What Is "China"?

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Summary

This article provides *a reflection* in the sense of deflecting or diverting the conventional thought on "China" to a different conceptualization, which would, hopefully, help us reorganize the notional field within which the People's Republic of China is placed or—rather—misplaced. My argument is that "China" is more than what it is *for itself* and/or *in itself*; it is a symptomatic moment of the present age in globalization. I will start with a reflection on the recent studies on "the urban question" in the People's Republic; then provide a treatment of the increasing difficulties in continuing the older language of the nationalistic identity-making of collectivity in the age of transnational capital and digital capitalism; and finally offers an analysis of *the Chinese internetwork,* read as inter-network or even "enter-network", which symptomizes the contemporary world in some decisive aspects of its crucial transformations.

Key words: China, globalization, subjectivity, internetwork

1. The Problem of Method

When sociology returned to the scene of Chinese social sciences in the 1980s, it claimed to have made an astonishing discovery—with all its delight and seriousness—that there was an unprecedented growth of towns and cities. The consequence of this, quite obviously, is the coming of an unprecedented explosion of "urban studies", however such a notion is understood or misunderstood. Nevertheless, one must be aware of the fact that the attention to the problem of Chinese cities is not new. Several major studies in the 1970s have already undertaken the path in trying to figure out the significance of urbanization in that unique socialist/modern development; and the attempt was made alongside a renewed interest in the cultural meaning of Chinese cities. The discovery would have been somewhat belittled if one were not too eager to celebrate the recent expansion of sociological knowledge, for what defines an intellectual project is not simply its empirical validity but, more important, its conceptualization. Is there anything new in this new wave of urban studies, sociological or not, in today's China? How far has one moved away from "the urban question" as once raised by Manuel Castells (1977)? Is it not an empirical fact that the city life in China, both historically and culturally, makes an interesting subject of study that goes a long way back to the days of Marco Polo when he traveled in the empire? "'Quinsai ... is the greatest city which may be found in the world,' says Marco Polo, 'where so many pleasures may be found that one fancies himself to be in Paradise.'"[1]

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[1] Quinsai, which is Hangzhou (or Hangchow), came from the Chinese term *Hsing-tsai,* meaning "temporary residence (of the Emperor)". In his work, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion* (1962), Jacques Gernet made frequent references to the Book of Marco Polo who, staying in Hangzhou for a considerable length of time during the years between 1276-1292, reiterated the image that urban life, with its amazing scale and intensity, was a significant feature of Chinese civilization. Gernet's references to Marco Polo are spread throughout the whole book. For example, see pp.28-29 on city administration; p.31 on population and the size of

Our sociologists today, having indulged in the urban pleasures, have not yet figured out what is new in a new round of urban studies. Plainly, what is new is not simply the scale of its development; it is *the form,* both historically and culturally, by and with which such a fast growth of urbanity produces and yet is produced. What needs to be done, therefore, is to sort out how such pleasures came to constitute ourselves as what we are—our being in the contemporary world.

Our inquiry, whether sociological or historical, should not be simply about the various types of urban transformation actually taking place in a vast social continent, nor with the divergent forms of expressions of the best or the worst extremes of human potentials in the development of large metropolises, nor with the political effort made by the state to control and manage a growing urban population; instead, a necessary step must be taken is to make an inquiry into "China" or "urban China" as a problematic—not simply as an empirical entity but as an object of critique, as an object of intellectual contemplation, that is, as an object of thought, so as to reflect on the condition of life in the contemporary world as a whole.

Let us first take a brief detour in reviewing the conceptual development of sociological studies in China as a point of departure to situate our below analysis, and then take a quick step in revisiting "the urban question" so as to make clear the genealogical tradition of sociological thought from which our contemplation is derived.

As I argued elsewhere, there was a development of sociological thought in China that prioritized the significance of village life and essentialized it as the nature of Chinese society (Liu 2002). Such an enterprise of conceptual scheme can be traced through the emergence of sociological thought in the early decades of twentieth-century China, especially via the missionary sociology, such as shown in the works of Arthur Smith, de Groot, and perhaps also Granet. It went through the phase of social surveys, such as those carried out by John S. Burgess, Sidney D. Gamble, and John L. Buck; and then arrived at, after a few decades, John King Fairbank's synthesis: "To understand China today, one basic approach is that of anthropology, which *looks at the village and family environment* from which modern China has just begun to emerge" (Fairbank 1993, 17; emphasis added). Or, as a native representative of this mode of sociological knowledge stated earlier: "Chinese society is fundamentally rural. I say that it is fundamentally rural because its foundation is rural.... We often say that country people are figuratively as well as literally 'soiled' *(tuqi).* Although this label may seem disrespectful, the character meaning 'soil' *(tu)* is appropriately used here. Country people cannot do without the soil because their very livelihood is based upon it"(Fei 1992, 37). Such an opinion would have appeared astonishing to Marco Polo and many others; however, it does illustrate the association created in a specific historical context: the essentialization of Chinese society as rural.

