

Fireworks in Afterimage: My Encounter with the Eighties

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If you are going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair.

--Scott McKenzie, "San Francisco"

I was a Ph.D. student at Stanford for the better part of the eighties. And that was the time when my life was all of a sudden inundated with all kinds of theories. But this period cannot be looked upon in isolation. With the immediately preceding period serving as the trigger for this immersion and the immediately following as the time of praxis on the basis of the theories that I came into contact with, my life at Stanford became the liminal phase of a rite of passage through theory, out of which I too claim my humble share in the songs of experience of our times.

Before I went to San Francisco, my exposure to contemporary theories was limited or at least not as up to date as students of today. The theoretical scene in Taiwan back then was still a bit behind due to the hurdles in information circulation imposed by, among other things, martial law and the blockade of the ocean. Buying foreign books was never easy, let alone having other channels as we do today. Nevertheless, we managed to have bits and pieces of information from the other side of the world, trying to climb out of the pit and comfort zone formed by New Criticism that our professors had herded us in.¹

I became interested in contemporary theory not only because I found New Criticism to be lacking as an academic methodology, but also because there were

¹ When I was an undergrad, the only theory we had was New Criticism, which was in vogue then.

personal stakes involved too.

During my junior year in college, I was the chief editor of the campus daily. And having an interest in creative writing, I devoted a small space in the daily to poetry. But that space elicited vehement criticism from students in the College of Business and Social Sciences; they argued that, with the nation in bumpy times, lyricism is the last thing we need. For them, if literature were to continue to exist, it had to engage “social reality.” That was but the kind of commonplace accusation against poetry—and, for that matter, literature and art in general—especially in times when the national fate seems at stake. But I was caught by surprise because neither New Criticism nor any other older theories had prepared me for defending against such attacks.

Those attacks were actually among the first stirrings of a monumental social change that was underway and which I am glad I was part of whenever I look back in hindsight. But at that particular historical juncture, I, as well as most Taiwanese, was not able to look ahead and see what was coming—until I started my doctoral studies at Stanford. During my time at Stanford the changes became a tsunami that swept through the island. I was holding my breath observing these changes from overseas. Luckily, with the newly acquired theories and the geographical distance, I was able to have a clearer view of what was going on.

For many of us it was so hopeful a time in Taiwan’s history; possibilities seemed to keep opening up endlessly. On the one hand, society was in the process of trying to shake off the constraints imposed by martial law, but on the other hand, with the newly released unformed vitality, Taiwan was also beginning to grapple with the amorphousness of its identity. And it was obvious that the old discourses were not able to fully map what was happening. For instance, one famous critic once deplored “prophylactically” that Taiwan’s literature would end up being summarized in a few lines in an imagined future book of Chinese literary history as part of the “Chinese literature on the periphery.”² A lament like that would have very well been dissolved by a deconstructive reading of the idea of national literature later on. But that was then.

The above-mentioned statement provoked strong reactions from the Nativists, whose contestatory movement began in 1972 with essays challenging the worth of poetry.³ Although having released huge amounts of pent-up energy, the Nativists (who later split into two camps, pro-unification and pro-independence,

² See Zhan Hong-zhi.

³ This was a major reaction against the Modernist dominance of Taiwan’s literary scene during the sixties. It began as a literary movement but soon expanded to comprehend the socio-cultural as well as political dimensions of society. In the late seventies, ironically, some proponents turned against its guiding ideology,

roughly Chinese nationalists and Taiwanese nationalists) could only think and argue in nationalist terms (despite its apparent Marxist façade).⁴ But even back then it seemed to me counter-productive to engage in politics in conventional terms: nationalism vs. nationalism. But I did not yet know there were other alternatives.

