

Inquiring After Theory in China

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How can one take Edward Said's advice and speak truth to power when power refuses to listen, when it actively suppresses and intimidates dissenters, when it systematically lies and exaggerates to mobilize popular support for its agenda, when it uses slogans like the "war on terrorism" to abrogate the civil liberties of its own citizens?
—W. J. T. Mitchell, "Medium Theory: Preface to the 2003 *Critical Inquiry* Symposium"

W. J. T. Mitchell and Wang Ning have announced to readers of *Critical Inquiry* that "theory is alive and well in China."¹ They report from Beijing

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1. W. J. T. Mitchell and Wang Ning, "The Ends of Theory: The Beijing Symposium on Critical Inquiry," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005): 267. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as ET.

in the summer of 2004 during the conference “The Ends of Theory: The Beijing Symposium on Critical Inquiry,” which picked up where a conference in Chicago the previous year had left off. According to Mitchell and Wang, “critical theory seemed outmatched in 2003 by a superior form of ideological theory hitched to the power of the U.S. military, the crusading sense of mission in the misbegotten ‘War on Terror,’ and the active compliance of mass-media institutions” (ET, 265). In fact, the gathering of the *Critical Inquiry* board occurred just as the Bush administration was taking the United States to war in Iraq. For the Beijing conference conveners a year later, theory in China offers a promising alternative to the American setting, in which, they suggest, while theory may not be dead, it is certainly very ill.

“The Chicago conference,” according to Mitchell and Wang, “was haunted by questions of the seeming impotence of theory and criticism in the face of folly and ignorance driven by fanaticism, greed, and hubris” (ET, 265). It seemed the day belonged to neoconservative theorists like Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, who, while “triumphantly announcing the dawn of a new Middle East led by the democratization of Iraq,” were applauded or at least accommodated by the mainstream press: “As the *New York Times* pronounced the invasion of Iraq a great success, it also marked one of the defining moments of the year as the ‘death of theory,’ mourned in Chicago at the *CI* conference of spring 2003” (ET, 265–66). And so, with scholarly criticism in the United States limited to disingenuous rationalizations of the hijacking of American politics (save the work of “a few critical theory die-hards” [ET, 265]), the mass media going along for the ride, and independent critique of interested power politics on the defensive, Mitchell and Wang consider the view from China in 2004:

As for the fate of critical theory in Beijing, one would never guess that it was dead or dying. Something called theory (whether of culture, of the arts and media, of literature, of language, of history or politics) has established itself as the lingua franca of international conversations about every imaginable topic: from the minutiae of everyday life in local situations to the unimaginably complex phenomenon known as globalization. Of course there are many other international vernaculars: advertising, film, finance capital, tourism, style and fashion, architecture, even literature in translation. But theory, as understood at this conference, was being mobilized as the effort to coordinate the understanding of these other vernaculars, to grasp their totality in a global act of cognitive mapping, to quote Fredric Jameson. (ET, 266–67)

Mitchell and Wang are certainly right to call attention to the plight of theory in a post-9/11 America, and they are not alone in promoting China as a welcome site of critical inquiry in the new century.² Yet I want to suggest that their view of theory's vitality in China establishes a particularly insidious anticritical approach to critical practice. Mitchell and Wang promote this practice as a means to expand the critical scope of current debates involving social justice, transnational capital, globalization, and cultural hegemony, among other issues, yet the result as it stands is a self-serving and dissimulating fantasy that leads critical inquiry to fall into step with repressive elements of Chinese state policy and the more mercenary aspects of Western transnational academia.

The View from Beijing, Part 1

Critical Inquiry's description of theory's new opportunities in China is of particular interest, and not only because it comes at a time when theory in China should no longer be examined as new but as evolving through stages and variations influenced by China's established engagement with a variety of global structures. Rather, the report raises urgent questions about the present direction of theorizing power in an age of globalization. Mitchell and Wang describe the neoconservatives' impact on American politics and military power as evidenced by the invasion of Iraq: "the vast majority of the world's population . . . looked on in horror as the world's only superpower plunged into a disastrous strategic mistake" (ET, 265). Then they speculate:

How does all this look a year later, and in Beijing? How does the world's oldest empire look upon the self-destructive follies of the youngest? With considerable irony, one suspects, and a sense of déjà vu and puzzlement. One question that arose in conversations around the conference was how the U.S. could possibly survive with a polarized two-party system. In China, it was remarked, such a division could only lead to civil war, and thus China's "one-party democracy" seemed to some like the wisest course for a large and diverse nation. American foreign policy, which looks strange enough from Europe these days, seems positively demented from a Chinese perspective. *But then China has never sent an occupation force halfway around the globe to liberate a foreign country.* Its imperial ambitions

2. For example, *boundary 2*, *New Literary History*, and *Social Text* have all cosponsored conferences in China and/or published special issues on theory in China.

have been mainly focused on *securing and expanding its own borders, creating an empire that has endured now for over two thousand years, an empire of consolidation and contiguity rather than adventurist colonialism.* (ET, 266, my emphasis)

Surely it is fair to call this puzzling, and fair to consider this breathtaking paragraph one phrase at a time. To begin, how is it possible to assert and condone the notion of “an empire of consolidation and contiguity” in contrast to an “adventurist colonialism”? How can the theoretical illusion of imperial ambitions that are “mainly focused on securing and expanding [one’s] own borders” get past the same critic who writes so convincingly of America’s imperial sleight-of-hand in the Monroe Doctrine and pronouncements of Manifest Destiny?³ We seem squarely faced with the urgent issue of imperialism’s changing forms at a time when the ambiguity of national borders not only leads critics to call into question the forces and location of imperial projects but prompts those in power at existing imperial centers to develop new strategies of maintaining real, geopolitical control. When Mitchell and Wang assert that China “has never sent an occupation force halfway around the globe to liberate a foreign country,” the criticism of current American neo-imperialism is clear and welcome, but it comes at the cost of perpetuating the myth that China’s current national borders are *not* the result of foreign occupation.

