

Postcolonial Theory and the “Decolonization” of Chinese Culture

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IN CURRENT CHINESE critical and academic circles, such “postist” (*hou zhuyi*) issues as those of postmodernism, post-Confucianism, post-Intellectualism, post-Chinese studies, post-Enlightenment, and postcolonialism are talked about and debated much among scholars, literary critics, and other intellectuals of the Humanities and Social Sciences.¹ These terms frequently appear in various academic journals or literary magazines, puzzling ordinary readers as well as some old-fashioned intellectuals of humanistic tendency. Strangely enough, scholars very often discuss these terms without quoting or referring to the original works. In the case of postcolonialism, for instance, they ignore the primary texts of such eminent theorists of postcolonialism in the West as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, let alone analyzing them in a critical and profound way in order to carry on a theoretical dialogue with international scholarship in the field of postcolonial studies.² Of course, such misuse or even misreading of these terms or theoretical texts is largely attacked and criticized by both domestic critics and overseas scholars, though these attempts themselves indeed have helped to produce some new versions, different from what they mean in Western cultural context.³ This is particularly true of the terms postmodernism and postcolonialism. In effect, postmodernism and postcolonialism are, to my understanding, two distinct discourses although they overlap, sharing the common theoretical ground of poststructuralism and the common Western cultural context. So we should first of all make a careful study of these concepts and phenomena before applying them to current Chinese cultural and literary studies. This

essay starts with a re-description of the postcolonial theory from the perspective of an Oriental or Chinese scholar before dealing with the issue of the “decolonization” of Chinese culture.

I Postcolonial Theory Reconsidered

Postcolonialism has prevailed even during the high tide of international postmodernism particularly in regard to issues concerning Third World culture or the Third World criticism. I would like first of all to outline briefly my approach as a Chinese scholar to the various postcolonial theories constructed by such Western scholars of Oriental background as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha before questioning such problematic constructions as those of Orientalism and the Third World criticism from my own perspective. Obviously, “postcolonial theory” is taken almost exclusively from English criticism and is “changing so rapidly and involves so many positions that it can only be spoken about in the singular as a collective noun” (Hart 71). It is certainly controversial in meaning as well as uncertain in connotation. As a theoretical or critical term, its meaning is undoubtedly indeterminate and thereby rouses frequent attacks from the mainstream Western critical circles as well as from critics of the Oriental or Third World countries. It is actually, according to some Western scholars, “a collection of theoretical and critical strategies with which to look at the culture, literature, politics, and history of the former colonies of the European empires and their relation to Europe and the rest of the world” (Hart 71). In this way, to scholars of the Oriental or Third World countries, postcolonial theory is “highly complex study of the cultural, political, and historical differences among the European imperial powers and from their former colonies” (71-72). It is obviously a long-standing process of deterritorialization of the Western empire from within as well as from without. As Deleuze and Guattari put it in describing the anti-Oedipus (decentralizing) process,

the process of deterritorialization here goes from the center to the periphery, that is, from the developed countries to the underdeveloped countries, which do not constitute a separate world, but rather an essential component of the world-wide capitalist machine.

It must be added, however, that the center itself has its organized enclaves of underdevelopment, its reservations and its ghettos as interior periphery. (231)

So those advocating the postcolonial strategy in the West are actually trying to undermine the power from within the hegemonic empire. It is not very much concerned with the anti-colonialist struggle waged by Third World intellectuals and others although it has indeed touched upon issues concerning Third World's anti-colonialist struggle. Since postcolonial theory is a product of Western critical discourse, it is by no means appropriate to be used in the Chinese cultural context although it is true that many Chinese scholars are worried about the "colonizing" process of Chinese culture and literature since the May Fourth period (1919), which actually marked the beginning of new Chinese culture and literature and the break from tradition.

