

Perspective

*The Popularization of English and
the “Decolonization” of
Chinese Critical Discourse*

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Of all the major international languages, English is undoubtedly the most popular and influential, not only in academic research circles East and West, North and South, but also in foreign trade, business, entertainment, and in people's daily lives throughout the world. Since we are now in an era of globalization or transnational capitalism, the ability to function of English is becoming even more essential. Western influence on Chinese literature since the beginning of the twentieth century has been largely through translations from English. Since China's economic reforms and openness to the outside world, English has become attractive, even indispensable, to young people at work and play, and it is now the most popular foreign language used and taught in China. Many people, especially scientists, welcome the use of English as the primary means of communicating with the international community and of popularizing their research results, but a few, especially scholars of old-fashioned humanistic orientation adhering to traditional Chinese culture, are worried about the possibility that the popularity of English might well do harm to China's national and cultural identity and even “colonize” Chinese literary criticism.¹ This essay is an attempt to respond to the “decolonization” fears in Chinese scholarly and cultural circles.

I. Popularization of English in the
Context of Globalization

In the current era of global and transnational capital, English has been playing an increasingly important role in Chinese

scientific research and intellectual life, which finds particular embodiment in the recent wide use of the Internet. Departments of English Language and Literature in the West have been subject to the strong impact of Cultural Studies. The same is now happening in the critical scene of China's mainland. Some Chinese scholars fear that the rise of Cultural Studies actually tolls the bell for canonical literature and traditional literary studies,² while others welcome the lash of it so that traditional, elitist, literary canon could be enlarged and reformed.³ It is true that Cultural Studies has in recent years been introduced and discussed in Chinese critical circles along with postcolonialism and postcoloniality,⁴ which came to the fore with the winding down of the heated discussion of postmodernism or postmodernity in the Chinese context in the latter part of the 1980s. Undoubtedly, Cultural Studies, a recent phenomenon in the English-speaking world, raises a severe challenge against elite culture and canonical literature. It is to a large extent a symbol of the linguistic hegemony of the US, whose political influence and economic power have exerted a profound influence on the English language itself. The so-called "Americanisms" are examples of this. So to deal with the popularization of English without referring to the prevalence of Cultural Studies is not to understand the "decolonization" of Chinese cultural and critical discourse. Any cultural or literary phenomenon, either from the East or West, could be read as a "text" from an international perspective. Similarly, any culture or literature if it is to communicate and be examined in the broadest international context should have no choice but to function by means of English. This is a paradox for Chinese scholars of postcolonial studies: on the one hand, they intend to decolonize Chinese culture and critical discourse so as to defend and preserve the Chinese national and cultural identity; on the other hand, in order to communicate more effectively with international scholarship — or more exactly, with Western scholarship — they have to publish their research results in English, the truly international language of today's scholars.

Cultural Studies is also discussed extensively in Hong Kong and Taiwan at the moment. As in the Western context, Cultural Studies in these societies does not point to traditional, elitist culture, but rather to contemporary and even popular culture, including mass media and consumer culture. On the other

hand, as far as the scope of Cultural Studies research is concerned, it no doubt includes the following aspects:

First, there is ethnic study with its focus on postcolonial writing and criticism: this includes critical study of such postcolonial theorists as Edward Said, whose theoretical doctrine is characterized by his construction of "Orientalism," and by both ideological and disciplinary critique of this constructed concept; Gayatri Spivak, whose academic career and critical practice are informed by Derridean deconstruction and feminist-postcolonial cultural politics of the Third World intellectuals; and Homi Bhabha, whose postcolonial criticism is characterized by hybridization of national and cultural identity. With the deepening of the postcolonial debate, Bhabha's theory is becoming more attractive, especially among Third World critics and scholars whose critical focus is on the question of national identity and diaspora.