Similarly, the notion that China has “endured now for over two thousand years” uncritically promotes the government’s representation of the modern Chinese nation-state as the sole heir to “Chinese civilization,” a narrative that in many ways is used to underwrite the current regime’s legitimacy. It is a formulation that overwhelmingly represents Han culture as the core of Chinese civilization and, in that way, ought to suggest a critical look at the imperial legacies of China’s own ethnic hegemony.⁴ The notion of an

3. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Postcolonial Culture, Postimperial Criticism,” *Transition* 56 (1992): 14. The essay is also excerpted in Bill Ascroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 475–79. Subsequent references are to the *Transition* version. An anonymous reader of the present essay has suggested that this reference to “the oldest and youngest empires” in fact recalls comments by Anson Burlingame, an American representative in China (and China’s own ambassador-at-large), who, in 1868, also celebrated the cooperation between “the oldest and youngest nations” as established by the treaty that bears his name. For background on this still-relevant instance of East-West dialogue, see S. S. Kim, “Burlingame and the Inauguration of the Co-operative Policy,” *Modern Asian Studies* 5, no. 4 (1971): 337–54.

4. In fact, I wonder if “two thousand years” isn’t a misprint, as it is standard policy to insist

ancient and enduring Chinese civilization-as-nation-state also serves to justify the PRC's standing claim to *any* territory associated with past Chinese imperial maps, including, of course, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Imperialism in these regions is therefore *not* imperialism, since the regions are all "contiguous" with the imperial center. And as for democratic representation in such a "large and diverse nation," Mitchell and Wang's only challenge to China's party dictatorship seems to be the ironic quotes timidly marking the unattributed and passive reference to the country's "one-party democracy." So the question arises again: In a world where national borders must negotiate for recognition with transnational capital and supranational organizations, what would *not* be an instance of a contiguous empire? If national, cultural, or civilizational contiguity can be asserted in new, transnational forms, how do you argue, as I would, that someone's "contiguous empire" is also a matter of "fanaticism, greed, and hubris" (ET, 265)?

For many theorists, of course, these are not rhetorical questions, as valuable critical studies of neo-imperialism, Americanization, globalization, and cultural hegemony have shown by questioning the imperial spirit that still motivates global exchange. And neither are these rhetorical questions for party intellectuals in China who recognize the need to enlist the changing vocabularies of intellectual discourse in order to justify, politically and otherwise, the current government's grip on power. China's news agencies and academic institutions systematically engage questions of national identity, globalization, and minority rights, and discursive freedoms predominate, yet the preferred agent of debate remains a carefully circumscribed "Chinese position." That this self-serving approach so often goes unchallenged is unfortunate:

Every visiting Western politician, anxious to win contracts, now acquiesces in the fiction that there has been a vast increase in political freedom in China. . . . The willingness to tolerate the Big Lie in China meant that when the Chinese did demand political reforms during the protests of 1989, the party could first send tanks against unarmed protesters, then blatantly deny that anyone had died in Tiananmen Square—and subsequently dare anyone to say otherwise. The "incident" has now so efficiently been covered up in China that most Chi-

on China's *five thousand* years of distinctive culture, as in Wang Ning's own 2004 online essay, "Translating Theory and (Re)Constructing Chinese Critical Discourse," available at http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ctccs/news/guestseminars/wangning/wang_ning.pdf. See p. 10.

nese under 25 are completely ignorant about what happened and convinced that outside pressure for political reforms is another form of US imperialism and foreign bullying.⁵

One would hope that the *Critical Inquiry* report would encourage the sensibilities of oppositional criticism—particularly that arising in China itself—not of politicians or businesspeople hoping to win contracts and more than willing to accept the increasing presence of official control. Microsoft and Yahoo, for example, currently facilitate government supervision of Chinese users attempting to access foreign Web sites.⁶ I simply suggest that any new “joint venture” between a Chinese and a foreign academic institution has the opportunity and obligation not to whitewash the disastrous effects of China’s market development, currently shielded by Communist Party propaganda as well as by familiar forms of professional opportunism. The result would be further contributions to critical studies already under way, ranging from issues involving labor unrest, China’s urban/rural divide, the suppression of minority rights, to the manipulation of democratic structures in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

In a recent review article, Yang Lian explains that far too many Chinese who survived more difficult times only to emerge as China’s new elite have abandoned their earlier struggles against political oppression: “It is not that they are unaware of the suffering of Chinese peasants, nor that of workers being made redundant, or residents forced to move to clear land for developers. But perhaps the conflicting desires became too burdensome for them; or they convinced themselves that nothing in their lives would, or could, ever be worth more than the title, car and house that the Party had bestowed; and that the quickest way to release the pressure of inner anxiety was simply to accept the status quo.”⁷ Scholars are no exception to the gen-

5. Jasper Becker, “The Big Lie,” *Index on Censorship* 2 (2004): 89.

6. From *The Guardian*, June 15, 2005, Foreign Pages, p. 12: “Even the most basic political discussion is difficult because ‘communism,’ ‘socialism,’ and ‘capitalism’ are blocked from entering cyberspace in this way, though they can be used in the body of the main text. Many taboo words are predictable, such as ‘Taiwanese independence,’ ‘Tibet,’ ‘Dalai Lama,’ ‘Falun Gong,’ ‘terrorism,’ and ‘massacre.’ But there are also quirks that reflect the embryonic nature of net censorship and the propaganda ministry’s perceived threats. The word ‘demonstration’ is taboo, but ‘protest’ is all right; ‘democracy’ is forbidden, but ‘anarchy’ and ‘revolution’ are acceptable. On MSN Space, Chinese bloggers cannot use the name of their own president but can comment on Tony Blair. ‘Tiananmen’ cannot be mentioned.”

7. Yang Lian, “Dark Side of the Chinese Moon,” *New Left Review* 32 (2005): 139.

eral tendency to self-promotion/protection through self-censorship, but for those who go out of their way to benefit from theoretical inquiry, particularly as it involves “every imaginable topic: from the minutiae of everyday life in local situations to the unimaginably complex phenomenon known as globalization,” a more open approach is surely in order.

