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Citation: Wang, Jing. "The Global Reach of a New Discourse." International Journal of Cultural Studies 7, 1 (March 2004): 9–19 © 2004 Sage Publications

As Published: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1367877904040601>

Publisher: Sage Publications

Persistent URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/111178>

Version: Author's final manuscript: final author's manuscript post peer review, without publisher's formatting or copy editing

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The global reach of a new discourse

How far can “creative industries” travel?

International Journal of Cultural Studies, Vol. 7, No. 1, March 2004,
p. 9-19

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Abstract: this article raises the question of “creative industries” as a travelling discourse and examines its relevance to mainland China in the wake of its accession to the World Trade Organization(WTO). How do we construct a viable comparative framework that would enable us to track the place-specific economies of knowledge, creativity and content production? How do we account for a locale’s needs for specific discursive constructs? How can responsible cultural theorists talk about different national cultural policies relationally? This article brings to the fore an approach that prioritizes the infrastructural inquiries of the local agenda. Thus, it is shown that the same socialist state launched a campaign on creative industries in Hong Kong while stepping up its promotion of “cultural industries” as a new policy category on the mainland. China’s stakes of entering the WTO are examined alongside the sites of crises embedded in the Chinese local norm.

KEYWORDS: asset hybridization, commercialization, creative content, cultural economy, cultural industries, logic of foreign capital, regulatory state, travelling discourse

Before departing for the “New Economy, Creativity and Consumption Symposium” at QUT in December 2002, I had a brief encounter with the Dean of the School of Humanities, Arts and the Social Sciences at MIT. Upon finding out that I was going to a university that had audaciously renamed its old Arts and Humanities Faculty the Creative Industries Faculty, he was both curious and excited. “Bring me back the model”, he said. Instead, I brought to Queensland an inquiry of a different kind that had less to do with “creative industries” as a new curricular paradigm than with its potential as a travelling discourse.

For me, there are two trajectories underlying the intellectual agenda of the QUT symposium on creative industries: one distinctly articulated, an institutional project that should engage any deans looking for cutting-edge visions; and another, an international project embedded in aggressive discursive movements. There are two distinctly different projects with various prospects of success and are therefore in need of an evaluative framework that acknowledges this scalar distinction. My concern lies with the international project, but a quick look at the institutional project will familiarize us with some of the staple questions regarding creative industries.

The institutional project

Of course, QUT's intuitional experiment has stakes far beyond the academy. However, because much of the deconstructive criticism voiced during the symposium was directed at the normative discourses of the "new economy" and "consumption", little light was shed on how those state-funded, newly established university R&Ds (housed in QUT's Creative Industries Research and Applications Center) will build knowledge integration communities that incorporate not only research, industry, education and public components, but a significant interface with the creative industries sector emerging within the precinct of Queensland. Exactly how the three-way partnership of the university, industry and government would pan out (auspiciously visualized in John Hartley's small tripod) remains a phantom question sitting on the back burner. To me, however, growing our curiosity about European models of kindred collaborative schemes (such as Ars Electronica Future Lab in Linz) and cultivating a parallel interest in the partnership (not to be completely conflated with the financial terms of exchange) constitute the real challenge for the humanist advocates of the old "arts and culture" from a spending portfolio to an investment one in the name of "emerging industries" (Cunningham, this issue). Kate Oakley's cautionary note that there is a "widening gap "between the growing rhetoric and the small "evidence data" of creative industries in the UK points to the same concern as mine with the question of substance (Oakley, this issue).

This said, the conception of creative industries as an institutional project specific to the state of Queensland makes a lot of sense to a convert of applied humanism like myself. Thinking 'culture' as an economic activity and questioning the 'general, prior, analytic distinction between "culture and "economy" ' (du Gay and Pryke, 2002: 9) are new intellectual orientations conducive to academic humanists' lagging engagement with social spaces outside the ivory tower. Therefore, mindful as I am of the political and social pitfalls of hyping the flexible working regime to which the future QUT-trained 'creative class' would be likely to be bound (McRobbie, 2002:105), I nonetheless appreciate the rare blend of pragmatism and utopianism registered in John Hartley and Stuart Cunningham's theoretical attempts at appropriating the rhetorics of the new economy to advance the creative disciplines (and content industries) from the margins to the mainstream (Cunningham, this issue; Hartley and Cunningham, 2001). 'Creativity' is redefined as an enterprise sector, intrinsic, not external, to the contemporary technologically-accented knowledge economy.

