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CHINA IN THEORY

THE ORIENTALIST PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

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If one wanted to raise again the idea that the superstructure follows the base, then China—or more accurately, Western obsessions with the perceived threats and achievements of the Peoples Republic—would seem to be an ideal case. But the omnipresence of “China” in the media and in economic circles has only recently been matched by its place in academic, intellectual production. That is, while an empiricist China Studies has proceeded as though its cold war assumptions needed no revision, continuing to produce Sinological analyses of what is wrong with the PRC, “China” has become a rather new object of interest in Western theoretical circles. It is this latter development that will preoccupy me below—the place of “China” in humanities theories of globalization as well as in cross-cultural studies of China and the West.

Although little of the work in cultural theory that speaks the country’s name is explicitly about China, it assumes a certain type of knowledge about the area. It addresses a “real” China in the form of a totalitarian state it confidently *knows*. This received knowledge consolidates its arguments by ostensibly making them more complex and cosmopolitan as opposed to narrowly Euro-American. For all their heterodoxy in terms of “pure” theory, their outlook on China is one shared by the media and mainstream Area Studies. Just as the latter need interrogation, so too does cultural studies work to the degree that it adopts the positional superiority of the theorist over and against the possible epistemological challenges presented by the foreign “area.” My attempt is to critique this particular production of truth about China and to offer another way of looking at intellectual labor and theory in the current conjuncture. Above all, it is the enlisting of

received images such as the events of 1989 in Tiananmen Square that suggest a certain new economism of theory—if “economism” can be used for a mode of argument that resists considering (or informing oneself about) materialities on the ground and that tends toward an increasing abstraction as though abstraction alone were the proper arena of truth.

These trends within knowledge production stem from the expansion of global exchange within the academy and intellectual life. At the risk of sounding vulgar (to use a word often applied to unapproved types of political analysis), it is as if the knowledge about China that is produced in the West has to be as abstract and, in short, as commodified as the other products of labor circulating between China and its business partners. The homology between what passes for knowledge about China today, on the one hand, and the workings of abstraction and the value-form in capitalist exchange, on the other hand, undergirds my comments below. My point is not simply to debunk such China references; nor is it to undo everything the theorists have to say. I seek to show that their premises regarding China are unfounded and that this falseness is symptomatic of something greater, which the second half of the essay on Alfred Sohn-Rethel and intellectual labor will explore.

“CHINA” IN THEORY

In the concluding chapter of *The Coming Community* Giorgio Agamben turns to Tiananmen in 1989 to demonstrate the actuality and worldliness of the new global situation and of his chief concept in the book: “whatever singularity” (1993, 84).¹ The latter refers to a community without “determinate contents,” without a defining essence or identity, without “conditions of belonging” and beyond any national ascription. Agamben’s project here is to find an ethics that can ground community, but one not based on ideology or, apparently, history. As with his later work, Agamben attempts to privilege ethics over politics, expressing a refusal of national belonging and the salience of the nation-state that clearly is shared somewhat later by Hardt and Negri’s work. This non-identitarian community of what he calls “the Chinese May” is, in his opinion, a new development to the extent that it was

not a struggle for the “control or conquest of the State,” but stood opposed to it as the “non-State” (85). This last is a term he equates, appositionally, to nothing less than “humanity” itself. It is this lack of an identity and belonging that the state—qua state—found most intolerable in the protestors’ actions, and it is this that it was attempting to suppress. In later work Agamben again fleetingly returns to Tiananmen to make much the same argument, speaking cryptically and ominously: “the tanks will appear again” (2000, 89; cited in Power, n.41).

Right off, however, we should note a discrepancy between the “China” of the U.S.-West and the “China” within the mainland. Tiananmen remains the most emblematic event of post-Mao China from the point of view of those living *outside* the People’s Republic. In part due to state censorship, 1989—while hardly unknown—has nowhere near the iconic status within China as it does outside. For better and for worse, it is simply not the Sinified analog of, say, the Prague Spring, and within China the anonymous Tank Man is not, as he is for *Time* magazine, one of the last century’s greatest heroes. My point here is not to downplay the significance of Tiananmen in an absolute sense, nor of course to excuse Deng Xiaoping et alia from their criminal violence. It is, though, to mark the difference between an inside and an outside and to mark the Western fixation on an event that serves as *the* key event of post-Mao China and *the* emblem of China’s perfidy in an era when it “threatens” the U.S.-West’s political-economic dominance. But while the choice of Tiananmen is itself significant here, the larger issue is the content of what Agamben and other theorists have to say. And striking in this regard is very simply the matter of historical accuracy and, by extension, of knowledge.

Whatever the merits of Agamben’s sentiments, he is uninformed when he claims that the *only* concrete demand of the movement was the rehabilitation of the recently deceased, liberal general secretary Hu Yaobang. Historians of the event concur that the student movement as a whole was actually patriotic (indeed, the youth insisted on this) and wanted above all recognition by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—which it by and large did not oppose. Their demands included treatment as an equal, valued partner in carrying out state policies of modernization and reform. Within China Studies, the consensus laments these characteristics, seeing in them the lack of a more Western, proceduralist understanding of democracy and civil society,

and identifying this lack as the reason for the movement's failure. So too the notion that this "community" lacked a representable identity would come as news to the participants, or to readers of Zhao Dingxin's history of the movement, which thickly describes the turbulent and fractious jockeying for personal and ideological control within the leadership.²