As for foreign visitors, I have seen how the polite instinct not to “spoil the party” by bringing up “uncomfortable” issues operates among first-time participants to conferences in China—and there have been many more first-time participants than “old friends” participating in the formative periods of theory in China. While conferences and publications, including those involving Wang Ning, have valuably introduced many Western critics to a developing new scene, many of these critics continue to treat their Chinese colleagues with an overly sensitive attitude of caution. The consequence is a patronizing gap separating the “real theory” we do at home from the provisional demurring we do in China. In a recent review essay that should be required reading (along with the review’s subject) for anyone interested in theory in China, Arif Dirlik reminds us that critique of China’s own political aggression is not in every case a reflection of hypocritical “China bashing”:

It is important for the world to have access to the thinking of Chinese intellectuals; in overcoming Euro-American hegemony, it is equally important for PRC intellectuals to engage a world of culture and ideas that is not bound by inherited geographies of power. It is not only intellectuals in the PRC who are oblivious to this problem, but also PRC promoters in the US and Europe, who seem constitutionally incapable of accepting that China is just like any other society which, in the particular mode of its escape from domination, visits devastation on others.⁸

What further complicates the present situation is the creation of a critical body that, as presented by Mitchell and Wang, reflects the same pretense and motivation as the scene of global theory in China generally. That is, an earnestly “progressive” voice condemns hegemony and social justice, but only within the confines established by those in power. Yang Lian specifically calls attention to those who, “waving the international hard-currency banner of post-colonialism, condemn with great moral indignation the injustices between rich and poor countries and the iniquities of the WTO, while

8. Arif Dirlik, “China’s Critical Intelligentsia,” review of *One China, Many Paths*, ed. Chao-hua Wang, *New Left Review* 28 (2004): 137.

keeping silent about the happenings under their own eyes.”⁹ From a broader perspective, Dirlik describes the scene of theory as a

post-socialist intellectual environment, still dominated by a Communist Party bent on carrying the country into capitalism in the name of an ever-more distant Communism. It is the left here that is most critical of the CCP in the name of democracy and social justice, as in the questions it raises about the preoccupation with globalization from the mid-1990s. Liberals—critical of the neoliberals who are influential in economic policy-making but otherwise quite happy to accommodate political despotism—focus rather on the reform of the political system which they hope will not only bring democracy but also alleviate social injustice.¹⁰

An urgent question left unaddressed by Mitchell and Wang’s announcement—and often by the notion of “theory in China” generally—is how global debate, like any supranational discourse, must and will adapt to the demands of its participants. How will the neoliberal perspectives of Chinese institutions and policymakers, including those of the Communist Party, allow room for open expression and critique in a world of global theory? The need for Chinese critics and institutions to be mindful of changing (and often unwritten) party lines and to self-censor their own conferences belies the fact that theory in China may be alive, but not entirely well. By policing for undesirable topics, scholarly institutions help to enable Beijing’s repressive policies, illustrating how the freedoms exercised by those exploring new avenues of critical inquiry come at the expense of keeping undesirable voices out of the discussion. If international discussion should turn critical of official Chinese narratives of labor relations, rural development, or minority repression—and it would hardly be unusual for open scholarly inquiry to be at odds with official policies—what will be the consequences for critics invested in conflicting orders of critical freedom?

After the Fever

Theory in China has traded on the global marketplace since the 1980s, although most commentators recognize that the events of 1989 significantly shifted the focus of critical debate. Chaohua Wang suggests that

9. Yang Lian, “Dark Side of the Chinese Moon,” 139.

10. Dirlik, “China’s Critical Intelligentsia,” 135.

during the eighties, “the theoretical concerns of the time were closely related to the immediate mentality of the [government’s official] reform process,” and “intellectual explorations seemed to enjoy a rarely seen degree of social influence and authority.”¹¹ The predominant character of these explorations, however, was such that “the achievements in literature and the arts of the ‘first reform decade’ will probably come to be seen as much more striking than its thinking in policy-related fields, and more truly representative of the creative energies of the period. In this sense, the 1980s could be described as a combination of ‘high cultural fever’ and ‘weak (or weaker) intellectual thought.’”¹² Following the crackdown at Tiananmen Square in 1989 and subsequent years of economic development, according to Wang, “the official watchword was ‘stability’ at all costs,” and intellectuals were reluctant to question the basic logic behind China’s ongoing reforms: “While its social contradictions became steadily sharper, politically they were subdued with an iron fist.”¹³ Ben Xu has also argued that, since 1989, “being increasingly at the mercy of capital, intellectuals are in the process of changing from the role of critical and oppositional thinkers to that of wage earners and moneymakers.”¹⁴

Wang Hui’s recent book links critical discourse to the transformations of China’s political scene in the 1990s generally, arguing,

The discourse concerning developmentalism carried on by scholars of the humanities and social sciences . . . [reveals] how the myth of “transition” and the fantasy of development cover up the urgency of the need for political freedom and social democracy. . . . Just as people have forgotten the sound of social fragmentation echoing behind the excitement at Tiananmen, neither can people remember that the market era referred to as “neoliberalism” is hiding behind the political specters of those on the square and has only in this way secured an exemption from social protest against it. In addition, these very specters of the past era are today’s stage properties. The old

11. Chaohua Wang, “Minds of the Nineties,” intro. to *One China, Many Paths*, ed. Chaohua Wang (New York: Verso, 2003), 12.