The international project

As an institutionally-driven project specific to the context of QUT and Queensland, creative industries may well develop into a sustainable vision

of its own. But the symposium had the higher purpose of internationalizing the discourse, which inevitably raised the stakes and brought us to examine a point of contention; namely, whether the discourse of creative industries travels well from continent to continent and from one mode of production to another. My answer to this straightforward question is not a simple cno\ I am keenly aware of the developed worlds interest in seeking its own mirror image in developing countries. If the locale or the country of your research is slow in 'transitioning' into capitalism and if it sits outside the world trade legal regime or if you fancy saying that not all oceans connect, the 'first world' elite may just lose their desire to find out more about your locality or your ocean, and also gone is the possibility of meaningful dialogue.

Our symposium struggled with staying away from such a trap. However, I found that our budding curiosity about the other locale was at risk of being overtaken by our more compelling professional anxiety about discursive stakes. Thus, when a western normative discourse such as creative industries was found not equally applicable to every locale under the sun, the remedy we sought was the deconstructive strategy of 'emptying its analytical content, - a move prematurely drawing to a close those productive fertile moments of contestation that could have led us to ask: what is the particular socioeconomic ecology of some locales (in my case, China) that sustains the currency of old terms such as 'cultural industries' in lieu of 'creative industries'?

Indeed, why do I, a cultural critic susceptible to the alluring call of global theories, think that the mainland Chinese, fast as they are in appropriating travelling discourses, would not, and should not, jump on the bandwagon of this new discursive movement any time soon? This is because the 'cookie-cutter approach' is applicable only to places that do not have a history and human geography. If, as Oakley cautions, sectors such as creative industries cannot be replicated in different regions of the UK (Oakley, this issue), what makes one think that a country on a different continent would be a blank canvas awaiting earnest cookie-cutters to carve and paste? The issue at stake is not my problem with sameness or your right to difference, but how we imagine 'difference' in such a way so as to undermine the pseudo-proposition that every place is unique. The way to do it is to think about difference *relationally*, as critical human geographers suggest (Massey et al., 1999; Pratt, this issue). Therefore, instead of emptying the analytical content of creative industries understood in the Australian, British or Scottish contexts, let us keep all of them, but, at the same time, turn to infra-structural inquiries about the other locales. Then and only then might a whole spectrum of complex local agendas and conditions begin to emerge and enable us to track the crisscrossing economies of culture, creativity and content production all within a comparative trajectory better prepared to respond to the place-specific articulations spawned from the universal

strategic thinking of writing 'culture' into policy lexicons.

The Hong Kong campaign on creative industries

This long detour returns us to my initial question about the travelling capacity of creative industries and, specifically, the degree of its (discursive) relevance to mainland China. First, a summary review of what is taken for granted in the creative industries discourse is in order here. A successful creative industries sector is highly dependent upon the socioeconomic opportunities opened up for the 'organic, bottom-up development' of small enterprises characterized by 'flat hierarchy and project-based work patterns, and the clustering of autonomous, risk-taking and avant-garde freelance producers who specialize, among other things, in post-broadcast media content production (Hartley and Cunningham, 2001; Oakley, this issue). We can hardly miss the sine qua non for the sector in those various definitions (i.e. a [free-] market economy that takes competition, intellectual property rights and, most importantly, a *commercialized* culture industries sector as givens).

Let us fast forward to mainland China, where none of the conditions named above can be taken for granted. Since the mid-1990s, administrative orders rather than the market principle have been driving frenzied media conglomeration and some convergence activities. Above all, the commercialization of cultural industries (especially television and news media)-state-owned to this day - is still a much contested goal two years after China's accession to the WTO. The recent conservative backlash on press freedom - a battle between President Hu Jintao's righthand men and the Communist Party's propaganda Czars - is just a small indication of the difficult Chinese long march towards reform in the media and cultural realm.²