Second, there is area study with its focus on the politics, economy, law, history, and culture in some specific regions in an interdisciplinary manner: examples are studies of the Asian and Pacific regions in a comprehensive way. Within this framework, such important issues as globalization and anti-imperialist strategy are largely addressed. The recent Asian financial crisis, for example, is one among many other elements that are seen as a direct consequence of economic and financial globalization. As far as our own research areas in the humanities and social sciences are concerned, I hold that cultural globalization, as a direct consequence of economic globalization, might well affect us in positive and negative ways. Its positive effect is that it enables our cultural industry and academic research to be manipulated by the rules of market economy rather than government intervention, thereby linking up economic construction to cultural construction more closely. Its negative aspect lies in its making the production of elite culture or non-market-oriented cultural production more and more difficult, as a result of which, a new sort of hierarchy is formed. In the current Chinese context, two dangerous tendencies should be taken into account: first, the unremitting advocacy of cultural globalization in an attempt to use it to replace localization will cause

Chinese culture to lose its national identity; second, over-emphasizing cultural localization and rejecting all influence of foreign culture compounded with a hostile attitude toward globalization may well lead to another type of harmful cultural nationalism if pushed to extremes. The latter will most probably set back China's international cultural and academic exchange and even prove detrimental to its economic construction.

The third is gender study with its focus on female writing and women studies: this is characterized by shifting attention from politically oriented feminist cultural politics to emphasizing the importance of women's physiological and biological nature rather than their antagonistic position in a multicultural context. In this aspect, women's cultural identity is reconstructed as a doubly marginalized force moving from periphery to centre and finally reconstructing a new female critical discourse different from that of the male-centred one. In recent years, along with the flourishing of female writing in China, feminist criticism and women studies are becoming more attractive to both male and female scholars.

The fourth is mass media study with its focus on such popular cultural forms as film, television, advertising enterprises, and other types of cultural industry: this is what Cultural Studies scholars are most concerned about. In the face of the impact made by the non-elite-oriented cultural studies, canonical literature and elite culture face a severe challenge. The popularity of the Internet and the Web has raised a stronger challenge against fictive writing and even traditional movie and television shows. The domain of literary creation and literary criticism has become narrower. Quite a few literary scholars and critics are worried about the future of literature in the next millennium.

Such is my understanding of the situation of Cultural Studies both in the West and in China. I should say, all these aspects of Cultural Studies could be done by means of the popularization of English or the strengthening of the English linguistic hegemony. This is an inevitable symptom of the era of globalization, in which everybody feels tempted or pressured to learn to read and write in English, and no one can avoid being confronted with the penetration of English if he/she does not want to iso-

late himself/herself from the international community. Thus some might pose the question of how to preserve national and cultural identity in the face of the impact of English?

Obviously, in the context of globalization and transnational capitalism, scholars all agree that English functions as a new imperial agent without which one cannot keep abreast of recent advances in international scientific and scholarly research. With the popularization of English, cultural and national identity issues have attracted the attention of more and more scholars internationally who do not work exclusively in their own countries or regions. As Bhabha contends in his theory of hybridity or hybridization, globalization has made national and cultural identity more and more obscure. One person, whether at the centre (the First World) or periphery (the Third World), could function both at the centre and the periphery — as happens with transnational corporations that have no fixed headquarters or central power and cannot be controlled by any one national government. This is true of many scholars from the Oriental and Third World countries, including China. This transnational identity even blurs these scholars' linguistic identities, as a result of which English becomes their only means of communicating with each other. On the one hand, scholars in China's humanities and social sciences take pains to introduce the most recent development in Western academic research so as to renew traditional Chinese scholarship; on the other hand, they have to write their most important academic works in English and publish them in some leading international journals or with internationally prestigious university presses, in an attempt to have them recognized by their Western and international colleagues. This is a significant phenomenon in Chinese Cultural Studies.