12. Chaohua Wang, “Minds of the Nineties,” 13. See also Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

13. Chaohua Wang, “Minds of the Nineties,” 13.

14. Ben Xu, *Disenchanted Democracy: Chinese Cultural Criticism After 1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 13.

violence and the old language have conferred on the present era of dramatic polarization a reputation for being progressive.¹⁵

During the 1990s, my own participation in literary conferences included presenting several papers, and I also spent a semester at Beijing University, teaching and conducting research for my doctoral thesis.¹⁶ My focus throughout the decade was on the significance of Tibet in “China and the West” exchanges. Consequently, my own experience as a “traveling theorist” included being removed from the program of one conference because the sponsoring institution’s party secretary did not want any discussion about Tibet. In another instance, I was simply told not to raise issues of Tibet, and regarding any invited lectures on postmodernity and colonial discourse that I delivered at Chinese universities, I was told to keep references to Tibet to a polite minimum and eliminate the word *Tibet* completely from the titles of my presentations. Of course, the situation is not that different in the West, where Tibet has never ceased to be a kind of “box-office poison” for theorists in the humanities. Images of the Dalai Lama’s Apple Computer ads or Richard Gere’s new-age pleading have made it easy for many otherwise critically minded theorists to not take Tibet seriously. Yet, it is taken very seriously in China and remains one of the most carefully monitored topics in any number of academic and popular circles. Nevertheless—and this is the most important point—since 1989, it has not been impossible, even if necessarily difficult, to raise “uncomfortable” issues in China.

Describing his experience at a Beijing conference (also arranged by Wang Ning) in 1998, John Frow explains that party officials attend such conferences in order to produce official reports of what is said, and this inevitably leads to a certain level of self-censorship among the Chinese participants. In fact, Frow writes, “one of the younger Chinese scholars, who had been asked a question about Tibet, told me in private that they couldn’t have answered the question honestly because to do so would have jeopardized their careers, including their chances of getting a passport to study abroad.”¹⁷ No doubt. Foreign scholars, however, have opportunities

15. Wang Hui, *China’s New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 104, 117.

16. See my *Critical Baggage: Traveling Theory in China, Tibet, and the Transnational Academy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). During an earlier stay in China (1985–86), I taught literature and language courses in the northeast city of Changchun.

17. John Frow, “Joking in China,” *Textual Practice* 13, no. 1 (1999): 3. It should be noted, though without paranoia, that party secretaries typically travel with scholarly Chinese contingents abroad, as well.

that most Chinese scholars at home do not, and local scholars do not always dread the out-of-bounds remarks made by their visitors, as long as the blame (if any) falls on the right head. Still, official silence on Tibetan issues at a conference should argue for rather than against viewing Tibetan issues as vital to theory in China. Whether seen from the perspective of an independence movement or from the position of reforming China's minority policies, Tibet uniquely and distinctly unsettles any attempt to keep to a "China and the West" paradigm. Not talking about Tibet means avoiding or compromising our discussions of transnational ethnicity in China generally. Not talking about Tibet means downplaying the key role that developing China's western regions plays in the country's overall economic strategizing. Most importantly for critics, however, not talking about Tibet is too often the sacrifice that enables discussion of other "difficult" topics.¹⁸ To engage in this kind of scapegoating, I feel, is simply bad theory and stands ultimately to degrade any position taken in the name of critique.

The View from Beijing, Part 2

While Mitchell and Wang marvel at the intellectual opportunities open to traveling theorists and their hosts in China, it makes critical sense to identify just where and when "international conversations about every imaginable topic" (ET, 266) must steer clear of topics deemed undesirable by those in power. China in 2004 actually saw a significant crackdown on the activities of intellectuals, particularly those involved with the "internationalizing" of what the Chinese government very jealously guards as "China's internal affairs." In December of that year, the BBC reported that the increase in detentions of intellectuals by Chinese authorities had scholars and students "terrified," fearful that a return to totalitarianism was being signaled by Hu Jintao and other Chinese leaders, who had recently accused intellectuals of being "elitist" and "ordered newspapers and magazines not to give publicity to several well-known intellectuals who are critical of the government."¹⁹

18. I once received an e-mail from a Beijing conference organizer, stating simply, "You are certainly welcome to our conference and give a presentation on any of the topics except the issue of Tibet." As noted above, the solution was to remove *Tibet* from the title of my paper and raise my intended points as tactfully as possible.

19. Louisa Lim, "China Questions Leading Critics," December 14, 2004, *BBC News* online edition, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4094075.stm>. Note that while the Bush administration must pay for newspaper columns biased in favor of its policies, officials in China simply order the press to print, or not print, articles on demand.

Among those detained in 2004 were the leading literary figures, Liu Xiaobo and Yu Jie, founding members of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre, who were being punished for breaking any number of unwritten rules governing approved speech. Liu Xiaobo, in fact, had just published an essay on the poet Shi Tao, who was himself arrested in late November 2004 for “leaking state secrets” and has since been sentenced to ten years in prison.²⁰

Another leading Chinese intellectual was placed in custody in 2004 as well, and this after the appearance of an essay in which, as if to discriminate more specifically between living theory and dead ends, the author points out that regardless of the relative loosening of restrictions on Chinese writers in general, open discussion of Tibet remains off limits. Wang Lixiong is a Beijing-based novelist and critic who has written more than any other Chinese intellectual on the central importance of Tibet's fate to China's political reforms.²¹ The occasion for Wang Lixiong's essay “Tibet Facing Imperialism of Two Kinds: An Analysis of the Woesser Incident” was the pun-

20. The Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN has protested Shi Tao's sentence, seeing it as another example of China's “seemingly intractable intolerance of dissent and a corresponding pattern of harassment and arrests of writers.” See Sara Whyatt, “Ten-Year Sentence against Writer Shi Tao,” International PEN Articles, May 9, 2005; available at <http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/index.php?pid=33&aid=299&query=shi%20tao>.