If one were to place Fei's work, with its emblematic title—*From the Soil,* against the image of Marco Polo, one would feel compelled to raise the question about why and how such a change in the perception of Chinese society took place, despite of their differences in focus and perspective. What was the sociological question for Fairbank or Fei? And how was it created in the context of a different power relationship in the twentieth century? Could what we have witnessed today in China be simply seen as another round of reincarnation of the spirit of Marco Polo? Or does it mean something

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the city; p.39 on transportation; pp.40-41 on luxurious carriages on the streets; pp.41-42 on the quality of the pavement and the drainage system; pp.47-49 on markets; pp.49-51 on amenities of urban life; pp.53-54 on the parties of pleasure on the boats.

different for us—not simply as subjects of the (Chinese) state but as a sign for the state of (subjective) being in the contemporary world? This is the reason that we need to walk through an old lane of thought.

"The urban question," as Manuel Castells (1977) raised and tried to answer, is not simply a question about *actual* social formations and movements in urban settings or across urban/rural boundaries; rather, it is an inquiry of theoretical specificity of the objective of urban sociology. It is not about what "urban" sociologists do but about the conceptual enterprise of sociological studies on the subject. His quotation from Max Weber in the beginning of an essay shows well his intellectual agenda. "It is not the 'actual' interconnections of 'things' but the *conceptual* interconnections of *problems* which define the scope of various sciences" (Weber 1949, 68). It seems necessary for us to make clear: What are the conceptual interconnections of the problems when we wish to explore the question of (urban) China?

Castells's argument is couched in the Althusserian reading of Marx,[2] of which a distinction is drawn between a theoretical and a real object. This distinction comes from Althusser's conception of the "materialist" epistemology in opposition to the empiricist one. Put aside his dubious adoption of the term "materialist", the basic claim of Althusser is to deny any validity of the assertion that theoretical concepts (or objects) are produced as a result of direct abstraction from real experiences. Regarding Marx, Althusser argues that "the mode of production" does not appear in any immediate experience; nor does it appear in any form of knowledge claiming to be part of the real object. Marx's revolution, according to Althusser,[3] is his power to make an epistemological break, that is, to break down the ideological bridge between knowledge and empirical facts, which are what Althusser called "real objects". As in the case of most structuralist thinkers, Althusser is not interested in how a person could have made such an epistemological break. Instead, he is concerned with how Marx's theory acts—in the very sense of the word—upon reality.

The real object—in a brutally generalized and simple manner—can be said to refer to some aspect of reality, which is always wrapped in certain preconceptions that are usually "ideological". Althusser makes a rigorous distinction between science (or theory, i.e., Marx's theory) and ideology, and maintains that all action, including socialist revolution, is carried out within the province of ideology. This is an interesting intervention, which remains useful for our questioning. According to Althusser, it is ideology that gives the human subject imaginary, provisional coherence to become a practical social agent. Therefore, ideology is not simply a false consciousness defined in terms that the subject misrecognizes the world. The misrecognition in question is a self-misrecognition, which is an effect of the imaginary dimension of human life. Here the introduction of the notion of the imaginary, which came to be quite popular later on, is important. What is the relationship of the two, and how do they come together? As Terry Eagleton explains:

Imaginary here means not 'unreal' but 'pertaining to an image': the allusion is to Jacques Lacan's essay 'The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I', in which he argues that the small infant, confronted with its own image in a mirror, has a moment of jubilant misrecognition of its own actual, physically uncoordinated state, imagining its body to be more unified than it really is. In

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[2] For a critique of Castells's critique of urban sociology, see Saunders (1986, esp.,162-70).
[3] See Althusser and Balibar (1968); Althusser (1972).

this imaginary condition, no real distinction between subject and object has yet set in; the infant identifies with its own image, feeling itself at once within and in front of the mirror, so that subject and object glide ceaselessly in and out of each other in a sealed circuit. In the ideological sphere, similarly, the human subject transcends its true state of deffuseness or decentrement and finds a consolingly coherent image of itself reflected back in the 'mirror' of a dominant ideological discourse. Armed with this imaginary self, which for Lacan involves an 'alienation' of the subject, it is then able to act in socially appropriate ways.

