existence of the kind of discursive gap dividing literary, scholarly and critical communities in different geopolitical and cultural locations. The discursive shift of attention to national characteristics in China is not only a collective expression of the nation's impatience with its inability to articulate a set of distinct theoretical positions but also indicates the advent of a counter-discourse, a discourse of resistance and exclusion. However, it would be too easy to attribute to the rise of nationalism this departure from engagement for a more self-centred practice. Even if there was indeed a resurgence of nationalism in China, it would be more a product and consequence of this shift than a cause of the obsessive return to China's "national situation." Those of us living and writing outside the mainland of China, with no particular professional investment in China studies, might easily have overlooked this development.

Some of the essays and translations included in this volume delineate this intellectual trajectory and give one a sense of some of the emergent preoccupations of Chinese academics. Contact with the cultural other prompts, in the classic manner, an intense self-reflection, and Jiang Ningkan's essay entitled "Reading the West: Notes on Recent Chinese Critiques of Western Discourses" traces some of the negotiations in which Chinese intellectuals have engaged with various theoretical discourses coming from the West (or the Wests), to show how a reading of the other may entail both a re-reading and a re-assertion of the self. Such self-reflection in some instances puts significant pressure on institutions. The essay here by Wang Shouren and Zhao Wenshu delineates the impact of English on contemporary Chinese society, in which the enormous popularity of the language, and its adoption as the medium of scientific publication, is not matched in university humanities faculties, where for various reasons, including a cultural nationalism related to the kind of resistance mentioned above, English studies is resisted, underdeveloped, and isolated. Wang and Zhou suggest that English is a problem that Chinese universities have yet to resolve. When he compares the intellectual vitality of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences with research institutions in other countries, Liu Dong allows himself to wonder whether its existence is justified at all. Although in the end he offers it a reprieve, it needs to change its ways, he suggests, if it is to play the role it should in helping China to adapt to some of the conditions of globalization and — equally importantly — to resist others. The contributions from Chinese academics here all speak to an intellectual and institutional self-consciousness, which, interesting in individual cases, is far more significant when considered collectively.

Scholars and critics based elsewhere may have a different set of concerns and preoccupations. Catherine Belsey's essay in the present volume is a good illustration of the shifting and contentious landscape of critical practice in the West, where quite fundamental issues (as her title suggests) of understanding and practice — of the *production* of knowledge — are open to debate. Her critique of cultural constructivism in the name of a Lacanian "anxiety of the real" frames

itself as part of a dialogue between poststructuralism and postmodernism, and yet it has a “situational consciousness” and geography, although for obvious reasons European intellectual endeavours in the last couple of generations have tended not to sail under a national flag. With a different idiom and focus, Ronald Judy, in “Some Notes on a Critique of Culture,” probes differences in thinking about culture, in his investigation of the institutional structures that imagine and mediate it. The new Europa Universität Viadrina at Frankfurt (Oder) was set up in the aftermath of the Cold War, with the idea of building a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe and redefining “Europeanness” through a new organization of knowledge that would emphasize internationality and interdisciplinarity. Judy sees this new variation on the idea of the university as the purveyor of culture, now in a global context, as having to answer to a history in which a “global culture” is in practice conceived as far from inclusive.

It is important, then, to acknowledge the differences between Chinese and Euro-American knowledge production that exist within these intellectual contexts. Within the context of China, the collective attention to the self and discursive emphasis on the urgency and legitimacy of constructing national uniqueness in China must not be construed merely as an indication of one interlocutor’s withdrawal from the conversation, but should be taken as indicative of the ineffectuality and unproductiveness of existing modes of interactions across regions and boundaries. The power of conventionality of knowledge production has sustained a distinct tradition of scholarship in China. It is impossible to list all the differences between Chinese intellectuals and their Euro-American counterparts in modes of thinking and habits of production. And there is no need here to broach in detail the deeper layer of ideological and political implications in the collective obsession with the national situation in China; our purpose is not to mount an argument *vis-à-vis* the discursive gap between the communities of scholarship but to foreground and probe the gap itself.

