



# Globalization, Cultural Critique, and China

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*In this essay, I illustrate a way of following discussions of economic globalization into discussions of domestic national issues involving cultural critique, arguing that the character and interests of local sites for transnational exchange are key aspects of analysis and closely associated with the logic of globalization theories. The essay begins with a summary of Saskia Sassen's place-based view of globalization, while in the second section, I consider five aspects of this place-based view in light of Chinese contexts for the international exchange of cultural critique. In the final section, I offer a broader sketch of three commonly discussed views of globalized, transnational forces and their relationships to domestic issues of cultural critique.*

It is not yet a matter of course to examine how the inter- and transdisciplinary nature of current work in the humanities should be seen as a particularly significant aspect of globalization, whereby ideas, methods, vocabularies and intellectuals move across the globe, provoking new structures of debate and giving rise to unanticipated consequences. Although this was the focus of an important earlier conference, 'Cultural Dialogues and Cultural Misreadings', held at the Beijing National Library in 1995 (Chen 1997), globalization as such was not then a central concern. For the present discussion, I wish to explore how Chinese contexts for what Edward Said has called 'traveling theory' (1983: 226–247) can be usefully examined alongside economic theories of globalization, where globalization is seen as a kind of 'traveling market economy'. Adopting a perspective that emphasizes the placebound nature of the global, i.e. the ways in which local (intra-national) concerns influence global (international) flows, I feel it is valuable to illuminate globalization as both a politico-economic and an intellectual-institutional process. Analyzing the forces of place in global exchanges sheds light not only on important economic and political features, but also on the theories and practices of scholars in the humanities. In contrast to an area-studies approach to knowledge construction in the service of foreign-policy planning, the new realities of the global academy prompt closer attention to traveling theory's transformation of the local, and of the significant role played by place in a seemingly placeless new world order.

When place is taken into account in such a way, those of us who study social narratives or engage cultural critique recognize anew the need to move beyond simple dichotomies of international debate, and in the present case, I concentrate on

the longstanding dichotomy that structures discussions of ‘China and the West’. I begin by noting that unitary subjects such as ‘China’ or ‘the West’, exist as meaningful signifiers only in their simple relation to one another, and tend to conceal the divisions and differences *within* the spaces they signify. This perspective for inquiry is especially relevant because we have come to understand how the processes of globalization—in the global marketplace of humanities scholarship, as well as in economics—do not simply transform inter- and transnational networks, but also reconfigure the sites of national and local-institutional practices. In an immediate example, Wang Ning noted in his introductory comments that globalization is ‘inevitable’ and will take place ‘whether we like it or not’. For this reason, he warned, and because of the Western-biased homogenizing dangers of globalization, ‘We must make sure that globalization takes place without endangering national cultural identity’. In identifying the possible effects on (as dangers to) national identity, our host illustrates what is perceived to be at stake in globalization’s economic and intellectual spread. My approach in this essay highlights and interrogates the nature of the ‘national cultural identity’ seen here to be at risk. How is this culture defined, and by whom? Does it serve a select group of people while leaving others out? Do discussions of globalization tend to reinforce strict national narratives, and is it justifiable to appropriate the insights of globalization theory for critiques of these national narratives?

### **Globalization and Place**

Saskia Sassen describes her general approach to globalization in a way that is helpful to discussion of exchanges in cultural criticism, since we are invited to consider how globalization transforms the ‘local’ institutions and structures of governance that we think of as facilitating international exchange itself:

The growth of a global economy in conjunction with the new telecommunications and computer networks that span the world has profoundly reconfigured institutions fundamental to processes of governance and accountability in the modern state. State sovereignty, nation-based citizenship, the institutional apparatus in charge of regulating the economy, such as central banks and monetary policies—all of these institutions are being destabilized and even transformed as a result of globalization and the new technologies. What happens to processes of governance and accountability when the fundamental institutions upon which they rest and depend are thus destabilized and transformed? (Sassen 1996: xi–xii.)