Therefore, as the most commonly used international language in the current world known as the so-called “global village,” the influence of English is becoming wider and wider, especially in those countries where the modernizing process occurring at an accelerated pace.⁵ In these countries, to be modernized actually means to be Westernized in one way or another. Contemporary China's openness to the outside world

and to economic reform encourages the popularization of English. All major universities, both at national and provincial levels, have set up Departments of English or Foreign Languages with English as the major language teaching division. Teaching of other foreign languages is either developing slowly or just shrinking. Moreover, all university students, both at undergraduate and graduate levels, tend to take English as their compulsory course, no matter what subjects they are doing research in. In writing their PhD dissertations, candidates from whatever fields are encouraged to use the original references in a foreign language, usually in English, if they are to pass their defence. Any academic researcher or scholar are required to pass examination in at least one foreign language, usually English, before he/she could apply for promotion.⁶ In almost all China's urban high schools (and in some big cities, even primary schools), students are required to take a course of a foreign language, usually English, before they could get their graduate diplomas and degrees. Apart from its use in China's universities and research institutes, English is also widely used in any other commercial trades or fields of learning or even consumer and advertising enterprises. No doubt the teaching of English in China is flourishing (as is reflected in the income of English teachers). This is signalling that China's academic research is becoming increasingly internationalized or globalized, which would be impossible without the medium of English. This is not only a fact of life but a historical necessity in China. So, in the era of globalization, whether we like it or not, we have to know English; without it we can hardly survive and work successfully in the contemporary world.

II. "Decolonizing" Chinese Culture and Critical Discourse?

The advent of globalization enables China to establish an irreplaceable, unique presence in the world. As a direct consequence of economic and financial globalization, cultural globalization has affected China's intellectual life and literary discourse. It is incumbent on scholars to find themselves a place in the process of (cultural) globalization. Undoubtedly, cultural

globalization has brought us into conversation with the international community and scholarship more conveniently as more and more scholars master the English language and get easy access to the Internet. Within the field of literary theory and criticism in China, by means of English, some scholars, including myself, spend much time and energy translating into Chinese the most recent research works on critical theory and Cultural Studies published in the West, in an attempt to influence and renew contemporary Chinese literary theory and criticism. Since the beginning of the 1980s, such Western critical theories and cultural and academic trends as formalism, New Criticism, phenomenology, structuralism, existentialism, psychoanalysis or Freudianism, poststructuralism, hermeneutics, the aesthetics of reception, New Historicism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and Cultural Studies have entered one after another the literary and critical scene in contemporary China, exerting strong influence on Chinese literary theory and criticism as well as literary scholarship. The major writings of almost all Western modernist literary masters are now available in Chinese. These have had greater influence than many Chinese writers' works on a number of young writers. But on the other hand, there have also appeared some unhealthy tendencies; some young scholars whose theoretical and English foundation is rather shallow, chasing after the dominant intellectual fashions, often misuse critical terms borrowed from the West in their critical and theoretical works to such an extent that not only ordinary readers but even specialists in the field cannot understand what they are saying. Obviously, it is not good for China's literary theory and scholarship to carry on dialogue with the international literary scholarship on an unequal level. Therefore, it is not surprising that these Chinese scholars' radical practice has offended other groups of scholars and critics who would rather stick to traditional Chinese cultural identity and critical conventions uncontaminated by foreign influence. To these scholars, China is a major literary country with its own literary theory and criticism that now does not use its own voice in international critical and theoretical debates. They complain that Chinese literary scholars do not even have their own criti-

cal discourse.⁷ Thus the whole country has become a country without voice or without critical discourse. Out of their concern for the construction or reconstruction of China's critical and theoretical discourse, these scholars call for establishing their own critical and theoretical discourse and view it as one of the postcolonial strategies in the process of China's cultural "decolonization." In comparative literature studies, the call for setting up a "Chinese School" is once again reaching people's ears.⁸ It finds particular embodiment in several conferences on literary theory and comparative literature and in critical articles published in certain journals.⁹ Obviously, to those scholars, globalization and foreign influence are inevitably opposed to the development of Chinese literature and the construction of Chinese critical discourse and are thus the main causes of the "colonization" of Chinese culture and its critical discourse. And the agent of such influence is no doubt the popularization of English.