As someone who loved to read and write poetry since very young, I had also been fascinated by another line of inquiry. Growing up in a folk tradition where everything was tinged with a flash of mystery, I always wondered, given the inexplicable appeal of poetry and my urge to write poetry, if poetry was only words. Was it connected to something larger? In this case, however, I was not concerned about poetry's connection to social reality, but about a larger reality that would involve the social but larger than the social. The limited theory I was exposed to in high school (such as T. S. Eliot and the French Symbolists) already allowed me to begin exploring this connection. The term "pure poetry," for instance, intrigued me for some time because it seemed to offer a connection of poetry with a larger reality. But obviously, these formulations were far from enough.

In other words, from the very beginning of my interest in theoretical issues, I was already confronted with the two most fundamental and almost perennial questions, which are apparently distinct but in fact interrelated. But in my college days, the seeming lack of connection between literature and social reality seemed to compel immediate response from literature lovers like myself, since in times of national crisis (which was what we were going through in the seventies) politics tend to demand that literature (and arts in general) serve political purposes. But this other concern, though simmering on the back burner, never slipped from my mind for a moment.

It was at Stanford that I found the vocabulary and theoretical framework with which to reflect on the problems I had encountered in Taiwan in the seventies, including both the social ones and the ontological ones.

I began my doctoral studies in 1981. And for me Stanford simply was a huge open-ended book. I spared no time in reading books from the library which were mostly unrelated to literature. I was just trying to satisfy my insatiable appetite for knowledge and make up for lost time.

namely, left-wing Chinese nationalism, in a patricidal move by converting to Taiwanese nationalism, and the movement split. For a preliminary understanding of the Nativist movement, see for instance my essay, "Becoming Cyborgian: Postmodernism and Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan."

⁴ To be fair, the movement was the first endeavor that fought for a pluralist society, but unfortunately, loaded with a nationalist baggage, it ended up splitting into two opposing nationalist camps and thereby eclipsing its more pluralist side. See my article, "Becoming Cyborgian."

Of all the fields of knowledge that I came into contact with, contemporary theory was the most intellectually stimulating. It was almost an experience of epiphany or *wu* in Chinese.⁵ Absorbing like a sponge whatever was available—structuralism, poststructuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and Deleuze (whom unfortunately I thought was just another poststructuralist back then)—pretty much everything was palatable and therefore swallowed.

I still remember the thrill derived from reading about structuralism. (Who didn't read Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* in those days?) How can one derive from thousands of stories a pattern formed by the interactions of only a few elements? That I felt was an experience close to epiphany, of getting really close to some kind of fundamental reality.

But it was deconstruction that presented to me the most radical of all contemporary theoretical thinking. Again, it was Culler's book that wonderfully encapsulated everything you needed to know about deconstruction. To a great extent, it provided a totally different perspective on understanding almost every contemporary issue that we in Taiwan were facing, from whether we should worship the Mazu Goddess to what being Chinese or Taiwanese means. That deconstruction-generated vertigo was just so liberating that the edifice of many monumental constructs that had seemed impregnable dissolved one after another. It was a tremendous pleasure to see this happening, one derived not from dismantling well-defined categories but from releasing the vitality trapped in them. Deconstructive readings of the world of common sense, consolidated by Romanticism and blinkering our vision, invited us to transvaluate every bit of common sense.

That was why the first essay that I wrote when I returned to Taiwan to take up a teaching job was about "deconstructing China."⁶ I did not mean to "destroy" China, but rather to help liberate the vitality and possibilities constricted by the term "China." Unfortunately, though, the word "deconstructing" has since become a faddish term and come to mean "destroying" or "debunking" in both academic and non-academic usages.

But as the clash between political beliefs in Taiwan intensified after the mid-eighties, I began to wonder in the back of my mind what makes people believe in what they believe in, despite the thrill derived from reading deconstruction and the whole poststructuralist gamut. Is it really rational calculation that founds belief? But then why is communication so difficult? Deconstruction was not able to answer that. In time, Lacanian psychoanalytical theory provided me with an eye-

⁵ I am fully aware of the incommensurability between these two terms due to their different religious overtones.