While Sassen does not argue that the nation-state’s influence in global matters has withered away, she emphasizes that destabilization and transformation of national institutions are key consequences of globalization. Of primary importance is the localized character of destabilization and the agencies of institutional transformation, and while Sassen addresses globalization generally as an economic process, her model for analyzing global economic processes can also serve as a basic model for what we could call the transnational humanities industry, an industry in which

we all participate. In fact, I find the features and processes of this transnational humanities industry are already implicit in Sassen's formulations of economic globalization, and I summarize these formulations as a prerequisite to addressing the way we construct our comparative cultural critiques.

Sassen's basic objective, like that of Anthony King (1997a,b), Stuart Hall (1997), Partha Chatterjee (1998), and Simon During (1997), is to 'dissect the global economy' and prompt us to reject economic globalization merely as 'represented in terms of the duality of national-global where the global gains power and advantages at the expense of the national' (Sassen 1998: xix). Her projects often focus on the city as a nexus of globalizing forces, thereby allowing an important view 'of economic globalization as concrete economic complexes situated in specific places' (xix). Such a view also serves to highlight those intra- or subnational components of globalization that are significantly 'articulated with the global economy' and those that are left out (xix). This perspective is in contrast to those arguments for viewing the nation-state, or state economic sovereignty, as declining in significance. Sassen feels that while new forms of control and jurisdiction arise through globalization, the nation-state continues to play a major role in the global economy, not least as the guarantor of capital—a point also made by Wang Hui (1998) in a recent article. New claims made by globalization on the nation-state have led to the production of new forms of legality—labor laws, industry regulation and deregulation, and so on—and these 'legal regimes' are, at least at this point in time, maintained solely by national structures and those international structures that presuppose the self-sovereignty of modern nation-states (Sassen 1998: xxvii).

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), and the World Trade Organization are examples of such regimes of legality that illustrate the interconnectedness of globalization and nation-states. The activities of these organizations, along with much of the deregulation of industries involved in global commerce, also lead, according to Sassen, to the partial 'denationalization of national territory'. That is, the nation-state itself is transformed when it engages global economies, and the nation's cities are particularly telling examples of the often forgotten or ignored 'placebound' nature of globalization. While the hypermobile and even cyberspatial nature of globalization is not to be denied, it is very often overvalored to such a degree that the equally undeniable features of place, as nation, city and institution, are lost in the analysis.

Moreover, the ability of the nation-state to regulate global economies varies according to the sphere of globalization in question. Sassen contrasts local, place-bound resources with the hypermobile outputs produced by those resources:

The considerable placeboundness of many ... resources contrasts with the hypermobility of the outputs of many of these same industries, particularly finance. The regulatory capacity of the state stands in a different relation to hypermobile outputs than to the infrastructure of facilities, from office buildings equipped with fiber optic cables to specialized workforces. (1998: xxix.)

In simple terms, the state may have considerable control over the ‘input column’ of globalization—the infrastructure and labor supply—but less over the ‘output column’—the resulting financial capital and its subsequent demands for further modifications to the state in order to benefit from global economic flows. In fact, Li Cong, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, sees this as a welcome force acting on nations out of line with international standards of economic behavior. He argues that one key aspect of anything like successful globalization is the constraint to be placed upon national sovereignty by international organizations (Li 1995: 61). Li’s view of the horizon for globalization, however, differs from those of many at this conference, as it emphasizes that globalization will not truly be possible until the capitalist system is abolished (1995: 62).

When it comes to the labor supply for globalized economies, one of Sassen’s key points is that ‘much of the multiculturalism in large cities is as much a part of globalization as is international finance’, and, crucially, the dynamics of such multiculturalism leads to the need to develop new spaces for transnational politics. Sassen suggests that ‘what we still narrate in the language of immigration and ethnicity ... is actually a series of processes having to do with the globalization of economic activity, of cultural activity, of identity formation’ (1998: xxxi). Put into such a framework, ethnicity is not viewed simply as an anthropological phenomenon, but rather as an integral part of global economies, and cultural critics are led to investigate how ethnicity is written and interpreted through such transnational political structures as immigration laws and globalized labor organizations.

