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Li, X.; Tsang, L.T.; Tse, H.

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Pluralising China as Method: Decolonising cultural mediations in the global South

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Xiaotian Li 

Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR

Ling Tung Tsang 

The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR

Tommy Tse 

The University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

The changing global landscape of imperialism, colonialism, and globalisation has urged scholars to reflect on and reexamine the lingering Eurocentric epistemology in media and cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, area studies, and other disciplines. The epistemological biases which currently exist in these academic disciplines hinder the development of a bottom-up theorisation and a thorough understanding of social and cultural phenomena. Recently, scholars in and beyond the global South have become more attentive to the inadequacy of a Eurocentric model of theorisation, and the idiosyncrasies of local societies. The rise of China, and its intensified international political, economic, and cultural exchanges with other Asian, middle-Eastern, and African countries, also make it imperative to move beyond a Eurocentric view in understanding the complexity of social and cultural dynamics within China and across the global South. Responding to this double inadequacy of Eurocentrism in terms of knowledge production in and for Asia, we build on the insightful arguments made, but also address their respective conceptual limits, in the “Asia as Method” and “trans-Asia as Method” approaches. While acknowledging Mizoguchi’s (2016) conception of “China as Method” which emphasises the empowerment of sinology, we seek to further rethink and pluralise such an existing epistemological approach to the study of media and culture in China. This double special issue brings together both reflective essays and empirical

Corresponding author:

Ling Tung Tsang, Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong, Rm 9.10, 9/F, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong.

Email: lingtung.tsang@hku.hk



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articles to examine the nuanced cross-border/cross-national cultural interactions and the intersectional dynamics of class, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity and national/local identities. It aims to rebuild the subjectivity and redefine the agency of Asia in the post-colonial and post-imperialist world order, using what we term as a “decolonial cultural perspective”, to understand the idiosyncrasies of local societies within a seemingly homogeneous Asian country. We propose China as Method as a useful approach for all humanities and social sciences researchers to critically rethink Eurocentrism and to avoid an essentialist form of Sinocentrism in the Asian context.

Keywords

China as Method, eurocentricism, global South, cultural mediation, decolonisation

The changing global landscape of imperialism, colonialism, and globalisation has urged scholars to reflect on, reexamine, and reconstruct the lingering Eurocentric epistemology in media and cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, area studies, and other disciplines. More than two decades ago, [Chen \(2010\)](#) had already pointed out that the global history of imperialism and colonialism had problematically imprinted Eurocentric perspectives in its knowledge production, with relevance to Western academic traditions. Consequently, Eurocentrism was further cemented in Europe (and later in the US) as the point of reference for scholarly and social development. Against such a backdrop, many Asian scholars, who have often been trained in the West, tend to directly apply, test, or refine Western theories to/with Asian empirical data without being aware of the epistemological biases, hindering a genuinely bottom-up theorisation and a thorough understanding of these social and cultural phenomena. [Chong et al. \(2020, p. 7\)](#) further argue “the long-standing imbalance of power between the Europe and the United States and the others have rendered Asianness a fictive and distant voice”.

Only recently have scholars in and beyond the global South become more attentive to the inadequacy of a Eurocentric model of theorisation and the idiosyncrasies of local societies. This inadequacy manifests in multiple facets across varying research areas. For instance, [de Kloet et al. \(2020, p. 6\)](#) argued that the existing scholarship in Creative Labour Studies is haunted by a Eurocentric bias, running the risk of overlooking different context-specific socio-political dynamics (also see [Tse & Shum, 2023](#); [Wong & Chow, 2020](#)). While the European creative industries policy has followed the discourse of either the “economization of culture” or the “culturalization of the economy” which “tends to use market reasoning to dissociate culture and media from socio-political concerns” ([de Kloet et al., 2020, p. 349](#)), in the case of China, “culture and creativity are not only touted for ‘restructuring economy,’ but also designated as instrument for wielding ‘soft power’ and maintaining social stability” ([de Kloet et al., 2020, p. 349](#)). Similarly, [Jansen \(2020\)](#) noted that the histories and theorisations of fashion as an interdisciplinary subject are intertwined with the Western understanding of modernity; they are merely perceived as symbols of power and capitalism, so conveyed in Europe, that are exported to the rest of the world via globalisation and imperialism ([Jansen, 2020, p. 816](#)).