We may start by thinking more specifically, for example, of the institutional and organized production of scholarship in China. Partly due to the particular political and social system, state sponsorship of research remains the most important form of support from outside academia. This kind of government support is commendable in a way, and indeed could be cause for envy elsewhere, where funding for humanities research is being cut severely. In China, funds received from the state are often provided for national scholarly projects, envisaged as leading to the erection of scholarly monuments. That is perhaps why a considerable amount of resources are channelled to support large-scale collaborative research projects, such as those on the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties referred to in Li Ling’s article in this volume, which involved a large number of distinguished historians, archeologists, philologists, and scientists. In China, projects of this kind enjoy a startling prestige rarely found elsewhere; they are funded and carried out as part of government planning for social and cultural developments over a certain period. This state participation in the process of

scholarly production, which recognizes scholarly labour as a constitutive part of the national economy, has been a decisive influence on the public expectation of research output and thus has shaped and defined public understanding of research culture in academia.

It is, then, small wonder that certain areas of studies or modes of scholarly production have enjoyed a privileged centrality and unusual popularity in China, even when they have been subject to critical reflections or even have been called into question elsewhere. Since the political and cultural liberalization in the early 1980s, the discipline of comparative literature, for example, has been one of the most popular and prominent loci of literary studies. There are historical reasons for the rise and development of comparative literature in China. Imported from the West, through Japan, in the early twentieth century, comparative literature as a discipline and area of studies has been closely bound up with China's national project of modernization. The ideological mainstay of its extraordinary popularity and prominence is shown nowhere more clearly than its mode of inquiry, which enables and supports, under the name of "comparison," direct participation of the self — national literature — in the global system of literary production.

The vitality of a discipline can only be sustained on the basis of a great deal of self-understanding and self-consciousness of its own history, of its present situation, and of its continuing possibilities in the future; the habit of disciplinary self-reflection constitutes an essential part of the discipline's scope of inquiry and contributes to its integrity. Said's critique of Western orientalism and more generally cultural imperialism, for example, is both enabled and substantiated by his critical reflections on the discipline of literary studies. In a broader context in which he speaks of "the general relationship between culture and empire," Said urges a historical understanding of the origin of comparative literature as intricately linked to the practice of imperialism in the nineteenth century, despite its apparently liberal aims, one of which is to free literary and cultural experience from parochialism and provincialism and from the dogmas of intellectual inquiry. "I suggest," he proposes, "that we look first at what comparative literature originally was, as vision and as practice; ironically ... the study of 'comparative literature' originated in the period of high European imperialism and is irrecusably linked to it." Only by understanding the genesis of comparative literature, Said continues, can we then "draw out of comparative literature's subsequent trajectory a better sense of what it can do in modern culture and politics."³ It is perhaps no accident that in the Anglo-American context and in the wake of Said's critique of Western orientalism, comparative literature has gone through some fundamental changes, in particular with regard to its comparative mode of operation and its inevitable practice of binarism; its prominence has been largely overtaken by other theoretical and critical programmes and concerns. Said's critique of comparative

3. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (NY: Vintage Books, 1994), xi, 43.

literature and its current status in the West should not be taken as the last verdict on comparative literature. The point here is, however, that the large amount of institutional and popular attention comparative literature has attracted in China illustrates that differences between traditions of scholarly production in China and elsewhere are far more deeply rooted than they might appear. In addressing differences of this kind, it is necessary to recognize the social and cultural circumstances under which these differences have been constituted as *discursive* ones and to consider how these differences have in turn generated further divergences.

