
The Phenomenon of China

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Note: This paper is based on an anthropological study of media/China; and extensive ethnographic examples and references are not included in this presentation.

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The Iraqi war, which is still going on and whose full significance is yet to be known, poses a double question: it poses a political question about our future: What should be the new international order of political things that can make the world secure and safe? This is clearly an urgent question that demands our immediate attention. However, on the other hand, one would have probably also noticed that the battle of Baghdad, the actual bombing and killing, the violence and blood, was made or turned into a show, a performance, an entertainment for those back home, comfortably seated in front of their large television screens.

This is a war fully staged on television. It was meant to be seen, that is, by everyone and anyone who would like to watch. Television crews were brought into the tanks of American soldiers, in order to report from the very frontline of the battlefield, almost every few minutes, for the sake of running the 24-hour news programs on CNN or some other satellite television networks. What have we seen? We are the witness of the power of high-tech military strategies in the making of a new kind of war: every soldier was equipped with not only guns but also—perhaps more important—cameras, computers, cellular phones, and everything possible and imaginable for *them* to see, to communicate, and to evaluate the situation right on the spot, which was also always within the sight of the White House. Through the video cameras of the war, one could not have misunderstood the function of technology—the information technology in particular.

In front of our very eyes, what is happening is precisely such a comic tragedy of high technology. Courage and determination alone will no longer affect the result of a battle much; it is the calculation and possibilities of technological advancement that hold the key to victory. The question of technology, especially informational technology, which has been reshaping our relations to the world, is what I hope to address in this paper. Instead of asking questions about the place of China *in* the world, I hope to ask questions about the invasion of informational technology into the People's Republic of China, which is now connected through internet and satellite television to the world. My contention is that what is global is not only the shrinkage of the globe and the convenience of traveling these days; instead, what has become common to us is the traveling images, such as those through satellite television networks or cyber space. This is where China is; this is also where the world is.

The invasion of informational technology has produced a new geography for everyone of us, in which the location of China cannot simply be defined in geopolitical terms, just as what we have seen in the Iraqi war, the physical distance in space could also be measured in virtual terms. It is this new geography, the invasion of informational technology into daily life, and the explosion of imagery representations across national or regional borders that need to be examined, if we hope to develop a new approach to the problem of social reality. The recent history of the People's Republic is a most interesting and convenient entrance into such an inquiry.

The Economy of Surface

At the present moment, in trying to capture our own experiences in a shifting world of economy and society, the idea of “society” or the social in general, which has been central to our analysis, may need some scrutiny. From *Capital* to *The Order of Things*, that is, from “the mode of production” to “the archaeology of knowledge,” or from *Science of Culture* to *The Interpretation of Cultures*, that is, from the Radcliff-Brownian understanding of “social structure” to Clifford Geertz’s idea of “deep fight” or “thick description,” there have existed diehard assumptions about the social world conceived as a depth, a deep structure, hidden and beyond our daily sight. In different traditions of cultural analysis, there is often this assumption about the social world as organized according to a structural depth or a deep structure beyond our immediate experiences in everyday life. Most commonly, it is often defined as a hierarchical arrangement of institutions and organizations, economic and/or political, within which people are united and divided, in conjuncture with a matrix of norms and values supported by and supporting these institutions and organizations. And this complexity of the social world is not directly accessible by everyday experiences. The social world thus conceived seems to possess a depth in both epistemological and ontological senses. Therefore one would often conceive of whatever on the surface of the social world as the appearance of a deep structural cleavage or an archaeological movement.

