

Technology, Posthumanism, Theory: An Interview with Chaoyang Liao

Hung-chiung Li

Chaoyang Liao is Professor Emeritus at National Taiwan University. He received his PhD degree in East Asian Studies from Princeton University in 1987, and he was on the faculty of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University until 2019 when he retired. He was the president of the Comparative Literature Association of the Republic of China (Taiwan) from 2012 to 2014 and the founding president of the Taiwan Humanities Society from 2012 to 2014. He has offered courses on many theoretical topics in the MA and PhD programs of his department, enriching Taiwan's theory studies by introducing cutting-edge discourses and problematics. His career made him a significant incubator and mentor for many younger scholars. His main research interests include Buddhist thought, literary theory, psychoanalysis, media and technology, science fiction, game studies, and translation theory. He has also written extensively on fiction and cinematic works from Taiwan and elsewhere.

This interview was planned as a supplementary project to the feature topic of "Theoretical Figurations: Up Close and Updated" in *Ex-position*, and in part proceeds in a way that bears on the essays for the topic, as readers should be able to perceive. Nonetheless, the main axis begins by addressing the recent challenges, as well as possibilities, posed by AI to the humanities, by means of revisiting Liao's 1990s' engagement with internet technology to connect it with his latest thoughts on AI. This path invokes the historical conjuncture in which the World Wide Web emerged to impact the humanities and, in comparison with the situation today, incited much more hopes through, for example, images of hyperlinked thoughts

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Hung-chiung LI, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Taiwan University, Taiwan

and cyborg (post)humanity.

As the interview proceeds, earlier theoretical figures, including Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Gilles Deleuze, are brought in to line up with late coming Bernard Stiegler, Rosi Braidotti, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Hiroki Azuma, for conjointly appraising and reappraising the current situation. In this short meeting space, resembling a flash of critical history at a standstill, what might be the signs of history and thought that, flitting by, this interview helps illuminate and readers are able to read? To go through this theory-scape with Liao, a figure in Taiwan who went through these thinkers and their times and practices, the interview hopes that the thoughts and reflections of this revisiting or repetition, combined with up-close theory engagements, can trace out some forces that point toward the possibility of difference, suggesting ways to “go through the wall,” in Liao’s own words here.

Hung-chiung Li (hence LI): In the 1990s, you embarked on the theoretical inquiry into informatics or cybernetics, leading Taiwan’s research on this emerging field. At that time, you came up with a pedagogical innovation, training your graduate students to write simple HTML webpages. What was the concept behind the innovation? We are now seeing seismic changes brought about by generative AI such as ChatGPT, causing great concerns and worries in academia, especially the humanities. The core faculties valued by the humanities, particularly thinking and writing—the latter having a decisive significance for poststructuralism and Bernard Stiegler—will be considerably “distributed” to AI technologies. What impact, changes, or possibilities, in your assessment, will (generative) AI bring to the humanities? And if you are now to offer a course pertaining to the problematics of AI, how would you design the course? What would be the concept behind it?

Chaoyang Liao (hence LIAO): Let me begin with my early experience with technology. I got my first desktop computer a few years after IBM introduced its PC in 1981. It was a cheap clone made by Sanyo, with 128K bytes of system memory. It took up much of my time. There was little support specific to such imperfect clones but the information I needed was very much in the air, so I learned 8086 machine code instructions and used a debugger to explore the inner workings of the machine, just to know it better. Eventually I learned to write small programs in assembly language. That was how I came to know first-hand the kind of small windows that could open up in the early development of technologies where users, for

a time, were granted easy access to, and could be up to, makers' knowledge.

A second window opened up in the 1990s, a time when no one in software was writing in low-level languages any longer but the internet, in turn, was in its stage of evolving fluidity. It was still possible for users to be close to the mechanics of web articulation. Here the presence of makers is felt in prescribed relations that tie each hyperlink to an address in the space of the web, an explicit though limited figure of the web of thought itself. Theoretical discourses took up the new turn, too optimistically in hindsight, as the beginning of a new era of public culture truer to the non-linearity of relations.

Part of my attempt to include hypertextual writing in my courses is linked to such optimism, but more importantly, I saw in hypertext a form of citationality that was clearly a mirroring of academic writing itself, using hyperlinks to imitate and amplify the use of footnotes and cross-references. Such writing seemed to bring a new turn to the user's knowledge, registering it as part of the image of thought constructed by the maker. At the same time, by thinking of such knowledge as a novelty divorced from conventional practice, theoretical discourse did not make much of such mirroring, and the technology soon turned to other directions with the rise of web marketing and social media.