Indeed, discursive divergences have punctuated every moment in the process of China's engagement with the West, even at times when there seems an obvious resonance between a certain trend in China and a particular strand of critical thinking elsewhere. At a more specific level, for example, one often hears, within Chinese academia, such pronouncements as "Critical theories come and go, but the text remains" or even statements much more radically hostile toward theoretical formations and critical approaches that are informed by theories. Surely, the antagonism between theory and criticism, or what de Man has called "resistance to theory," has been a continuing oppositional critical movement since the advent of what is now known as poststructuralism. It is possible to subsume the critical resistance to theory in China under a certain academic "conservatism," but this discursive and institutional resistance to literary theory is at the same time a manifestation of a more profound and significant anxiety over China's inability to develop a counter-critical discourse and over its lack of the critical imagination to reinstate, resuscitate, or create a theoretical and critical system of its own. For "literary theory" as a category is generally perceived and understood in China as a synonym of poststructuralism, a product of Western critical and speculative imagination in the last few decades of the twentieth century. The call for a return to the text, therefore, is a strange spasm of the collective intellectual fatigue that, as mentioned above, is developed out of the continuing and doubly belated experience of the overwhelming presence of various kinds of Western "postology" on the Chinese scene. Parallel to this call for a return to the literariness and textuality of a literary work, not just in the classroom but also in the institutional production of critical knowledge, is a strong critical movement for the creation of a system of criticism and theory that would be Chinese and indigenous and that would operate as an alternative to forms of Western critical theory circulated and practised in China. The politics of resistance to theory therefore marks a fundamental fissure that disrupts the journey of "traveling theory" in its global mission, however much Said considers resistances to theory to be "conditions of acceptance" or "an inevitable part of acceptance" of the regime of theory.⁴

4. See Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1983), 227.

To illustrate what we mean by the discursive gap, we may now turn to a debate between J. Hillis Miller and Qian Zhongwen, staged in China. In his speech at a conference held in Beijing in 1999, Miller made a plea for a widening of the vision and horizon of literary studies, but he projected at the same time a gloomy picture of the future of literary studies, whose disciplinary integrity, he said, was increasingly threatened and undermined by the new global conditions. Miller's argument is not exactly the first of its kind, and in a certain sense not even a very controversial one. But his speech provoked, somewhat surprisingly but significantly, strong responses. A revised and extended version of the paper Miller presented at the conference was translated into Chinese and published in *Wenxue pinglun* (Literary review), the leading Chinese critical journal edited by the Institute of Literature, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Its publication was meant to set the stage in the journal for a debate over whether indeed the importance of literary studies has diminished in the context of globalization. A slightly different version of Miller's speech and Qian Zhongwen's response, which regrettably has to be truncated and synopsisized due to the limitations of space, are reprinted in this volume. This is a rare example of direct dialogical interaction between a US poststructuralist critic and Qian, among other well-respected critics in China. But what emerges from this debate is that their differences are derived more from the different contexts in which they speak and from the different discourses in which they are situated. The problem Miller addressed may not have been an immediate and serious one or had not yet been perceived as one in China. In the realm of literary studies in China, there remains a discernable adherence to the normality and legitimacy of certain critical operations that might be seen to have been superseded by other issues elsewhere. Our purpose in collecting in this volume some of the articulations from that debate is not to mount a certain argument, is not, in other words, to take sides, to validate or invalidate certain issues or positions. Rather, to stage the dialogue is to drive home the seriousness of the discursive gap existing even in a genuine and direct exchange like this and to draw attention to the need for a clearly identified common set of concerns that would make critical interchange meaningful and productive.

The "third world" intellectuals' obsession with the "national situation" which Jameson detected nearly two decades ago is still very much with us today, though it may have different manifestations. It may be argued that the "national situation" can entail differences in forms of institutional practice and intellectual formations; the production of knowledge and scholarship in China does not, therefore, have to follow the procedure established in the West. In this volume, quite a few authors take a stand on the importance of recognizing the necessity and value of a different path that China has taken or should take, and argue for the inevitability of differences on the grounds of the particularities of Chinese society, tradition, and culture.

The discursive emphasis on local particularities, without an attempt to

understand how these particularities may become discursive gaps in understanding, entails real consequences in critical practice. One argument Li Yi mounts in his “Re-evaluation of Modernity’ and Modern Chinese Literature” is that misreadings of canonical modern Chinese writers such as Lu Xun partly result from a lack of lived experience of modern Chinese literature as a unique formation under specific social circumstances. We may read this line of critical thought as indicative not merely of a return to the national or local situation but of a placid acceptance of incommensurabilities existing among different cultures of critical production. Although apologies for local or national specificities are not always made on the basis of an overt rejection of ideas and views from elsewhere, there is a real danger that local specificities may be easily ontologized, and this would render critical exchanges across cultures and traditions impossible or unproductive.