The surface of society, like that of the sea, may, the anthropologist admits, be in perpetual motion, but its depths, like the depths of the ocean, remain almost unmoved. Only by plunging daily into those depths can we come in contact with our fellow-men; only—in the particular case of language—by forgoing the advantages of this or that special scientific symbol system, by drinking of the same unpurified stream, can we share in the life of the community. If the clouds of accumulated verbal tradition burst above us in the open—in the effort to communicate, in the attempt at interpretation—few have, as yet, evolved even the rudiments of defence. (Odgen and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 1923, 25)

The metaphor, which to a large extent still occupies the habitat of our intellectual tradition, is “deep ocean”: to understand the social world is to dive into it, in order to discover the rules and norms, rather stable and constant, of an *underlying* universe. “I remember a night near Bahia, when I was enveloped in a firework display of phosphorescent fireflies; their pale lights glowed, went out, shone again, all without piercing the night with any true illumination. So it is with events; beyond their glow, darkness prevails” (Braudel,

On History, 1980, 10–11). Both the prevailing darkness or the unmoved ocean, as metaphors, are the counter-images of our time—the time of transnational capital and digital capitalism, which has created an economy of surface. What was implied by the depths of the ocean or the darkness of the night is that something, which cannot be directly experienced, must lie beneath the senses of our empirical faculties. According to this logic, what is moving fast, that is, traveling on the surface of the social world, such as jumping waves or glowing fireflies, should be considered superficial and meaningless.

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There is a danger in the employment of such metaphors today, because they would make us miss some crucial aspects of change in the contemporary world, introduced and supported by a new technological development especially in the field of mass communication. There is no doubt that one's intellectual curiosity should not stop short of deep reflection on our world; that is, intellectuals should not all become short waves or fireflies; however, what is also important to note is that there emerged a new way of being in the social world, that is, to inhabit the surface of it. This new way of surviving on the surface of the social world, which is characteristic of *our* experiences of everyday life at the present moment in history, which may be called, properly or not, *the phenomenon of surface*.

This phenomenon, placed in contrast to the image of the unmoved ocean or prevailing darkness, registers a moment of difference in a long historical transformation: it has changed our relations to others; it has affected the way in which we are able to relate ourselves to others; it has altered our relationships to the past and the future; it has modified our senses of reality; in short, it has made an impact on our being in the world. Even from today's prospect, while tomorrow is not yet clear enough to our vision, it is quite certain that, in terms of making senses to ourselves and others, there is a new possibility for a different economy of discourse or a different discursive formation, that is, *the economy of the surface*. It is part of the real economy in operation, corporate and transnational in investment and capital accumulation, supporting and is supported by the existing world market, into which the People's Republic of China is drawn. It also suggests that the law or the logic of such an phenomenon, best exemplified in the cyber space of the netext, follows exactly the economic legal constitution: exchange in the form of transaction.

The habitat of this economy is “there and now,” rather than “here and now” or “there and then.” In this economy, “there” or “out there” understood as a real spatial distance, just as what anthropologists used to say about other people or cultures when they set off to do field research in far-away places, is always constituted in a moment of now-ness for oneself being in time. That is, the constitution of the *now* moment of oneself is inevitably connected to other such now-ness in other places, which can be reached and are always available on line. The other is always there for oneself due to the slippery surface produced by the mass communicational means, which allows the constant contact with others by ourselves in the moment of *now*. From such a perspective, one can see that the idea of area studies has become problematic, because the physical distance, which was essential to the definition of regional geographies, is virtually reduced to the moment of *now*, to be part of a new economy based on “now” and “there.”

The Outline of a Social Surface

Imagine that one were to sketch a facial outline of the People's Republic of China, hoping to draw the features of a new surface of this vast continent of social significance, at the present moment of a historical shift, it would be difficult to miss several striking features of this lively and yet somewhat uneasy countenance.

If bearing in mind of its history of revolution and socialist past, one would immediately notice that, on the face of the People's Republic, as if a cosmetic surgery just took place, because the surface of its social world has become a lot more smooth or slippery, which allows easier accesses and movements. From a certain angle of observation, the impression is that intellectuals and migrant workers and many others travel from one place to another as if they were skating on a huge piece of ice, without much cultural hurdles or social barriers which had been the main difficulty for moving around during the years of the Maoist revolution. Nevertheless, social cleavages and ditches, both in metaphoric and literal terms, such as the increasing gaps between the poor and the rich shown in the official statistical yearbooks, continue to deepen and widen; whereas, on the other hand, there is this unmistakable sentiment, shared by many, that conventional boundaries of understanding and meaning, with which those social cleavages and ditches were made sense to life, are dissolving or melting.

