

The Ends of Theory: The Beijing Symposium on Critical Inquiry

W. J. T. Mitchell and Wang Ning

June is the month for academic conferences in China. In just one week (7–15 June 2004): a conference on globalization and indigenous cultures in Zhengzhou; in Beijing, a conference on literary theory and on “Fred Jameson in China” at Renmin University; and a four-day conference at Tsinghua University on critical inquiry (both the journal and the practice for which it is named), organized by Wang Ning with the cosponsorship of the University of Chicago.

The critical inquiry conference was subtitled “the ends of theory,” with a pun on the goals or purposes of theory and the oft-reported death of theory. In these two ways, the conference was a continuation of the 2003 gathering of the *CI* editorial board in Chicago to discuss the future of criticism and theory (see the winter 2004 issue for the proceedings of that conference). Convened during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in April 2003, the Chicago conference was haunted by questions about the seeming impotence of theory and criticism in the face of folly and ignorance driven by fanaticism, greed, and hubris. Critical theory seemed outmatched in 2003 by a superior form of ideological theory hitched to the power of the U.S. military, the crusading sense of mission in the misbegotten “War on Terror,” and the active compliance of mass-media institutions in leading a reluctant American populace into the war. Neoconservative theorists, notably Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, were riding high, triumphantly announcing the dawn of a new Middle East led by the democratization of Iraq. The U.S. occupation was heralded as a liberation on every side, except for a few critical theory diehards—and the vast majority of the world’s population, which looked on in horror as the world’s only superpower plunged into a disastrous strategic mistake. As the *New York Times* pronounced the invasion of

Iraq a great success, it also marked one of the defining moments of the year as the “death of theory,” mourned in Chicago at the *CI* conference of spring 2003.¹

How does all this look a year later, and in Beijing? How does the world’s oldest empire look upon the self-destructive follies of the youngest? With considerable irony, one suspects, and a sense of déjà vu and puzzlement. One question that arose in conversations around the conference was how the U.S. could possibly survive with a polarized two-party system. In China, it was remarked, such a division could only lead to civil war, and thus China’s “one-party democracy” seemed to some like the wisest course for a large and diverse nation. American foreign policy, which looks strange enough from Europe these days, seems positively demented from a Chinese perspective. But then China has never sent an occupation force halfway around the globe to liberate a foreign country. Its imperial ambitions have been mainly focused on securing and expanding its own borders, creating an empire that has endured now for over two thousand years, an empire of consolidation and contiguity rather than adventurist colonialism. The only war on terror that made the front pages of the *China Daily* in June was the one involving the U.S. arming of Taiwan with weapons of mass destruction that are seen as targeting major Chinese cities.²

As for the fate of critical theory in Beijing, one would never guess that it was dead or dying. Something called theory (whether of culture, of the arts and media, of literature, of language, of history or politics) has established itself as the lingua franca of international conversations about every imaginable topic: from the minutiae of everyday life in local situations to the unimaginably complex phenomenon known as globalization. Of course there are many other international vernaculars: advertising, film, finance

1. Reference the *New York Times Magazine*’s end-of-the-year summary that mentioned the death of theory as one of the hundred notable ideas of 2003.

2. See Xiao Xing, “Terrorism Part of Taiwan Separatist Agenda,” *China Daily*, 18 June 2004, p. 6.

W. J. T. MITCHELL is the Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor of English and art history at the University of Chicago and editor of *Critical Inquiry*. His newest book, *What Do Pictures Want?* will appear in 2005. WANG NING is professor of English and director of the Center for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Tsinghua University. He is also editor of the Chinese edition of *Critical Inquiry*. Apart from his numerous publications in Chinese and English, his most recent English publications include *Globalization and Cultural Translation* (2004) and, coedited with Jean O’Grady, *Northrop Frye: Eastern and Western Perspectives* (2003).

capital, tourism, style and fashion, architecture, even literature in translation. But theory, as understood at this conference, was being mobilized as the effort to coordinate the understanding of these other vernaculars, to grasp their totality in a global act of cognitive mapping, to quote Fred Jameson.

If theory (along with irony, deconstruction, postmodernism, and Marxism) had been declared dead or dying since 9/11, perhaps since the onset of the New World Order in 1989, it seemed energetically alive and going about its business in the Beijing of June 2004. After all, events of the year (most recently, the revelation of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs in May 2004) had “deconstructed” in the most profound sense the triumphalist fantasies of the year before (deconstruction is, we must remember, not a method but an event, the cunning of history revealed by interpretation). Even the mass media, led reluctantly by the *Times*, developed a spark of critical self-consciousness and began apologizing for its shameful cheerleading and journalistic dereliction of duty in the rush to war. Theorizing the systemic failure of the media, however, seemed beyond the paper’s capabilities, and the quiet apologies were stuffed discreetly in the inside pages. One wonders when and how the *Times* will publish a correction to its premature declaration of the death of theory.

This is not to say that great theoretical breakthroughs and heroic new ideas were circulating at the Beijing conference. Something more modest was occurring, a subtle reformulating of literary and cultural canons,³ a dislocating of familiar questions and methods, a “medium theory” that stresses the long durée and what Thomas Kuhn called normal science, while attending to the mediations of theory itself. Pessimistic or revolutionary story lines make for the better sound bites: if it bleeds it leads. But the real news of the critical inquiry conference was the discovery that theory, like international-style architecture, like capitalism itself, is alive and well in China, bringing new inflections of critical method and speculative model building to an enormous variety of topics. Panels and workshops included the following: (1) hermeneutics and aesthetics of reception; (2) theories of interpretation: East and West; (3) literary studies in a global context; (4) interpreting Western literature from the Chinese perspective; (5) interpreting Chinese literature from the Western perspective; (6) cultural translation and critical interpretation; (7) iconographical interpretation of literary texts; (8) modernity and postmodernity reinterpreted; (9) reinterpreting postcolonial and diasporic literature; and (10) changes in the func-

3. Wang Ning’s paper on comparative transformations in literary canons was especially important in this regard.

tion of theory. There was also a workshop on the future of the theoretical journals (with the obligatory anxieties about the possible demise of these essential institutions). Over eighty scholars from all parts of China, Asia, Europe, and the Americas participated in the conference.