“Chinese Studies: A Changing Field of Contention,” by Li Ling, offers a concrete example of how our confidence derived from the habitual practice in knowledge production may generate radically different views. It is a review essay on the controversies and debates arising from Wu Hung’s *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture*, foregrounding how differences in the style of production and protocols of research can generate a range of misunderstandings and mutual distrust. Particularly interesting and noteworthy are Li’s positive appraisal of Western sinologists’ achievements in the area of Chinese studies, for which China as the original site of knowledge is often taken for granted, and his call for a more open-minded and sympathetic attitude towards Chinese intellectual practices among Western scholars who have been accustomed to a set paradigm in research and its rules, which for Li are open to debate. However, to point to those inevitable divergences and differences in opinion and mode of thinking, whether between scholarly communities or within the same academic community, is to show their limitations, their biases, and to remind us that a productive mutuality of scholarly dialogue or debate, between individuals or systems of culture, can be ensured only if we are ready to listen to and learn from others. We have no intention of suggesting that the examples given above present a whole picture’ of the complexities of Chinese scholarly practice in relation to research paradigms accepted and valued elsewhere. Generalizations attempting to capture the ethos of a time or a space are often self-defeating in the end. In fact, the two pieces included in the same section, Wang Hui’s “Historical Imaginaries of Asia” and Xiong Yuezhi’s “Foreign Settlements in Shanghai and Fusion of Different Cultures,” may be considered in this context as articulations that disrupt the discursive efforts to construct local homogeneity: the former reveals the inconsistencies of the notion of a unified Asia; and the latter, by focusing on the case of Shanghai’s early modernity, shows the impossibility of local cultural autonomy.

The problem — of squaring intellectual commonality with a full recognition of the difference of experience and idiom in different places and circumstances

— is a leading preoccupation in this volume. Many of the essays here, whether they speak directly to the situation of China or to other locations and predicaments, try to insist on the values of both the local and the global, cultural particularity and international universalism. Eric Clarke’s collocation of English studies and “global ethics” brings together two very different discourses with an analogous mimetic problem — on one hand, the difficulty of imagining and representing the cultural diversity that a universalist global ethics ought to be advancing, and on the other hand, the way nineteenth-century writers such as George Eliot and Walter Pater sought to elaborate idioms of particular experience that would purport to have a universal extension. Eliot’s and Pater’s understanding of the task of fiction is a reminder that the field of English studies should not be limited to a national predication of cultural experience. That passage, opened up in the syntax of Eliot and Pater, between specific local experience and a form of analogical commentary that may generalize it, can be pondered as we face our own task of being true both to what makes us different and to what we have in common.

What we have called the discursive gap that exists in cross-cultural communication but has often been overlooked in the context of globalization should not be simply attributed to the politics of identity at either a national or an individual level, should not be seen as contingent, transient, or isolated. It is imperative that we recognize those blind spots, discontinuities, and voids in the global exchanges of ideas: they have already commended attention as symptoms of a certain failure in our efforts to promote and advance cross-regional understanding. To posit differences and discontinuities as a given, as a regular occurrence, and as a *typicality*, can be to make a virtue and a critical value of the discursive gap coterminous with the globalization of scholarly communities. Studies of globalization must also at the same time investigate what the discursive gap can offer in developing an understanding of the current global conditions that is closer to our actual experience of those conditions, an experience that is in fact never frictionless or unproblematic. Differences, when taken seriously and responsibly, can enable a new form of participation and practice in the experience of intellectual globalism.

The symposium on “Higher Education and the Humanities”

To recognize, not just in theory but also in practice, the virtues of the kind of discursive differences mentioned above, the English Department of the University of Hong Kong, the English Department of Nanjing University, and the Editorial Collective of *boundary 2* jointly organized a symposium in May 2002 on the present status of the humanities and the university in the context of globalization. The organization of the symposium was also a response to some of the problems that have surfaced in recent years in academia and demanded serious attention. The

desire to promote better understanding of those issues considered significant beyond one's own locale of intellectual activity is also a desire to make a space for the formation of a common intellectual community. Those of us who wish to work beyond and across disciplinary or regional boundaries were particularly interested in the ways direct dialogue on issues of common interest could be sustained and deepened. Thus the symposium brought together scholars from Hong Kong, mainland China, and the US.