If we were to consider this phenomenon carefully, we would realize that whether or not Chinese culture and critical discourse are "colonized" depends on various factors. Some people hold that the popularization of English is responsible for the overall Westernization of Chinese literary theory and criticism in the past two decades, from content to discourse, since many of the theoretical doctrines and cultural and academic trends are introduced in China by means of English. As a result, Chinese culture has lost its own national identity, and critics have lost their own discourse and even their voice in international theoretical debates since they cannot speak in English. Others think it necessary to realize the decolonization of Chinese culture by means of setting up a "Chinese School" in comparative literature studies, which used to be attractive in the 1980s when comparative literature as a discipline was "rediscovered" after a long period of "silence" but which is now to me nothing but a reversed version of the old-fashioned "Eurocentrism" or "West-centrism," that is the so-called "China-centrism." They obviously have every right to raise the question of whether having a grasp of English serves as a measure of whether or not one is noble-minded and learned? In contrast,

in the West, especially in the US, few people know Chinese, let alone the profound spirit of Chinese culture and philosophical thinking. In order to go abroad for advanced study, Chinese students or scholars have first to pass English proficiency examinations; however, those invited Western experts working in China do not necessarily have the obligation of learning to speak Chinese. They are usually accompanied by young Chinese interpreters either in business or tourism. Is this not an imbalance in cultural exchange? We cannot deny the truth of all these observations, at least as things stand now, but we need to look at them more closely, more analytically.

We should acknowledge that these scholars and critics have reasons to worry about the penetrating power and hegemony of English in the international community and the "colonization" of Chinese culture and theoretical and critical discourse. Actually, since the beginning of the 1990s, along with the introduction of postmodernism and subsequently postcolonialism, there has been a "postist fad" (*houxue re*), especially a "postcolonial fad" used as an antagonistic strategy in the struggle against the so-called Western neo-colonialist cultural penetration, in the Chinese context. Many Chinese "conservatives" do think that Chinese culture and literary discourse have been "colonized," since the turn of the century, or more exactly, since the May Fourth Movement, which marked the beginning of new Chinese literature that is responsible for such a "colonized" state as is shown in the Chinese language that has been more or less "Europeanized" or "Westernized." It is true that Chinese culture and literature were almost free of any Western influence before that time; it is also true that after China opened its door to the outside world, Western academic thoughts and cultural theories flooded into China, having strong influence on modern Chinese culture and literary discourse. In this aspect, Lu Xun's principle of "grabism" is best known and has been most influential till today. Of course, it is both a good thing and a bad thing: it is good for Chinese culture and literature to move away from isolation and get into the main stream of world culture and literature; it is bad that the coming of these trends and theories has obscured the national

identity of Chinese culture that has had a long and splendid tradition but is now being "colonized." This dilemma confronting the Chinese scholar is more and more evident, making us more and more worried about the future of Chinese culture and literary criticism. In my view, however, to solve the problem and continue to communicate with the outside world will by no means belittle Chinese culture or deconstruct its literary discourse, for it is a necessary sacrifice in the course of modernizing Chinese culture and literature.

I want to argue that it is necessary to adopt a dialectical attitude toward those complicated phenomena in Chinese culture and literature. The popularization of English should not necessarily give rise to the "colonization" of Chinese culture and literary and critical discourse. We have taken great pains in the past few years to translate Western culture and literature into Chinese by means of English, which has certainly helped us to have a better understanding of the world and has contributed to the flourishing of Chinese literature and culture. But along with the heightening of China's position in the international community, the aesthetic value and profound thinking of Chinese culture and literature have been more and more recognized by Western sinologists as well as the broad reading public. In this sense, the popularization of English will in turn help us to introduce the very spirit of Chinese culture and literature to the outside world since English is still the most popular international language. Scientists have taken the lead in this aspect. It is time for us in the humanities to do likewise. In the case of comparative literature, one of the most international disciplines in China today, if we recognize that the first stage of comparative literature studies in China is characterized by influence-reception studies, especially how Western literature has influenced Chinese literature, then the second stage into which we are about to move will be characterized by paying more attention to how Chinese literature and culture is disseminated in the world.¹⁰ In this way, publishing our research results in English is absolutely necessary. We have only just started to do so. So it is certainly good for us to introduce the rich Chinese cultural heritage and its excellent literary works to the world by means of English so that Western people will know