Imported key terms, however, bring in a heightened awareness of sites of crises embedded in the local norm. The thorniest question triggered by the paradigm of creative industries is that of 'creativity' - the least problematic in the western context. How do we begin to envision a parallel discussion of something like creative industries in a country where creative imagination and content are subjugated to active state surveillance? Let me provide an update on the censors' latest activities: distributors of 'cultural products' via the internet have required state licences since 1 July 2003; content censorship of imported video games is to be strengthened ('Gaming Industry . . .', 2003); and, finally, only 10 firms approved by the state can now run national internet cafe chains, which will soon push independent operators out of the market. The setback to the internet in the past two years - the medium theoretically most immune to boundary policing and centralized monitoring devices - is highly symptomatic of the Chinese problematic. China, of course, has a creative content industry, but it has yet to deliver 'unfiltered, market-led content', in Michael Keane's words (2003: 2).

In what conceptual terms, therefore, can we talk about an anomalous industry that clearly compromises the western concept of creative freedom?

Certainly, creative industries is not the answer, but neither is it utterly irrelevant. For, if we turn our gaze to Hong Kong, part of China's territory since 1997, creative industries (*chuangyi gongye*, an awkwardly translated neologism) is the hottest buzzword in town. Who is behind the media blitz of this discourse, you ask? The Chinese Communist government. Faithful to its much hyped policy of 'one country and two systems', the regime has allowed the former colony to cook up policy terms appropriate to its particular social and economic infrastructure. Commissions were set up to explore strategies of developing creative industries. The film industry, a comparative advantage that Hong Kong once enjoyed, was singled out as a sector for strategic rejuvenation. Not only was a credit fund for new film productions established ('Hong Kong Should Actively Develop its Creative Industries Sector', 2003), but a preferential policy treatment will remove the quota restrictions on Chinese films made in Hong Kong for their entry into the mainland market (Yahoo, 2003). Hong Kong's 'three-pronged approach' of developing the creative industries sector even includes its key sectoral *raison d'être* (i.e. the drive to seek export markets) much in the same way as the British Council is eyeing places like Japan and Singapore as the priority export markets for the UK creative and media industries ('Hong Kong Developing a Strategy for Creative Industries', 2002). What is the designated export market for Hong Kong's creative industries? The Pearl River delta in Guangdong Province.

This is a very interesting development, especially for those who subscribe to the politics of sameness. Does that mean that some day the Hong Kong influence will spill inland and corrupt the ideological rigidity of the mainlanders? Will this discourse of creative industries infiltrate China in the next five or 10 years? This is far too complicated a question to address here. I will take a shortcut by saying, infrastructurally speaking, that China will not become Hong Kong in much the same way as Beijing will never be like Guangzhou. More importantly, let us take a close look at the popular logic of 'the influence of (foreign) capital' on Chinese media, an analogy categorically close to those speculations about the possible impact of the Hong Kong model on the mainland.

The logic of (foreign) capital

AOL to Sell 64 Percent China TV Stake to Li Firm. (Young, 2003)

MTV to Dance to Communist China's Tune. (Galupo, 2003)

Two headlines, two storylines, but the same dream. AOL Time Warner entered the Chinese market with unrealistic expectations about the profits to be reaped there. In less than two years, it sold the majority of its stake

in China Entertainment Television to tom.com, Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing's media and advertising company. Asset release may be a particularly pressing problem for the debt-ridden AOL, but news has been widely circulated that Phoenix, the TV station owned by Rupert Murdoch who knew how to tango with Chinese leaders to perfection, is also losing money.

But News Corp. and AOL hang on in China because there is no shortage of foreign investors lining up to compromise not just in financial terms, but also ideologically. Enter Viacom, the company that owns MTV. It struck a deal in March 2003 with China to launch a 24-hour music video channel in Guangdong Province. What about the potential 'influence' of foreign creative industries on the freedom of artistic expression in China? The president of MTV made a pledge that it would not associate itself with underground dissident artists. This story is one of many featured in neoconservative critic Ethan Gutmann's book *Losing the New China* (2003), in which he condemns the routine ideological capitulation of American media companies to the Chinese content regulators. But, between the lines, Gutmann rationalizes (just as any western neoconservative and liberal would) on behalf of those businessmen and finds apologies for them by tracing their aberrational practices to the fundamental logic of capital (i.e. their wishful thinking that 'the cultural cross-pollination and financial linkages will liberalize China' in the long run) (Galupo, 2003: D01). My cautionary tale, of course, is different from Gutmann's, for the problem lies not just with the capitalists, but with capital itself.