This internal struggle within the student movement and their external conflicts with the party and with workers' groups on the square were certainly about identity and recognition as much as about ideology, policy, and social justice. Or in other words, Tiananmen contained the inevitable mix of factors in a protest movement and a struggle over representation in its political and subjective dimensions. The students' demands for the reversal of the April 26 *People's Daily* editorial condemning them as unpatriotic, for official dialogues with CCP leaders, and for the dismissal of Premier Li Peng (who called for martial law) have to be seen as in part a struggle over identity.³ So too for the workers' calls to have the finances of Deng Xiaoping and others publicized, and for their own big-character posters that (contra Agamben) made specific demands for, say, the right to form their own unions and get paid, and that moreover proclaimed themselves as the vanguard of the nation and revolution.⁴ Such fundamental aspects of the protest movement find no space within Agamben's analysis of the Chinese March-to-June event, and his positing of a communal "singularity" beyond identity and against the state is simply asserted as a romantic obviousness. It is just something that is known, without need for research and elaboration.

The Tiananmen events, then, here become an floating signifier, whose only concrete meaning is precisely its rhetorical function as the historical "proof" of Agamben's conceptual work: that we are beyond the nation and that traditional forms of politics, ethics, identity, and collective struggles are anachronistic, but we are witnessing, messianically, the birth of singularities and new forms of global community. In other words, Agamben's use of China—and it is worth repeating that he *concludes* his study with Tiananmen, one of the few specific, contemporary examples in his text—must be seen not as a measured analysis of the actual events but as of a piece with the popular images of Tiananmen, 1989: the Tank Man, the *Goddess of Democracy* statue, the spontaneous explosion of common humanity underneath

the visible foreignness of China, and so forth. For Agamben, as for Hardt and Negri below, this is Tiananmen as spectacle. As Rey Chow once put it: China is that thing that “facilitates the production of surplus-value in the politics of knowledge-as-commodity”: “it becomes . . . the ‘Other’ onto which the unthinkable is projected” (87). In a different but equally problematic register, the great majority of China Studies scholarship still codes the protest movement as the birth and then termination of a (bourgeois) “civil society” that stands opposed to the state and that is disconnected from class.⁵

Far closer to the events would be to read the crackdown as a panicked response to the general strike emerging in Beijing due to the activities of the workers more than to the students and intellectuals that the West fixates on. The movement and the workers’ overwhelming presence in it are best seen as a class-based response to the unemployment and “structural adjustments” of a formerly planned, socialist welfare system. From a Marxist or workers’ perspective, 1989 was a response to an *increasing* political authoritarianism linked to the state’s *abdication* of social welfare and a rising neoliberalism.⁶ Hence the absence of an antistate position but rather demands for inclusion by students and workers. As for the civil society interpretation, or Agamben’s similar but more profound antistate one, Wang Hui has argued against both on the grounds that in China the public sphere has for a long time existed “within the state’s space” and so cannot be a “natural deterrent” to state power (179–80). Wang consistently defends the capacity and necessity of the nation-state, and socialist ideology, to foster social justice in China. His own complex reading of the Tiananmen movement—couched in neutral prose—argues that its rise and fall was ultimately about the restoration of “links among market mechanisms that had begun to fail” in the late 1980s and that had created the social dislocations and discontent behind the protests (117). In the event, 1989 marked the coming onslaught of neoliberalism and the eventual weakening of the state.

Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* is a similar text in both its *Zeitgeist*-style and its case for nothing less than a new communist manifesto for the global communities or “multitudes.” Hardt and Negri revise the metaphysically anthropological mode of Agamben’s *The Coming Community* by emphasizing “immaterial labor” and post-Fordism and declaring that the new global community has already arrived. But they

share with Agamben a highly challenged use of China. Here, too, Tiananmen presents itself in unexpected places, again turning on what the movement *lacked*. This struggle, like the Palestinian Intifada of 1989 and the Zapatista uprising to which it is equated, is characterized above all by its “incommunicability,” its “failure” to communicate at both a “local level” and to other, global struggles (Hardt and Negri, 54). Hardt and Negri do not see this as a problem as much as a sign of the times: that in the age of empire, what such struggles lack in communicability and duration, they make up for in “intensity” and point to a new or future type of communication based “not on resemblances but . . . differences”: “a communication of singularities” (57). And yet, the question of who is communicating what to whom goes begging. This is also assuming, as one must with Agamben, that a crypto-sublime singularity can be communicated at all. But despite its alleged ephemerality and inability to “communicate” locally or globally, Tiananmen nonetheless leaps “vertically,” “touches” “the global level,” and “attacks . . . Empire” (55, 57). It is very odd to hear that a mass movement that spread across several provinces and rapidly mobilized much of Beijing’s population, not least through big-character posters, handbills, and pirate broadcasts, was not communicating anything—even to the Chinese (see, e.g., Unger). I would submit that, just as the Mao period is made equivalent to Soviet Russia, the Tiananmen reference is simply a convenient vehicle—a crucial “proof” and *exemplum*—to show the truth of “empire.” Precisely because the text seeks to convince us that the new empire, its multitudes, and their common resistances do actually exist and form a whole, it is crucial to ask what such struggles as Tiananmen, the Intifada, and so on have in common. But Tiananmen, invoked in Deleuzian language, is something that we are just supposed to know. “China” is ready-made to fit the theory in a seamless way.