Postcolonialism is in effect a metamorphosed version of postmodernism in relation to the anti-colonialist and decolonizing practice in the Oriental and Third World countries. During the heyday of postmodernism, postcolonialism was almost overlooked or even deliberately "marginalized" by mainstream Western critical circles. The theorists in postcolonial studies are mostly scholars who have an Oriental or Third World background or have relations with people from Oriental or Third World countries who have very good teaching positions in Western universities. Their Western and non-Western national and cultural identities undoubtedly account for their mobile positions in the theoretical debates. They cannot but confront such an insurmountable dilemma: since they live in the West, they have to write of their own experiences either directly or indirectly in the English language, and they achieve success by first of all identifying themselves as Westerners; but they have to speak up on behalf of the Orient or the Third World in a particular way in a multicultural society so as to work in their own as well as their countrymen's interest. Consequently, their political tendency is often complicated and even uncertain, and their criticism of the cultural hegemony of the First World often cannot fairly represent the interest of Oriental and Third World intellectuals be-

cause of their insufficient knowledge and understanding of the practical situations in these countries and because of the problematic ideologies in their research. Thus their construction of the Orient and Third World is usually based on their incomplete understanding or even misreading of the Orient and Third World rather than on first-hand personal experiences in an Oriental or Third World country.

However, in spite of all these shortcomings, postcolonial theory is still a forceful cultural strategy and a challenging theoretical discourse opposed to mainstream Western culture and critical discourse, helping to correct Western people's long-standing prejudice against the Orient and to popularize Oriental studies in the West, promoting the academic dialogue between the East and West. Postcolonialism, if applied in an appropriate manner, could also be adopted by Third World intellectuals in their decentralization of the "totalitarian" ideology and academic discourse. Therefore, we have to observe this complex phenomenon in a dialectical way and deal with different postcolonial theorists in different ways.

Edward Said, the postcolonial theorist best known for his description and construction of the so-called "Orient" and "Orientalism," is quoted and discussed frequently in Chinese cultural context. He has pointed out correctly that the Orient in the eye of Western people actually has nothing to do with the the "geographical Orient" or Oriental people themselves. For quite a few Western scholars, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. Now it was disappearing; in a sense it had happened, its time was over" (*Orientalism* · 1). So it is a "constructed" Orient rather than the "real" or geographical one—obviously a Western means of representation. Since the "Orient" constructed in Western discourse has nothing to do with the "geographical East," there have appeared a number of versions of Orientalism, including a Freudian one, a Spenglerian one, a Darwinian one (22), but none constructed from the perspective of any Oriental culture. Thus Orientalism exists only in Western discourse; and this makes it problematic and uncertain (Wang, "Orientalism"

905-10). It is also true that Said has criticized severely the unequal relationship between the Orient and the Occident and the falsehood of Oriental studies in the West: “that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, ‘there’ in discourse about it” (21-22). Obviously Said’s severe critique has warned us that the so-called “Orient” or “Orientalism” exists only in the eye of Western people or in the means of representation in Western culture. So in my view it is of vital significance for us to observe Orientalism as an ideology as well as a discipline in the Western context.

Gayatri Spivak, another influential representative of post-colonial theory in the West, is known in China simply for her translation of Jacques Derrida’s book *Of Grammatology*. She actually plays a double role in American academic circles and in her own native country. Her challenge against and criticism of mainstream Western culture is still within the framework of *Western* culture itself although she sometimes refers to the practical condition in her native country India and *tries* to speak for Third World intellectuals. But as she herself puts it in describing her “mobile” stand, “I am not interested in defending the post-colonial intellectual’s dependence on Western models: my work lies in making clear my disciplinary predicament. My position is generally a reactive one. I am viewed by the Marxists as too codic, by feminists as too male-identified, by indigenous theorists as too committed to Western theory” (*The Postcolonial Critic* 69-70). Furthermore, from her haughty attitude toward Third World scholars both from India as well as from other countries, we can hardly recognize her cultural identity as a Third World critic or intellectual. It would appear that she simply wants to attract the attention of the mainstream Western scholarship so as to fulfil her “anti-Oedipus” enterprise to move from periphery to centre and attempt to deconstruct the sense of centre. If ever she completes this task, she (or someone else) will no doubt manifest herself or himself as a cultural elitist of more or less Third World background. Perhaps herein is the unique value and significance of these postcolonial theorists represented by Spivak: they have