⁶ See Hsien-hao Liao, "Jiegou Zhongguo" ("Deconstructing China").

opening account: it is not rational calculation but the effect of affect that is at work. In other words, ultimately people are made to believe in what they believe in because of the Lacanian Real understood as *sinthome*. And, as Žižek has suggested, being the core of one's identity, the *sinthome*, or what he calls the "particular absolute," needs to be "respected" (Žižek 106-20). As a result, there is no point in trying to deprecate what supports an opposing identity because by definition that nondescript affect is what makes one human and unique. The Real being the support of the Symbolic, every time we make a choice, any choice, it is in fact affect in the disguise of rational choice. That being the case, there is a limit to "rational" communication, beyond which there is only the possibility of negotiations between different configurations of affective fixatedness.

But within a few years, before one realized it, the carnivalesque atmosphere of the late eighties dissipated and was replaced by a new militancy, which began, unfortunately, to polarize the society. In this militancy, all the theories we had learned in the West seemed to have become merely cosmetics to what each person had already believed in. But what is worse, there was little awareness that many of these arguments were only affective fixatedness disguised as rational communication. And this became clear in a prolonged debate over identity that occurred in the mid-90s in which I also participated.⁷

At the center of the debate was the exchange between myself and a colleague from the same department. Interestingly, although we both drew on Lacanian theories, we came up with almost diametrically opposing arguments concerning identity formation in Taiwan. And the point of contention was whether identity could be re-formed on the basis of a rational calculation that could judge one identity to be more beneficial than another and therefore more preferable. The metaphor used by my opponent was a familiar one, which was once used by Fu Si-nian during the May Fourth Movement when the call to rid the Chinese people of the burden of traditional culture was quite intense: pouring out the stale water (the old and harmful identity) from the cup and refill it with clean water (a new and beneficial one).⁸ I, however, argued that ultimately identity formation is not based on rational choice but is inflected by the affective register of our psyche, which may in fact play a foundational role in identity formation, as corroborated by Lacanian

⁷ The debate in *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* (*Chinese and Foreign Literature*) from May 1995 through July 1996 was the most recent large-scale debate over identity in Taiwan. It involved six scholars and twelve essays and was symptomatic of the identity dispute at that historical moment.

⁸ See Chaoyang Liao. Fu's original words that forged a strikingly similar metaphor are as follows: "If it is an empty bottle, then we can just fill it with clean water; if it has dirty water in it, then we have to pour the water out before we fill the bottle with clean water." See Fu 53.

theories about affect. And ultimately one has to “respect,” à la Žižek, the other’s affective fixatedness and be ready to negotiate.

I was not trying to argue that there was only the affective dimension, but I did argue that if we were not aware of how powerful this dimension is, then we would be duped into believing that we are being rational through and through in preferring one identity to another. And instead of engaging in negotiations, the society will slip into oppositions between what is right and what is wrong, between God and Satan.

Unfortunately, after the lifting of martial law, that was what happened; different takes on identity were taken by some to be engaged in a struggle of life and death. The reason was simple: one nationalism declined but another took its place. Caught in the uncertainty surrounding identity, much of the liberating potential we saw in the theories we read came to little except to provide props for staging a new nationalism.

This brings us to the concept of liminality. In 2000, I published an essay entitled “Becoming Cyborgian: Postmodernism and Nationalism in Taiwan,” in which I argued that the uncertainty surrounding Taiwan’s identity in fact allows us to have relatively easy access to liminality and put Taiwan in an advantageously strategic position than many other societies, as long as we know how to tap this potential by means of a “politics of amorphousness.”⁹ To be sure, no one can actually live in liminality or be naive enough to even think of a prolonged liminal state. But living close to liminality is how Taiwan has come to be Taiwan, beginning as it did as a haven for the pirates and for some time sustaining a nomadic maritime way of living that among other things waged guerrilla warfare against the state.¹⁰ As the exclusionary nationalist thinking has once again come to grip the imagination of some corners of Taiwan, re-learning how to take advantage of liminality can open up all kinds of alternatives.