21. See, for example, Wang Lixiong, “Reflections on Tibet,” *New Left Review* 14 (2002): 79–111. See also Wang Lixiong, “The People's Republic of China's 21st Century Underbelly,” *Beijing Zhanlue Yu Guanli*, January 2, 1999, 21–33, trans. the BBC Monitoring Service, published in *The BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, available at www.columbia.edu/itc/ealac/barnett/pdfs/link14-wang-lixiong.pdf. The latter essay explains the central importance of the “Tibetan matter” to the Chinese government in the following way: “Preparing for a possible future conflict with India is the bottom line as to why the Central Government cannot allow Tibetan independence. The Central Government cannot retreat or compromise on the demands for Tibetan independence or covert independence. There is also another related factor that we need to be clear about . . . that any special disposition of the Tibet matter could have a chain reaction among other minority ethnic groups. While the Han Chinese make up 93 percent of the Chinese population, minority ethnic regions make up 60 percent of Chinese territory, 89.6 percent of our grasslands, 37 percent of our forests, 49.7 percent of our timber resources, and over 50 percent of our water conservancy resources. So the minority ethnic group matter must be one of overall consideration, which is dealt with very carefully. While all 55 of our minority ethnic groups would, of course, not demand independence or a high degree of self-rule along with Tibet, if even the Uighurs did so (which would be almost certain), the two places together would have an area of 4 million sq km, or more than two-fifths of Chinese territory. China's grim population explosion, spatial crowding, and resource shortage are the basic limiting factors as to why China cannot solve our minority ethnic group problem in the Soviet breakup model.”

ishment handed down to the Tibetan literary critic, journal editor, and poet Woesser (the Chinese transliteration is *Weise*), for publishing her own collection of essays in 2003.²² Following his discussion of Woesser, Wang Lixiong elaborates on the distinction between China's intellectual scene generally and the conditions for scholars involving themselves in Tibetan matters. He explains that even those Chinese critics who promote critical discourse and democratization cannot or will not adopt strong positions regarding Tibet. Moreover, while many of these critics are admirably willing to be identified as critics of the state or even dissidents, they generally remain immune to the harsh treatments that would be imposed on a Tibetan writer. It is a politi-

22. Wang Lixiong, "Tibet Facing Imperialism of Two Kinds: An Analysis of the Woesser Incident," published in Chinese on the *New Century Net* Web site, <http://www.ncn.org/asp/zwginfo/da-AY.asp?ID=60694&ad=11/16/2004>; English translation at the *World Tibet Network News* archive, http://www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/2004/12/20_1.html.

Wang argues that Woesser's punishment for publishing her collection of essays, *Notes on Tibet (Xixiang Biji)*, mirrors the colonial behavior of the Chinese government in Tibet generally, and it offers an important lesson on the contours of accepted critical debate in China today. Wang explains that while *Notes on Tibet* attracted a popular readership, it also prompted scrutiny by official censors. The book was banned, and it was determined that Woesser's essays made "serious political mistakes," such as celebrating the positive aspects of religion in Tibetan culture, failing to properly acknowledge the benefits that China's colonial "Tibet reforms" had brought about, and voicing opinions that do not contribute to the "unification and solidarity" of the nation. Woesser also wrote openly and accurately about an international conference during which a religious figure from Tibet did not immediately recognize that certain participants (Tibetan supporters of the Dalai Lama) should be either shunned or condemned. With the publication of her essays, Woesser had, according to Wang, simply "stepped into the wrong political terrain": "Weise happened to be in Beijing attending an advanced seminar on journal editing at Luxun Literature Institute when the ban was imposed on *Notes on Tibet*. Prior to the incident, the TAR Literature Association was considering promoting her to vice editor-in-chief of *Tibetan Literature*. However, as soon as the book got into trouble, her study was immediately suspended. She was summoned back to Lhasa. A 'Helping and Teaching Group (*Bangjiao Xiaozu*)' was organized for her 'education in thinking (*sixiang jiaoyu*):' She was asked to 'examine (*jian-tao*)' and 'jump the hurdle (*guoguan*) [of her erroneous views].'" Woesser has since lost her position with the Tibetan Literary Association, been deprived of her income, her medical insurance and retirement benefits, had her housing taken away, and is not permitted to obtain a passport. She was also ordered to sign a written "confession," in which she was to renounce the Dalai Lama as a threat to China and to Buddhism. Not only has Woesser refused to sign such a statement, according to Wang, but she has composed her own letter, reaffirming her distinctive Tibetan identity as well as her "conscience as a writer," both of which would prevent her from voicing support for the repressive policies of her government. It remains to be seen whether Woesser will face any further censorship and punishment.

cal and often ethnic dynamic familiar to many who are interested in social change—fight “one’s own” battle first, and then, perhaps, call for broader change—yet it is also too often undertheorized in Chinese contexts:

The consciousness of cultural imperialism still exists among even those democratic figures who, compared with others, have so far paid more attention to the questions of national identity. They typically take Great Unification (*Da Yitong*) for granted. While believing in and promoting democracy, they still subliminally take the superior position, assuming that they have the right to judge the claims of minority nationalities. They draw the bottom line that allows demands for democracy but not independence. There is no openness to consideration and understanding of the position of the suppressed nations.

Democratic Han Chinese in general deny the existence of suppressed nations within China anyway. According to their rationale, there is only autocratic suppression, and since the Han people are also suffering under it, they want the minority nationalities to join forces with the Han to fight for China’s democratization. Therefore the minority peoples ought not pursue only the goals of their nationalities. Yet, the fact is that even the autocracy is discriminatory in dealing with different nationalities. For instance, the Han scholar who wrote “Criticism on the Propaganda Department in the Central Government” and the reporter who made critical comments on the Party Secretary in a public letter were both tolerated. Their positions within the system were not affected. In contrast, Woesser’s single sentence praising the Dalai Lama and her exposure of Nyima Tsering’s confusion are enough to result in her losing everything. How can we say the suppression is all the same?

Minority people who have traveled to inland China commonly experience the difference: “We would have been thrown into jail long ago if, as a minority, we dared to articulate what you Han are saying.” On the other hand, even among democratic-minded Chinese, there is an unspoken common agreement that in order to maintain a united nation-state, a future democratic China would not mind waging wars against any minority nationalities that demand independence. It would no longer be a case of each nationality suffering a shared autocracy; it comes back to the scheme of the Han nation’s domination over the minorities.²³

23. Wang Lixiong, “Tibet Facing Imperialism of Two Kinds.”

What Wang Lixiong describes, of course, is the same maneuver characteristic of much theory in China: condemn hegemony and call for democratic reform, but do not inquire too critically into domestic issues that stand to disrupt a “unified front.”