Ideology can thus be summarized as 'a representation of the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence'. In ideology, Althusser writes, 'men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an *'imaginary', 'lived'* relation ... In ideology, the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation. (Eagleton 1994, 214, emphasis original)

Plainly, the real object is ideological in the sense that it is always embedded in an imaginary relationship. An immediate implication of such a theoretical position is that, to begin with, one should take the real object of any kind as an object of epistemological critique. One cannot, or should not, simply dive into the world of urban development without rendering it, in the first place, to a critical examination, for all such feelings or observations, which seem empirically grounded and natural to the observer, are indeed ideological in nature. One must stand back, take a deep breath, seriously think about what sort of imaginary relationship with which one is embracing the world. What Castells elaborated in a series of essays, a few decades back in time, meant precisely to develop such a critique (Castells 1976a and 1976b); and his target is that of urban sociology, to which he asks two fundamental questions. First, does urban sociology have a real *theoretical* object? Second, does urban sociology have an *urban* real object? Let us reverse the order of these two questions and ask: first, is there an *urban* phenomenon, exemplified by the real object of China, that indicates a new mode of social existence in today's world? In other words, when turning our attention to the real object of China, are we contemplating on something that is problematic and indicative of the contemporary experiences of our time? Second, what kind of imaginary relationship do we carry into such studies as these? In other words, how is it possible to undo an ideological embodiment within which we are given an imaginary relationship to the world? What is the theoretical object in and for our inquiry?

The purpose of this detour does not mean to review an old debate but to pose the question: How can we problematize the real object of China as a way of thinking about ourselves/Ourselves in the contemporary world? What are the interconnected problems of our conceptualization through a real object, which is already *ideological* in the Althusserian sense? What is the imaginary relationship within which we are implicated as such? How is it possible to develop a critique of the misrecognition that is a self-misrecognition? It is a meaningless statement to say that urban studies study what is happening in an urban setting. Or China studies study China. Such claims as these are no more than saying that all fish should be studied as aquatic animals. Our inquiry must take China as a theoretical object, with which we hope to enrich our understanding of ourselves/Ourselves in the contemporary world. This is the necessary starting point for our inquiry; it is also the reason for revisiting an old neighborhood of thoughts and ideas as the departure for a new reflection.

2. The Question of the "We"

Starting from the mid-1990s, Japan Foundation and the International House of Japan initiated a fellowship program, targeting primarily Southeast Asian scholars and hoping to build an alternative platform for a different kind of intellectual exchange. I joined the program in 1998-99. Below was originally written for the program's Ito workshop, and I am still grateful for the opportunity provided for me. It was truly a unique experience, one of the very first such experiences for myself, of being able to get out of the overarching shadow of Sino-European/American vision of the world. It was a good place to hear "little voices" or "not-commonly-heard concerns" of those scholars and activists from such as Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and other Southeast Asian countries. It was an *other* occasion, outside the normal range of one's usual sojourns, that brought forward a different view of intellectual questioning.

In our discussions and exchanges, either among the program fellows themselves or between the fellows and Japanese scholars, the word "we" was often employed in a particularly emphasized way. More often than otherwise, it was not just used as a pronoun in the convention of the English language (i.e., "we"); instead, it tended to be employed as a notion (i.e., "We"), in order to mean or imply a certain socioeconomic or political position, presupposing that such a position was conceptually clear and theoretically unproblematic. At the time, as it is now, it was quite often heard such as that in order to resist some evil aspects of globalization, "We" must act in such and such a way. Or, in order to protect *our* environment, "We" have to fight against the selfish interests of transnational corporations. So on and so forth. There may be different purposes or intentions behind such uses of the pronoun; however, for this group of scholars and activists, it is undeniably true that such employment of the term signified a strong desire for collective action. This desire was most commonly articulated in relation to the various situations of local struggles against the penetration of transnational capitalism. Specifically, in the late 1990s, the question of the "We" was often raised against the background of the Asian economic crisis.

This question of the "We" concerned every fellow of the program; it particularly concerned those who have actually engaged in the struggles of everyday life in their home countries. Sylvia Mayuga, Endo Suanda and Suwanna Satha-anand, among others, defended the view that globalization must also be understood from the perspective of a local people in their everyday struggles. It is in such a theoretical orientation, which has emphasized the significance of "local people" and "everyday struggle", that both the meaning and function of the "We" can be understood. Some immediate questions may arise. What are the implicit connotations of such an emphasized "We"? In other words, when it is employed as a notion rather than a pronoun, what kind of conceptual implication is introduced? Or what kind of presupposed meaning do we mean? Do we really understand what is happening around us? What is happening in the contemporary world within which we area struggling? What do we mean to say about the condition of life in today's world by such a usage? Furthermore, are these conceptual implications still adequate for everyday struggles of our time, which are by no means similar to the older kinds of struggles characterized by the revolutionary sentiment, either nationalist or socialist for example, in the twentieth century?