what China is really like rather than what the country appears to be judging from books written out of ignorance, (mis)reading and (mis)construction of China and its people. In this way, to emphasize cultural decolonization does not necessarily mean writing off the popularization of English, for Chinese culture has never been “colonized,” although the country was once partly colonized (Wang, “Postcolonial Theory” 44). On the contrary, only by raising the level of our English proficiency in an all-round way can we communicate with the international community more efficiently. So the popularization of English will be no impediment at all to the construction of China’s literary and critical discourse. With the help of English, we could only understand the world better and do a great deal of good to the construction of Chinese critical discourse.

III. The Function of English in Constructing Chinese Critical Discourse

It is true that we are in an age of globalization, both economically and culturally. Whether we in China like it or not, it is a historical necessity beyond anyone’s expectation or resistance. Since China has officially entered the system of (socialist) market economy, it is already in the process of globalization. It cannot escape the relentless “law of the jungle.” In this aspect, it could be predicted that English will play a much more important role in people’s lives as the world today becomes smaller and smaller. We all live in a huge “global village,” in which we easily communicate with each other, exchanging views on different subjects and cooperating in undertaking huge joint ventures. If we all speak our own languages exclusively, what a chaotic state will exist, given the hundreds of languages in the world. We certainly have to agree upon one or two languages spoken by comparatively larger communities from different countries which serve as our means of communication. Given this, we could not but choose English as the most convenient means of international communication. In order to make our research results recognized by international scholars, we have to write our major works in English or translate our most impor-

tant ideas into English — which disappoints conservative scholars. They might well ask why are all the prestigious international journals published in English instead of Chinese, which is spoken by largest number of people in the world as their mother tongue, and why are the members of Nobel Committee for Literature not able to read Chinese literary works in original? It is true that China is one of the largest countries in the world with the largest population, that is, the Chinese-speaking population is the largest in the world. Yet this statistic does not make it possible for people all over the world to communicate with each other in Chinese now. It is obviously unrealistic, not only because the Chinese government could not afford to support those who are interested in learning the language even though there might be many people from different countries who intend to take Chinese courses, but, more important, the Chinese language is one of the most difficult languages to master, even for many Chinese intellectuals. Furthermore, the Chinese characters are not compatible with internationally prevailing linguistic system or the Internet. Since English is already the most popular language used by people from a great many countries either as their native tongue or official language or the first foreign language, why should we not use it at least for the moment? We cannot help but realize — if reluctantly — that it is our only choice; without English we would end up isolating ourselves again from international scholarship.

It is understandable that within our own fields of literary criticism and cultural studies, scholars are very much worried about the possible “colonization” of Chinese culture and literary and critical discourse. But their strategy should not be to prevent people from studying English. If we have a good grasp of English, we would be able to participate on international academic discussions and have a “voice” although in a non-native tongue. But if we do not study English — as was the practice on the mainland during the years of 1949 to 1976 — Chinese scholars would not be able to have any “voice” on any international academic occasion and would be forced to speak among themselves or to a limited number of sinologists.