This new face, or social surface, is made of imagery representations, especially electronic or photographic images, that came in, or were given birth by the digital transformation of our everyday experiences, to shape a set of different possibilities in our facial expressions and social feelings. From time to time, when looking at such a face, or the new social surface, one would almost feel *as if*, regardless the vista of prospect of any subject position, that is, regardless the view of either those trapped in poverty or of those still climbing up the mountain of wealth, the panorama of plural vision were created for every pair of eyes. It made people feel *as if* cultural boundaries and social hierarchies could be transgressed or overcome by the pure movement in society. It felt like *as if* everyone could travel in a similar way. This feeling may be false; it may well be an illusion. Nevertheless, maintained and reinforced by the new means of communication, this feeling seems to be so real. It is this unreal reality to which we must pay our attention, that is, to develop a theoretical understanding of ourselves/Ourselves standing on the shifting grounds of our own world. In every locale of our globe, there are traces of an emerging system of relations, both social and cultural, both economic and political, whose existence depends on the employment of imagery presentations and representations. In other words, the structural transformation of our very experiences, greatly affected by the innovations and revolutions in the means of mass communication, is an urgent task for analysis.

For example, the photographic language, popular in China today, seems to have provided a different possibility for "ordinary people" to speak about the world of life and truth, without necessarily following the official footsteps of discursive practices. A crucial characteristic of this language, which triggers an alternative employment of the eyes, does not require any intensive or extensive learning in order to *read*. It is immediate, often unmediated by words, and intimate in its reception. What is conveyed or captured by the

camera could almost be understood instantaneously with little or without linguistic mediation, different from such as deciphering the syntactical sequence of a literary text. This possibility of seeing in pictorial forms, such as in an image, in a television soap, in an urban advertisement symbol, which is by no means new to the world or to the Chinese history, has become an actual possibility for a different mode of speaking. Given the political context of the People's Republic, in a sense, one may say, the imagery language is the language of the masses, whose subjectivity can only be represented by the images of everyday life, and their expressions of the feelings about life and the world, or life in the world, often cannot be articulated in words. The very means of telecommunication, with which we are able to be what we are today, therefore obtains a liberating function regarding the recent history of the People's Republic.

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Another feature of this new social surface, or the face of the People's Republic, is a set of recent wrinkles, effected by the introduction of the innovative telecommunicational means, indicating the shortening of the distance between the oral and the written communication, such as in the emergence of the internetextual space. When writing or reading in the cyber space, it felt as if the boundary between the written and the spoken were blurred; in particular, it felt as if literary expressions were trying to imitate the momentum of speech acts, to copy the liveliness of oral communication, to dress up in a rhetorical gesture characteristic of the face-to-face situation. "The technologization of the word," as Walter J. Ong once called it, has created a new platform for communication, connecting everyone, however distant and remote, through such as chat rooms on the internet, allowing people tell their secrets and fantasies intimately to strangers. This change in the mode of our being with others began to affect the life of the text. One should be patient to see what will be the long-term effect of this shift in the linguistic practice of a long textual tradition. However initial, one should be able to argue that what is happening, besides the rising height of the urban space in the vast continent of a late socialist/modern development, suggests an renovation in the relationship of the author to the reader and vice versa.

The contour of this argument could perhaps be seen more clearly in the historical mirror. If we turn to look at the significance of speaking in the years of the Maoist revolution, some fifty years ago, when the masses of the people were to be mobilized by the various kinds of government campaigns in which a specific kind of socialist oratory was developed. In the early moment of an innovative revolutionary practice, how to speak was very important. For example, in the movement of "speaking bitterness," which achieved a great success in the mobilization of the masses for the Maoist government, peasants had to learn, or rather taught by the communist cadres, how to pour out their grievance against the remains of the Old Society, the one that the Maoist revolution meant to destroy. How to speak and what vocabularies should be used, were two chief concerns of the Party during the years of a radical revolution. What to say and how to say it became an essential means of managing the society. Later on, there was an even more tight control over the textual production of meaning. This control of the text and meaning, seen as an essential part of the Party ideological dominance, was produced in the exact parallel to the political oratory invented by the Party and for the masses. In both domains of linguistic practices, there was

a clear imprint of the voice of the State/Party authority, that provided a discursive foundation for revolution and society. It is against this historical background that the celebration of the internetextual space may be understood: it created a difference—in the sense of generating an actual rather than a potential possibility for a different mode of authoring and reading. The possibilities of speaking, that is, the birth of ordinary people as an author, on a much smoother social surface, would invoke or have invoked a renovated feeling for oneself being with others in the world.