My tentative answer to these questions is that, more often than otherwise, when such a notion was employed, the implicit connotation is of an older kind, deriving its theoretical justification and conceptual energy from the struggles of the past, which are not similar to those of our time, i.e.,

the time of transnational capital and digital capitalism. In my view, it is practically dangerous as well as theoretical unproductive to emphasize the "We" without a critique of its inadequate associations with a set of old problems. That is, in order for the "we" to be emphasized for today's struggles in everyday life, its connotation has to be enriched in the first place.

Several layers of its meaning, which are contained in the emphasized "We", relate in a complex way to the functions of this phrase in the actual struggles of various social groups. My first proposition is that a proper understanding of these layers of meaning is indispensable for any serious attempt in making it function as any part of any political strategies, either *for* or *by* the very group indicated by such an "We". My second proposition is that, although it is difficult to generalize the actual relationship of the meaning of the emphasized "We" to its function, it is possible to analyze these layers of meaning with reference to the structure of its internal coherence, which is the product of a long history. Let us start with three most important layers of its meaning. They respectively mean: "'We' must"; "'We' are"; and "'We' know (what/who) 'We' are."

1) In a most common way, the employment of the emphasized "We" is meant to indicate the existence of a collective group as social entity, which can be defined in a number of ways, such as in terms of gender or ethnicity. The assumed intention of such usage is to emphasize the solidarity of a social group or to reaffirm the awareness of its identity. The presupposed meaning of such an emphasis is *calling for action,* that is, suggesting the possibilities of collective action by this "We", i.e., as a recognizable or recognized social subject. In other words, such uses of the pronoun mean to reaffirm the possibilities of agency in the collective identity thus announced. That is, such usage presupposes the justification for social or collective action. Or, more adequate, it calls for action and, therefore, can be understood as if it were saying "we must" or "we should".

2) Such usage provides a good example of what may be called "dividing practice". It creates a "non-We" as its opposite. It excludes by means of including and, therefore, creates boundaries which may or may not be necessary. It is necessary when the boundaries are useful in demarcating a battle line for social struggles; it is harmful when these boundaries, after having been invented, are taken as fixed or unchangeable. When it is necessary to assert oneself as a collective identity, it is also important to remember that these identities are situational, i.e., dependent upon the occasions whereby such identities are called upon for action. In other words, it is the cultural difference or the political need that calls for the usage but not the other way around. There is no such collective identity as given nor should it be taken for granted. This is to say that the emphasized "We" may, as it often is in its daily usage, presuppose that we are what we are as pre-given. In fact, identities are made rather than given.

3) Epistemologically, such a usage further indicates that the subject is conscious of who it is and what needs to be done: "'We' *know* (what/who) 'We' are." It is We, rather than You or They, that knows its condition of existence; it is We, rather than You or They, that is conscious of our own subject position from which our identity is proclaimed. This consciousness is self-consciousness, which came from the real historical struggle that entails a particular conception of history and society. In other words, this self-consciousness is the child of a particular mode of subjectivity, i.e., "consciousness of consciousness", which is historically valid. What kind of assumptions are beneath it, and how these assumptions are themselves historically limited to their own social conditions are questions that need to be raised.

If one wishes to continue to employ such a usage, one must raise the question of the extent to which it is still adequate for today's cultural or political struggles. My contention is that the contemporary world, i.e., the one that we are now inhabiting, is no longer the one that had made this usage historically valid. What needs to be done is to provide a critical re-examination of its connotation in order to talk about new forms of subjectivities and collectivities characteristic of the contemporary conditions in our time, i.e., the time of transnational capital and digital capitalism.

1) On the question of action

In its most popular form, the use of the emphasized We means to call for collective action. For example, as one often hears, *we* have to protect our environment; *we* have to protect our own culture; *we* have to protect our own national industries; etc. This way of using the pronoun presupposes the solidarity of a social group, through which collective action is always seen as potentially possible. Such a social group taken as a collective agent is most commonly conceived in terms of local communities or cultures, just as what we have usually seen in daily conversations or scholarly communications. However, a difficulty may arise if following such an assumption in today's situation. Due to the technological innovation of late capitalism, particularly in the sphere of telecommunication and informational technology, the conventional definition of local community or culture, which had been defined largely on the basis of real geography, began to lose its significance as a natural grounding for collective representation or action. Plainly, in today's context, it has become increasingly difficult to rest collective representation on real geography. Things are more and more translocal or transcommunal or transcultural. This experience is evident in at least two senses. First, in the actual sense, people move around and transgress communal or cultural boundaries that used to define their identities. Traveling and migration have become a common experience for many people whose identities used to be clearly local or communal. Second, in the symbolic sense, electronic media, such as television or internet, has invaded every bedroom of local people in such a way that there is no longer a secured sense of *our* culture or even *ourselves.* It creates further difficulty in announcing the emphasized We even if we remain in the same local community, because people are no longer united by the "We" defined and enforced by the face-to-face communication that used to be essential to the communal life.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that collectivity itself cannot be defined in any specific way; instead, it means that there is an increasing difficulty in defining it in *general* forms conceived in terms of those theoretical concepts such as locality, community, or culture. All these notions are essentially based on real geography, which has become less a natural starting point for understanding our contemporary experience. Local struggles continue to go on, and people continue to fight against the various kinds of exploitation, real or imagined. What has been transformed is not the content of collective action but its form. The form of collectivity is *the way in which* collective action is shaped, rather than the actual manifestation of collective activities or struggles. Therefore, the question is: In what way can one continue to employ the emphasized "We", if not in its old fashion, to refer to the transcultural experiences so typical of our time?

