

20070617 Shanghai Cultural Studies Conference

Closing plenary roundtable: Closing plenary roundtable on Conditions of knowledge: Cultural Studies Movements and Institutions

Moderator: Meaghan Morris (Lingnan University)

Panelists:

- Cho Haejoang (Yonsei University)
- Melani Budianta (University of Indonesia)
- Firdous Azim (University of Dhaka)
- Shunya Yoshimi (University of Tokyo)
- **Josephine Ho (Central University, Taiwan)**
- Dai Jin-Hua (Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing)

This has been an amazing conference with too many panels to choose from and too little time for discussion, or digestion, or even socializing, not to mention touring. Now that we are at the end of the conference, I would like to take this opportunity to share some of my thoughts.

I think by now it is common knowledge that globalization is prompting dramatic changes in the conditions of knowledge production; and this is most acutely felt in Asian nations that aspire to assert a presence in various aspects of this global competition. After all, even if the winds of economic boom happen to be not blowing in the direction of such a nation at the moment, it could, with outstanding achievements on the academic front, still hope to stay in the game by acting as the brains of production. And if the gods of economic boom happen to be smiling upon one such nation, then it should all the more demonstrate excellence in the academic or cultural realm in order to present itself as worthy of the blessing. Thus emerged the heated race over university ranking, and likewise the demands of accountability and quantified productivity under which all of us are toiling.

With these new pressures in sight, I would like to focus on two fall-outs of this development that pose problems for cultural studies:

First of all, third-world conditions of knowledge production have often been described as copying the west or providing only rote applications for western theories. After all, to write academically means to think through or work within current paradigms of thought, which usually consist of a select few great masters, from Foucault to Fanon, be they originally from the west or trained and popularized by the west, and a series of writings/interpretations/discussions of their thought. However, the imagined domination by western thought and paradigms may not be all that smooth. For it is also a fact that when third-world knowledge productions are done within their own socio-cultural contexts and written in their own indigenous languages, with no ultimate authority to arbitrate the appropriations unless some local scholar happens to be a direct student of the great master; all kinds of deliberate or unwitting appropriations or misappropriations may be produced, often resulting in quite interesting applications and reconfigurations of theory that may work quite well for a given local cause but in fact extend well beyond the original confines of the

theories. The specificities of the local contexts and the specific configuration of local academia often ensure that such “deviations” can exist without much contestation.

But now, under globalization and the ensuing corporatization of universities, academic publications are countable only when they are published in professionally indexed, such as SSCI or A&HCI, international journals which usually means journals published in the English language, *InterAsia Cultural Studies* included. (University officials have a rather euphemistic way to put it: we want you “to test your research results in an international context.”) Consequently, in their efforts to be read and discussed outside the national context, many third-world knowledge products will have to suffer the awkward footnoting or over-explanation that seem to plague such papers when presented in an English context. I think most of us here have had that kind of experience to a more or less extent, when we are compelled to be apologetic about the seeming idiosyncracies of our writing and the inconvenient uniqueness of our own cultural context. Worse, when papers are rendered in English, they lend themselves easily to rigid scrutinies by mostly reviewers from the west who abide by the paradigm and who may be familiar with agenda situated within the paradigmatic context of the original theory but have limited or little patience or understanding of other contexts and oftentimes makes little effort to reflect upon the serious constraint levied by the paradigm against such local appropriations.

In other words, by forcing local knowledge products to transform into English and compete in the international circle, thus subjecting them to scrutinization by western paradigms, globalization and recent changes in knowledge production may be helping to discourage or discredit possible local outgrowths or reconfigurations of useful theory. This is one aspect that should be kept in mind as we gather at such occasions of international exchange, be it journal publication or conferencing.

The stress in international publication is coupled with a second challenge to cultural studies. In the past 10 years, rapid and massive expansions in higher education, taken as an important index of national strength, have shifted the nature of higher education in many parts of Asia. As enrollment has increased several folds in a very short period of time and without comparable growth in manpower and resources at the universities, great pressure is exerted on the structure, the curriculum, and the daily operations of the university. A corporatist-minded spirit now permeates the administration, shifting the university’s orientation from pedagogy and cultivation to operation and management. In other words, concerns of input/output now dominate institutions of higher education not only in relation to publication but also in course offerings and future employment for students. Among the ominous signs is the rise of the so-called “core curriculum” in many Asian universities amidst proclamations of multiculturalism proposed by Asian liberal democracies in order to validate their nation-state status and legitimacy. For years, the cultural studies project has been gradually asserting itself in the institutional set-up of universities, to the degree that institutionalization itself has become an important topic for consideration in the field of cultural studies, prompting special conferences or journal issues, even the creation of new titles for disciplines or new degree-conferring programs. Nested in various disciplines and departments as part of the professional, albeit interdisciplinary, training, cultural studies has enjoyed some room for development. Yet with the emergence of the core curriculum, departments are required to reduce their professional course offerings so as to make room for core courses. That means for the faculty, fewer choices in course offering and larger

courses in teaching, and for the students, cultural studies courses—as marginal and interdisciplinary, in other words, not core and vaguely practical—will very likely end up being the first courses to be sacrificed in the regimentation of the curriculum.

In this grand scale transformation, a general shift in higher education is taking place: research is increasingly defined as something that only professors and Ph.D. students are qualified to conduct; consequently, college education is increasingly Taylorized and devalued as nothing more than job-training, carried out through large classes and an increasingly uniform process of production. As employment has come to dominate conceptions of disciplinary boundaries and education evaluations, the critical orientation of cultural studies is increasingly challenged not only in its practical use but also in regard to pragmatic employments prospects. That, also adds to the difficulties in promoting cultural studies in the institution.

Be it on the professional fronts of publishing or teaching, cultural studies is facing formidable changes in the evolving context of higher education. The education sessions at this conference have already embarked upon brainstorming for possible solutions, and I am sure these questions will continue to occupy us for years to come. Thank you.