Critical Collapse

In theory, of course, it has proven expedient to limit the number of available analytical categories to what Rey Chow points out as “China and its ‘preferred others’” while ignoring “China’s other others,” since this move can reduce political and institutional complications.²⁴ In China, as anywhere, getting and keeping a job sometimes depends on knowing what not to talk about. The tendency to restrict the terms of debate has been noted for years, yet it continues to prop up what would otherwise be premises in need of interrogation. Productive debate over the various forces at work in collapsing the world into a “China and the West” formulation call attention to the legacies of Western colonial power, ethnocentric approaches to theory, post-Cold War geopolitics, and various combinations of these factors. My immediate concern is how an overly simplistic framework also serves to limit criticism of current regimes of political, economic, and cultural power—“even among confirmed deconstructionists and postmodernists.”²⁵ That is, the fetishization of “China and the West” has as much to do with present-day imperial projects as earlier ones. While past imperial legacies, ethnic prejudice, and cultural traditions all factor into the current, seemingly unstoppable habit of exploring only “China and the West,” it remains that such a fixation also dissuades Chinese and foreign scholars alike from focusing on differences *within* these two terms. Mitchell and Wang’s assessment of theory in China falls in line with this perspective, and in doing so forecloses on opportunities for oppositional critique.

An unquestioned view of China as a unified, uniquely developing nation-state engaged with and yet opposed to Western hegemony leads, as Wang Hui has carefully shown, to an intentionally misleading picture of China’s “progress.” He argues that discourses of globalization blend with the discourse of development and the defense of China in a unipolar world. He points to neoliberals after 1989, for example, who depict markets as not only free but operating freely in ways that challenge the forces of globalization from outside the system:

24. Rey Chow, “Can One Say No to China?” *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 147–51.

25. Dirlik, “China’s Critical Intelligentsia,” 137.

They went on to regard the market order as one that was spontaneous and self-regulating, thereby obscuring the meta-market forces on which the market order depended. As markets expanded, polarization between wealth and poverty, capital flight, social inequality, the environmental crisis, unemployment, corruption, and similar phenomena rapidly spread and the social need for the protection of basic fairness (that is, social benefits and insurance) became more acute by the day. This finally reached the point that neoliberalism was obliged to employ the theory of “transition” to maintain its myths of free markets and globalization.²⁶

What is happening with theory in China is often a reflection of the same process. Critique is assumed to be and promoted as genuine, spontaneous, and attentive to the concerns of various areas of theory—colonialism, globalization, and so on—while in fact the repressive forces that structure the debates are intentionally hidden so that conferences and publications can continue to be sold at home and abroad. Wang Hui, quoting Dirljik, points out that “where a situation is constructed in which ‘national struggle against global capital’ becomes the dominant discourse, the result is ‘not a socialist language but a dialect of capitalism. This is the language that dominates Chinese socialism today.’”²⁷ Literary and cultural critics, as well, are developing in China the discourses of capitalism, not of open, truly oppositional critique.

With postcolonialism as a case in point, Wang Hui argues that “in Chinese postmodernism, postcolonial theory is often synonymous with a discourse on nationalism, which reinforces the China/West paradigm. For example, there has not been a single Chinese postcolonial critique of Han centrism from the standpoint of peripheral culture.”²⁸ As I have suggested above, Wang Lixiong’s writings on Tibet may certainly be seen as colonial critique, if not an outright deployment of postcolonial theory. The point remains that while postcolonial theory is much discussed in China, it is done so almost entirely in ways that prop up both China’s opposition to the West and the government’s own narrative of unruffled national multiculturalism.

At one point in their report, Mitchell and Wang speculate on the future of change:

26. Wang Hui, *China’s New Order*, 120.

27. Wang Hui, *China’s New Order*, 192n40.

28. Wang Hui, *China’s New Order*, 170.

If capitalism is changing China, it may be the case that China is also changing capitalism, reversing (to give just one instance) the tendency of capitalism's drive toward mechanization and automation in favor of a renewed emphasis on manual production made possible by China's enormous labor pool. One must ask, therefore, what is happening to Western traditions of literary and cultural theory—and of critical thought more generally—as they encounter the overwhelming reality of China: the unrivalled depth and antiquity of its intellectual and cultural traditions; the sheer abundance of its human resources. (ET, 268)

This is a curious line of thought for two reasons. The first is the remarkably optimistic appeal to “China's enormous labor pool,” which ignores the widespread abuses of this disenfranchised “resource.”²⁹ Second, these comments beg and then bypass important questions of the actual character of change to be brought about through China's engagement with theory and Western institutions. Is the suggestion that theory, like capitalism, will be revitalized through the “renewed emphasis on the manual production” of Chinese critics, as opposed to the “mechanized” theories of a more exploitative Western tradition? Regardless of the precise implication in this report, the real issue at stake in theory mirrors the concerns of joint ventures throughout China—who or what will ensure that any “changes” precipitated through foreign exchange follow the approved path of development?

As Saskia Sassen explains, the economic dynamic by which local businesses “get more than they bargained for” when accepting global capital—in terms of restructured labor relations, the development of secondary and tertiary businesses, cultural hybridity, and so on—is closely monitored by policymakers concerned with the destabilization of structures of governance and accountability.³⁰ Edward Said, referring to a parallel phenomenon in criticism as “traveling theory,” should lead us to ask, if theory

29. See, for example, Anita Chan, *China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharp, 2001), and Azizur Rahman Khan and Carl Riskin, *Inequality and Poverty in China in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

30. See Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). In an essay based on a presentation I first made in Beijing, I bring Sassen's work into further dialogue with China's engagement with the “global humanities.” See “Globalization, Cultural Critique, and China,” *Social Semiotics* 10, no. 2 (2000): 211–20.

is changing China, how is China changing theory? This is, undoubtedly, an exciting question, typically premised on the expectation of mutual exchange of theoretical perspectives. Yet for party secretaries based in Chinese colleges, universities, and publishing houses, and for those scholars beholden to China's strict narratives of development, the notion of "changing China" is hardly a neutral concept. Similarly, China's leadership and business elite are clearly concerned with the consequences of China's inevitable influence on the globalization of critique. Supranational organizations of all types continue to be the targets of China's policies of keeping everyone on the same message. Whether through protests to the United Nations over the international activities of the Dalai Lama, demands to the International Olympic Committee regarding the proper designation for athletes from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macao, or even lawsuits filed to keep video games from featuring soccer players identified in (national) ways unacceptable to Beijing, the PRC—just like any other nation-state—keeps its own interests at heart when notions of "changing" global structures and institutions are in play.