According to Sassen, post-colonial analyses are also shifted to allow for more relevant discussions based on the centrality of colonial processes to globalization, rather than their alterity:

Too often immigration and ethnicity are constituted as otherness. Understanding them as a set of processes whereby global elements are localized, international labor markets are constituted, and cultures from all over the world are de- and reterritorialized, puts them right there at the center along with the internationalization of capital as a fundamental aspect of globalization. This way of narrating the large migrations of the post-war era captures *the ongoing weight of colonialism and postcolonial forms of empire on major processes of globalization today*, and specifically those processes binding countries of emigration and immigration (1998: xxxi; emphasis added.)

We are encouraged, then, to consider colonial histories and the structures they have established when we turn to issues of contemporary transnational exchanges, including economic flows and ethno-cultural transformations.

### **Traveling Markets and Traveling Theory**

By revisiting each of the five areas and arguments already outlined from the perspective of humanities scholarship in general, and transnational cultural critique in particular, we can sketch out the parallel dynamics of globalized institutional-intellectual flows. Like the economic flows, traveling theory is characterized by its

global spread, but our analysis emphasizes the local contact-points of globalization as they are influenced by national (state) interests and local (institutional) motivations, and as these motivations consequently influence globalizing processes of cultural criticism.

In the first area, where Sassen focuses on the city as a nexus of globalizing forces and argues for the continuing (although transformed) importance of the nation-state in global matters, I suggest we focus on institutions such as universities and research centers, and the continuing influence of local regimes of institutional oversight. Any 'global' discussion, such as that taking place here, converges at an institution and is inflected by the local conditions of that institution. Moreover, the regimes of institutional control are developed at the local level to deal with the global flow of ideas and even scholars. For Chinese institutions, this means that since reforms began in 1978, the 'opening up' to global cultures has involved transformations of curricula, faculty, libraries, housing, computer technology, and an increasing concern shown by academic departments and Communist Party advisors to the activities of scholars involved in global research. The changes that have taken place here at the Beijing Language and Culture University, for example—an institution previously devoted solely to language instruction as the Beijing Language Institute—are distinct from those at, say, Peking University, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Tamkang University in Taiwan, Harvard's Yenching Institute, or the East-West Center in Hawaii.

In the second area, regarding international organizations and the 'denationalization of national territory', I would counterpoise the organizations and associations involving our academic work. That is, along with the IMF, we consider the Modern Language Association, and along with the IBRD, there is the International Comparative Literature Association, and so on. Organizations such as the Chinese Comparative Literature Association and the American Association of Chinese Comparative Literature differ in their political and intellectual orientations. Examples of organizations providing funding, each with its own agenda, include the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), the International Institute for Asian Studies, the East-West Center, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, the Pacific Cultural Center, and various Chinese state bureaus. Sassen's main point regarding membership in globalized or globally oriented organizations is particularly relevant to our own work. That is, the content and direction of our work, and the local institutions with which we identify, are themselves transformed by their involvement in the global exchange of scholarship. In fact, the President of the Beijing Language and Culture University stated just this morning in his opening speech that one key reason for this university's new emphasis on cultural inquiry—particularly transnational cultural inquiry—is the need to 'be compatible with the general tendency of the world'. Throughout the conference, this view of globalization as inevitable came to generally characterize the position of Chinese participants. In response to this inevitability, then, new topics are discussed, new research directions are taken, and even new vocabularies are created to address global interactions.

One interesting example of the transformation of local institutions—an example that speaks to Western as well as Chinese constructions of ethnicity—is found in the

International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS). The IATS was founded in Oxford, England, in the 1970s, yet it was not until the seventh triennial meeting in 1995 that there emerged a sizable presence of participating scholars from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Of course, many views of Tibet's history and status held by Western scholars are not always shared, and often directly opposed, by scholars in the PRC. Despite such contentions, however, changes have taken place in the IATS, both because of transformations of institutional perspectives in China and a greater openness on the part of the organization to divergent views and topics of interest. Moreover, it is the membership of the IATS that makes decisions for further changes to the organization as well as local member institutions, and the diverse membership now suggests a more global, less Eurocentric future for Tibetan studies.

