

Preface¹

Cultural Studies has become one of the most dynamic fields of academic studies in China today. Conferences with “Cultural Studies” in their titles are held every year. Many academic journals feature a special column dedicated to “Cultural Studies”, and the body of publications, including papers, monographs and book series has been expanding rapidly. There are also numerous Cultural Studies institutions around the country.

As a research methodology, path, approach and point of view, Cultural Studies has penetrated deeply into many different fields of studies in the humanities and social sciences, even those not nominally associated with it. More importantly, Cultural Studies is gaining popularity among young scholars, and quickly becoming a favorite topic of doctoral dissertations. And it is the choices by young scholars that shape the future prospects of Chinese academia.

It was, however, the establishment of the Birmingham (UK) Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham that marked the beginning of Cultural Studies as a distinct academic field of study. “Cultural Studies” so understood hasn’t been in existence in China for very long at all. It first appeared on the mainland between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, though it is difficult to pinpoint the exact time, in part because we cannot say convincingly what constitutes and what does not “Cultural Studies”. For instance, did the nationwide discussions about culture in the 1980s fall under “Cultural Studies”? It did in a broad sense but did not in a narrower sense. The same ambiguity and uncertainty are true for studies of traditional culture, tea culture and food culture, to name a few.

Personally, I prefer to define “Cultural Studies” in a comparatively restricted manner; that is, as a field that began when the Birmingham (UK) Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham was established in

¹A book generally begins with a preface. So does this one. But it may make no sense to give an overview of the book in this part. This preface is nothing more than my personal thoughts on, instead of a systematic analysis of, Cultural Studies. It is merely what I myself think about Cultural Studies. The opinions of the other two professors who co-authored this book aren’t expressed here in this preface. From Tao Dongfeng who wrote the preface.

1964 As a distinct academic subject, “Cultural Studies” is to be distinguished from studies of cultures in a more general sense. The Chinese language edition of *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* by the American Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson (Xi’an: Shaanxi Normal University Press, 1988) and the Chinese language edition of *Dialektik der Aufklärung (Dialectic of Enlightenment)* by the Frankfurt School philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 1990) may mark the beginning of Cultural Studies in the Chinese mainland. But at that time most people did not think of “Cultural Studies” as a term that referred to a special field of research (one with its own approach, set of problems, political stance and analytical approach, and so forth). Horkheimer and Adorno have long been recognized as masters of Cultural Studies for their criticisms of mass culture (they called it “the culture industry”). Nonetheless, back in the 1940s and 1950s when they conducted their studies of mass culture, the term “Cultural Studies” had yet to be coined. They referred to what they did as “critical theory”. It was scholars of later generations that put the works of Horkheimer and Adorno under the umbrella of what had become “Cultural Studies”.

One thing is certain, which is that in the beginning Cultural Studies in China focused on mass culture. Topics included *Yearning*, the wildly popular TV series from the early 1990s, the “hooligan style of writing” by Wang Shuo and pop music. The same thing happened in the west, where when Cultural Studies first emerged it focused quite narrowly on such mass culture phenomena as Hollywood movies and pop music. Personally, I tend to think that while people back then did have different opinions on those cultural phenomena, they did not think of “Cultural Studies” as a whole field of study, nor did they try to engage in theoretical or methodological construction or reflection. It was not until around 2000 when people began to talk about what “Cultural Studies” actually is, what features it has and its relationship with literary studies. For instance, “Cultural Studies” was already used in its specific meaning in 2001 when discussions were held on “the aestheticization of everyday life” and the relationship between “Cultural Studies” and theory of literature and art. That is to say, practices preceded the conscious reflection on theories in the field of Cultural Studies.