Therefore, when Mitchell and Wang speak of theory encountering "the overwhelming reality of China," I have to wonder how *Critical Inquiry* itself (and "the very idea of exchange itself as an object of reflection and critique" [ET, 269]) will respond to the overwhelming reality of resistance to the free exercise and expression of critique. Will a "one journal–two systems" arrangement keep anyone openly critical of China's "off-limits" policies, for example, from engaging in the debates to be published in the Chinese versions of *Critical Inquiry* or *New Literary History*, both edited by Wang Ning?³¹ Indeed, if essays by Woesser, Wang Lixiong, or Wang Hui were to be published in the American versions of these journals, what would be said about the authors' falling under suspicion of contributing to the "foreign meddling in China's internal affairs" so often condemned by self-righteous commentators? Hardly an example of merely polite "cultural exchange," it serves no one if the critical force and intellectual rigor of existing critical inquiry in the West is diminished as scholars rush to explore new theoretical territory, no matter how promising the territory seems.³²

31. For example, though Wang Hui (like Wang Ning) teaches at Tsinghua University in Beijing, the essay of his discussed here has not been published in China (Theodore Hutters, introduction to Wang Hui, *China's New Order*, 6).

32. Haun Saussy's discussion of postmodern theory in China includes the assessment that "*reform under tightly controlled conditions* . . . could summarize not only the last twenty years of Chinese internal politics, but the ambitions for the future expressed by 'post-' studies," and should Taiwan be unified with mainland China under the current condition

Wang Ning's own record as an impresario of theory in China stands both to explain and frustrate attempts at oppositional theorizing and truly open debate. Like any successful entrepreneur, Wang attends to his work with his own interests at stake, but the result has been an atmosphere in which globally circulating theories of globalization, postcolonialism, postmodernism, and cultural analysis are marshaled into China with a careful eye to maintaining national frameworks while deflecting critique of domestic conditions. In his scholarly essays, Wang Ning has positioned himself as the representative of "the Chinese perspective" on topics including postmodernity, postcolonialism, decolonization, globalization, translation, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, Orientalism, comparative literature, and aesthetics—and this is not an exhaustive list. My concern is not that he himself does not raise issues that I would like to see raised, but that the subject-position he has crafted, as well as the framing of his arguments, illustrates much of the disabling aspects of theory in China that I have been discussing.

In one essay, for example, Wang Ning highlights the oppositional force of postmodernism with regard to dominant forms of power by explaining that "the phenomenon of postmodernism is closely related to the decolonizing efforts made by the Oriental and Third World people in their struggle against neo-colonialist penetration both in politics and culture."³³ He also insists that by addressing globalization in a "critical way," China can defend itself against the hegemonic forces of global economics and culture: "If we face the challenge in a critical way and make full use of the opportunity to develop our national culture in a broader international context, we will most probably highlight the Chinese national and cultural identity, and make it known to the international community."³⁴ Wang Ning is careful to warn against any negative consequences of countering globalism with localism by explaining (rather in a "Three Bears" style) that China should neither be like Japan (too strong), with its potential neo-fascist militarism, nor India

of intellectual freedom, any details of "the independence movement's narratives are not going to be debated, merely suppressed (along with their authors, no doubt) as contrary to public order." Haun Saussy, "Postmodernism in China," in *Cross-Cultural Readings of Chineseness: Narratives, Images, and Interpretations of the 1990s*, ed. Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2000), 157, my emphasis.

33. Wang Ning, "Chinese Postmodernity, Post-Coloniality, and Globalization," *Social Semiotics* 10, no. 2 (2000): 223. A modified version of this essay appeared earlier as "The Mapping of Chinese Postcoloniality," *boundary* 224, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 19–40. Subsequent references are to the *Social Semiotics* version.

34. Wang Ning, "Chinese Postmodernity," 229.

(too weak), where “the attempt of localization is often associated with its national struggle for decolonization, but due to its weak economic force, it could not necessarily threaten its neighboring countries as compared with those developed powers, although it is trying to now and then.”³⁵ Ultimately, Wang Ning’s approach to global exchange serves to preserve a national sense of “Chineseness,” rather than investigate how such an identity is itself challenged and fragmented both within China’s own borders and by China’s participation in the globalized structures that provoke such debates to begin with: “I think that in the face of current cultural globalization, our strategy should be first of all to conform to it without sacrificing our national cultural identity, and, then, to expand our cultural communication and academic dialogue with the international community.”³⁶

By the time of the 2004 *Critical Inquiry* conference, the line in the sand with regard to defending China’s “identity” is even more clearly drawn. While addressing globalization with an eye to its disastrous effects on non-Western countries sounds like a good idea, what is really going on with much theory in China is simply the move to install an already determined narrative of national identity as the preferred instrument of debate. In many cases, this is the narrative of beneficial neoliberal development, but it is often also the narrative of a unified national representative undisturbed by critical minority voices. Again, Dirlik’s remarks seem the best supplement to the point:

We need to recognize the ways in which [contemporary Chinese intellectuals] have been repeatedly abused for daring to be social critics, or just for being different. It is equally important not to let memories of political repression stand in the way of efforts to expand the realm of freedom in the future, when past experiences may in fact catapult Chinese intellectuals to the forefront of struggles for greater liberties. They, in turn, have to learn to speak in another language, not just the language of nations and states, but the language of democracy and justice that has a relevance beyond Chinese political and cultural boundaries.³⁷