2) On the question of identity

The emphasized "We" presupposes "You" or "They" as subjects being demarcated by clear-cut

cultural or communal boundaries. To emphasize it often means to claim for oneself a coherent collective identity. Embedded in the very notion of identity, there is inevitably a conception of difference. In fact, the notion of difference may be a better place for us to understand what is meant by the emphasized We. However, we often start from a wrong direction: we tend to take who we are as a given cultural fact. For example, as we may hear, "We Chinese" are proud of our own cultural traditions. Yes, we are proud of our own traditions, but we will never say this to simply please ourselves; instead, whenever we want to say this, it is usually because we find an occasion, facing an addressee, that creates the need for us to say this, that is, to defend ourselves in the face of our traditions. In other words, the need for uttering the emphasized We is always rooted in a situation of making a difference, either cultural or political. A question that needs to be asked here, however, is how the globalizing process has affected our identity making practices.

Let us take an example. As part of the fellowship program of the 1998-99 group, we attended a conference on migration in the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka. It was a productive conference that focused on groups or individuals traveling cross various kinds of local or regional or national boundaries. The central theme of the conference was about the translocal experience in Southeast Asia. As it is shown, when people traveled from their own local communities to other places, searching for new opportunities in life, they had to deal with the differences between the world they were familiar with and the world they newly encountered. A translocal world of culture is one in which one's neighbors eat different types of food, wear different types of clothes, speak different languages, etc. It is needless to say that these cultural differences are always engraved or prescribed with social power. As the scholars at the Osaka conference have shown, at the turn of a century, this mode of everyday life has become a dominant form of cultural experience for many people in Southeast Asia. One of the most significant implications is that, in such a world of everyday life as this, the meaning of identity has shifted from its conventional sense of identifying oneself with one's own tradition to one of constantly differentiating oneself from others. In other words, in a translocal world of everyday experience, the meaning of identity can only be understood as a means for struggling for one's place in the hierarchy of difference.

A further question, in relation to what we have just said, concerns the plurality of the "We". Diana Wong, a known sociologist from Malaysia, has explicitly raised the question of the meaning of difference in plural society. What is a plural society? How can we conceive it? What is the difference between plural and democratic society? How can we think about democratic practice in plural society? These questions go beyond the scope of my discussion here. Simply, I think that part of the answer to her question lies in a reconceptualization of the "We" in a new sense of plurality. The conventional plurality of the "We" means that it consists of a bundle of individuals, that is, many individual "I". That is, the We is plural in the sense that it consists of many individual persons. However, the idea of plural society or plural We, in our attempt of a new formulation, which should convey the sense of plurality at another level, indicates the reality of constant formation and reformation of "trans-We" within a given historical context. The basis of a plural society is no longer the "I" but the "We", already a cultural unit, though it is constantly in formation and reformation through transcultural practices. The essence of the question concerns how to conceptualize the plural *of* the plural.

3) On the question of subjectivity

Finally, the employment of the emphasized We presupposes a conventional humanistic conception of history and society. This is not to deny that such a conception was indeed useful or necessary for the successful organization of social or political struggles in the past. And it may continue to be necessary or useful for our current or future struggles. However, it does have its own limitations because it is based on a conventional set of assumed relations of Man to History and Nature. If we look around today, obtaining a contemporary view of the technological development of our world where technology has changed the way in which we relate ourselves to the world, we should become cautious of such a presupposition. In other words, one should realize that this particularly humanistic way of seeing things is itself a historical phenomenon. That is, one should be aware of the historical conditions under which such a conventional humanistic conception of history and society emerged. Human subjectivity is made in history. That is, the very possibility of uttering the We in such a way is a product of a violent history. To understand history does not only mean to understand it from this particular humanistic perspective; it also means to understand how human subjectivities are historically produced. Therefore, for the present moment, in order to be able to utter the We more effectively, one must try to understand the formation of new subjectivities effected by the globalizing process transforming local or communal life in a particular historical way. This on-going transformation has changed the relations of ourselves to the world which in turn produces new forms of collectivity, sociality, and subjectivity. To understand these new forms correctly is a precondition for the employment of the emphasized We. My contention is that, without being able to realize the objective character of the globalizing process as a historical fact, it is quite impossible to utter an emphasized "We" effectively for the struggles of our time.