Why should anybody be surprised that capital is ideologically blind in China? Capital - this is old news - is not inherently liberatory. The MTV example tells us just that: foreign capital enters the 'third world' to make money, not to emancipate the minds of the locals. The liberal master narrative may pit a 'weakened' Chinese state against the Messianic capital/market, but that paradigm has outlived its usefulness. It is time that we look into the collusive aspects of such a relationship and think about how such an acknowledgement could complicate our assumptions about the difference that new discourses such as the 'new economy' and creative industries could make on the mainland.

Asset hybridization and its impact on Chinese CI (cultural industries)

Like the UK and Australia, China's policy on the new economy has so far concentrated on infrastructure, connectivity, IT and information science. The term, introduced officially at the 15th Party Congress in 1997, refers specifically to the triple alliance of three entities: 1) state-owned and industry-sponsored science and technological R&Ds; 2) institutions of higher education; and 3) corporate China, especially the industrial sector. The policy slogan underlying the new economy is 'merging industry, higher

education, and science research in one* (Zhu and Liu, 1998: 164) - the usual hackneyed rhetoric about knowledge integration also current in the West.

The Chinese policy discourse on the knowledge economy, however, did make a theatrical difference. It cracked open a forbidden territory with its legitimization of the IT sector's privatization of 'knowledge goods'. For the first time in the history of the PRC, national universities like Beida (Peking University), a state-owned, public cultural institution (*sbiye danwei*), previously ineligible for privatization initiatives, can now create semi-autonomous R&Ds such as Beijing Beida Founder Group Corp., which formed joint ventures with industry partners and became listed companies on China's stock exchange. What this entails is that creativity, or at least innovation in the hi-tech sector, has now earned a better chance of facing market demands and breaking away from content control. Soon, this revolutionary practice, what I will call 'asset diversification or hybridization', spread to the media industries and raised the public's expectations for the commercialization of a sector hitherto considered off limits.

This formula, which lends a hand to a hidden process of privatization, is in fact an old protocol reinvented. It is a simple variation of the classic logic underlying the mixed Chinese mode of economy that permits both domestic and foreign capital entities to gain a footing in the market through *indirect entry*. Let me start with the simpler category: the entry of foreign capital. Transnational advertising agencies entered China during the 1980s and 1990s by attaching themselves to Chinese ad agencies that owned majority stakes. In the print sector, similar hybrids came aplenty. While a range of foreign titles (including *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Business Week*, *Advertising Age*) all have Chinese editions, they are not only published under licence by Chinese-owned companies, but they carry a large dose of sanitized 'Chinese content'. So what's new about this formula if it seems to bring us back to the beginning of the vicious cycle: the regulatory state and its hype about the Chinese characteristics of this and that?

What is new can only be comprehended if we turn to the entry of domestic capital into the publicly-owned media industries and ask how some of them succeeded in entering the stock market. What hybrid form of ownership does such an entry require? How is public listing to be achieved for a cultural industry that was previously barred from commodification altogether and total marketization now?

None of this would make any sense to those who take for granted the meaning of cultural industry as understood in the western context. The Chinese cultural industry is a different kind of animal. While the western term 'cultural industry' means what it says, its Chinese counterpart (*wenhua chanye*) contains within itself at least three subtexts - a state-owned sector undergoing the rugged process of partial commercialization; the tenacious

hold of state monopoly even while it is pushing an agenda of commodifying public cultural goods; and the thorny issue of mixed ownership and the debate over the hidden process of privatization.

Compare the indigenous term *wenhua chanye*, which alludes to all the crucial terms of the debate concerning the politics of Chinese cultural industries, with the hypothetical discourse of *chuangyi gongye* (creative industries). The double reference of the word *chanye* to *chanquan* ('property ownership') and *shiye* ('public institutions'), the eye of the storm, together with the local agendas, would be totally lost were the neutral term *chuangyi gongye* to take its place.