Responding to a variety of frustrations in the global exchange of ideas, Paul A. Bové appealed, at the symposium, for "the value of understanding" among regions and communities under the current global conditions. "Not only are we aware," said Bové, "of how globalization has changed many of the basic categories of especially Western critical thinking, but we are especially aware of how central to future cultural development is the relation between China and the US. Intellectuals must accept as one of their tasks the need to work through the modes of thinking that the new globalized world requires and that emerging relations between America and China demand." Bové was speaking as an intellectual based in the US and with special reference to this symposium held in Hong Kong, now a Special Administrative Region of China. What he sees as the "value of understanding," a global understanding and sense of shared intellectual responsibility, can obviously be extended to other contexts. There is no doubt that China for its part needs to understand its relationships not only with the US but also with other parts of the world. Bové's appeal for better intellectual understanding as the condition of possibility for building, strengthening, and developing a meaningful relationship among individuals, communities, traditions, and spheres of critical inquiry speaks directly to the agenda of the symposium. Understanding is constitutive of any meaningful relationship; it requires serious and continuous efforts to renew and deepen itself. If so, then what is more important, Bové continued in the same speech, is to "establish or restore the rigorous efforts and standards needed to make understanding possible." Therefore, "[at] the heart of this entire conference and the institutional forms we hope to develop from it," he summarized, "lies the need to give the humanities a seriousness of purpose the absence of which ... has led to their degradation and mockery."⁵

The symposium started this project of understanding with an effort to understand ourselves, to understand what we do as both intellectuals and institutional members, to understand the relationship between our professional activities and the university as a locale and space that both enables and frustrates those activities. The theme of the symposium, "Higher education and the humanities," is a topic recognized as demanding urgent attention from critics and

5. Paul A. Bové, "Welcoming Remarks" (presented at the International Symposium on Higher Education and the Humanities, University of Hong Kong, 3–4 May 2002).

scholars.⁶ The issues discussed and debated at the symposium may be broadly subsumed under four rubrics: “Academics and the University,” “Politics and Academia,” “Local and Global,” and “Literary Studies and Cultural Studies.” These topics opened up for discussions and debates many more aspects of our professional and institutional life, from research to teaching, from the global situation of the university to its local specificity, from some of its historical moments to its present status.

Globalization — the marketization of education as one of its specific manifestations and its impact on academics — presents challenges we cannot avoid and opportunities we must not miss. Zhang Boshu and Guilan Wang’s essay on the history of the rather anxious development of private higher education in China is an instance to ponder. Higher education in Hong Kong and in the mainland of China provides specific dimensions and perspectives in the debates over “the university in ruins” that the United States and Britain, among others, have been experiencing. Some of the papers at the symposium took historical situations as their focus in thinking about the theme of institutional knowledge production. Christopher Hutton’s paper (reproduced here) on the scientific and cultural basis claimed for race theory narrated an academic and legal struggle in Nazi Germany that offers a reminder of the responsibilities of research and theory, within and outside the academy, and uncovers complex issues of knowledge and politics, science and ideology, race and language, too easily buried under our ideal negative construct of Nazism. The paper suggests that contemporary scholars find it easier to be disgusted by such episodes in intellectual history than to learn from them.

Critical Zone

The symposium was conceived not just as a meeting, an isolated event, but as a conscious effort to initiate a procedure and create a mechanism for a more sustainable dialogue across regions and boundaries. Supported by both the University of Hong Kong and Nanjing University, that conception can now be embodied in this series of publications. *Critical Zone: A Forum of Chinese and Western Knowledge* is conceived as an enabling forum in which to continue that collective effort to participate in the practice and experience of intellectual globalism. It is intended to address what we have spoken of above as a general and pervasive insensitivity to a whole range of divergences and differences in the context of globalization. In a sense, this book series has an extremely simple genealogy: it begins with a recognition of the lack of and the need for understanding beyond boundaries, by means of critical engagement.