This is an assimilating logic of equivalence at work in their text, indicative of an abstract, capital logic of value within intellectual labor. For Marx as for Sohn-Rethel, equivalence is of one piece with the logic of capital and abstraction itself, and it grows in force and scale with the universalization of exchange and the separation of intellectual and manual labor (see also Jameson). This logic is again shown when the authors suggest a “parallel” between the twin “bureaucratic dictatorships” of China and Russia, and that as with the case of Russian

culture during the last throes of the USSR, the “Chinese proletariat” likewise showed “fabulous creativity” in the 1980s during the Cultural Fever “movement” (Hardt and Negri, 278, 460 n.29). I leave to one side the description of elite Chinese intellectuals and artists as proletarians and analogs to Russian glasnost artists. While one of the merits of *Empire* is its avowedly synthesizing method, touching on any number of theoretical currents, it is nonetheless marred by an assimilation of foreign contexts and by a lack of mediation that is rooted in the antidialectical sources of their work. Theoretical practice here means yoking together facts, images, or events from around the globe into a contemporary theoretical framework that is recognizably Western in provenance.

What is striking is the cursory gloss of the challenges to historicism by like-minded poststructuralist/postcolonial critics, or of the challenges to orientalist historiography by, say, Edward Said or Andre Gunder Frank. If in their major programs of research Said and Frank threw down major challenges to how we have written the history of the Other, then this is a call that, in the current conjuncture, most producers of knowledge and new theory simply do not hear. *Empire's* mode of assimilation and lack of response to others' major challenges indexes material transformations within intellectual labor and the larger economy. These traits reveal an increase in the force of abstraction within thought under contemporary capitalism, a development that goes hand in hand with the expansion of the commodity relation into more and more spheres of intellectual life. Of this, more later in the second part of this essay. But to the point right now: *Empire's* inability to engage with concrete situations and political events is crucial for establishing its chain of equivalence between Soviet Russia, 1980s China, the Intifada, and so on, and for producing the concept of a decentered but global empire literally encompassing everything. Their concept of empire is as Zhang Xudong has argued, a “normative” one grounded by “a voluntarist and ahistorical Left vision of global utopia” and not the empirically true one they claim (2004, 47). To which we can also add that China, be it of the Great Leap (1958–61) or the 1980s, can really make no difference in this analysis. Given this type of abstraction, Chinese communes and Chinese capitalism are more or less the same, as is Chiapas.

In recent writings on totalitarianism, Lenin, and the state of the

“global Left,” Žižek (to take a rather different wing of cultural theory) displays a similar use of China. The reference is most often to the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which reduces to the stereotype of entranced “Red Guardists ecstatically destroying old historical monuments . . . desecrating old paintings,” and to Mao’s emperor-like “extreme” pursuit of “full personal power,” after which he quickly restores order (2001b). For Žižek, what this image proves, against the Chairman and Stalin (whom he thoughtlessly equates), is the proper autonomy of the “sphere of material production”; if the latter is subordinated to “the terrain of political battle or logic,” it can only result in “terror” (2001a, 139). Totalitarianism, in this view, is the result of the primacy of the political over the economic, and not the other way around (as Hannah Arendt would have it). Žižek thus uses China to counter the misuse of totalitarianism as a politically quietist notion devoid of economic mediation. Yet the more salient, useful points about this slipshod concept are not broached: that in the case of China, where genuinely popular Maoist mobilizations were as common as conflicts within the party and society, the attribution of totalitarianism implies “brainwashing” and oriental-despotic control of a perennially passive populace. It is not a critical concept so much as part of colonial discourse.⁷ That China was and is totalitarian, that its populace is largely quiet, passively suffering, and state controlled even when it is rebelling, is a standard part of orientalist common sense and Area Studies discourse. But it is contradicted by, for example, China’s long history of peasant rebellions, the “mass democracy” of the Cultural Revolution, the new regime’s widely felt legitimacy through the early 1970s at least, and the skyrocketing of mass incidents since the 1980s.⁸

What we have here, then, is not an interrogation of Arendt and others or of China but a dressed-up “vulgar” Marxism that emphasizes the primacy of the productive forces over the relations of production. Žižek thus shares this belief with Deng Xiaoping and post-Stalinist Marxists. As it was for them, it remains a strongly depoliticizing type of rationality that is just as quietist as “totalitarianism.” Whatever else one might say of his critique of Arendt, the point here is that his uses of China have little to do with what the Cultural Revolution was really like. Thus, his notion that Mao was only after full personal power is belied by the fact that by 1967 Mao already re-secured that. This leaves

Žižek with nine-tenths of the complex era to account for. This is indeed Mao as despot and not historical figure, thinker, or rational political leader. It comes as no surprise then that Žižek (2007) can cite a pulp-orientalist biography as an authoritative text on the Great Leap Forward and Mao's thought.⁹ It must also be said that when he writes on the Cultural Revolution as a hopeless entanglement of politics and economics (the "terror" of politics in command of production) he reproduces a key element of colonial discourse. As George Steinmetz has noted (22–23), characterizing premodern and socialist societies as muddled, confused, and backward in this way—as opposed to the rationally differentiated spheres of the West—has long been a staple of orientalist thought.