The changing global order of international relations, especially the rise of China, also makes it imperative to move beyond a Eurocentric view. Of particular importance is China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which represents the intensified international political, economic, and cultural exchanges between China and other Asian, middle-Eastern, and African countries. Through the BRI, China aims to increase both its hard and soft power in its relations with these “Southern” countries. Against this background, it is increasingly inadequate to take Europe as the *only* point of

reference in understanding the complexity of social and cultural dynamics within China and across the global South.

Responding to this double inadequacy of Eurocentrism in terms of knowledge production in and for Asia, in this double special issue we build on the insightful arguments made in the Asia as Method and trans-Asia as Method approaches while also acknowledge their respective conceptual limits. We take **China as Method**, while acknowledging Mizoguchi's (2016) conception of such an approach, as a starting point to further rethink and pluralise existing epistemological approaches to the study of media and culture in China. Chen (2010, p. 212) has once noted – in a somewhat idealistic tone – that by “using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt”. Nevertheless, it oversimplifies “Asia” as a harmonious unity and neglects the increasingly imbalanced and heterogeneous power dynamics across various Asian societies, particularly due to the rise of China's global power. We concur with Chong et al.'s (2020) acute criticism of the concept of Asia as Method as “a rather Asia-centric idea” (Chong et al., 2020, p. 4) which further perpetuates a kind of academic parochialism. They further develop the concept of trans-Asia as Method to recognise “the importance of ‘Asia’ as an affective and imagined framework” while resisting “[the] drawing [of] fixed boundaries that blocks exchanges, and therefore limits epistemological potentials” (Chong et al., 2020, p. 6).

Going beyond the premise of trans-Asia as Method which advocates for difference and transformation – due to increased human mobilities and cross-border flow of cultures – that validate inter-referencing with the West (Chong et al., 2020, p. 15), this double special issue brings together both short reflective essays and long empirical articles which examine the nuanced cross-border/cross-national cultural interactions and the intersectional dynamics of class, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, national/local identity, and nationality. This collection of studies aims to rebuild the subjectivity and redefine the agency of Asia in the post-colonial and post-imperialist world order, using what we term a “decolonial cultural perspective.” It shows the importance of taking each Asian society as a point of reference in theorising media and culture – a characteristic that has not been adequately addressed in trans-Asia as Method due to its predominant focus on a dewesternised and transnational mode of knowledge production – yet also to understand the idiosyncrasies of local societies within a seemingly unified, homogeneous Asian country. In doing so, it responds to the call for “transform[ing] the universal validity claims of western concepts and...show[s] their coloniality...[which] have functioned to erase, silence, denigrate other ways of understanding and relating to the world” (Jansen, 2020, p. 823).

The authors in this double special issue also pay specific attention to the cultural mediations, especially the symbolic relations, between the nation-state, the media and the public that have not been directly addressed in trans-Asia as Method. By analysing the agency of and interactions among various human and non-human cultural mediators, such as cinema, fashion, media and cultural consumers, athletes (taking sport as a cultural industry product), and social media and other digital platforms, they look at **how culture is at once conditioned by localised cultural ideologies and societal order and mediated by heterogeneous types of cultural agents in local societies**. How these ordinary people make sense of cross-cultural interactions in their daily media and cultural practices (Bai, 2012; Xie, 2022; Yecies et al., 2019) provides a more grounded perspective when reassessing the allegedly increasing awareness of Chineseness. For example, how existing Eurocentric perspectives on gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity are insufficient to explain how Chinese based ideas on the aforesaid areas of knowledge are perceived, mediated, and disseminated in and beyond China. Drawing parallels to Franceschini and Loubere's (2022) “Global China as Method” according to which China cannot be studied in isolation, but needs to be understood as an

inseparable part to the world, the studies from China mainland, Hong Kong, and Africa included in this double special issue will demonstrate how the rising soft power of China is *divergently* perceived, negotiated, and contested, domestically and internationally, through “new” as well as legacy media and communication technologies, providing a more nuanced discussion – going beyond Global China as Method – of mediation and media use as well as the localised impacts of China’s soft power.

What distinguishes the China as Method approach from the existing Asia as Method and trans-Asia as Method approaches? Composed of three ‘In Focus’ short reflective pieces and three full-length research articles, the first part of this double special issue proposes various conceptions of China as Method. The three reflective essays by Keane, Zhang, and Wang and Yuan offer different answers and further pluralise this context-specific epistemological approach.