Debating the future of literary and cultural theory in China these days can be a disorienting experience, all puns intended. For one thing, there is the overwhelming sense of rapid transformation in China itself, with the massive arrival of Western capital in the last decade, the transformation of the urban fabric, the explosion of industrial production, displacement of millions of workers from the country to the city, and the emergence of new, hybrid cultural forms, from a distinctively Chinese avant-garde art scene to new syntheses of modernist, international-style architecture with traditional Chinese forms. If capitalism is changing China, it may be the case that China is also changing capitalism, reversing (to give just one instance) the tendency of capitalism's drive toward mechanization and automation in favor of a renewed emphasis on manual production made possible by China's enormous labor pool. One must ask, therefore, what is happening to Western traditions of literary and cultural theory—and of critical thought more generally—as they encounter the overwhelming reality of China: the unrivalled depth and antiquity of its intellectual and cultural traditions; the sheer abundance of its human resources.

The conference was keynoted by Fred Jameson and Hillis Miller, the two critics who have arguably done most over the last twenty years to bring Western theoretical ideas to China. Miller's subtle reading of Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* through the lens of recent thinking about empire and post-coloniality provided an eloquent demonstration of the way theory reaches back into the literary canon and reshapes response, inciting new questions, new answers, and even new archives. Jameson's address on cyberpunk science fiction showed the way that literary and filmic narrative is evolving to reckon with the new technical and cultural realities of late capitalism, the old plots of the heist film refunctioned for the scenarios of cyberterrorism and biopolitics. Jameson's presence reminded us, moreover, of how his thought has, over the last twenty years, taken root in Chinese intellectual life, offering a new life and new poetry to the seemingly defunct categories of Maoist Chinese modernity. As the leading spokesman for a Western Marxism widely reported as obsolete, Jameson's thought not only survives in China but prevails in a situation where global mapping, the dialectic analysis of cultural and material transformations, and a willingness to think the totality of capitalism seem now more urgent and timely than ever.

Space does not permit us to summarize in detail all the excellent papers given by the participants, but a copy of the program is now available on our

website. Everything from comparative literary canons (Wang Ning) to sex workers and “affective labor” (Sheldon Lu) to theory and its discontents (Ming Dong Gu) was discussed. A prominent theme was, of course, the impact of globalization that was so visible all around us in the streets (and new expressways and skyscrapers) of Beijing: urban space and cinema (Liu Kang and Xie Shaobo), the anxieties about “Chineseness” in a stream of transnational styles (Yu Haiqing, Lu Jie), and the Chinese diaspora and postcolonial theory (Sheng Anfeng, Louis Schwartz, and He Donghui). New context-sensitive narratologies (Shen Dan), the reception of Walter Benjamin in China (Guo Jun), gender and iconography in everything from Ibsen’s late plays (Knut Brynhildsvoll) to Feng Xiaogang’s new film *Cell phone* (Nie Jing) were also on offer in a whirlwind of discourse punctuated by fabulous meals and outings to the Great Wall and the opera.

The workshop for editors of theory journals included Luo Xuanmin of *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, Pamela McCallum and Xie Shaobo of *ARIEL*, Knut Brynhildsvoll of *Ibsen Studies*, Thomas Beebee of *Comparative Literature Studies*, Milan Dimic of *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, and Robin Tsai of *Tamkang Review*. It also attracted the editors of some major Chinese journals, such as Chen Jianlan of *Wenyi yanjiu* (*Literature and Art Studies*), Chen Yongguo of *Wenxue lilun qianyan* (*Frontiers of Literary Theory*), Tao Dongfeng of *Wenhua yanjiu* (*Cultural Studies*), Ye Xiangyang of *Zhonghua dushu bao* (*Chinese Reading Weekly*), and Guo Jun of *Waiguo wenxue yanjiu* (*Foreign Literature Studies*). *Critical Inquiry* editors in attendance included Elizabeth Helsinger, Richard Neer, and our managing editor, Jay Williams. Dipesh Chakrabarty participated from a distance by sending along a green paper raising questions about the varying fortunes of theory in a comparative Asian context.

Aside from the usual grouching about overwork, eyestrain, unhelpful colleagues, uncomprehending publishers, and inadequate resources, this workshop provided an occasion for thinking practically about the dissemination of literary and cultural theory in a global context; about the transformations in communications and media that are making theory (and the theory journal) into a transnational commodity and a common site for research and speculation; and about the transformations in the substance of theory itself as the old lessons of structuralism and poststructuralism become a kind of common-sense basis for the articulation of new, unsuspected forms of uncommon sense in the new millennium. Far from being dead or dying, theory in Beijing seemed at once exuberantly youthful in its energy and maturely modest in its goal of not only facilitating the exchange of ideas but patiently treating the very idea of exchange itself as an object of reflection and critique.

We wish, therefore, to acknowledge the generous support of our home institutions that made this festival of the intellect possible. We wish especially to thank Don Randel, the president of the University of Chicago, who made it possible for *Critical Inquiry* to send a contingent to China, and vice president Xie Weihe of Tsinghua University, for the magnificent hospitality. We are sure that the significance of the Beijing conference on critical inquiry will manifest itself more conspicuously along with the publication of the first volume of the Chinese version of *Critical Inquiry* in the near future.