Now my point here is not just that Žižek would benefit from reading, say, Gao Mobo (1999, 2008), Chris Bramall, or Han Dongping on the socioeconomic achievements of the Cultural Revolution, or Wang Zheng and others' affirmative, feminist analyses of growing up during the Mao era. Nor that Žižek's parallel between Mao dissolving the Shanghai Commune and Lacan's closing his *École Freudienne* is less clever than flippant (and all wrong chronologically). The point is that such intellectual labor would involve a research paradigm beyond theoretical "application" to casually posited "facts" about China. It would be of a different type than that embarked upon by Žižek or the others examined here, particularly when they write about the non-Western world. Surely, then, there could be no better illustration of the use of theory as a labor-saving operation. The abstract form of the China knowledge reflected in such work indexes not just the orientalist common sense about China at work in the world, but again a certain economism. The use of China as something already known and ready-to-hand saves time. But at what cost to the concrete history of China?

The simpler, "vulgar" question of reading bears scrutiny. What is striking in the positions adopted by heterodox thinkers is that even in the sphere of left cultural theory, many of our theorists content themselves with received notions about China taken largely from the Western media. Ironically, we need not be limited to such knowledge due to Chinese state censorship, for there is now a significant body of work that offers alternative, complex knowledge of the PRC. There is no evidence at all, in fact, that radical theory has read or digested the

views of their counterparts in China or abroad, whose own heterodoxy would throw new light on the problem of an imputed totalitarianism and the “known” realities of the PRC. Wang Zheng, for instance, has argued that the quasi-feminist, Maoist discourse of gender neutrality—promulgated by the state—enabled young women to self-identify as “revolutionary youth” and “communist successors,” to grow up free from patriarchal kinship obligations, and to be largely unaware of being “women” (see esp. Wang Zheng 51–52). Han and Gao (1999) offer us rich studies of the remarkable increases in rural welfare, education, health care, and political participation during the Cultural Revolution, as well as incisive critiques of elite histories of post-1949 China within and outside the mainland. These are complemented by Wang Hui’s (116–37) theoretical arguments against the Eurocentrism of the antistate, beyond-the-nation position of Western theory and for more, not less state intervention into the free market.

None of this work is in the true of China Studies or Sinological-orientalism. It represents another China that is more complex than televisual images of 1989 and the common sense about post-1949 China. The latter uses of China speak to an essentially cold war if not colonial perspective on the PRC. Gao, Wang Hui, and others—for all their differences—show us a China that for all its turmoil and failures achieved much in terms of human welfare and egalitarianism and was, perhaps until 1989 itself, a revolutionary society in transition toward another order of things. My point here is that the scholarship and counterfactuals evoked here (by no means an exhaustive account) call into question the heedless yet crucial uses of China in the above works. Moreover, these texts and alternative truths are available in English. Thus, the failure of theorists to engage this material, to “labor” adequately, cannot be placed at the door of a real but in this case limited Chinese censorship. The root of this problem then must lie somewhere else; not in personal failing but in the marked tendency toward abstraction within theory.

I will return below to questions of economism and intellectual labor, and why such uses of China take the abstract form that they do. But to further my case for the orientalist use of China in theory, I want to turn to the generic poststructuralism in texts that examine the question of how China has been written in foreign and native literature alike. Here the new turn is called “Sinography”: “the study not

simply of how China is written *about*, but the ways in which that writing constitutes itself simultaneously as a *form* of writing and a *form* of Chineseness" (Hayot, 87).¹⁰ But whereas Derrida targeted Western logocentrism, "Sinography" is focused on the process of graphesis or writing as such, and is in fact aimed *against* critique of the West and the marking of misrepresentation. It eschews evaluation, judgment, and criticism on the basis of what counts as the truth. That type of work—the work of the negative—in Eric Hayot's view can only be "moralistic," "debunking," and can only falsely grant to China or the West "an ontological stability" that neither has (xiv, 180–81). Like Haun Saussy he is at pains to announce that the West has no such stability and is just as constructed and changing at different moments and in different texts as is China (Hayot, xii–xiii, 180–81; Saussy, 853–54, 885 n.14). While valid at a formal level of the signifier, this claim misses the point of Marxist-inspired work on globalization: the world remains structured neocolonially by a core/periphery division centered on the West and First World, which exercises economic and political, if not cultural hegemony over "the Rest." Indeed, Saussy will claim that the phrase "the West and the Rest" is "mythology" (182). What explains this perspective, aside from the substitution of ethics for politics à la Agamben, is a strident poststructuralism that presents itself as more "complex" and ethically sensitive than postcolonial or other critiques. It is as if facts, beliefs, or identities, accessible only through language, do not acquire material force and have real effects in the world; as if all constructions of China are the same.

Thus, despite the caveat that Sinography will proceed "without abandoning the question of reference altogether," it indeed abandons this, save for a few potshots at Maoist or "nationalist" intellectuals and the party-state ("the shadow of realpolitikal China") (Hayot, 182). (Such shots further indicate that the eschewal of reference allows Sinography and other poststructuralist "new" readings of China to conceal their essentially cold war political dimensions.) All forms of knowledge—of writing China—are *generally equivalent*, as they are all "graphesis" (Hayot, 185). Here, China ceases to exist outside of constructions, dreams, or writings of "China." For a theoretical turn that aims to be more sophisticated than Saidian critique, we are left with a China—and Sino–West encounter—that is an abstract thought experiment. This is preordained in the original transformation of the

topic of Western understandings of China into an act of *generic* cross-cultural reading. The problem arises in part with Hayot's positioning of China as only a space in Eurasia with a "more or less continuous history of being *conceived* as a political identity"; from this standpoint, the study of representations of China can only be an exercise in "intellectual history and cross-cultural reading" in general (Hayot, ix, my emphasis). As is often the case with strict "social constructionist" modes of criticism, the only reality is that of perception and form. My point here is not just that there is a difference between such constructions of reality and reality itself. That, as Roy Bhaskar reminds us is the epistemic fallacy: mistaking our knowledge of reality for the "thing," reality, itself (111–12, 397). It is also that "Sinography" cannot help us discern *what* is being constructed. It cannot answer or even pose questions like, Why is one "graphing" of China more or less valuable than another? Why do Sinography other than to show that representations of China and Chineseness are "written"? There is here no dialectic, process, or relay between an actual event and our textualized knowledge of it.