The Birth of a “People’s Public”

What is at issue, if cast from a sociological projection, is the transformation of everyday experiences by the imagery representations; and this, as I argue, must be taken up by us as a problematic of our being in the world today. It is essentially a question about how we/We are made, in and through this new possibility of being with ourselves and others, into anOther existence. It is not the technological change itself, nor is it the social organizations of it that should be our focus; instead, what needs to be questioned is the problem of contemporary existence—the way in which we are able to be what we are in making sense to ourselves and others in the world.

What was born in this sociotechnological transformation *and* out of a topographic movement of a late socialist/modern development, is a *People’s Public*. In contrast to the *People’s Republic*, once a most significant signifier for a political imagination that had inspired people to live and/or die for, not too long time ago, the prefix “re” should be dropped today. The sociological task is to show how such a shift in the connotation of the utterance of “People’s Republic” as both a social space and a political order of things has taken place; *and* to announce the arrival of a *People’s Public*, given birth by a history of conjuncture of revolution and socialism, of socialism and reform, of reform and market, of market and capitalism. “People’s Republic,” as a nickname or as a symbolic expression for an older political order of things, signified not the identity of the people but the will of the Communist Party; it could have meant the Nation, the Liberation, the Government, or the Party itself, except for a *real* people’s republic in the sense that we normally understand in the tradition of Western democracy. During the radical years of the Maoist revolution (1950s–1970s), the adjective “People,” if taken away from the phrase “the People’s Republic,” chiefly designated the meaning of “masses” as a collective identity for the totality of all the working-class people. The masses, which could be represented, in its concreteness and entirety, truly and only by the Party, were not able to speak any other language than that of the Party.

Whereas, *the People’s Public* designates a different social space, without an identifiable political authority that dominates such a space in the way that the Maoist Government used to do in controlling the social life of the *People’s Republic*. In the territory of the *People’s Public*, a plural author, often under the name of “ordinary people,” was given birth. “People” or “Ordinary People” as a signifier for the authorship in this emergent space of discourse is neither divided by the class origins nor defined by the official categories of the State; and they came to communicate, apart from such communications physically possible in internet cafés, as partial authors and/or mutual readers. The space within which

this new authorship became possible, within a particular sociopolitical context of revolution and reform, is what may be called a *People's Public*.

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Authorship here is a key notion by which one may invoke both a different image of social life and a different analytical possibility at once. In the basement of my thinking, an assumption is that a new relationship of ordering and/or authoring, not simply at the institutional or (infra)structural level of reform, is emerging; and the historical arrival of this *People's Public*, supported by the technological innovations of our time, is creating conditions of possibilities for reconstituting the relationship of speaking to listening or writing to reading and vice versa. If we further consider that the conditions of possibilities for speaking are intrinsically linked to the way in which our relationship to the world is made possible, our subject positions thus formed, or our subjectivity hence reformed and remade, we must understand that this re-ordering means a refurbishment of the relationship of society to the State. The question thus postulated is not so much about what discourses have been generated in such a space; instead, what must be seriously thought is the emergence of this new possibility for speaking, that which has produced a new sensibility for our being in the world. As I have suggested earlier, the thesis of the retreat of the State is unattainable and needs to be carefully thought when putting it forward. The State is still running around, full of energy, with its jaw widely opened, threatening to close down all the internet cafés and to wipe out all the perilous web-pages and so on. It is true that the State has remained powerful and penetrating in censorship and controlling; nevertheless, the birth of a *People's Public* indicates a topographic change—a shift in the grounding on which both the State and its subjects stand.