some Oriental roots but have received more education in the Occident. Since they have received education in the West, they usually have a solid foundation of Western culture rather than their own culture. But, ironically, they appear in the West always as "others" (from the Third World) due to their Oriental national identity. When they come to the East, they also cannot deny the strong impact of Western culture in which they are deeply rooted, and so they are then viewed as "others" in the East. This is a predicament that many of these hybrid Western-non-Western postcolonial critics cannot but be confronted with.

Bhabha is different from Said and Spivak. Younger than his two colleagues, his attitude appears to be more flexible. He tries to undermine in a playful manner the hegemony and authority of Western discourse by parodying the Western way of thinking and writing. On the one hand, he does express his sympathy toward the anti-colonialist struggle waged by the Third World people:

The struggle against colonial oppression changes not only the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist "idea" of time as a progressive, ordered whole. The analysis of colonial de-personalization alienates not only the Enlightenment idea of "Man" but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge. ("Remembering Fanon" 114)

But on the other hand, unlike Said or Spivak, he always looks upon the postcolonial discourse as polemic rather than antagonistic, through which the hegemony of Western discourse is undermined or deconstructed. Since the Third World discourse is an "other" to the imperial discourse, it exists only in relation to the latter, without which this "other" is obviously meaningless. Hence his attitude is more playful than serious on many occasions and his works are written always in an ambiguous way open to different interpretations.⁴ So it is not strange that because of such a playful attitude towards and such an ironic tone about Western cultural hegemony, he can hardly make people believe the real intention of his deconstructive effort. In current China, Bhabha's critical practice has been more and more attractive not just to postcolonial scholars but to some young critics and writers of postmodern and poststructural persuasion as well.⁵

Since postcolonial theorists have such complicated political and cultural backgrounds, they cannot avoid confronting an inherent dilemma: on the one hand, they always promote their academic research by constantly criticizing Western culture and theory from their unique (Oriental or Third World) perspectives; on the other hand, they cannot escape the shadow of Western discourse and Western influence now that they live in the West and use exclusively Western languages, or more specifically, the English language, which is different from the indigenous “english” language used by the “real” Oriental and Third World intellectuals. Nor could they have equal dialogue with non-Western academics. So to Third World people they are actually playing a double role: as critics of colonialism in the West and as advocates (and examples) of a sort of neo-colonialism in the East. Their criticism of Western culture is nothing but a sort of strategy of deconstruction in the course of which a neo-colonial discourse is gradually constructed in a unique way. Their decolonizing practice “occurs on the periphery, but it occurs at the center and at the core as well” (Deleuze and Guattari 237), or even more in the First World rather than in the Third World. Notwithstanding this, postcolonialism has come onto the scene of Chinese culture and literary criticism and has had a certain influence on our cultural strategy and writing discourse. Thus in talking about postcolonialism in the Third World countries, such as in China, one must associate it with the practical situation of the native countries, otherwise it could only produce something “other” to the Western audience.

II “Decolonizing” Chinese Culture?

The term “Third World culture” is often talked about in China largely because of Fredric Jameson’s influence (and his reading of the Third World text as a national allegory) as well as of the recent debate on postcolonialism in academic circles. Economically speaking, China is still a developing country belonging to the Third World although its economy has been advancing beyond expectation in recent years. So it is not surprising that Chinese scholars and critics usually identify their culture as that of the Third World. But as far as the so-called “Third World