In the third area, regarding the regulation of global economies, I think it is important to see the 'input column' of resources for transnational cultural critique in the humanities as including such features as institutional mandates and the financial support they enable, local faculty and student populations, structures of foreign-study programs, memberships in international scholarly organizations, and conferences themselves as venues of discussion. These inputs, adapting Sassen's argument, are easier to control at the local level than the hybridized 'outputs', which can be particularly troublesome in China, where matters of transnational flows are often read as instances of 'interference in China's domestic affairs', whether of the political, economic or cultural type. The outputs of our transnational cultural critique, for example, include all of the 'cultural misreadings' discussed in this and previous conferences, as well as politically uncomfortable elaborations of traveling theory (such as portions of the present discussion), institutional modifications that result from engagement with heterogeneous organizations, and even students who remain abroad or foreign scholars who make awkward demands on local institutions in host countries.

The fourth argument, establishing narratives of ethnicity as economic and political agencies, closely parallels the discourse of ethnicity in much current cultural criticism in the humanities. Critiques ranging from well-known studies of hybridity or the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993; Bhabha 1994) to lesser-known analyses of Japanese imperialism in northern China (Young 1998) are specifically addressed to the interrelations of ethnic identification and the politico-economic sphere, particularly regarding immigration and/or exile. Ethnic identities in humanities scholarship and cultural theory are even formed in a similar way, as scholars who become 'transnational', either voluntarily or under conditions of exile, claim new, hybrid national spaces from which to speak. Under scrutiny, then, is the easy correlation between national identity as defined by a majority population or by state policies and the actual cultural identification of cultural critics. Even regional designations such as 'Western' or 'European' theory do not suffice when we recognize that the agency for such theory has always acted in and through colonial, non-Western sites (Spivak 1993). By extension, we are challenged to investigate not only the Eurocentrism at the heart of much global theory, but the Han-centrism that characterizes China studies and the Sino-centrism that is reinforced in East-West studies, particularly as

contemporary scholarship in China influences the transformation of global debate, as exemplified in this gathering.

Finally, regarding post-colonial studies, we can see that a focus on ethnicity as an economic and political manifestation leads to a broader view of the global processes of colonialism and neocolonialism in cultural critique. That is, studies of post-coloniality are challenged to expand from a narrow focus on nineteenth-century European forms to contemporary aspects of cultural imperialism, transnational corporate hegemony, and even forms of Eastern imperialism, including critical examinations of China's own imperial past and its relation to activities in minority regions today. Colonialism's historical twin, modernity, is therefore to be analyzed on a wider stage as well, one that is not overdetermined by the identification of modernization with Westernization. Specifically with regard to much of Asia in the past century, the concept of modernity, rather than circulating as an exclusively Western import, has in fact been viewed as a specifically Japanese or Chinese project (Barlow 1997). This is true not only of Southeast Asia, but of the minority regions of modern China, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, which have experienced modernity largely as a function of the PRC's economic, political and cultural policies (Gladney 1991; Venturino 1995). A Han-Chinese culture is perceived as actively serving as the subject of modernity for regions such as Tibet, as much, if not more so, than Western culture. This subject of modernity, like its Western counterpart, tends to efface the imperial discourse moving through it, begging further investigation using the tools of analysis currently brought to bear on Western imperialism. Such investigations redefine the terms of debate over globalization, imperialism and modernity by acknowledging significant nonWestern flows. Globalization studies must account for such flows and seek to challenge the circumscription of theory by Western interests, no matter how hybrid and transnational those interests that have already been defined in West-centered studies.

### **Redefining Globalization in China**

To conclude, I reconsider three commonly discussed views of globalization from a perspective that acknowledges China's presence and the relevance of globalization theory to intra-national cultural critique. One general view of globalization holds that its characteristic feature is one of 'homogenization' or even 'McDonaldization', whereby Western (largely American) culture spreads out to absorb other cultures, transforming the entire globe into a 'village' with a single, shared corporate culture (Tomlinson 1991). Alternatively, a double-sided view identifies globalization as both an economic threat to weaker nations and an opportunity for those nations to engage and benefit from the expanding global economy (Gilpin 1987). Third, the view of globalization as a 'general global connectedness', emerges from a lived sense of the everyday global interrelations in economics, culture, the environment, technology, and so on (Robertson 1992).