6. The present status of the university in the context of globalization has already brought out a spate of publications, among which is, for example, Bill Readings’s *The University in Ruins*.

For this purpose, we have decided to devote a substantial portion of each volume to presenting what we regard as significant trends or articulations from this region, primarily from China, either in translation or in the form of review essays, each of which gives an overview of the field or topic reviewed. The section of reviews and translations as one of the two regular sections in each volume of this series aims to be informative, narrating and delineating, collectively and in the most concrete terms possible, some of the intellectual concerns that preoccupy scholars from this region. We believe access to the production of regional critical scholarship is a necessary condition for cross-cultural and cross-regional engagement. For a long time now, China and the Asia Pacific region as a whole have remained the loci of interest mostly for scholars with special intellectual or professional investment in studies of the region. It is high time to move beyond disciplinary demarcations, because global interactions must remain partial unless there can be a scholarly convergence not only of regions but also of disciplines. Reviews and translations included in this series are meant to make available critical scholarship from China and from this region to international readers who may not have linguistic access to it.

In this volume, two review essays are included. Chen Jianhua's "The 'Linguistic Turn' in 1990s China and Globalization" is a critical response to the "linguistic turn" in the 1990s in China, detailing the debates over *hanyu* (Han language) and its problematics under new social and cultural conditions. As Chen Jianhua shows, the language reform movement in China is an incomplete national project, and the debates over the status and legitimacy of modern vernacular Chinese are to some extent defined by the very paradoxical nature of *hanyu*, which, as "a double-edged sword: internally ... subverted the orthodox tenets of language reform since the early twentieth century, yet at the same time ... reaffirmed national unification under the name of Han" (148). Zhu Shoutong's "Research Methods and Chinese Humanities at the Turn of the Century" narrates some of the noted academic trends in the last few years of the twentieth century in China, linking them to the extraordinary amount of interest in Western research methods and critical approaches since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Those who witnessed the excitement and jubilation in the Chinese academy following the cultural and intellectual liberalization of the early 1980s will remember this "methodology fever," erupting perhaps as a result of a decade's intellectual isolation during the Cultural Revolution. Zhu Shoutong shows how this fever receded with the advent of an increasing consciousness of the importance of forming China's own intellectual or critical identity in the humanities and social sciences.

In addition to this section of translations and review essays, which may be of particular interest to readers outside China or this region with no linguistic access to publications in a language other than English, is another section of *Critical Zone*, committed to the publication of original articles on themes or topics, some but not all of which will be closely related to those covered in the second section

and should be of special interest to readers from this region and elsewhere, for they present some of the critical or intellectual preoccupations and debates that are shared by scholars from different cultural settings and academic communities. In its form, therefore, this series has already made a commitment to direct and dialogical interactions among scholars from China, Euro-America, and elsewhere: to see where we differ and disagree, not just with regard to what we in each of our own ways believe to be important but also in terms of the different positions from which we enter upon issues we consider important.

Critical Zone is a site of dialogue, and the articles and translations of articles it contains do not necessarily represent editorial views or positions. Still, it wishes to create a particular mode of critical engagement, in addition to its desire to promote sympathetic understanding in the realm of intellectual engagement. *Critical Zone* is in favour of a critically constructive approach to issues of common interest. Over the past few decades, critical approaches to and theoretical reflections on literary and cultural phenomena have been substantially guided and controlled by a proclivity that seems largely interested in subversion and reversal. The new global conditions have altered many of the basic categories of Western critical thinking, and there is now a need to move beyond critical theory as we understand it, not least because it is by and large a self-centered discourse. Poststructuralism and postmodernism in their various manifestations and applications remain ostensibly preoccupied with the Western experience, historical, social, and cultural, either as an object of inquiry or as a point of reference to which all must return in the end.