I myself began to touch upon the Cultural Studies theory in the early 1990s and focused on mass culture. What I read at that time mainly included the aforementioned *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, *Dialektik der Aufklärung (Dialectic of Enlightenment)* and works by other Frankfurt School philosophers, such as Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*. Like other elitist-thinking intellectuals, I couldn’t agree more with those authors for their comments on the features of mass culture, such as social control, being sensual, commercialized and one-dimensional and mechanical reproduction. “The Culture Industry” was a highly quoted chapter from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It seemed that the key to mass culture was finally found all of a sudden.

However, it is noteworthy that the Frankfurt School theory of mass culture was inflexibly copied by the Chinese academic circles; that is to say, the specific context and political and cultural functions of mass culture in China have been terribly overlooked.

Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (the Chinese version of which was published in 1991 by Peking University Press) was another important work for the early Cultural Studies. The book lies as a cornerstone of the Cultural Studies in the UK and plays a seminal role in the Cultural Studies in China. Williams put forth in the book his famous ideas on culture, such as "a culture is a whole way of life" and "culture is ordinary". His anti-elitist views of culture have created a legitimate foundation and methodological perspective for the Cultural Studies focusing on mass culture rather than elitist culture. The book happened to be published in China between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Personally speaking, my studies of mass culture have been focused on civil society discussions. For me, it was a significant source, yet seemed to be left unnoticed.

Then how did I find around 1995 my mechanical copy of the Frankfurt School's critical theory at all? It was more or less coincidental as well. The Chinese academic circles (mainly sociologists in China) happened to hold discussions on civil society in the middle 1990s. Initiated by Deng Zhenglai, the then editor-in-chief of *Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly* (a quarterly journal registered in Hong Kong and published in Beijing), the discussions were warmly received by social sciences scholars, particularly sociologists, and by scholars of political sciences and law. Few humanities scholars, particularly those engaged in literature and aesthetics, took part in those discussions. Nonetheless, scholars of literary criticism and aesthetics were at the time the mainstay of the Cultural Studies in China. That may be one reason why Cultural Studies and civil society discussions couldn't communicate with each other.

A nongovernmental-style journal, *Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly* has been quite popular with insiders. Civil society discussions went under the profound influence of the democratic transformation progressing between the late 1980s and the early 1990s in East European countries, most of which were totalitarian or post-totalitarian ones. In practice, the discussions served as a theoretical response and interpretation to the transformation of the old-day totalitarian countries to democratic and liberal ones. It is worthy of ample attention, as conditions in China and East European countries had much in common. And that was why I paid much attention to the discussions. It was natural for me to do so in the then conditions in China and out of my own past experiences. One thing that interested me was: Is China a "civil society" as opposed to a "totalitarian one" or to what extent it is? It may be put in the other way round: Is China a "totalitarian society" as opposed to a "civil one" or to what extent it is? I agree more with this: China is neither a typical civil society, nor a typical totalitarian one. Instead, it is in the transition from a totalitarian society to a civil society.

This judging of the nature of the Chinese society has played a critical role in my studies of mass culture. Integrating this judging into my thoughts on mass culture in China, I formed an opinion on mass culture, different both from my previous views and the ones by other scholars at the time: In the 1980s and 90s, the Chinese society saw a mass culture that was a special-type civil culture generated in the transition of a totalitarian society to a civil society. Like the then immature civil society in China, this special-type civil culture of the time both depended upon government and stood independent from the latter. It was a folk thing unable to escape from the political force. It couldn't mind only market and business laws, despite the seeding marketization and commercialization. Thus, the mass culture in China at that time tried to challenge, but had to compromise at times, and tried to subvert, yet had to assimilate. Complicated as its content and functions were, it couldn't be simplified or put inflexibly into the mass culture theory popular in the West.