Keane (2023) presents and highlights the distinct position of China, whilst predominantly comparing and contrasting it with countries in the West but also those of Asia as well, with reference to the discourse of Asia as Method through two perspectives: (1) the landscape of academic knowledge production from Chinese scholars; and (2) the understandings of identity, differences, universal values, and the concept of dignity, as well as how they tie in with the notion of discourse power. Regarding the former, Keane has observed the trend that a large majority of the most authoritative Chinese scholars, especially in the fields of communications and media studies, have undertaken their PhDs in the West and have “benefited from western knowledge and methodology” (2023, p. 2) through engaging in debates associated with global issues and being mentored by leading international academics. In turn, scholarship, especially in the humanities and social sciences, has advanced – showcasing a greater degree of nuance and sophistication without deference to Western commentary, ideas and theory – and shines a brighter spotlight on the “rise of China” as well as its associated issues with greater accommodation and critical application of Chinese values and cultural thought. In terms of the latter, Keane critiques the ideas of social homogeneity and the lack of polarisation in constituting a Confucian aura of harmony and order – a stabilising force for China grounded in governance of and conformity to a “collective” discourse power. This is in contrast to the assessment and understanding of power dynamics and identity politics found in Western countries where individuals, due to the influx of immigrants and refugees that such countries have opened up to, seek personal affirmation and advocate instead for “personalized discourse power” instead. Ultimately, Keane reminds us that China should not be considered as a case that “implies exceptionalism” (2023, p. 5) due to its differences from other countries, but it is these differences that allow for dialogue and accommodation for such localised explanations.

Zhang (2023), with her refined “Chineseness as Method” approach, perceptively clarifies that Chineseness is not a one-way subjective choice. She conceptualises Chineseness as “an open process of identity work” which involves not only how a subject self-identifies as being Chinese (or rejects doing so), but also how other people identify a subject as Chinese. Specifically, there exists parallel development of many Chineseness(es) in the process of globalisation, some defined by diverse groups of Chinese people, including those from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diasporas, and some defined by others, such as the Europeans (who invented the word “Sino”), Thai people and Malaysians. The complicated relations and power dynamics among different groups often raise the debate about who holds the authority to define and represent the most “authentic” Chineseness. By showing “how Chineseness as identity work is negotiated, contested, or refused”, Zhang (2023) follows the proposition of China as Method and proposes the usefulness of Chineseness as Method. Taking Chineseness as a method means treating Chineseness as “a constitutive element of the world” and as “relational to other identity works such as Thainess or Malaysianness”. Thus, the study of Chineseness as identity work contributes to the understanding of

other identity works, and vice versa. And ultimately, studying different identity works as constitutive elements of the world will contribute to our understanding of the world as a whole. Zhang also reminds us that working on Chineseness does not necessarily reject other identity works, but could be a process of travelling between different identities or integrating multiple identities.

Wang and Yuan's (2023) analysis of the online dissemination of misogynistic disinformation in China provides a context-specific analytical lens to complicate the utopian narratives about digital media's potentials for empowering women, increasing the visibility of feminist politics, and facilitating women's solidarity and political participation worldwide. While we concur that it is important to *be hopeful* about how digital affordances can bring about women's empowerment, awareness of the material constraints and everyday media practices across heterogeneous political regimes and sociocultural contexts also plays a crucial role in enabling us to imagine new forms of resistance and resilience. Through an analysis of the country's deeply-sedimented framework of patriarchal Confucianism, Wang and Yuan explain how the rise of "platform society" in China is entangled with the dual power of digital capitalism and the authoritarian state, which further intensifies misogynistic sentiments online, and subjects women to complex forms of oppression. The unique histories and infrastructures of Chinese digital platforms also render different sets of technological and techno-cultural mechanisms, which enable a different set of actors who wield greater power to amplify "the politically correct voices" and "to take over the digital space" (Wang and Yuan, 2023, p. 3). These actors also perpetuate "misogyn(ist)ic disinformation, which echoes the ancient discrimination against women in Confucian culture ... giving millions of Chinese who are dissatisfied with the status quo in the real world an easy exit to vent under the protection of internet anonymity" (Wang and Yuan, 2023, p. 4) in the post-truth era; this includes the online popularised terms "feminist bitch (*nü quan biao*)" and "feminist cancer (*nü quan ai*)" that stigmatise feminists and counteract their calls for gender equity (Tan, 2017). What Tan argued in her book, *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China* (2023), while not explicitly deliberated as a China as Method approach, also resonates well with Wang and Yuan's and our theoretical standpoint: to offer a more complex and nuanced insight into what is going on in China amid its "digital authoritarianism and cyber utopianism" and "between omnipotent state-media control and liberation afforded by digital cultures" (Chow, 2023, p. 1).