Although based in China, *Critical Zone* attempts to adopt a global outlook, to promote understanding across boundaries and propagate new forms of understanding in theory and practice, and to engage in dialogue in the wide area of human cultural experience. It hopes to add its voice to the global debates on issues of more general interest. As suggested in the title, the emphasis on the importance of *critical knowledge* is indicative of its general commitment to global understanding. “Knowledge” here is understood in its simplest and most immediate sense — “knowing” and therefore “understanding.” What we mean by “critical knowledge” is not knowledge about one object or one set of objects of inquiry external to us. Neither is critical knowledge simply critical theory that may be produced by individual talents. If it is knowledge at all, it is about ourselves, about our understanding of what we consider important, about what we do, and how we think about what we do. Such knowledge, no longer understood as exclusively one’s own, is collectively produced; it can only exist in practice, in experience, and be obtained and made available in a lively network of interactions among academic communities. The production and propagation of such knowledge, however, must be checked and balanced by critical self-reflection and self-awareness. For us, then, critical knowledge is built on the choice of a positioning, a conscious exercise of skepticism toward the established protocols of scholarly inquiry, and a willingness to accept the necessity to understand what

we say, what we do, and our relationship to others, and to develop a more open intellectual sympathy on a global scale. It is this critical skepticism, as a practice and *modus operandi* of the mind, that first inspired this project. As Bové asserts, “skepticism’s critical and intellectual force ... unlike cynicism or hipness ... does not destroy values and meaning in the demise of effortful thinking. Rather it is an essential basis for thinking, for humanistic minds unwilling to remain caught either within the despairing attitudes of dominant political culture or the hackneyed phrases and old thoughts of academic professionalism.”⁷ Skepticism enables understanding and knowledge; it exemplifies the kind of critical knowledge we have in mind.

We invited Paul Bové, whose opening remarks at the symposium have been quoted above, to read all the contributions to this volume and write an Afterword. We are very grateful for his essay printed here. We were aware that, as Bakhtin showed, every word is an afterword, elicited by and responding to a dialogic history, and every afterword is a foreword, provocative of further response. We trust that the essays in *Critical Zone* will be no exception.

***Critical Zone* and Hong Kong**

To run a series of publications in English, based in Hong Kong and Nanjing and published by two presses — one in Hong Kong and the other in Nanjing — is also responsive to the inevitable challenge Hong Kong faces: how to establish its postcolonial relationship with mainland China. Those of us who have a sense of rootedness in Hong Kong are also confronted with the challenge to construct a new and substantive relationship with colleagues on the Mainland. Since its handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong has been placed in an irreversible historical process of ever-increasing integration with mainland China. Is Hong Kong able to continue to play the role that it has been supposed or expected to play, as “a meeting place,” “a contact point” between China and the “West,” both in popular perception and in the familiar parlance of Hong Kong studies? And if so, in what sense? Hong Kong needs to understand itself, its history, its present status, and its possibilities.

Anyone attempting to think about Hong Kong more seriously would be struck by its conspicuous marginality. Hong Kong has been in an unfortunate position, not least because it is inescapably tied to its colonial past. The colonial history of Hong Kong has defined Hong Kong as we know it, and has made Hong Kong what it is. But Hong Kong’s past has also been a burden and sometimes an embarrassment not easily or quickly shaken off. That Hong Kong is unfortunate is nowhere more manifest than the conspicuous cultural marginality to which it

7. Bové, “Welcoming Remarks.”

has been assigned, historically and discursively. Familiar terms used to describe Hong Kong range from early colonial impressions of Hong Kong as “barren” to orientalist celebration of it as “dream-like,” and to a postcolonialist reading of it as “fluid” and forever “disappearing.” For the cultural purists on the mainland of China, precisely because Hong Kong has been a colony, it is a container of cultural emptiness. Hong Kong’s remarkable economic success has not done much to shape a more sympathetic perception of it. On the contrary, the wealth of Hong Kong accumulated over the past decades is, for those cultural purists, yet another example of its irredeemable materiality, whereas for some postcolonial commentators, it is the result of a libidinal diversion of its suppressed political and cultural energy.⁸ Hong Kong has recently been struggling with a severe economic downturn, and how and where would that fervent economic drive, one wonders, be redirected? On the international scene of postcolonial studies, Hong Kong is often “too small to merit attention” and is “usually entirely omitted in most debates on postcoloniality.”⁹