35. Wang Ning, “Chinese Postmodernity,” 230.

36. Wang Ning, “Chinese Postmodernity,” 231.

37. Dirlik, “China’s Critical Intelligentsia,” 138.

Conclusion

Perhaps not surprisingly, echoes of the West's own imperial traditions and the dreams they foster tend to complicate even the most avowedly anti-imperial projects. Mitchell's own 1992 discussion of postcolonial culture and postimperialism offers an extremely insightful critique of the theoretical pitfalls that seem to reappear in *Critical Inquiry's* 2004 report. In the earlier essay, Mitchell engages the by then ongoing "crisis in the humanities" by suggesting that changes in the meaning of humanities scholarship ought not to be seen as part of a Kuhnian paradigm shift, ultimately suggestive of a culturalized and racialized worldview, nor as part of a "global mapping" or "postmodernist" trend that sees in the professional humanities a microcosm of a global episteme, but rather as a kind of decolonization and deimperialization process.³⁸ This "middle region" allows us to understand how the humanities are challenging the processes of empire that are fundamental to traditional Western notions of self, other, and the civilizing mission. Western civilization, Mitchell explains, has always required colonial expansion out into the world as a way of revitalizing a weakening imperial center. Mitchell quotes George Berkeley's "America or The Muse's Refuge: A Prophecy" on the future of the humanities in America:

The Muse, disgusted at an age and clime
Barren of every glorious theme,
In distant lands now waits a better time
Producing subjects worthy fame:

That is, "as Europe degenerates, the American colonies will thrive, developing a new culture and a new imperial destiny. Europe continues in its inexorable westward path, from Greece to Rome to Europe to England . . . to its final act in America."³⁹

I agree, but would add that for some traveling theorists in a globalized academy, the westward path seems to extend even farther across the Pacific Ocean to China, where adventurous critics faced with the scene of dead or dying theory at home can make "the discovery that theory, like international-style architecture, like capitalism itself, is alive and well in China" (ET, 267). Near the end of their report, Mitchell and Wang draw on a welcome sense of hope for the future of theory, yet develop this vision in terms that suggest, if not outright nostalgia for the good old days of post-

38. Mitchell, "Postcolonial Culture," 11, 12.

39. Mitchell, "Postcolonial Culture," 13.

modern theory, at least the dream of seeing those days reborn and ready for new critique in an energetic—though respectfully compliant—territory: “Far from being dead or dying, theory in Beijing seemed at once exuberantly youthful in its energy and maturely modest in its goal of not only facilitating the exchange of ideas but patiently treating the very idea of exchange itself as an object of reflection and critique” (ET, 270).

In the earlier critique, Mitchell also explains how the West is never where it thinks it is, that the empire always demands a displacement paradoxically indicating the colonial site as the space in which the imperial center is most fully, though fictitiously, realized. The crisis in the humanities, therefore, arises from Western theory seeing itself as being at the end of the line, since, “for some time . . . it has been evident that the Western empires have nowhere to go.”⁴⁰ Berkeley’s American-bound muse, of course, hopes to transfer, transplant, or rekindle past “empire and arts,” in new lands, since they have declined in their birthplace:

Not such as Europe breeds in her decay;
Such as she bred when fresh and young,
When heav’nly Flame did animate her Clay,
By future Poets shall be sung.

Several years into the future, theory in China appears as just such an opportunity for the rejuvenation of past glories in new soil:

Jameson’s presence reminded us, moreover, of how his thought has, over the last twenty years, taken root in Chinese intellectual life, offering a new life and new poetry to the seemingly defunct categories of Maoist Chinese modernity. As the leading spokesman for a Western Marxism widely reported as obsolete, Jameson’s thought not only survives in China but prevails in a situation where global mapping, the dialectical analysis of cultural and material transformations, and a willingness to think the totality of capitalism seem now more urgent and timely than ever. (ET, 268)

Mitchell’s earlier critique of empire’s subtle and stubborn transformations is a welcome skeptical commentary on the generalizations and hyperbole emerging from theory in China today, at least from the perspective of those unavoidably bearing the legacies of empire. What I have tried to explore here is the need to recognize that Chinese scholars and institu-

40. Mitchell, “Postcolonial Culture,” 14.

tions may share some of these legacies, and bear distinctive ones as well, and that new transnational critical debate should not turn away from such networks of control. When those in power are threatened, good criticism should illuminate how fear and defensive policymaking threaten open civil discourse: "The common thread that runs through recent right-wing jeremiads on the 'decline of American culture' is precisely that of the fall of empires and the emergence of new, threatening centers of cultural power. When the neoconservative National Association of Scholars reacts to the emergence of ethnic and women's studies by declaring that 'the barbarians are in our midst,' we recognize the . . . rhetoric of an empire in decline."⁴¹ Similarly, when the Chinese government charges that scholars who engage certain topics or critical perspectives are part of "international anti-China forces" intent on "splitting the motherland,"⁴² we ought to recognize the rhetoric, and behind it the political and institutional force, of an empire reacting to suppressed voices in cultural dialogue.

I sincerely appreciate, having spent significant portions of my professional life in China, the very real dangers faced by scholars who step out of line, regardless of how far and fast the lines have changed. The statement and gesture, however, that *Critical Inquiry* has made in its 2004 report and in the planned development of a Chinese edition of that journal beg questions of intellectual freedom and the critic's responsibility that simply must be (and, in other circles, are being) considered with conscientious oppositional energy. Supranational theory in China is undeniably valuable, necessary, and, in fact, a reality. My hope is that, in addition to celebrating theory as "energetically alive and going about its business" in China (ET, 267), we continue to engage the critical questions that those in power "going about *their* business" will always attempt to silence: "The neoconservative attack on contemporary criticism may well be a blessing in disguise for those who hope for an alliance between postcolonial culture and postimperial criticism. For one thing, it should produce some solidarity among academic humanists by providing a clear sense of the common threat to standards of literary excellence and scholarly responsibility."⁴³

41. Mitchell, "Postcolonial Culture," 17.

42. Doje Cedain, "The Dalai's Disregard for Precedence," *China's Tibet* 3 (1996): 5.

43. Mitchell, "Postcolonial Culture," 18.

An Editorial Note

Paul A. Bové

Professor Wang Shouren kindly hosted the editorial masthead of this journal at the University of Nanjing. The essay that follows provides both an excellent example of the hospitable opportunities for discussion Chinese intellectuals now provide and a clear statement of China's position, a statement that we carry to our readers in the same spirit which brought it to us.