Globalization studies grounded in any of these basic views, or any combination of them, can help us examine domestic questions involving dominant 'national cultures' and minority ethnicity, particularly in such countries as China, the United

States and Australia, which are all large nation-states comprised of a variety of ethnic groups, classes, and economic zones. In China, for example, as Ye Xiaowen of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party points out in a bureau report, the economic systems of the minority areas must be linked to the economy of the nation as a whole, so that development can be more equitably distributed (Ye 1996: 55). In the United States, critiques of cultural imperialism are often directed not only to the global, but to the national processes of cultural hegemony acting on minority cultures. Cultural difference, celebrated in many quarters, is nevertheless resisted in some, often in the name of national unity, and especially when the 'celebration' of difference moves beyond the sphere of cultural spectacle and toward significant transformations of existing political or economic structures. In the field of China studies (in mainland China and elsewhere), a similar dynamic operates, with Han culture serving as the majority force and the unifying voice of the nation. This makes critical analyses of a national culture that continues to bear the contradictions of imperial expansion and colonial discourse very difficult and, in fact, such analyses often conceal or ignore these contradictions altogether. Ye Xiaowen, for one, accepts unapologetically that 'the minorities problem will exist over a long historical period' because 'the withering away of nationalities' takes a long time (1996: 54).

The double-sided view of globalization as both a threat and a promise is also a matter of domestic concern when we recognize that cultural interconnectedness within a single nation brings with it both the promise of minority development (in the economic, political and cultural spheres) and the threat of extinction to those cultures, institutions, academic projects and theoretical approaches that become absorbed by the majority culture. Global economic projects undertaken recently by the IMF have stirred controversy for what some see as the intentional disruption of weaker countries by stronger ones. Within a single country, funding and institutional support from financially and politically strong sources (public and private) become the regulating forces by which weaker, heterodox academic projects can be furthered or drained of any power to transform existing structures. American educational policies continue to struggle with divergent responses to dominant culturalism, and recent Chinese educational policies have been questioned for their destructive effects on minority culture (Bass 1998).

The view of globalization as a general connectedness among economies and cultures, along with the unequal regional dynamics often recognized as a part of this connectedness, also resonates with the conditions within a multiethnic nation. At an earlier conference in Changsha devoted to critical theory in 'China and the West', I cited an article to illustrate this, and it is appropriate for the present discussion as well. The article appears in China's state-run, English-language newspaper *China Daily*, and the headline reads, 'East, West Co-operation Benefits Both'. The article explains that since China began its reforms almost two decades ago, East-West cooperation has developed into a rapidly growing trend for narrowing gaps in development, understanding and social progress. The article suggests that while the 'East' has an advantage in terms of technological know-how and capital investment, and the 'West' has vast natural resources and cheaper labor, the West must use caution when accepting offers of cooperative technological and environmental

ventures with the East. This is because, as one government official notes, 'it is unavoidable that the East will transport some of their obsolete industries to the West. The West will have to make a choice'. Indeed, this same official recalls that the West has 'already paid dearly for ... mistakes in the past' (Kang & Ma 1997).

We, like the participants at the earlier conference, are much more used to hearing concern voiced by Eastern (or Southern) countries over development programs undertaken by Western (or Northern) countries. The language of this article is surprising and provocative because the official quoted is in fact the governor of the western Chinese province of Shaanxi and the 'East-West' cooperation in question is not global, but that between China's own developed eastern cities and the lesser-developed western regions, the most extensive of which are the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the largely Muslim Xinjiang Province. Here, the concept of 'China and the West' is complicated by 'China and *its* West', and we are once again prompted to recognize the influence of the national on the transnational and how domestic interrelations may mirror the logic and discourse of the global.

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