3. A Chinese Symptom of the World

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 critical reexamination. From *Capital* to *The Order of Things,* that is, from "the mode of production" to "the archaeology of knowledge";[4] or from *A Natural Science of Society* to *The Interpretation of Cultures,* that is, from the Radcliffe-Brownian understanding of "social structure" to Clifford Geertz's idea of "deep fight" or "thick description";[5] there seem to have existed diehard assumptions about the social world conceived as a depth, a deep structure, hidden and beyond our daily experience and vision. In different traditions of sociocultural analysis, there is often this assumption about the social world as organized according to a structural depth. This depth 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 the everyday experience. The social world thus conceived seems to consist of *a depth* in both epistemological and ontological terms. Therefore one would often conceive of whatever on the surface of the social world as the appearance of a deep structural cleavage

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[4] See Marx (1967); Foucault (1970).
[5] See Radcliffe-Brown (1957); Geertz (1973).

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. (Odgen and Richards 1969, 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 1980, 10-11). Here is another powerful metaphor for the social world as the prevailing darkness. Are these metaphors adequate for us to think about what is emerging in today's world? As I shall argue, both the prevailing darkness and the unmoved ocean, as metaphors, are the counter-images of our time—the time of transnational capital and digital capitalism which have 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 mode of thinking, 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.

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 reflections on our world; that is, intellectuals should not all become short waves or fireflies; however, what is also important to note is the emergence of a new mode of social existence, that is, to be or to dwell on the surface of either a social or a discursive world. This new way of surviving on the surface of a world, which is characteristic of *our* experiences of everyday life at the present moment in history, may be called—properly or not—*the phenomenon of surface.*

This phenomenon, placed in contrast to the image of unmoved ocean or prevailing darkness, registers a moment of difference in a long historical transformation: What is happening around us 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, whereas 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 discourses or a different discursive formation. That is, there came *the economy of surface.* The typical experience of this economy is that of surfing on the internet. This is indeed part of the real economy in operation—corporate and transnational in investment and capital accumulation—supporting and yet is supported by the existing world market into which the People's Republic of China is drawn.

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 in real spatial or physical terms, 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 very 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".

For those who could read in what used to be called ideographic (now more often logographic) writing, and specially those who were reading or, perhaps more accurate in the point of speaking, *surfing,* in the internet space of a new continent of signification and significance, recently discovered by a huge number of Columbus in the People's Republic of China, a kind of sensation, which certainly elevated some to a climax of ecstasy, was learning to play the role of a jury in the court of public conscience: to debate, to argue, to criticize, to defend, to attack, to curse, to make fun of, to humiliate, to laugh at, or to tear others apart in words, regarding a case of plagiarism caught in the work of an eminent young scholar of social science, of Peking University, a most esteemed institution of higher education which is well-known for its inspiration for freedom and intellectual democracy in the country.

The case, however, was not too complicated.[6] A scholar, who originally came from another part of the country and got trained abroad, went back to Peking University to take up a position in the mid 1990s, and soon built up a good reputation for himself as a leading figure in the newly cultivated field of anthropology, which had been regarded as a bourgeois discipline and dismissed—together with a number of other social science disciplines—during the radical years of the Maoist revolution (1950s-70s). This scholar, in the larger context of a national effort of re-building the metropolis of social sciences in a late socialist landscape, made a significant contribution to the image of anthropology as a possible new site for a disciplinary (re)construction. Anthropology, as this foreign and peculiar word might have suggested and inspired for the popular mind, had hardly been known except within a small circle of professors and students in the 1980s. That the general public began to open their eyes to the ideas of anthropology, according to some serious scholars in the field, was largely due to the strenuous effort that this young and dynamic scholar has made in popularizing the anthropological knowledge. Prodigiously productive and intensively hard-working, he published a large number of books and articles in a relative short period of time, that is, within the span of several years. It is within an environment of reform where things were running fast in both a physical and a metaphysical sense that his energetic publications, though not without criticism and challenge, made a visible mark on the scene of social sciences and brought him to the forefront of both academic and popular attention. The incident occurred when this promising young scholar was at a considerable height of his achievement. A graduate student from another field wrote an open letter or, rather, a

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[6] I am treating this case as an ethnographic experience, that is, as ethnographic materials obtained by my participant observation, either in the form of conversing with people involved or in the form of reading the debate on the internet. My purpose, as one will see in the following paragraphs, is to show how the internet constitutes an emerging arena for a different kind of discursive practice, that is, to focus on its possibility and emergence, rather than dealing with the plagiarism itself. The objective is to write about this animated feeling, innovated by and innovating as a special kind of everyday experience of *internetwork,* rather than to make a judgement about the plagiarist case.

short article, to a major social science journal, charging then well-known young professor's new work of plagiarizing his own translation of a text book, some years ago, written by an American anthropologist.[7] The young scholar in question made a public apology later for his misconduct, though prior to the apology had there been a heated debate about what was academic honesty and intellectual value that must be defended, drawing ardent participants from all lanes and corners of a fast-moving society.