In the end we are presented with a closed system of discourse that like orientalism itself is only self-referential: "Whatever distinction exists between the West and 'China.' . . . nonetheless reveals itself . . . to be caught up in the ephemerality of self-recognition" (Hayot, 188). This echoes Saussy's claim against critique and for theory as self-referential therapy: "Have we been missing something all these centuries, so that we take a work of critique to be the archetypal project of logical construction? Or is the difference (between philosophy as foundation and philosophy as therapy) merely illusory?" (189–90). There is indeed a long view of History here, resulting in a condition that can no longer say what China or "China" refer to, beyond a certain set of signifiers that refer back only to the text in question. This is indeed a postmodernism—a triumphalistic textuality reminiscent of the Modern Language Association of the late 1980s—writ large. The positional superiority of the Sinographer is as strong here as in Agamben and the rest. It is assumed that this "graphing" framework fits China seamlessly, and virtually all writings of China at any point in time. Thus, Saussy can reach back to Mateo Ricci, the sixteenth-century Italian missionary as easily as to journalist Edgar Snow (1905–72), alleged Chinese nationalists, or Derrida, because he is unimpeded

by contextualization. Note that this type of analysis departs from Said's own sweeping history. *Orientalism* mapped changes within a discursive structure and rooted these within a larger history of contact and colonialism. The postmodern template of Sinography is also notable for its non-engagement with the large body of literature from China on postmodernism (as theory and as epoch) and its relationship to the mainland, a subject of intense debate since the late 1980s (for an overview, see Dirlik and Zhang, and Liu and Tang).¹¹ We can thus say of these texts directed against postcolonialism and *for* misrepresentation what Brennan has said of Rey Chow's deconstruction of the "myth of origins" and "Chineseness": that they do not deconstruct reference so much as "efface" it; and having done this, "there is no outer tribunal to compare China against the West's 'translation' of it" (Brennan, 54). This is not to appeal to an unmediated reality but to a mediated one, to the context and constitutive outside of interpretation and cultural translation. In the case of China this must be informed by the antagonisms and epistemological challenges—such as orientalism—that have subtended the China–West relationship for, say, a good three hundred years. Without such ground not just critique but understanding is impossible. This tribunal will inevitably have to substantially address and not dismiss the complex matters of misrepresentation and judgment.

The knowledge of China and cross-cultural relations produced by Sinography is thus not just self-referential but—notwithstanding its local detail about, say, Pound's poetry or Tel Quel's polemics—as abstract as the references to China in the texts above. So, too, one has to again note the economism: what is announced is *not* a research project into China–West relations but a yoking together of all such encounters into a common, generic act of writing in and of itself, one that is somehow more ethical than and beyond critique.

REAL ABSTRACTION AND THE RISE OF "CHINA" IN WESTERN MINDS

Having examined some uses of "China" in theory we are in a better position to reflect on their consequences for how we understand knowledge production today. From here it is worth exploring why, after the

rise of postcolonial studies and the “theoretical turn” in the humanities, such knowledge of China persists and arguably increases in volume. The answer is that Sinological-orientalism exists because it can. By this I mean several things. The most basic is that China Studies—and the knowledge of China produced in other fields—has gone through neither a process of decolonization nor what Chen Kuan-Hsing calls the de-cold war. It is hard to imagine, by way of comparison, major heterodox, theoretical texts that comfortably invoke large, sweeping generalizations and falsehoods about, say, India or Mexico. What explains this sanctioned ignorance in regard to China and not, to the same extent, to South Asia?

One reason is the relative success of postcolonial theory that is rooted in the areas of South Asia and Africa in particular, but also in that great, “Middle Eastern” text by Said from 1978. By saying this I hardly mean to imply that postcolonial studies is adequate to the critique of colonialism and capitalist modernity; but it has been institutionalized and has had effects. These places, through the work of scholars working over a long period of time in the U.S./Western academy, have produced knowledge that to a limited but palpable extent does challenge colonial thinking. *Critical China* scholarship by contrast enters the scene of knowledge production only recently—admittedly in the time of post-Mao China and greater academic exchanges. It also enters with a more fraught, charged, and orientalized geopolitical relationship with the U.S.-West and Area Studies. It is postcolonial work, as well as Marxist scholarship on colonialism and globalization that is elided in China Studies and, with the partial exception of Hardt and Negri, in the work examined here. So too the West’s cold war triumphalism and China’s massive “reforms”—including an open season for *Sinological knowledge production*—have made alternative, critical truths about China *harder* to apprehend. Since the 1980s, in other words, China has been more or less an anything-goes free-for-all for the production of knowledge and an attendant “archive,” including the creation of, for example, famine statistics, tell-it-all memoirs, anecdotes and anonymous interviews, isolated county annals, and so on. There is an important paradox here: while the mainland is more or less an open field, so to speak, this does not mean that the resultant knowledge and information is any less interested and worldly than before. And if what I am arguing—in more detail below—about the pressures

of economism and abstraction within intellectual labor obtains, then despite its concrete detail at one level this “new” China knowledge is much more problematic and abstracted—removed from the great political and social complexities of China—than assumed.