On the one hand, the power of commercial culture to undermine government sanctioned culture manifested itself amply in the late 1980s in China (according to some, including Li Zehou), when the rise and development of mass culture helped put an end to the near-monopoly of officialdom-controlled and elite culture on China's culture scene while at the same time expanding the country's cultural space government-sanctioned culture. On the other hand, mass culture was subject to interference and restraints from government-sanctioned culture, thus had to yield and remain subordinate to the latter (few saw this at the time). Mass culture was primarily a bearer of commercial value (though the point can be easily overstated). Therefore, it was to a large extent within this context that I changed my views on mass culture, particularly the mass culture local to China. Looking back, the changes resulted from my integrating civil society theory with the studies of mass culture, which led me to abandon the one-sided application of the Frankfurt School's theories and to a great extent, go beyond an overly simplistic elitist mindset and narrow perspectives on humanities (civil society theory is a social theory). In this context, I wrote a number of articles on mass culture, including "Compromise and Interpenetration of Government-sanctioned Culture and Mass Culture: An Inspection of the Post-1989 Chinese Culture",² "Binary Opposition beyond Historism and Moralism: On a Third Stand on Mass Culture"³ and "Critical Theory and Mass Culture Criticism in China".⁴ In these articles I made substantial revisions to my previous research perspectives and conclusions. The last of these articles, in particular, gave a review of how mass culture studies in China mechanically applied the Frankfurt School's theory. I think it was this change in my

²Tao Dongfeng, "Compromise and Interpenetration of Government-sanctioned culture and Mass Culture: An Inspection of the Post-1989 Chinese Culture", *Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly* (Hong Kong), August 1995.

³Tao Dongfeng, "Binary Opposition beyond Historism and Moralism: On a Third Stand to Mass Culture", *Shanghai Culture* (Shanghai), 1996 (3).

⁴Tao Dongfeng, "Critical Theory and Mass Culture Criticism in China", *Oriental Culture* (Guangzhou), 2000 (5).

studies that helped me see better the complexity and uniqueness of mass culture in China. I have been focusing on these two issues ever since.

Cultural Studies in China saw another important event in the early and mid-1990s when *Dushu (Reading)* magazine published in 1993 a series of articles introducing Edward Said and post-colonial criticism, thus helped intensifying the consciousness of the third world and geopolitics in Cultural Studies. However, some of those articles featured a sympathy for parochial nationalism. Roughly around the same time, reflections on modernity and globalization, post-modern and world-system theories were introduced to China, leading many Chinese academics to change their ideas about modernization and modernity. This was clearly seen in the field of Cultural Studies. As is known to all, modern ideology dominated the fields of humanities and social sciences in the 1980s. Large disagreements existed on the question of whether Chinese or Western cultures were more suited to modernization. Nevertheless, all the interlocutors had similar theoretical resources and model of discourse and appeared to agree on one thing, that modernization and modernity are of positive value. The only questions were whether the Chinese culture was good enough for modernization and how modernization is to unfold in the Chinese context. The Cultural Studies practice in China in the early 1990s under the influence of the Frankfurt School no longer pursued modern ideology alone. But it hardly touched upon issues of geopolitics and cultural colonialism, either.

Things were different with the post-colonial theory: Did the traditional Chinese culture lead to the backward position of China in the process of modernization? Or, was China unable or hard to get modernized under the oppression from the capitalist world system? It was no longer a self-evident question. Many “New Leftists” (mostly nationalists) often held an opinion quite different from the modern theory. According to them, China fell behind in the process of modernization, as China was marginalized in the capitalist world system, not because the traditional Chinese culture couldn’t go well with modernization. They thus considered Mao Zedong’s socialist modernization mode as a modern alternative to resist the capitalist modernity of the West and a great attempt to open up a way of modernization of China’s own. Some others even equated China’s “Charter of Anshan Iron and Steel Factory” with post-Fordism and the mass campaigns in the Cultural Revolution with mass democracy. Nevertheless, these thoughts simply seemed to be inconceivable in the 1980s.