Such a missed encounter, mainly between technology and the humanities, is itself a figure of the continuing degradation of knowledge-making in the humanities that has been going on for quite a long time. In any case, the recent major turn in technology, epitomized by generative AI, signifies a further distancing between maker and user, as generative AI is subject to high demands for hardware, software, and data resources and in practice is unable to escape industrialization. The tightening grip of social control systems only adds aggravation. The humanities can do hardly anything as it has been lagging behind since the last window was closed. If you look at the development of "digital humanities," you can see that most of its followers pursue a kind of user's application of new technology to serve the humanities. This path is confirmed by new models of AI appealing to users by API-driven, "worry-free" interfaces. Again, most responses to new AI in the humanities look for ways to use it, to adapt to rather than "adopt" the new, as Bernard Stiegler would say.

What we need today, possibly to correct the late clock a bit, is a theoretical "generative" review of the development of AI from a humanities angle, to reconsider the making of humanities knowledge as relevant to a better understanding of intelligence in the humanities as well as elsewhere. Personally, I would begin with a return to Douglas Hofstadter's milestone work, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, which sort of concluded the first wave of AI scholarship. Hofstadter has been largely brushed

aside in the current wave of AI practice, but his way of linking technology with humanities intelligence remains underexplored in theoretical discourses in AI research and in the humanities.

LI: This sounds quite interesting. Would you please explain how Hofstadter links up these two kinds of intelligence?

LIAO: I don't have a clear picture, but Hofstadter's later work, which explores cognitive mechanisms in concept and analogy making, is explicitly linked to literary devices but thought out in an entirely technical way. The slow path he and his group chose to pursue, the path of "general" intelligence as differentiated from deep learning and data-dependent models, may prove to be useful when the current wave of AI development hits its "barriers of meaning," to use a phrase from a recent book by Melanie Mitchell, Hofstadter's student. And, who knows, the family resemblances between slow AI projects and those of literature or the humanities may yet allow the two sides to intersect in some way.

LI: In your research on the posthuman, Stiegler is a central figure for discussion. He criticizes nascent philosophy, including poststructuralism, for avoiding or repressing "the technical question" in its discourses, leading to its inability to recognize and tackle the "pharmacological condition" of knowledge. In his analysis of the university, he brings into relief this condition, in explicit disagreement with Jacques Derrida's idea of "the university without condition," which mainly refers to "the unconditional freedom" of the university to think and question. Stiegler asserts that in struggling for freedom, the university or philosophy, in spite of or precisely because of this condition, has to undertake research on the toxic and therapeutic aspects of mnemonic, especially today's digital technologies. How do you see Stiegler's claim regarding the relationship between philosophy, or theory, and the pharmacological condition of knowledge, including theoretical knowledge itself? Do you agree with him that theory has to engage with mnemotechnologies? Would that not reduce the scope of theory and simplify the conditions of knowledge as well as of emancipation or therapeutics?

LIAO: As Yuk Hui points out, Stiegler's scheme has a place for tertiary protentions but is in need of more elaboration to clarify their connections with the sphere of tertiary retentions or collective memory. One way to respond to Hui's suggestion is to take up the angle of the "infinite game," a term picked up by Stiegler from James P. Carse, referring to the way players play the game not only to win but to

change the “rules” of the game or its “literature”—styles, strategies, conventions, history in general. Such infinity covers finitude but is not limited by the latter, in the same way as history covers the past but is still open to the future. Finitude is indeed a key issue in the current state of AI development. Generative AI, as we know, is limited by available datasets which, however massive, cannot produce a soul with real infinity and an openness to the future.

To refer to a soul takes us to the posthuman. Stiegler is usually not thought of as an avowed posthumanist, but for me, he has a peculiar way of conflating the human and the posthuman, a corrective to the usual trap of detached posthumanism hiding a humanist transcending view. Here my point is to place the soul in the maker’s position, in the context of what is called up in the first volume of Stiegler’s *Technics and Time*: the “invention” of the human, a crossing of the *who* and the *what* or, arguably, of the human and the posthuman.