The three empirical long papers included in this special issue authored by Tsang, Li and Li, and Xiao, further address the aforementioned approaches to understand China as Method by advocating for the importance of examining cross-national cultural interactions so that China can be understood relationally, deconstructing the symbolic relations between the nation-state, the media and the public, and adopting a "decolonial cultural perspective" to further understand China or at-large discourses associated with China.

Tsang's (2023) article shines a spotlight on the masculinity of provincial Chinese professional and university athletes, asserting that this is multiple and pluralized in nature. Moving away from solely adopting a pre-existing Eurocentric gender order and hierarchy, or traditional Chinese conceptions of gender (e.g. "wen" and "wu" or Maoist masculinities), Tsang brings to the forefront the theoretical importance of a "decolonial cultural approach" that blends together both Chinese and Western points of reference together in reconstructing contemporary Chinese sportsmen's gender identities, intersecting with both Western notions of consumerism, modernity and individualisation and Chinese-based discourses of "Chenggong" and nationalist propaganda relevant to sport. Grounded on male athletes' subjectivities and their interactions with teammates, coaches and peers, Tsang ethnographically examines how there is an increasing sense of "Chineseness" that cannot be understood or contextualised in isolation and within the distinct context of China as a type of cultural milieu. Rather, Chinese theorisations of gender are in constant negotiations with Western

understandings of masculinities. This, in turn, highlights the connection between those two aforesaid bodies of knowledge, taking on an epistemological point of departure that “[perceives] China as intimately entangled with global histories, processes, phenomena, and trends” (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022, p. 6). In particular, Tsang provides an updated assessment of how the traditional discourses of “wen” and “wu”, articulated as “wen”ized and “wu”ized masculinities that showcases greater asymmetry, are further conditioned by discourses associated with globalisation and transnational flows of culture, thereby creating and constructing athletes’ new configurations of masculine practices.

Li and Li’s (2023) article uses the approach of China as Method to advance existing debates on the notion of cultural authenticity. While it has been well established that cultural authenticity is socially constructed, in continual flux, and dynamically negotiated in the ongoing communications in local communities, the authors move such debates to the digital world. Their empirical research investigates how Chinese game players and fans define and debate the “Chineseness” of a popular mobile video game in online communities. The video game, Genshin Impact (GI), is a Japanese anime-style game produced by a Chinese company with a global customer base. The global popularity of the game is itself partially the result of increasing cultural appropriation and hybridisation in the globalising world. They ask if Chinese players still consider such a game, with its cultural hybridity, an “authentic Chinese” game, and what kinds of power dynamics have shaped Chinese players’ definition of “Chineseness”. Their findings show that a relational perspective is particularly crucial in the social construction of the meaning of a “Chinese” game: Chinese GI players “situated Chineseness in China’s relations with other countries in the changing power dynamics among China, Japan, and the West” (p. 16). In the Asian context, in addition to the West, Japan has also been an important point of reference for Chinese fans to reflect on cultural appropriation and cultural authenticity in the globalised world. Japan is perceived as being simultaneously a role model for reversing cultural appropriation from the West, and a coloniser that appropriates Chinese culture and erodes Chinese cultural authenticity. By revealing these complicated relations, Li and Li illustrate how to go beyond a dichotomous theorisation between the West and the rest, or North and South, in the in/authenticity debate. While inter-Asian referencing, as illustrated in their case study, is still an important point of reference for the social construction of meanings and concepts in the local society, Li and Li’s article captures the relational perspective in the China as Method approach, calling for more research to use inter-Asian referencing as “a significant manoeuvre for making concepts and theories derived from Asian experiences translocally relevant and shared” (Iwabuchi, 2014, p. 44). Furthermore, Li and Li also point to how the (historically changing) imbalanced power dynamics among Asian countries play a critical role in the social construction of Chineseness. The rise of China gradually, as evident in Li and Li’s study, transforms the inter-Asian referencing in the Chinese context, which distinguishes their use of China as Method from Asia as Method.