In this sense, the introduction of the post-colonial theory into China has had a profound influence on China’s Cultural Studies. For example, Said’s *Orientalism* has left much impact upon China’s Cultural Studies and even the entire intelligentsia of China. Not that obscure in its content, this book changed Chinese intellectuals’ perspectives on the Chinese history, in general, and the modern Chinese history, in particular. Since the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese intelligentsia had seen the West-influenced modernization in China in a positive perspective by the 1980s. Then, some scholars, with the inspiration from the post-colonial theory, held that the Chinese history of modernization was actually a

process of “alienation”, during which period the Chinese nation gradually lost its own identity. According to the scholars holding the aforementioned opinion, Lu Xun and other enlightenment thinkers actually internalized the Western imperialist thoughts, by trying to reshape the national characteristics, and what those thinkers advocated was the self-exile and self-alienation of the Chinese nation. Thus, the long-recognized discourse of enlightenment from the May Fourth Movement onwards was entirely and completely denied and the narration of the modern Chinese history rewritten. Nonetheless, has this theory infected with nationalist and New Left thoughts opened a new horizon, or covered up the issues not fully and deeply discussed before? It may be tested only by time.

Around the turn of centuries, China saw a rapid economic development, while consumerism swept across the country, ragingly with hedonism, utilitarianism, Cynicism and presentism (I coined this term to describe the attitudes and lifestyle totally indifferent to future and past). In the meantime, Chinese people cared less about politics, showed a weak awareness of citizenship, but got zealous about amusements and fun. By this, I don't try to deny any of these social phenomena or cultural thoughts in the previous times. Instead, those things stood out around the turn of centuries as never before. Thus, Cultural Studies needed changes once again.

It was during this period when I learned about Václav Havel's post-totalitarianism. According to Havel, the most distinct characteristic of a post-totalitarian society lies as the integration of consumerism and totalitarianism. On the one hand, the public indulge themselves in consumption and sensual fun and enjoy an unprecedented freedom in this. They “sing what they like” and they “do as they wish”. While on the other hand, most people care nothing about political issues and are passionless to public participation and indifferent to civil rights. Skepticism prevails and people believe in nothing. Utilitarianism, however, pushes people to do anything, so long as there is profit. People lose interest and faith in ideological empty words and lies and skepticism are developed into nihilism and Cynicism, so that people question any possibilities to change the reality. “Post-totalitarian phenomena”, as I call them, are simply found everywhere.

The mass culture in a post-totalitarian society has its own phenomena or patterns. I myself have focused more on parody and fantastic literature. Parody literature reflects a distinct mentality of young adults in a post-totalitarian society: They are radical skeptics who hold aggressively negative attitudes toward idols and authority (as shown in their copying classics in an amusing manner), and meanwhile, they muddle along, without any positive thoughts and teasing everything. Young adults seek a seemingly easy life and try to avoid any serious issues by diving into the world of fantastic literature. They hardly care about the reality or have any sense of history. Instead, they simply indulge themselves in the unreal world constructed with video games, a vacuum place without the past or future.

In some people's opinion, though Cultural Studies appears to be popular in China today, it is actually a neglected or marginalized sector, considering its systematization level and the support and recognition it receives from the national educational and research institutes. I hardly agree with this opinion, though.

Cultural Studies is popular in China, not merely appearing to be popular. The level of systematization or governmental support cannot serve as the single criterion to assess an academic sector's popularity. Or rather to say, the level of institutionalization or disciplinary specialization of an academic field doesn't suffice to illustrate whether the academic field is popular or not. It is simply because institution doesn't mean everything. So it is particularly true today. Otherwise, we may come to a conclusion as absurd as that Han Han and Guo Jingming or pop stars are not as popular as Marxism and Leninism.

This is particularly important to Cultural Studies, which is an academic field under exploration, little systematized or disciplinarily specialized, and in its nature, an interdisciplinary or even anti-disciplinary field. In today's modern disciplinary context, disciplinary specialization lies as the basic mode and symbol of systematization. It is particularly true in China. The basic pattern remains unchanged, despite reflections on the issue, though. Ministry of Education still follows a highly-specialized path of higher education (such as specialty design, undergraduate enrollment and graduate programs) and the situation is unlikely to see any radical changes in future.