Creative industries as a discourse is thus of little practical value to the mainland Chinese at this moment. The engine of desire driving the Chinese cultural industries is named *shang shi* ('going for stock market listing'), something only joint venture heavyweights capable of asset diversification are well positioned to do. This is all about asset concentration and economies of scale prescribed by the policy directive of 'securing the big and letting go the small' (*zhua da fang xiao*) - a vision contrary to that of creative industries. After all, we also need to remind ourselves that place-specific priorities (or constraints) drove the same socialist government to embrace the discourse of creative industries in Hong Kong while stepping up the development of cultural industries on the mainland.³ Is this a contradiction? Hardly. The marketization level of cultural industries on the mainland is simply too low for the creative industries model.

Of course, lowering the threshold for market entry was an industry demand to which the state responded with measured caution. But, predictably, asset transfusion from the public to semi-private domain is a prerogative for large media and cultural companies in the coming decade. This brings us back to the question of market entry rules as well as the hybridization of assets and ownership of the cultural sector.

China's Securities' Regulatory Commission recently included media and cultural industries in the newly released *Directory of Industry Categories of Listed Companies*. However, this is a far cry from liberalizing the content industry. The government's logic is a hair-splitting one. Since China's commitments to the WTO bind it to liberalizing retail and distribution, but not content, the 'media and cultural industries' allowed to go public are specifically defined as publishing, audiovisual production, film distribution and information transmission - technical and service subsidiaries that have little to do with news and culture content and national security issues (Jiang and Xie, 2003: 44-5). It follows that companies specializing in those above-named, potentially commercializable sectors or totally commercialized ones such as real estate are fervently sought by non-commercializable content sectors for joint venture formation, asset investment and transfusion in

preparation for public listing. It is worth noting that cross-sectoral asset diversification was legalized by a new, albeit experimental, policy allowance for trans-sector convergence.

This policy provision, together with the breakthrough achieved under the regime of the knowledge economy mentioned earlier, has given rise to the curious practice of identity borrowing (*jie ke*, literally living in somebody else's skin) and has made possible the listing of Hunan TV & Broadcast Intermediary Co. Ltd. Conversely, it should also make possible, theoretically, the entry of non-media entities - the skin providers - into the domain of media content. Just how the capital influx from those non-media entities for whom media licences are off limits might impact upon media content remains subject to speculation. One can only imagine the complicated task that diehard regulators will confront in the face of such increasingly routinized practices of asset hybridization.

In the meantime, small project-based private content producers and post-production companies can be spotted in the big metropolises. The few examples I encountered during my recent visits to Beijing bore testimony to the fallacy of the automatic association between marginality, dislocation and progressive politics. In contrast with their western counterparts, many members of the rising 'creative class' in Beijing and Guangzhou have deep pockets, networking capital with the state, and a lifestyle characteristic of the nouveau riche. Totally indifferent to public issues concerning the truly socially dislocated (i.e. rural migrants), those twenty- and thirty-somethings are a species that even the most enthusiastic advocates of creative industries would find difficult to romanticize.

So what are our prospects of finding regulation-free creative space in Chinese media in the short run? The chances are slim regardless of the western media hype about the 'revolutionary restructuring' of the cultural sector in progress. In the meantime, Chinese content is being transmitted by 100 European channels, including Murdoch's British Sky Broadcasting Group, via CCTV-9, the English language channel of China Central Television (Wang, 2002). The most ironic scenario, much as I did not wish to conclude this article thus, would be European audiences watching the 16th Party Congress and absorbing the Communist Party's discourse of the 'Three Represents'.

Notes

1 In 2003, the research team, headed by John Hartley at QUT, received a grant from the Australian Research Council for a project entitled 'Internationalizing Creative Industries: China, the WTO and the Knowledge-based Economy'.¹ participated in a brainstorming session with the team about how to plan that project during the symposium.

2 During the SARS outbreak, Chinese media enjoyed a brief period of relaxed news control. But in June 2003, the Propaganda Department suspended the *Beijing Xinbao* tabloid newspaper and the *Caijing* magazine. They also pulled the plug on the popular TV series *Marching toward the Republic* (see Wo-lap Lam, 2003).

3 Two research institutes of cultural industries were established by the state at Peking University and Shanghai Jiaotong University. They are charged with the mission of developing policy research and training talents for the sector.

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