Here I should mention one exciting fact. Chinese learning is becoming more and more popular both in China and elsewhere.¹¹ More and more foreigners come to China not only to learn to speak the language for doing business with China, but also to understand the very spirit of Chinese culture and literature. What revelations have we got from such an exciting phenomenon? In the past, such a situation would be impossible. Those who were interested in doing business with China came only to learn the Chinese language, by means of which they could easily negotiate with their Chinese partners. But now Western intellectuals admit that Chinese culture could enrich their own culture. So more and more Western young people are coming to China not only to learn the language but also to work on their MA's and even PhD's studies after attaining their first degrees. But in their preliminary stage of schooling, in order to make them interested in Chinese culture and literature, we must lecture on these topics in English. Eventually, they would find that something is missing in learning Chinese culture and literature through the medium of English, and they would want to read and appreciate Chinese culture and literature directly in Chinese. I dare say that in the future, along with the rapid growth of China's economy and the steady development of Chinese culture and literature, the Chinese language will become increasingly important and popular in international communication. If that is a likely realization in the future, then we should attach more importance to the study of English now, for it will help us to popularize Chinese culture and literature rather than “colonize” them. It then is absolutely unnecessary to launch a movement to “decolonize” Chinese culture and literary and critical discourse in an era of globalization.

NOTES

- 1 This could find particular embodiment in the recent fad of Chinese studies (*guoxue*), which is obviously a postcolonial strategy set up to oppose Western influence on Chinese culture and academic study.
- 2 In this respect, the authoritative *Wenyibao* (*Literature and Art Gazette*) launched a discussion in late 1998 on cultural industry and cultural studies. Those who are opposed to the lash of Cultural Studies are usually scholars of English literature before the contemporary era, as the dominance of Cultural Studies has made it difficult for them to get published.

- 3 Some Chinese journals of literary studies, especially the authoritative *Wenyi yanjiu* (*Studies of Literature and Art*), adopt a pluralistic attitude towards the new cultural and academic trends, such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, and, recently, Cultural Studies. See articles by Wang Ning, Zhang Yiwu, Tao Dongfeng, and Yang Naiqlao in the issues of the journal between 1997 and 1998.
- 4 Since 1995, Cultural Studies has been discussed extensively in some major critical and learned journals. In August 1995, The International Conference on Cultural Studies: China and the West was co-sponsored by Peking University and the University of Virginia. As a result, a special issue, on the basis of selected conference papers, was published in *New Literary History*, 28.1 (1997). Eight papers were published in Chinese in *Guowai wenxue* (*Foreign Literatures*), 2 (1996).
- 5 For instance, at the moment, China's modernizing process is actually mixed up with a sort of postmodernity, which manifests itself in those advanced special economic zones, such as Shenzhen and Zhuhai, while in the broad rural areas and small cities, its modernizing process is still of certain premodern elements.
- 6 It is true that due to their refusal to take the English examination, some researchers' promotions in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences were delayed even though they obtained their PhDs in Western universities.
- 7 In this respect, Cao Shunqing is a representative. See Cao, "Wentun shiyuzheng yu wenhua bingtai" ("Lacking in Discourse in Literary Criticism and Cultural Sickness"), in *Wenyi zhengming* (*Debate on Literature and Art*), 2 (1996): 50-58.
- 8 Actually, the idea of setting up a "Chinese School" of comparative literature was first put forward by the comparatists overseas (and in Taiwan), such as John Deeney and Chen Peng-hsiang in the 1970s. In the 1980s, when comparative literature was introduced into China's mainland, this idea was once popular and attractive. Now this issue is raised again by Cao Shunqing and others, but its influence is much smaller and less attractive in the broad context of Cultural Studies and globalization.
- 9 For instance, at the Sixth National Congress of Chinese Comparative Literature Association (2000), there will be a session exclusively dealing with the issue of a "Chinese School" in comparative literature studies.
- 10 To fill this gap in China's comparative literature studies, Ji Xianlin and I have edited a series on Chinese Culture in the West, which includes eight books dealing with the influence of Chinese culture on, and its dissemination in, Europe and North America. It is published by Hebei People's Press (1998).
- 11 The indicator is that more and more self-supported schools for teaching Chinese to foreigners have appeared in Beijing and other Chinese cities.

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