In the meantime, Cultural Studies as a research methodology, path, purport and standpoint, or as a critical mentality and public concern, has been traced in every corner of humanities and social sciences, even in some academic studies that are not known as "Cultural Studies" by the name, such as studies of communication, film and television, literary theory, comparative literature and modern literature. It is easy to understand, if we take Cultural Studies as an academic research methodology and purport. In another word, it is its research purport, methodology and standpoint that decide whether a research belongs to Cultural Studies. Taking for communication studies for example, it may be or may not be Cultural Studies, all depending upon its purports, including political orientation, interdisciplinary methods, marginalized standpoint and critical and interventional tendency. So are the situations concerning literary theory and criticism. In my opinion, my literary studies and criticism and those done by some others are essentially Cultural Studies. Of course, some are not. I am delighted to see a deeper and wider application of the methodology, purport and objective of Cultural Studies in humanities and social sciences, despite various doubts and criticisms. Cultural Studies enjoys a promising prospect in China.

Cultural Studies gains its stronghold and vitality in practice, as it is highly sensitive and responsive to key social and cultural phenomena in modern China, in various applicable ways. Cultural Studies is also sensitive to and absorbs all sorts of leading-edge theories (in philosophy, sociology, linguistics and social theories). At present, Cultural Studies in China is confronted with many problems. For instance, it remains strange to leading-edge theories and not professional enough in practice or operation. The fundamental issue lies in the lack of space of speech and in the little attention to the context and issues unique to China. Western theories are still copied mechanically.

Furthermore, theoretical resources for Cultural Studies lie well beyond the field itself. Personally, I see few true masters among the Cultural Studies scholars

recognized by the Western academia (Raymond Williams, who has been seen as the Founder of Cultural Studies, is not a Cultural Studies scholar, strictly speaking. What he did for Cultural Studies was to lay the foundation for the idea and approach of Cultural Studies). None of the Cultural Studies works could be as deep or methodical in thought and theory as Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Bourdieu's *Distinction* and *The Theory of Communicative Action* by Habermas. I'd like to consider Cultural Studies as "parasites" on the trees of giant thoughts like Marx, Foucault and Bourdieu. Personally, I don't think there is any master thinker or masterpiece of novel theories in Cultural Studies. To be frank, none of the Western thinkers who have exerted the most profound influence upon me or none of my favorite academic works is from or concerning the narrow-sense Cultural Studies field. For example, neither Habermas nor Bourdieu, both of whom are my favorite philosophers, is a Cultural Studies scholar, despite their unrivaled influence on Cultural Studies. Nevertheless, I've found it of more help to read their works than to read the narrow-sense Cultural Studies ones, as the former ones help shape or reshape one's academic horizon by the roots.

Bourdieu's works have to a large extent changed my opinions on literature and aesthetics. For instance, I believe now that both literature and aesthetics are social constructs. Self-discipline of literary arts in the 1980s was also a social construct. It was never born so. Instead, it created certain social conditions for self-disciplined literature and literary theory. Because of impacts from various conditions, self-discipline of literary arts was neither self-evident nor eternal. The abovementioned opinions of mine are all inspired by Bourdieu's influence, of course. Moreover, Bourdieu's influence also came from his theory of power applied to art analysis. As time passed, I grew increasingly unsatisfied with Bourdieu's theories that largely target Western countries. What are the characteristics of the Chinese society? What is the special relations among power and literature and art unique to China? It is hardly possible to answer these questions by reading Bourdieu's works. Thus, we need to make one more step and embark on a deeper investigation into China's social and cultural structures and the dispute on the relationship between culture and politics in China. This investigation covers issues such as China's social nature and structure of state, the relationships between the government and the market and between the government and the people.