In the turn of a new century, or on the threshold of the past and the future, such cases as this were called "academic corruption", that is, *xueshu fubai* in mandarin, which produced a cultural connotation specific to the recent memory of the People's Republic, where the idea of corruption had originally meant the wrong doings of government officials. Gradually, it seems that the word "corruption" has obtained a greater connotation in its application, chiefly, via a redefinition of it by the public in such a way as to include everything considered *immoral* or *unethical,* broadly speaking. Academic corruption basically meant two things: 1) producing false degrees and identifications; and 2) plagiarizing. The cultural history of this development in the meaning of a word, which could have become a good place for looking into the underlying trajectory of a new mode of sense associations in language, is not our task here; instead, what is interesting is to note how this particular case was debated on the net, allowing a new platform for a different kind of discursive possibility. One would have been struck, if involved in the debate, by the ephemeral power, penetrating and absorbing at once, of the virtual space, perhaps unparalleled by any other forms of social struggles in the *real* sense. When this case was just about to receive a greater attention from popular media, which is in a constant search for all possible sensations to feed the hungry masses as consumers these days, some sincere scholars, out of their conscience, spoke out, with good intentions, issuing their warning about making the case a public affair, which might be wrongly or improperly judged by the popular audience. For this was a serious academic matter and it should be dealt with within the walls of the academe. The consideration is that the public may not be able to judge the situation in an adequate way, given the fact that they lack basic knowledge on the subject matter. There was a great deal of sympathy for the young scholar under criticism, because, as some argued, this was probably the most productive advocate of this new field and; if he got burned by any unfair media fire, it could be damaging the construction of a new building for the social sciences as whole. Indeed these were good intentions and kind warnings, however, nothing stopped the case from becoming a national fever in the already heated debates about academic corruption over all the possible means of popular media, such as newspapers and television. Among all the means of debates and communications, the most ferocious was internet, that immediately created several public forums where the jury of public conscience, self appointed, was formed. The idea that such serious matters as this must be discussed among specialists in a more refined setting of intelligence was challenged by those who, ignoring the warning, opened an internet page for discussion, arguing that this was a matter of basic morality or ethics instead about academic knowledge. The internet did not make people change their attitudes, but it provided a new platform for refuting the scholarly opinion in the hope of confining the debate within the academic circle. The internet made it a public affair without the consent of academic

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[7] The charge was that one third of his book was directly copied from the English work, which he had translated into the Chinese language some years earlier.

authorities. The judges for this case required no special training in any discipline. The battle was easily won by the public on the net, where the argument for the confinement of the case to the walls of an academic circle was ridiculed in a number of ways on virtual space. It quickly became a scandalous sensation, a public affair of seduction and betrayal, the very kind that ordinary people have always enjoyed, just as some said, half jokingly, that this could well be the most exciting moment of public entertainment after the President of the United States (Clinton) was caught in his oval office engaging in some peculiar form of reproductive activity.

When a number of web-pages were opened up for such discussions, no longer did anyone wonder whether this matter should be left alone to the university professors; and the hesitation about saying something about it evaporated. It became a spectacle in the strict sense of the term, that is, to be observed by millions of people who had little interest in the subject matter of anthropology. The affair itself was lifted to the height of a new level, say, to become almost a contentious criminal case to be publicized on the net. A crowd was gathered, in different hours of the day and in different locations of the world, communicating across regional and national boundaries and chatting with each other from several time zones; and they were united only by the capability of reading the logographic writing, as if this were a show, a kind of show that was both played and watched by the same community of people—being both its performers and audience at once. As Roland Barthes would have said, spectacle is a physical thing that ties together both the performers and the audience. This is precisely what we have seen in this affair: the performers are themselves also the audience, watching the effects of their participation in the debates by switching on and off their computers, both there or here and then or now.