As for the pharmacological condition, it is precisely because the human is invented, or made, that it is embedded in *techné* and accompanied by built-in toxicity. Here Stiegler is not simply repeating Derrida in referring to the *pharmakon*. For example, Derrida assumed that the humanities are first all right and then “held hostage” by fields of science and engineering, whereas I take Stiegler to be saying that there is inherent toxicity to begin with, which then must go through a therapeutic transition. If you look at the humanities in Taiwan, you can see that some fields are different from others; English, for example, began—was made—as mainly “applied,” first to take part in projects of cultural modernization in the Japanese period and later also to support access to foreign markets.

In any case, Derrida presented the “university without condition” with all sorts of conditions, summed up in the claim that it pertains to *mondialisation* rather than globalization, in other words to a conditioned world. What he proposed may be said to be a detemporalized figure of temporal intelligence, finding a circle of being “without condition” amidst the wider conditioning of other worlds. We are sailing into uncertain waters here, but the agreements and disagreements between Derrida and his disciple point to important issues we face today. For example, apropos of the “echo chambers” of web communication in our digital societies, couldn’t we say that they resemble a kind of worlds without condition? If fake news and AI-generated videos existed or were more prevalent in Derrida’s days, would he have paid more attention to the making beyond the use of truth? Making, and makers’ intelligence, transmitted through exteriorized memory, becomes central here.

LI: You seem to suggest that making is more creative regarding knowledge production, or human productions in general. Martin Jay has foregrounded a series of

figures centered on *poiēsis* and *technē* that accounts for the Western accentuation of “making,” production, and creation. Wouldn’t the emphasis on making repeat the same tendency that led to what Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer criticized as calculative reason? Or, allow me to draw on Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “decreation,” which he employs to read Bartleby’s practice of deactivation or inoperation. Shouldn’t we posit and valorize the figure of the inhuman, taken as a kind of non-figure, prior to various “positive” images of the human (super)maker, the *homo faber*, as these maker images are too predominantly suggested by the figure of the posthuman or transhuman?

LIAO: No, making is not more creative than using, but, in the mode of potentiality, it is more “in the know.” It is not opposed in a simple way to using either. For example, if you know enough about hypertext coding, most browsers today allow you to modify a webpage to turn off, until you leave the page, things like unwanted ads or prompts. By using or actualizing knowledge about making, in a sense you have not created anything, only modified your experience, thereby remaking your use of it. My point is that this is different from uninformed user experience.

Neither can this difference be explained by the Aristotelian split between *poiēsis* and *praxis*. Martin Jay would, I believe, agree that *praxis* for him is the re-making, not overturning, of normative principles to adapt to local needs and new contexts. Indeed, using technology in an uninformed way amounts less to resistance against calculative reason than to the canceling of possible resistance. Our situation is actually even more complex. As I have mentioned, the quandaries we face today are very different from those of earlier times, and it is precisely calculative reason that has been outperformed by algorithmic intelligence in new AI models.

To remake the question a bit, the very use of the word *poiēsis* is subject to different readings and interpretations through the ages, so to use the word today, one has to sort out a degree of citationality, to consider the possible associations readers might have about it. The history of such a word meets us in the same way as an infinite game. The challenge of new AI models is predicated precisely on the fact that this making of history, previously considered to be beyond reason, is now more and more covered by industrialized automation, presaging a future where the power of critical intelligence will be more susceptible to political control as well as subject to degeneration because of lack of use.

In the humanities we have actually faced such toxicity every day, in a much smaller scale, in the natural blackboxing of citationality. Academic training is intended to be therapeutic against such tendencies toward automation, and having

received such training, we sometimes achieve appropriate, even fruitful abbreviations of citationality. AI can cover much wider scopes in assembling citationality, but relies on chance to draw real insights.

Agamben's account of "decreation" is another example. For me, a lot of Agamben's thought awaits remaking in the wake of his recent interventions into pandemic management, but even the term itself has its own sources and cannot be picked up as ready-made. Agamben's source, Simone Weil, presented decreation as a means to pass from the created human to a hidden part in the subject shared with the Creator who is the beyond of the created world. The theological conception can be traced further back, and actually fits quite well with some strains of transhumanism. Agamben's citation must have introduced new twists, but remains affiliated with the theological tradition in ways to be determined by those who wish to *really* use his use. We should always keep in mind that we constantly run into such loops as laid out by Weil: isn't the inhuman, as a "figure," already made by, and in, the human?