To grasp the essence of these issues, I shifted my attention to Arendt's theories, particularly her arguments on totalitarianism, commonality and politics. In addition, I read about Havel's post-totalitarian theory. With these theories, we may better understand the Post-1949 Chinese society and the social and cultural status quo in China. I made more progress academically by reading Western cultural theories for full understanding.

I would like to stress here the significance of Arendt and Havel to Cultural Studies of China. As is known to all, Western Cultural Studies has been under the heavy influence of Marxism and almost all the renowned figures in Cultural Studies in the West are "Leftists" believing in Marxism, more or less. Influenced by

Western left-wing thoughts, Cultural Studies in China has seemed to be left-leaning from the very beginning. Moreover, it tends to be more so in recent years. But, situations in the West differ from that in China. Socialism has dominated China since 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded and Marxism has been always the only officially-legitimate ideology. The political, economic and cultural patterns of China have never gone fully capitalist even in the post-Mao era. So, would it be absurd if the Cultural Studies circle in China blindly follow the West and criticize capitalism?

I think Arendt's and Havel's theories and thoughts fit Cultural Studies in contemporary China better than do post-modernism and the Frankfurt School's theories, even though I used to be a keen follow of the Frankfurt School and post-modernism.⁵ With some self-reflection, I felt it insufficient to analyze the cultural phenomena in contemporary China only with post-modernism and the Frankfurt School' theories, as the theoretical discourse and the cultural reality have apparently been incommunicable, for those theories have been extracted from and for the social and cultural conditions in the Western developed capitalist countries, while China is too much different from those countries. Havel's and Arendt's theories, in contrast, make a better fit in the Chinese context, as Arendt drew her theories mainly from the social realities of Germany and Havel based his thoughts on the social and cultural phenomena in socialist and post-socialist Czech in East Europe. Evidently, the conditions in these two countries had more in common with those in China.

I have recently tried to establish a totalitarian and post-totalitarian paradigm of Cultural Studies. It is not easy, though. As previously noted, Western Cultural Studies scholars have based their theories and thinking on capitalist societies of the West, thus are largely left-leaning in political orientation. Western Cultural Studies is therefore a red sector finding its driving forces in criticisms of capitalist society and mass culture. If we mechanically transplant Western theories of Cultural Studies into China's context, taking capitalist society and mass culture as the target of our criticisms, we risk choosing the wrong objects to criticize and arriving at wrong conclusions. In my recent publications I have been trying to clarify this argument. For instance, in "To Know Our Version of 'Amusing Ourselves to Death': The Abusive Use of a Western Cultural Theory in China", I argued it is inappropriate to apply Neil Postman's notion of "amusing ourselves to death" in the Chinese context. According to Postman, people become confused by and finally drown in the excess of freedom, information and choices. Postman also thinks that Orwell's prophecy never came true in the West. The latter predicts that culture will one day die in totalitarianism. Instead, Postman points out that the West has finally seen Huxley's "Brave New World" in which human cultures die in excessive democracy, interests and choices, rather than totalitarianism. People simply enjoy too much fun and comfort in that "Brave New World". In too easy a life, one will

⁵See Tao Dongfeng, "Desire and Degradation: Criticism on Contemporary Mass Culture", *Wenyi Zhengming* (*Debates in Literature and Arts*) (Changchun), 1993 (6).

fall into the obsession with entertainment. But I don't think it is what we have in China now. China faces quite complicated situations combining consumerism and totalitarianism with its own characteristics. Thus, present-day China is neither a Brave New World nor a typical totalitarian country. It's an integration of the two. Based on this, I try to investigate into specific cultural examples and cases in contemporary China and establish a new research model of mass culture of my own that is different from the existing Western Cultural Studies theories.

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Cultural Studies in Modern China

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2017, XXI, 210 p. 2 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-10-5579-9