culture" discussed in the Western context is concerned, the term, like the "Orient" or "Orientalism," usually refers to the colonized culture of the Third World countries. It is also an invented phenomenon as an "other" to the West. Unlike the phenomenon of the Orient or Orientalism, it is created both by Westerners and Third World people themselves. In this aspect, Chinese culture and literary discourse are said to have been "colonized" since the beginning of this century, or more exactly the May Fourth period, when various Western cultural trends and academic thoughts flooded into China, exerting strong influence on modern Chinese culture and literature (Wang, "Confronting" 905). Almost all the major writers and literary scholars at the time were more or less involved in the Chinese "modernist" literary movement or cultural modernity. As a result, comparatists usually research the literature of this period by adopting the method of influence-reception study rather than parallel study, as they do in observing classical Chinese literature, which is almost independent of any Western influence. If we recognize the May Fourth period as the *first* "colonization" of Chinese culture and literature, then the practice in the 1980s should be regarded as the *second* "colonization," which occurred after a long period of Soviet doctrinal domination of Chinese culture and literature, for since then not only have Western cultural trends and literary thoughts come into China, but they have even permeated almost every aspect of Chinese people's lives, including consumer culture and mass media and advertising enterprises. A particularly significant change occurred in the Chinese literary language, which used to be characterized by being classically elegant and fluently concise, full of allusions and images and sounding rhythmic; since the first and second colonizations, it has since been hybridized and even "Europeanized" (*ouhua*). Scholars, writers, and literary critics cannot avoid using the "borrowed" language and theoretical terms in Chinese contexts and this is largely due to the easy accessibility of translations of Western works. Translated literature is more popular than created literature to many young people. One of the present day avant-garde novelists puts it frankly this way: "When writers like our generation began to write, we were most indebted to translated novels rather than

classical Chinese literature, let alone modern Chinese literature. I have always been thinking that the contributions made to the construction and development of a new Chinese language should be first of all attributed to those translators, who have found an intermediary way of expression between the Chinese language and foreign languages.”⁶ This “intermediary way” is just between the “pure” Chinese language and the totally (translated) “foreign” languages, which surprisingly is not regarded as a sort of “colonized” cultural phenomenon. The same is true of the critical discourse used by some young avant-garde or scholarly critics in their writing. Thus, the Chinese language is “hybridized” or even “colonized,” confronted as it is with Western influence, with translated literature as a direct consequence of Western cultural colonialism. To such writers as this novelist, the “colonization” of the Chinese literary language is in effect an innovation of the literary discourse that will help contemporary Chinese literature approach the main trend of world literature. So it is absolutely a necessary step in the process of China’s modernization. But to those adhering to traditional Chinese literary doctrines, it is nothing but a phenomenon of “cultural colonization,” which should be traced back to the radical innovation of the May Fourth new cultural movement in which traditional Chinese culture and its sage Confucius were severely criticized. And this brings us to this question: is it true that Chinese culture is a “colonized” one? Is it necessary to wage a struggle to “decolonize” our culture and literary discourse? This has become a stimulating topic, heatedly debated among the current Chinese cultural and literary circles.⁷

History advances despite the resistance of individuals, and this is true of the evolution of language. China should, to most Chinese intellectuals as well as ordinary people, catch up with and even surpass the advanced Western countries, both economically and scientifically as well as culturally. The same is true of the Chinese language, which certainly should be modernized in order to communicate with the international community more conveniently—particularly in an age of cyberspace. In the contemporary era, no society, no culture, be it Oriental or Occidental, can avoid the influence of, or even “colonization” by,

other societies or cultures; interpenetration and mutual influence among different cultures have become an inevitable trend. The fact that hundreds of Chinese scholars have got teaching positions in North American universities in the field of comparative literature or East Asian studies has undoubtedly changed the traditional essence of "Orientalism" or Oriental studies in the West, inserting into it some fresh methodologies and ideas and even new ways of thinking. (Could we regard such a phenomenon as a kind of "colonization" of North American culture?) In the process of international communication, any culture will undoubtedly lose something, which is absolutely necessary in order to influence others as well as renew itself. Whether our language and literary discourse have become "colonized" or modernized is a question for further study. But we should distinguish between colonization and modernization: the former is passive, meaning that we could not but receive the (Western) influence, thus making our language Westernized ("colonized"); but the latter is active, which indicates that the Chinese language should also be popularized and simplified along with China's modernization in order for us to communicate with the international community more easily. The state of the art of contemporary Chinese culture and literary language obviously belongs to the latter case. So we should observe such a phenomenon in a dialectical way: on the one hand, such a "colonization," if it continues to exist, will help promote the revolution and modernization of Chinese culture and language so as to make Chinese literature gradually approach world literature. On the other hand, the national character and cultural identity of Chinese culture and language cannot but be obscured or even more or less lost. In this respect, the postcolonial strategy of opposition to mainstream Western culture is easily identical with the Chinese attempt to struggle against the imperial hegemony, both politically and economically as well as culturally.