The anxiety in the face of liminality led me to re-read Walter Benjamin. What did we miss in our encounter with the eighties? Now that everything becomes once again the victor’s history, what can we rescue from the past as ruins? Not only the recent past, but the distant past as well, since the Chinese past has always been used to justify the superiority of the West and to confirm that (Western) modernity is destiny.

Through the fragments of the ruins, what I see is the flickering transcendental nebula which has been eclipsed by the poststructuralist timidity toward the ontological. Amid the poststructuralist boisterousness, there were also dissenting

⁹ See Hsien-hao Liao, “Becoming Cyborgian” 175-79.

¹⁰ See Hsien-hao Liao, “Huaren haiyang” (“The Sino-Maritime”).

voices, but the deconstructive fad deferred, to use the deconstructionist term, this possibility for some time until Deleuze was re-discovered whose thought, among others, brought about the new materialist/posthuman turn. What exactly is the problem of this timidity toward ontology?

The caution against logocentrism, though for good reason, unwittingly has trapped us in the given. And the resultant fear of uncertainty and vertigo in the end turns the deconstructive spirit upside down, ironically making it an excuse for taking “what is” to be “what ought to be.” We have come full circle—once again we are back to insiderism and identity politics based on essentialism. Having been forced by poststructuralism to live like flatliners, we are not able to shake modernity at its foundation. Everything from nationalism to anthropocentrism stemmed from the disenchantment of the world which has turned it (as well as the humans) into “resources.” And the deconstructive drive seemed to have simply aggravated this modernist tendency.

The longing for the transcendental (not “the transcendent”) was once poetically and powerfully conjured up by Benjamin in his conception of aura. Benjamin believes that aura, being associated with the idea of “profane illumination,” exists everywhere in everything. Though a concept he developed in order to bring about redemption in the loser’s history, “profane illumination” has to be induced from, say, smoking hashish which transmits the smoker into a state where time and space are inseparable and, in Baudelaire’s eyes, is connected to metaphysical forces rather than material social conditions.¹¹ Unfortunately, Benjamin’s later discovering of Marxism prevented him from further developing his earlier intuition about the demonic potential as well as the transtemporal nature of aura.¹²

But is it true that, like Benjamin, we have to choose between material conditions and ontology? That is why, ultimately, we have to ask what the connection exactly obtains between the ontological and the social. Deleuze and the new materialist thinking timely intervene in this discussion. Read against Deleuze, deconstruction’s problem becomes so clear: it understands the transcendental to be inevitably “transcendent” and does not seem to be aware of the alternative tradition in the West which treats the transcendental as more or less “immanent,” let alone non-Western traditions. And this blindness toward the traditions of immanence makes

¹¹ For more on this, see Cohen 212.

¹² In his later piece “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin strips his materialism of its ontological implications, reducing it to the material (social) conditions and thereby relegating aura to the naiveté of a bygone era. The auratic passage to the ontological is then blocked. But the powerful “presence” evoked by aura nevertheless still beckons. For a discussion on the difference between the early Benjamin and the later Benjamin in terms of their attitudes toward the transcendental, see Hansen.

me realize that the eighties did not take us far enough. Having begun our quest from the East, we eventually need to come back to the East, and more specifically the Chinese cultural traditions, to fully understand what the eighties have given us and what they did not deliver. For the Chinese philosophical traditions, all major strands included, predominantly consider the transcendental as “immanent.”