One must also note the virtual disappearance of an emergent, leftist tradition of U.S. China Studies scholarship from the late 1960s and mid-1970s that was based in the former *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*. As a social scientific Area Studies formation it seems to have lacked the theoretical armor and self-reflexivity to respond to the changes within China and the rightward-drift of intellectual political culture there and at home. I tend to locate this shift in an uninterrogated humanism that was shocked to the core by the later, post-Mao realization that post-liberation China was indeed at times seriously violent, authoritarian, chaotic, and not a dinner party. Given the regrettable absence of that generation’s self-reflection on such issues, it is hard to say. But clearly, the leftist tradition abdicated, and you would be hard pressed to find leftist or recognizably Marxist work on China in any of the main journals of the field or in its flagship Asian Studies presses.¹² For one thing, the form of scholarship has changed. Area Studies experts aspire to a professionalized “objectivity” and anti-theoretical empiricism, even while explicitly or surreptitiously endorsing the PRC’s turn toward capitalist “reform” and its own de-Maoification and denigration of the post-1949 revolutions within the revolution.¹³

Another factor behind the “new” orientalism are the changes in the long relationship between the Chinese revolution and Western theory, especially on the left. As Robert Young has noted, “Maoist theory became highly influential among radical left intellectuals in the 1960s. . . . The degree to which French poststructuralism . . . involved what amounted to a Maoist retheorization of European political and cultural theory, as well as its complex connection to Indian postcolonialism, which has also been deeply affected by Maoism, remain as yet unexplored” (187). This is to say, the Chinese revolution inspired a good deal of heterodox theory—to say nothing of actually existing Maoist movements across the Third World. Whatever else we might say of such appropriations—think of the Black Panthers, or the early Subaltern Studies historians like Ranajit Guha—clearly China proved an enabling, creative, and productive space for noteworthy intellectual

and political efforts. What we have now is something quite different, where the poststructuralist importation into China Studies comes in a strongly depoliticized form and where, in general theoretical circles, China serves as negative example if not mere spectacle. Surely what lies behind this is in part the tides of depoliticization sweeping the globe as well as what Fredric Jameson once referred to as the widespread paralysis of the Western social imaginary. But it is hard not to hear a strong note of disillusionment on the part of the Western left in regard to the rise of a spectacularly successful and spectacularly capitalist post-Mao China. That rise, actually and tragically built on the infrastructure and human capital produced in the Mao years, has its roots in the 1970s. Those are also the roots of our contemporary, “post-Fordist,” and flexible capitalism.

But we must broach another dimension of the persistence of Sinological-orientalism. Not least because there is, again, scholarship and criticism about China that is not orientalist and dominative, and that counters cold war-era Sinology.¹⁴ But this type of work has to date made little impact on intellectual trends and the abstraction of China in texts like the ones here (nor indeed on China Studies). Why this is so has to do, in the last instance, with the larger China–West relationship, particularly with the PRC’s emergence within global capitalism. It has not escaped anyone’s attention that the relationship between China and the world is overwhelmingly an economic one. Yet no one has examined the implications of this for the knowledge of China that is produced in the world. *This rise of China and its economy must have its effects on intellectual production.* This includes, I will now argue, an effect on the form of the labor of the critic who uses China as an example of something else (of the truth of postmodernism, the multitudes, and so on). Whereas in the recent past one would not have had to reference China without a specific, direct interest in the revolution or culture, today it is difficult to avoid it. It simply *must* be referred to by the critic at large. As if the West must now respond to China—a remarkable reversal of the classic model of Sinology whereby China must respond to “us.”

Not that there is anything wrong with that: the issue is what one says and how one approaches “China,” by way of what previously accumulated “knowledge” and one’s relationship to that area in the center of Asia that—pace “Sinography”—exists as a political, economic,

cultural, and not merely conceptual entity. Those truths are often orientalist and ultimately abstract and do not index China so much as something else. This something else is for one thing the economism underlying the China references. By economism here I mean something more than the professional imperative to produce texts that include “China” and that now “see” it due to its rise. Yet even this speaks to an economic relationship worth noting despite or rather because of its vulgarity: it is not that we now know China better, but that the global economic footprint of China is too large not to enter our consciousness and to produce more “China references.” But in addition, by economism I refer to the force of capitalist exchange: of the real abstraction underlying thought within capitalism. For Marx as for Sohn-Rethel, real abstraction derives from the commodity form. Or more accurately, the genesis of real abstraction lies in the force of capitalist exchange, in the process of value that unleashes a calculating, quantitative rationality into the culture and society of capitalism.