In contemporary China, along with the brief references to Western postcolonialism, there have appeared different manifestations of postcoloniality in cultural and literary circles: first, postmodern studies, aimed to prove that postmodernity is not an exclusively Western product, for it could produce some meta-

morphosed versions in some Oriental or Third World countries where the general condition is modern or even premodern;⁸ second, post-Chinese studies (*hou guoxue*), which is viewed as a strategy to “decolonize” Chinese culture and literary discourse, but the approach that these scholars adopt is still a “colonized” one, that is, using (borrowed) Western theory or way of thinking to reconsider and reinterpret Chinese culture, thus actually producing something “other” to the West; and third, Third World criticism, which attempts to help demarginalize Chinese literature and criticism so that it could merge in the mainstream of world literature or have dialogues with the international critical circles on an equal footing. All these are summarized in a misleading way as the joint attempts of cultural conservatives in contemporary China although there are obvious different orientations among themselves, similar to a sort of postcoloniality, by certain overseas Chinese scholars.⁹ Of course, their attempts have raised the controversial question of whether Chinese culture should be “decolonized,” and if the answer is “yes,” how this is to be achieved.

Such manifestations of cultural conservatism are apparently different though more or less decolonization/deterritorialization oriented. The first practice aims at carrying on an equal dialogue on the same plane of postmodern studies with international scholarship; the second attempt is made to carry on dialogues with overseas Sinological studies, making traditional Chinese culture known to the world; and the last is aimed at distinguishing indigenous Chinese critical discourse from that of the West. Their ultimate goal is still aimed at opening up more space for scholars and intellectuals to activate their academic dialogues with international scholarship rather than isolating themselves again. In this way, to criticize all three phenomena without careful distinction and profound analysis is indeed out of time and place. It will only do harm to cross-cultural communication on an international scale. Ours is an age of information as well as cultural globalization, and the “global village” is by no means a myth. There is no such thing as the “colonization” of Chinese culture and literary discourse since China has never been a colonial country and Chinese culture has been deeply

rooted on the soil of the Chinese nation, so it is unnecessary to wage any struggle against such a "colonization." The misleading attempt to "decolonize" Chinese culture could only do harm to the international academic dialogue and cross-cultural communication.

III Toward an Age of Dialogue

We are now approaching the turn of the century. What will be characterized by the new century? Will it be like the situation described by Samuel Huntington in his controversial essay "The Clash of Civilizations?" Or will there appear the contrary situation as described by some Chinese scholars who envisage the new century as being that of the Orient or more specifically that of China?¹⁰ My answer is neither, for since the end of the "Cold War" period, the world has entered a so-called "post-Cold War" period in which the main trend is characterized by different forces co-existing and complementing each other and having dialogue and communication rather than maintaining opposition. This is probably one of the reasons why the long-ignored idea of cultural relativism has again attracted scholars' attention and has become a hot topic for comparatists to deal with. In Western society, especially in North America, characterized by multiculturalism, postcolonialism functions as one of the different voices, a contrapuntal one, which always remains within the limited sphere of academic studies and does not influence government policy. Whereas in China, scholars talk of how postcolonialism will lead China to a new isolated state from the outside world and to a new opposition between the East and the West. Since Chinese people have suffered a great deal from the state of isolation, we need more understanding from and communication with the outside world, including the West. So it is absolutely not the time to take pains to "decolonize" our culture since Chinese cultural identity will be more and more realized by people of other countries although on many occasions it appears as a false image in the eyes of Western people. According to the new significance of cultural relativism, any culture exists in relation to other cultures. No culture will forever dominate the world. In the past, when Oriental culture was "marginalized" and