The point is that there is a change in *the way* in which we are being with others. Even in a social space still relentlessly censored and minutely controlled by the State authorities in many respects, quite effective in some areas and less in others, there emerged a different dynamic for interaction and exchange, largely due to the introduction of a cyber universe that has been operating according to a certain rule contradicting our understanding of social formation in its conventional sense. It was not about the contents of arguments or the opinions of differences, produced or consumed by this or that particular social group; it is about *the form* of public life in change. This case of so-called academic corruption, from the very beginning of its being exposed, was destined to become a public affair—that is, no matter what measurements were taken to prevent such a case to be exposed, by the official order or not, it would have been very unlikely to be otherwise than what it did appear, that is, to be judged by a self-appointed jury of public justice. There was no alternative, no such a possibility of confining it to a small circle of concerned scholars despite of all the kind warnings and benign considerations. A virtual community were like a rural community in the sense where rumors and gossip would travel faster than anything else. Whenever there was a noise on the street in a village, as some ethnographers could recall the experience, an excited crowd would have been gathered, leaving behind each window several anxious faces struggling to figure out what was going on in their neighborhood. Whatever actually happened might not be very important to oneself, though one must have his or her share in knowing it and/or having an opinion. The feeling of getting out of one's own door, jumping into the gathered crowd in a village square, would feel quite similar to what was happening on the internet space of virtual debates. There is perhaps little difference in the actual movements between the stern neighbors who jumped into their sleepers, grabbing their shirts in

hands, and hurried out of their homes to watch how a village fight broke out; and those who, with the same impatience and eagerness, just after returning from work or having a coffee break in the office, trembled on the key board of a Dell or a Sony or a Mac computer, searching for the pages that displayed all the comments, short or long, insulting or defending, proving or disagreeing, on the intriguing case of academic corruption. In terms of how individuals were attracted by the noise, and how he or she was allured by the temptation of knowing everything that was happening, there was indeed no difference between peasants and internet surfers; nevertheless, the difference, a decisive one, is that the village crowd consists of a group that shares a common cultural identity, a familiar social context, and a known collective history of sentiment and passion; whereas, the crowd in the virtual space is made up by a group whose relationship to each other is simply generated by the shared interest of a commonality, apart from which there is almost no other common bounds among the people of this virtual community. This is why I have invoked the images of a jury and a court, where a loosely related bunch of individuals came in to judge, according to their rationality and common sense, on the criminal case of academic affairs. There is a connectivity rather than collectivity of the Durkheimian sense among them; and the court room is the home of their commonality.

The internet acted as an arena for a particular form of connectivity; the jury, volunteered, was constituted as a plural subject, whose face was never clearly shown, because one could simply write to the web pages without leaving his or her full name or any other social trace; the space within which such a social force was operating was also plural—in the sense that it was not a place that barred access from certain directions or from certain layers of the social hierarchy. Of course, not everything written was worthwhile reading; in fact, a large number of comments on the case were light-hearted jokes; however, the point is that the creation of such a public space, via the new technology of information, allowed a different discursive formation, in which the argument for a rigid conceptual division of labor between public/media/popular interests and private/textual/academic discourses has become difficult—if not entirely impossible.

Is it not the case that this spectacle, of internetwork in virtual space, poses some serious questions about our relationships with ourselves and others, questions about our mode of self and belonging, questions about our very *being* in the world? What needs to be explained is not the general mechanism of electronic (re)production of information and image, about which books and manuscripts have been piling up on the shelves of our libraries; instead, what must be understood is this reifying process of internetworking, historically specific *and* specifically historical, in transforming our relationship to the world, within which we are struggling. We need to take a step into a particular history of the present and examine this unique technological development in the vast ruins of a socialist revolution, in order to draw a possible sketch of ourselves/Ourselves on the canvas of the contemporary world.

Concluding Remarks

I wish to make three points as concluding remarks. First, the (neo)positivist reincarnation, which was given birth by a vast expansion of the global system of production and consumption, needs to be critiqued. What is called "China", as I have shown in the reemergence of sociological studies, is a good entry for such a needed reflection, not only due to its enormous importance for us today but also

due to the uniqueness of its coming of age in modern development. Second, the identity of self, either "Chinese" or "Japanese", may need to be re-thought so as to reflect, adequately and sensitively, on the revolutionary struggles of our time. Nationalism has been on sale from the 19th century; and the question is how one could engage with an old language embedded with new meanings. As I have suggested, how we could announce ourselves as a collective "We" has become a serious problem for those in or outside the People's Republic, due to both historical and global reasons. Our intellectual task is, or should be, part of this effort in redefining who *we* are, rather than simply producing mimicries of an older kind. Third, the problem of corruption is a *global* one; it is one about the age of *the copy* or, if one wishes to put it in the words of Jean Baudrillard, the age of *simulacra.* It is not a problem specific to the People's Republic; it is a problem concerning the nature of global transformation, in both its material and moral senses, in which "China" has become its *symptomatic symptom* today.

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