LI: Let me go back to ask a follow-up question which is related to the *who* and the *what* in your explication. Wouldn't the emphasis on the *what* incline theoretical discourse toward the direction of analytic philosophy? To put it slightly differently, theory, especially in the line of critical philosophy, might also want to ask the question of *how*, that is, the question of using or making use of, as Michel Foucault should have in mind about the "use of pleasure," apart from or more than the question of making or the *what*, even when we acknowledge the impossibility of a clear distinction between using and making or *how* and *what*. This bears on your reservations about some posthumanists like Rosi Braidotti and others who opt for critical posthumanism instead of analytic posthumanism which sometimes appears to be closer to your stance. This question might also explain Foucault's choice in his last years to turn to the classical self-technology of *askēsis*, while his earlier genealogical studies can be said to deal with the *what*, that is, the evolved technologies of knowledge and power; in short, the technical aspect of the *what* is considerably reduced in his late writings to illustrate the practice of the *how*. If I am allowed to allude to the concept of "milieu" which Foucault took from Georges Canguilhem, the *what* makes up the milieu of the society, similar to Stiegler's pharmaceutical condition, while it is the *how* as the praxis of making use that makes it possible for the subject to move within/amid the milieu, inflecting it into a kind of *mi-lieu*. So how would you place the *how* or critical posthumanism in your scheme?

LIAO: Again, not all forms of the *who* are related to the *what*, the *how*, or similar

terms in simple opposition. Nor does *how* pertain only to use, whatever kind it might be. Stiegler and his sources pinpointed the *who* and the *what* only because in certain historical or discursive situations, or at certain historical turning points, certain configurations become manifestly visible, when, for example, some humans began to make tools. The coupling of the *who* and the *what* does not preclude dynamics from, for example, *how* the *who* is made, or *how* the *what* is used.

Next, I don't believe that Foucault intended his late work to supersede earlier approaches. The "use of pleasure" is featured, at least, not because it embodies a newly discovered interiority of the self but because it is a focal point of converging relations with social, political, discursive and other forms made by history and recorded by ancient Greek mnemotechnology. The Greek model, in any case, is of value mainly as a template for later formations. It may be true, of course, that focus can be placed on other terms like *how* here, depending not only on who is reading Foucault but on what is being brought into the reading.

As for the types of posthumanist theory, generative AI should have taught us that classification is for beginners only. To be properly intelligible, even simple words must be represented by huge feature vectors that may be thousands of values long. Even in the macroscopic world, schools of theory never sit well with simple labels anyway: analytic views have to be synthetic sometimes; critical positions cannot do well without analysis. Feature vectors are made to be condensed and reordered, by algorithmic processing or by human judgment, so again there is room for toxic misrecognition, and we have to be careful when making judgments about how posthumanism works as theory.

My main complaint with Braidotti is the hidden humanism underneath the transcending position of a pan-species ethics, but more generally, I am interested in the possibility of recognizing and dealing with misrecognition when we draw up genealogies of theory. Posthumanism is a good test case here, as it is currently one of the major attractors of genealogical desire. If my impression is right, many strains of poststructuralism continue to thrive, but regarbed in the new clothing provided by posthumanism. One should at least be aware of the need to tell robust remaking from mere repetition.

LI: In your recent essays and speeches, you analyzed Masahiro Mori's (森政宏) concept of "the uncanny valley," which refers to the feeling of unease aroused in the onlooker when humanoid objects like robots resemble humans to a great extent but still fail to achieve perfect similitude—the humanoid figure seems disfigured somewhere. You once mentioned that Mori uses statues of Buddhas as an example to illustrate how the feeling of uncanniness is overcome. Here it seems

that, apart from the technical ability to approximate humans or life, another kind of ability is also required, for instance, for this refiguration that transcends disfiguration. Can you elaborate a bit more on the uncanny valley phenomenon? Do you also think that the two abilities or aspects suggested above are involved in its transcendence?

LIAO: It is actually easy to overcome the uncanny valley, simply by getting used to the uncanny object. Mori's account of the uncanny valley is most interesting when he goes beyond the crossing of the valley and says that after the second peak of the valley, the slope should continue to rise toward a higher ground. In the original graph of 1970, the slope ends at the second peak representing the highest point of likeness, but placing *bunraku* puppets close to the peak already points to something beyond likeness. In a brief note written in 2005, Mori adds that beyond this peak of the human, there is an even higher point exemplified by the faces of Buddha statues. So there is a rising curve with a valley describing a robot's level of likeness to humans, followed by a straight rise to an ideal image of more-than-human life. We can think of this dissymmetry of the two parts of the curve as a figure of the dissymmetry between the *who* and the *what*.