Indeed, Hong Kong’s marginality is extraordinary. Commentators have remarked on the uniqueness of Hong Kong as a colony in the past and as a Special Administrative Region of China now, and about its present ambiguities and ambivalences with regard to its identity and its relationship to the Mainland. Though Hong Kong’s colonial experience has not turned it into a “third world” place but worked to its economic advantage, Hong Kong’s decolonization did not entail its political independence and was not followed by the birth of a new nation-state. There have been numerous critical reflections on this apparent anomaly. What is often overlooked and neglected, however, is that Hong Kong’s decolonization was predicated on a historical contract of its status as part of China. Hong Kong started and ended its coloniality as a territory without sovereignty, and it could not have had itself successfully decolonized had its independence been a possibility. Its colonization and decolonization are two historical phases that have been completed outside and beyond Hong Kong itself. Hong Kong, as it was and is, is not its own invention.

Hong Kong’s marginality, however, is not just a product of forces from without. Its self-marginalization is even more striking, and disturbing. For some, precisely because the history of Hong Kong is essentially a colonial history, it has no pre-colonial history to return to and is forever “disappearing.” It is a place of transience, amorphous, shapeless, fluid, made of air, dust, noises of footsteps, traffic jams, and evaporating and evaporated breath; Hong Kong is a place and non-place, a city and a phantom, a mass of concrete and a collection of memories, suitable only for the pleasure of aestheticization. Only when Hong Kong

8. For a critical reading of this view, see Rey Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998), 169.

9. Chow, *Ethics after Idealism*, 150.

“disappears” can it be aestheticized as such, and the aesthetic presence of Hong Kong can only be articulated in an imaginative interpretation of the city as “disappearing.”¹⁰ Writing Hong Kong as such from without might be considered a contemporary form of orientalism; writing Hong Kong as such from within would be an example of self-orientalization, a form of internal alienation. For the “disappearing” Hong Kong would be, to borrow a phrase from Santner in a different context, a “homegrown alterity” that is created through a self-defamiliarization.¹¹ What is left of Hong Kong in “the politics of disappearance”? The historical burden of Hong Kong would be increased considerably by articulations of this kind. Hong Kong’s “ethereality” could become a constituted understanding and cultural identity of the city, if it is profusely and discursively reproduced in various forms. Hong Kong “disappears,” not because it does, but because the rhetoric of “disappearance” performs its disappearance.

Why has Hong Kong been repeatedly marginalized? And how can we figure Hong Kong’s role in its postcolonial era and in the context of globalization if it can only exist in imagination or aestheticization? We cannot afford to congratulate ourselves on the possibility of presenting Hong Kong as a place whose beauty lies in the very impossibility of capturing it. Hong Kong presents a challenge to postcolonial studies in its refusal to be defined as such. Has Hong Kong failed the test of postcolonialism, or is it the other way round? Perhaps there is a need to rethink the critical practice that attempts to fit Hong Kong into a postcolonial paradigm too often short-circuited by identity politics.

Answering the rhetoric of disappearance about Hong Kong, this series is conceived as a metonymic presence of Hong Kong itself. Indeed, it is Hong Kong’s unique historical and geocultural positioning and its special relationship with the mainland of China that have made it possible to conceive the idea of an English publication and carry out that idea in practice. We have long felt the importance of bringing China and other parts of the world into closer contact academically and intellectually, beyond ceremonial and symbolic gestures. Scholars from mainland China, in particular from Nanjing University, and Hong Kong have discussed the possibility of sustainable and productive relationships and have agreed that an English book series, based in this region but publishing scholarly and critical work in English from around the world, would not only place our collaborative work on a solid basis but also become a form of expression of such collaboration in the public sphere for years to come. *Critical Zone* is therefore a project of inter-communal collaboration among scholars from around the world,

10. See Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1998).

11. Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2001), 6.

and more specifically among scholars from the mainland of China and Hong Kong. *Critical Zone* is envisaged as an intellectual bridge between China and the rest of the world and as a site of scholarly and critical convergence beyond regional and disciplinary boundaries.

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