The space between the reader and the author, which is precisely the space in which authority is construed, has too often been forgotten, not only by the traditional sort of social science scholars who tend to consider cultural meaning as simply a reflection of actual social cleavages, determined by and derived from the structural (re)arrangements of society, without paying enough attention to the medium of cultural transmission through which economic or political re-structuring is happening; but also, from time to time, by scholars in anthropology or cultural studies in general, who incline to think of the authorship as a text, that can always be *read* in a-historical or a-cultural vacuum. This is precisely where we should look into: the space intersected between economy and culture where a new type of author was born.

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What is happening in the vast continent of the People's Republic is a topographic change, generated by a geological movement of history and culture, of politics and society, of tradition and revolution, of socialism and reform, of market and transnational capital and capitalism—in short, of the inertia of a *longue durée* of things that have gone far beyond our horizons of ethnographic observation. What one is able to see, if one zooms his sociological lens properly, is the formation of a different social surface, almost like a face bearing the expressions of a harsh life for many decades. What is most urgently needed is *not* the study of the reorganization of social institutions, *nor* of the further subalternization of the already

marginalized groups, *nor* of the strategies of new modes of dominance and control, *nor* of the emergence of “civil society” (i.e., *minjian shehui*); instead, there should be a study of the emergence of a new topographic shape that is transforming our experiences in everyday life.

The image of “a thousand plateaus,” borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari, is a good metaphor for us. “A thousand plateaus” is an image of a surface, continuous and connected through endless possibilities of routes and roads, where there are no starting or ending points in terms of movements. If such a metaphor is taken, social life envisioned as such will no longer be seen as a vertical structure of hierarchical relations but as a mountainous landscape with a surface, a *terra firma* of connections and ruptures, bumps and dents, rocks and rivers, trees and animals. Life and discourses inhabit this surface, and movement or the sole possibility of it contains the secrets of such life and discourses. Everyone or everything moves and travels, from one plateau to another, from one hill to another, from one plain to another, from one valley to another, often without being able to tell where one was or how one felt, because the traveler’s attention was often entirely caught by the sceneries in these different places of visions and views. What astonishes us is not where one has been but the speed of one’s movement, not the purpose of his travel but the manner in which such traveling is made possible. Such is what I believe an important topic: to capture a glimpse of our way of being in the world today, that is, in the contemporary world, by understanding the feeling of being on a surface, a slippery surface.

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The birth of the People’s Public, with its historical significance and political heritage, signifies a different relationship of society to the State; it also indicates the need, if seen from the official point of view, for a different mode of governance. Notions such as “public sphere” or “civil society,” with close conceptual consanguinity to the Hegelian and the Habermasian tradition of German philosophy, assume the centrality of the State as the gravity of its conceptual division of labor. There is no doubt that the State of the People’s Republic is a real political and economic power: Walls will be abolished, people will be forced to migrate, products will be forbidden to sell, if the official power sneezes, prohibits, and orders. It is true that this sweeping force of the State power is still there, functioning and operating in the vast continent of the People’s Republic, even today; nevertheless, what is new, of a recent memory, is the change in the signifying practices of everyday life. It is not that the official storm will never come in my way any more; instead, there emerged a plural space of possible interpretations for what is happening. That is, the space for speaking about the experiences in daily life has become more “democratic,” less constrained by the dominance of the voice of the People’s Republic standing solely for the Party.

It will be an error, of course, to assume that there is no longer any possibility for the situation to be reversed, no longer any possibility for the State to resume its monologue of the official language, to reconquer the strategic locations of the discursive space. It is true that, in the vast continent of the People’s Republic, the State power has continued to be dominant and scary, especially in a certain number of social spheres of political life. However, what must be noted is the fact that the State has also become *plural*, like a phantom, such as in the minds of ordinary people, not just due to the greater social and economic stratification but *due* to the emergence of a plural space of signification, which

allows meaning to be construed according to different frameworks of reference. This plurality lies not simply in what *is* happening but also in the way in which one is able to relate oneself to the official order of things circumscribed by the State. The State is *within*, rather than outside, such a process of transformation. To call it a topographic change—in contrast to either historical or political change that we are familiar with—means to direct our attention to the very process in which the form of power, the way of being, the mode of existence, and the mentality of governance are all affected by this (re)ordering, both familiar and strange.

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