Xiao (2023) critically reflects on what she calls the “double-edge-sword role of digital platforms” to dissect the cultural resilience of the Chinese slash community – manifested as various strategies, from “cultural enclosure” to “border-crossing platform-switching” to “social media activism”. Moving beyond a focus on first-world countries as the centre of globalisation studies, Xiao advocates for a bottom-up approach studying the horizontal border-crossing cultural exchanges in post-socialist China, offering alternative conceptual understandings of the formation of subcultural groups and their subversion of the dominant construction of sexuality. Rather than essentialising its “Chineseness”, Xiao’s multimodal social media discourse analysis demonstrates the inherently transnational nature of slash subculture in China, debunking the typical overemphasis on its “major-resistant” mode in Western globalisation studies, which often fails to capture the capillary nature of

disciplinary power, coined by [Lionnet and Shih \(2005\)](#) as “minor transnationalism”. By revisiting recent studies on the social formation of Chinese subculture and the resilience of alternative cultural practices under turbulent political circumstances, Xiao responds to a timely call for a more comprehensive framework that can account for both resistant outbursts and mundane acts of rebellion. While queer relationships appear as a frequent theme in traditional Chinese literature, even prior to China’s reform and opening up ([Ruan & Tsai, 1987](#)), the opening up of Chinese culture to global influences radically transformed Chinese people’s perceptions of sexuality and queerness. Chinese Internet users, especially for those who were deeply involved in cross-cultural prosumption activities, had always been participating in collective, cultural border-crossing activities, facilitating the development of a group of multilingual, culturally creolised, politically liberal-leaning prosumers who actively engage in the creation and reading of works that challenge heteronormativity and sexual conservatism in the dominant discourse. Going beyond the conventional East/West dichotomy, Xiao understands her own China as Method approach as a “Sino-centric” one: she theorises the Chinese slash community as a “transnational minor” from a bottom-up perspective, examining the intricate power dynamics within Chinese popular culture and between China and other nations that contribute to its formation within the Chinese platform economy.

As we have discussed, the various conceptions of China as Method in these articles have manifested divergent epistemological approaches to the study of media and culture in China. Taking China as Method as a starting point, these articles illustrate how to go beyond the “West” as a point of reference to define “Sino”, “China” or “Chineseness”, but to locate various discourses of China in the cross-border/cross-national cultural interactions in and beyond Asia. Moreover, these articles recognise the power imbalance among Asian countries, especially in the context of China’s rising global power. It is in this context that we propose China as Method as a useful approach to rethinking Eurocentrism in media and cultural studies as well as to avoid an essentialist form of Sinocentrism in the Asian context. While it is important to avoid drawing fixed boundaries between Asian countries, we note that these boundaries do exist historically, and that boundaries have been continuously altered and redrawn through increasingly intensified cross-border/cross-national cultural interactions. In this double special issue, we encourage all humanities and social sciences researchers to critically reflect and further advance China as Method as an approach to examine how cultural mediations are shaped by and interact with existing nation-state boundaries in and beyond Asia, in addition to how the “globalised China” reshapes people’s conceptualisations of such boundaries.

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ORCID iDs

Xiaotian Li  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9461-3606>

Ling Tung Tsang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5665-0251>

Tommy Tse  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2805-1777>

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Author biographies

Xiaotian Li is a postdoctoral fellow of sociology at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He specialises in labour, gender, digital platforms, and China’s internet economy. His current research looks at content creators on China’s social media platforms. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Gender Studies*; *Work, Employment and Society*, and *Sociological Studies* (in Chinese).

Ling Tung Tsang is a lecturer at the Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong. Previously, Ling Tung obtained his PhD in Sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science and was a Visiting Fellow at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University. He specialises in identity, masculinity, race and ethnicity, and the sociology of sport. Ling Tung’s current research examines Chinese athletes’ identities in China and diasporic spaces. He has published articles in the *Journal of Consumer Culture*; *Journal of Cultural Economy* and *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies*.

Tommy Tse is Associate Professor in the Media Studies Department at The University of Amsterdam. He is also affiliated with the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), and Lingnan University’s Department of Cultural Studies as Honorary Associate Professor. He specialises in Asia’s media and cultural industries, consumer culture, creative labour, digital culture, and fashion. Tse is a recipient of the European Research Council’s Consolidator Grant 2021 for his multi-sited ethnographic project *China Fashion Power* (<https://www.chinaafricafashionpower.org/>). His work has appeared in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*; *Information, Communication and Society*; *Journal of Consumer Culture*; *Journal of Cultural Economy*, and *New Media & Society*, among others. Previously, Tse taught at the University of Hong Kong’s Department of Sociology and Hong Kong Baptist University’s School of Communication.