There are a few alternative figures for such dissymmetry in philosophy. One is Leibniz's monadic world as expounded by Deleuze in *The Fold*, with a higher tier of self-enclosed souls and a lower tier of openly interacting matter. This is easy to understand as technology, the sphere of material arrangements, is naturally resistant to the restriction of borders. Thus souls touch one another indirectly, by communicating with the lower tier, feeling pain, for example, when one sees or imagines another person in pain.

Walter Benjamin offers a variant of this monistic dualism, describing translation as the crossing of language walls by using "arcades" in them. This is in one sense a reversal of Leibniz since here the connectivity is provided by language, sustained by material signifiers that, however, must be put down now to allow meaning as a kind of bare linguistic soul to go through the wall. Such is the strangeness of translation: matter stays home and spirit travels.

Even more explicitly, Mori's conception of Buddha statues revealing a higher form of *shinwakan* or *rapport* posits a kind of upper room of the monad that not only rises above matter but is unconstrained by the walls of the *who*. Recalling Stiegler's account of exteriorization as the projection of mental content onto matter through technical means such as speaking, writing, or tool making, can't we say that material things here, aided by artists, are exteriorizing their souls? The uncanny valley is predicated on the way robots reflect back what humans exteriorized

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onto them, so we can at least say that the statues are also reflecting to us something exteriorized, this time a form of *rappport* that might as well be taken as larger-than-human.

Mori has written about Buddhahood in robots. The proposal is framed in very conventional terms, but may point to something useful for our era of digital industrialization, laying weight on that part of the curve that is beyond resemblance, precisely what today's AI fails to deal with. A lot of work has to be done here, but a little amount of Buddhahood may prove to be the key to dissolving the toxicity residing in the pursuit of partitioned intelligence.

LI: The reversed monad seems to be your figure for the posthuman. It reminds me of Deleuze's nomad who is also characterized as able to traverse different worlds. The image of a nomadic traveler promptly recalls to me Hiroki Azuma's (東浩紀) *Philosophy of the Tourist*, because its Chinese translation (觀光客的哲學) was just published and you wrote an introduction for it. In the book, Azuma invents the figure of the tourist in place of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's multitude to envision possible resistances or changes in the globalized world as well as in the wake of Japan's 2011 earthquake. How would you evaluate the potential as well as weaknesses of this figure, since the tourist appears to be close to the nomad as well, not having fixed identities and being able to form contingent ties or communities with the locals? Is the tourist able to move between different worlds via the globalized *what* and by dropping his *who*? Or does the tourist have the potential to induce "bifurcations," which Stiegler greatly wagers on?

LIAO: Azuma makes an innovative move by proposing the figure of the tourist, but the account is very sketchy at the present. The tourist, Azuma is very clear about this, is not the nomad, crossing borders only for enjoyable sightseeing. One can imagine that, in order to serve Azuma's purpose, there must still be some ways, some situations, in which the tourist may turn into some version of the nomad, but Azuma's point seems to be that we should examine earlier phases, staying with the rising slopes of valleys, paying attention to the making of the end, not skipping banalities. The tourist, to begin with, is a volatile figure. Azuma notes the association of tourism, as an easy cover for infiltration, with terrorism. We have also seen innocent seekers of pleasure turned into targets of violence when there is a sudden outbreak of war. Mori advises robotics to refrain from too much obsession with likeness, and Azuma follows the same path by taking up the vicissitudes of contingency as a necessary part of the making of time. Here again, we have a second tier added to the tier of contingency.

To return to the toxicity of hyper-industrialized living, we then, of course, have to ask about how to avert violence and terror and to facilitate the coming of therapeutic bifurcations from out of unpredictable contingency. This part of the project has not been adequately explored by Azuma, though he does offer some prospects in his *praxis*, including his engagement, for example, with Chernobyl and Fukushima “dark tourism.” The situation recalls Stiegler’s advocacy of new digital platforms, which has not been adequately factored into theory either.

In 2017, Stiegler visited Japan and had a post-seminar *taidan* with Azuma. As noted in my introductory preface to the Chinese translation of Azuma’s book, minor differences show up in the dialog, but there are also overlapping concerns and solutions. Most importantly, both share a willingness to break away from traditional leftist critiques by returning to more open-minded reconsiderations of the possibility of resolving the disparity between the *who* and the *what*. Their discourses have not really been able to affect the main strains of humanities theorizing, but may yet turn out to be a few places where new insights about our posthumanizing culture can be made.

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