Much of our understanding of the culture of capitalism derives from the Marxist theory of the commodity form as the triumph of exchange value (the money form) over use-value in production for the market. The institutionalization of exchange not only represents a negation of use-value—where this last signifies experience and difference, not just “utility”—but the type of thought that makes the incommensurable comparable (see also Jameson). This theme remains indispensable, not least with a homogenizing globalization in full force. But to develop the connection between intellectual labor and real abstraction we need to take a step back to the work of Marx and Sohn-Rethel and what makes this force real. To begin with, abstraction is much more than a mental generalization that organically springs forth from the head. It is real in that it is historical and social: “The commodity or value abstraction revealed in [Marx’s] analysis must be viewed as a *real abstraction* resulting from spatio-temporal activity” (Sohn-Rethel, 20, cited in Toscano, 281). This activity is not just the historical evolution of the money form of value but also the material processes by which labor power—defined by Marx as the “living personality” of the human being, “the living, form giving fire . . . the transitoriness of things, their temporality [and] their formation by living time”—becomes abstract labor (Marx 1977, 270; 1973, 361). Put another way, labor power—that is, laborers—undergo a social process

of abstraction; all forms, all concrete manifestations of labor power are rendered the same, reduced to the same substance. Like “Sino-graphies” and “Chinese facts” to orientalism, they are made generally equivalent to abstract, homogenous labor. The positing of this abstract sameness is therefore far from a solely mental operation.¹⁵

So too abstraction has its own roots, marked better by Marx than Sohn-Rethel. Its genesis, as with capitalism as such, lies in the expropriation of peasants, in primitive accumulation and dispossession, and in the theft of gold and silver from the Americas at the beginning of modern colonialism. And here, too, China is of some significance: Andre Gunder Frank’s last work established the centrality of China to this rise of Western or global capitalism, as it served as the great buyer of silver stolen from the Americas, thence leading to Europe’s massive capital accumulation (see the inimitable Frank). Real abstraction, then, as Alberto Toscano notes, is “to be discerned in the operations of capitalism rather than in an ideological preoccupation with the concrete truth or hidden essence that the abstractions of capital supposedly occlude” (282). Value and exchange are not simply metaphorical here, even if they are asked to do a lot of theoretical work. Sohn-Rethel is far from, say, Georges Bataille or Derridean notions of general economy. While Kantian and not Hegelian, he retains a notion of totality and works within the traditions of historical materialism. Thus, abstraction is rooted in the commodity form but also in production and labor.

Sohn-Rethel contributes to this value theoretic by bringing the multifaceted history of abstraction to bear on the development of intellectual labor. Co-extensive with this history of the commodity relation and the labor/capital dyad is the division between intellectual and manual labor. His intervention is to recode what philosophy calls “theory of knowledge” into a question of intellectual labor and its separation from manual labor. The creation of intellectual labor is as much the result of real abstraction as the labor/capital and use/exchange value divisions; they are of whole cloth. His characterization of intellectual labor allows us to return to the abstract form of theory and China knowledge examined above, grounded now in our more expansive and “Chinese” moment of global capitalism. For Sohn-Rethel, the real abstraction generated by commodity exchange transforms intellectual labor. It transforms the very form and quality of thought

under capitalism: “[W]hat defines the character of intellectual labour in its full-fledged division from all manual labour is the use of non-empirical form-abstractions which may be represented by nothing other than non-empirical, ‘pure’ concepts” (66). It will help to recall here that commodity exchange too is non-empirical in its erasure of the conditions of labor (e.g., in the sweat shops of South China), of the erasure of time that goes into surplus value extraction, and so on that subtend such exchange. The pure and independent intellect of philosophy, then, and the “fundamental forms of abstract thought (as manifest in . . . the postulations of mathematics, or the constitution of the Kantian transcendental subject) all originate with the commodity-form” (Toscano, 280).

It is in this sense that Sohn-Rethel can answer his famous question—“Can there be abstraction other than by thought?”—in the affirmative (17). It is in this sense that he can demonstrate the centrality of exchange and real abstraction—concomitant with the genesis of classes in the modern, capitalist sense—to fundamental problems of social, cultural, and philosophical analysis. In sum, “Sohn-Rethel undertakes a veritable *expropriation* of abstract thought” (Toscano, 280). Intellectual abstraction is not bad because abstract but dangerous because it is blind to the social processes that constitute “pure” thought.

While Sohn-Rethel’s work deserves further examination in its own right, we should nonetheless be in a better position to see his relevance to the problems of intellectual labor, if not directly to the question of Sinological-orientalism and the impression of “China” on our consciousness. Given the obvious relevance of his work to the expansion of capitalism—which is to say his purchase on globalization—it is striking that his great study remains out of print and largely unread. One reason for this would be that much humanities work on globalization proceeds on the same poststructuralist grounds as before—as if such theory automatically fits a post-cold war era of neoliberal development and a rising China.¹⁶ Sohn-Rethel’s breathtaking but sweeping generalizations from antiquity onward must seem decidedly old-fashioned and modern/structuralist, as would his wrestling with inordinately complicated philosophical (as opposed to “theoretical”) problems. One such hindrance is more specifically the totalizing nature of his argument, and his evident—that is, clear and forceful—

claims to causality. For Sohn-Rethel the commodity abstraction is to be taken literally. His critique of epistemology and intellectual labor turns in the last instance on economic determination (Sohn-Rethel, 20). My point, however, is not that this is a flawless text, and the strikingly confident world-historical sweep of his analysis certainly gives one pause. At one point he reaches back to the “Bronze Age” as just one moment of his historical narrative. But as befits Sohn-Rethel’s analysis of real abstraction, our best move is to think again about the groundworks and historical changes in intellectual labor today, beneath the surface level of fashion.