appeared mysterious to the West, it nevertheless survived the period of Eurocentrism and began to flourish again in the past decade. But if Western culture has failed to overcome Oriental culture, neither could the former dominate the latter. Any attempt to reunify world culture with any kind of Oriental culture or ideology is bound to fail, so that what we need most at the moment is dialogue rather than opposition. So my essay is intended just to prove it unnecessary to wage a struggle to “decolonize” Chinese culture and literary discourse. However, postcolonialism could still be viewed as a field of academic study in which we could discuss significant theoretic issues and in doing so link ourselves to international scholarship.

NOTES

- 1 It is quite easy to read essays in such journals published in China's mainland and Hong Kong as *Dushu* [Reading], *Dongfang* [The Orient], and *Ershiyi shiji* [Twenty-First Century], which show the hot debate carried on by domestic and overseas Chinese scholars concerning the relationship between postcolonial theory and Chinese culture and literature.
- 2 Apart from the essays published in Chinese, I should mention the two conferences at which such dialogues between the East and West were carried on concerning the issue of postcolonialism: the International Conference on Cultural Studies: China and the West (August 1995, Dalian), at which such scholars as Terry Eagleton, Ralph Cohen, and Jonathan Arac addressed topics relevant to the postcolonial theory; the International Conference on Cultural Dialogue and Cultural Misreading (October 1995, Beijing), at which such scholars as Douwe Fokkema, Mario Valdés, and Gerald Gillespie touched upon this topic. On these two occasions, the Chinese scholars were able to discuss some academic issues directly in English with their Western colleagues.
- 3 To most of the Western scholars, postcolonialism is viewed as something rather radical, while in China, it is regarded (especially by Zhao Yiheng and Xu Ben) as something conservative having something in common with the government policy.
- 4 Along with the debate and discussion about the issue of postcolonialism in the Chinese context, we find that Bhabha has exerted more and more influence on some young avant-garde Chinese critics, especially Zhang Yiwu and Chen Xiaoming who are regarded as two of the major postmodern critics in current China and whose ways of writing are more closely related to that of Bhabha's than that of Said's or Spivak's.
- 5 In this aspect, cf. particularly Zhang Yiwu's recent publications in the Hong Kong Journal *Ershiyi shiji*, published between 1994 and 1996. Unfortunately, he is often misunderstood by the overseas Chinese scholars as a “spokesman” of official Chinese discourse.

- ⁶ Cf. Yu Hua's conversation with Pan Kaixiong on the first day of the new year, in *Zuojia* [Writers] Number 3, 1996. I do not doubt that many other young writers share his opinion.
- ⁷ One can easily read in such leading Chinese newspapers as *Guangming ribao* [Guangming Daily], run by the Government, and in such authoritative academic journals as *Beijing daxue xuebao* [Journal of Peking University] articles dealing with or criticizing postcolonialism and the colonization of Chinese culture.
- ⁸ Along with the deepening of the debate on postmodernism in the Third World, particularly in China, more and more Western scholars have realized that postmodernity is not a typical Western model. It could generate some different versions in some under-developed Oriental or Third World countries, for instance, in China. One such example is a special issue on postmodernity and China co-edited by Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong for the postmodern journal *boundary 2*, which, due in late 1997, includes a dozen articles.
- ⁹ Especially cf. Zhao Yiheng's challenging article "Post-Isms and Chinese New Conservatism" ['houxue' yu Zhongguo xin baoshouzhuyi]; the Chinese version appeared in *Ershiyi shiji*, 1995. 2: 4-17.
- ¹⁰ In this respect the most influential idea is put forward by Ji Xianlin, an eminent Oriental scholar and comparatist, who predicts that the twentieth-first century will be that of the Orient and that Oriental culture will dominate world culture.

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