For someone from the non-Western world, studying in the West is always a double-edged sword. The point of going West is to learn about Western modernity, but one might also drown in too much Western modernity. And this became flagrantly clear some years ago when, for instance, the local queer movement began tradition-bashing as if Chinese traditional culture(s) were no different from the Western culture(s) which, due to its Judeo-Christian provenance, has a deep-running animosity toward homosexuality. Reminiscent of Marxist periodization of Chinese history, those who have unreflectively appropriated queer theories risk “transplanting” Western problems onto the Chinese/Taiwanese context, which they nevertheless mistake for local problems, and as a result tend to recommend solutions that miss the mark.¹³

The grand narrative that has been internalized by the intellectuals in the non-Western world is, as mentioned above, “Western modernity is human destiny.” Despite all the so-called postcolonial theories, this myth has never been dispersed; if anything, it has been strengthened by the deconstructive brand of postcolonial theory’s ambiguous attitude toward colonialism. What has transpired in Taiwan is the strangest phenomenon; postcolonial theory has been stretched to its absurd opposite in a Moebius loop: “To be postcolonial is to be pro-colonial.” The bourgeois valorization of colonial rule as the modernity-bestower famously criticized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interestingly has had its most unabashed manifestation in Taiwan partly because of the ambivalent concept of “enabling violence” Spivak herself concocted.¹⁴ The official discourse in Taiwan on colonialism has now become, “Despite everything, colonialism brought us modernity,” which echoes almost verbatim the Japanese right-wing revisionist historiography on colonialism.

Looking back from all these vantage points, the eighties suddenly seem quite conservative in the sense that, with the engagement with the transcendental subtracted, none of the theoretical brands derived from deconstruction were able to truly forestall the essentialist backlash. It is not until Deleuze and new materialism that deconstruction’s fallibility is somehow rectified and that we finally may have

¹³ Traditionally, China was much more tolerant of male homosexuality than the West. It was in fact Western modernity with its inherent protestant morality that stigmatized and disapproved homosexual and semi-homosexual phenomena in China. For more on this, see Hinsch.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Moore-Gilbert 76.

a chance to truly critique modernity by means of the light they have shed on the relationship between the social and the ontological.

From a posthuman or new materialist point of view, the two cannot really be separated. Or, to be more precise, they are indeed two sides of one coin. Since everything is material and all matter has vibrancy, does it not follow that all matter has “life” or even some kind of “consciousness”? From material agency, it is only a short distance to panpsychism, which further confirms the myriad things as forming what Bruno Latour calls a “common world.”¹⁵

The point in radically understanding the relationship between the two is that it provides us with a philosophical foundation for considering the non-human to be on equal footing with the humans. Only with this recognition of the common ground of all things can we hope to debunk the myth that modernity is destiny and rectify all its attendant discourses such as exclusionary nationalism and anthropocentrism.

Yet, to quite an extent, the posthuman turn is unwittingly a move toward the Eastern (Chinese) immanent thinking. And that is the point about coming back to the Chinese cultural traditions that I mentioned earlier. For these traditions—from Taoism and Zen Buddhism all the way to folk wisdom and practices such as *feng shui* and *qi gong*—have pushed farther than most of the new materialist branches. Featuring an impulse reminiscent of and yet more radical than the posthuman endeavor, they could very well complement the posthuman turn and urge it to take bolder moves.¹⁶

I remember that a few years ago after a conference in Evora, Portugal, I went to Lisbon for a short visit. That afternoon I took a walk all the way to the mouth of Lisbon River. Sitting on a rock facing west, I suddenly realized I had reached the extreme end of the (Western) world and that, had I been a Greek native in Homer’s times, I would probably have been thinking there was nothing else to pursue beyond the horizon of the vast sea, and I might have felt lost. But I am no Greek, and I knew very well that day—and always will—that there is a place out there hidden from view, which is called the East.

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¹⁵ For a discussion of material agency, see for instance Barad; for panpsychism, see for instance Shaviro. For the idea of “common world,” see Latour 53.

¹⁶ For a preliminary understanding of the posthuman impulse in Chinese Taoist thinking, see for instance my essays “Becoming Butterfly” and “Transversally Yours.”

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