To wit: perhaps what has changed is the increasing dominance of real abstraction within the forms of thought under contemporary global capitalism. As the commodification of everything proceeds apace, incorporating even the “area” of China and the university, it cannot but involve the increasing abstraction of intellectual labor. This includes the practice of this labor, from the “quality management” corporatization movement within academe and the erasure of tenure to the growing “flexibility” of academic labor. Recall as well that the increasing time–space compression of global capitalism since the 1970s also exerts its abstract force on thought: a faster, just-in-time production of knowledge (see Harvey). This is to say, then, that this historical shift is one important reason why work like Sohn-Rethel’s single study, written and revised over a period of fifty years, is nearly impossible to imagine today. The paradigm of sustained historical and theoretical research beyond the straight-up application-mode of theory is in decline. Under such pressures, theory can become a labor-saving operation. The complexity and specificity of China and its differences from orientalist, cold war discourse have less space to register.

But if my argument for an increase in abstraction within intellectual labor obtains at all, perhaps Sohn-Rethel’s work—his case for the indispensability of the commodity relation in any analysis of thought—will, after all, have its due. By establishing the relation between thought and capitalism—and recalling again our current moment of capital—his work usefully develops Marx’s insights into abstract “forms of thought.” By these I have in mind how Marx characterized the concepts of political economy: “The categories of bourgeois economics consist precisely of forms of this kind [of “universal equivalence”].

They are forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of production, i.e., commodity production" (1977, 169). As he goes on to note, this social "validity" disappears when one encounters a different mode or space of production. For our purposes, China—the actual one—would be such a space. While Marx's concern was not a critique of epistemology, his framing of these categories as only "socially valid" for a particular mode of production speaks to their formation by real abstraction. They are, like Sohn-Rethel's abstract forms of thought, both true and false; not empirical in a final, scientific sense but only valid for a certain context.¹⁷ (This dovetails with Sohn-Rethel's treatment of "Galilean-" and "bourgeois science" [117–39].) These twin thinkers enable us to see, within intellectual labor and knowledge production, the economic dimension of forms and categories of thought. That is, we can better apprehend the work of real abstraction within theory.

What I will now claim, then, is that as befits a global capitalism increasingly centered on and obsessed with the rising PRC, "China" or "the real China" represents a placeholder for a "new" abstract form of thought within intellectual labor and knowledge production.¹⁸ This is to say that the self-referential "China references" in the above "heterodox" texts are abstract in an economic, Sohn-Rethelian sense. They are non-empirical form-abstractions. They are real, orientalist ones that index not China, or even a considered "China," but the increasingly economistic nature of intellectual labor and the increasing presence of "China" within Western minds. In sum, then, I am pointing to a homology between the abstract form of the China in theory, and the real, forceful abstraction at work in contemporary global capitalism and intellectual labor. This economism of theory points to the expansion of capital within the realm of thought, and for which Sohn-Rethel's work knows a new lease on life. It is an encroachment with orientalist "Chinese characteristics." Unless the production of knowledge about China changes—including within the mainland, itself subject to the same forces—the decolonization of China in theory will remain an unfinished project. Such a change will not proceed from further modernizing development and "quality management" within academe, nor from theoretical-critique-as-application.

Notes

1. "Whatever [*qualunque*]," as the translator notes, "refers precisely to that which is neither particular nor general, neither individual nor generic" (Agamben 1993, 107).
2. See Zhao. For the tensions between the workers' groups and the students, see Lu.
3. See part 2 of Zhao and the documents in Oskenberg, especially the talks between Li Peng and student leaders (269–81).
4. See the anonymous poster from a workers' federation, "Ten Questions for the Chinese Communist Party," reproduced in Lu, 184.
5. See Calhoun and the 1993 issue of *Modern China* on this topic (vol. 19, no. 2). For a detailed critique, see Vukovich, 2009.
6. See Meisner; Hinton. The right to strike—put into the constitution during the Cultural Revolution—was eliminated in 1982.
7. See Pietz. This is also a central argument of my forthcoming book, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the P.R.C.*, and I am indebted to Pietz.
8. For a history of such rebellions in modern China, see Gray. In 2005 the number of official, recorded "mass incidents" was 87,000. There were 10,000 recorded in 1994.
9. The biography by Jung Chang and Fred Halliday has even been strongly criticized by mainstream China studies. See the bulk of one 2006 issue of *The China Journal* (no. 55) on this topic.
10. Original emphasis. Contra Freud and Lacan, Hayot repudiates depth models and asks us what if "the latent and the manifest content [of dreams] might be the same thing?" (87).
11. See as well the special issue of *New Literary History* called "Cultural Studies: China and the West" (28, no. 1, Winter 1997).
12. I thus disagree with Arif Dirlik, who in several ad hominem and ad feminam essays laments the rise of postcolonial studies and theory since the early 1990s (even as he borrows its insights)—years after the decline of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*—because they somehow negated an allegedly existing yet wholly unspecified tradition of leftist (?) China scholarship. Dirlik's own, distinguished work as an historian fits conventional Area Studies. I understand him to be defending and gatekeeping for that discipline.
13. See Cumings; Roberts. See also Barlow; Dutton. I attempt my own analysis of the (official and expanded) China field in *China and Orientalism*. Space limitations preclude further discussion here.
14. See Bramall; Gao (1999, 2008); Han; and Wang Zheng. In more theoretical registers, see Liu Kang; Zhang Xudong 2008. For earlier periods, see Hevia; Karl; and Lydia Liu. This is a partial list but one must also note the relative absence of "counter-disciplinary" works about the *verboden* Mao era.
15. My reading of abstract labor follows Colletti.

16. See the discussion of “belated” theory in Behdad.
17. Etienne Balibar’s discussion of this passage is apposite (62–67).
18. I further examine this relationship between “China in theory” and capital in the concluding chapter of *China and Orientalism*.

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