



China Perspectives

2013/2 | 2013

Real Estate Speculation and its Social Consequences

Kuan-hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*,

Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2010, 342 pp.

How Wee Ng



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6214>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.6214

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

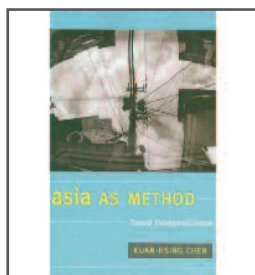
Date of publication: 1 June 2013

Number of pages: 89-90

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

How Wee Ng, « Kuan-hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2013/2 | 2013, Online since 01 June 2013, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6214> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6214>



Kuan-hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*,

Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2010, 342 pp.

HOW WEE NG

How does Cold War discourse continue to be articulated in the contemporary context of Asia? How does an ex-colony such as Taiwan become a neocoloniser in Southeast Asia, yet was implicated in a campaign pushing for the island to become the 51st state of the US? How can scholars continue to challenge the binaries of Asia-versus-West in post-colonial studies while remaining critical to nativism and Eurocentrism? In what ways can cultural studies more effectively challenge the cultural imaginary formed by capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism? These are just some of the questions posed in Kuan-hsing Chen's work, which is partly inspired by Takeuchi Yoshimi's "Asia as Method." In part building upon the latter's inter-referencing approach of comparing societies geographically closer or that share similar historical experiences, the book follows Chen's continuing efforts of establishing an inter-Asian cultural studies that critically reviews Eurocentric frameworks while examining the inter-connectedness of the history, culture, and politics of Asian societies. Making an impassioned appeal for formulating new recourses to how Asia may be approached as an object of study, this volume in part responds to the discourse of Taiwanese nationalism under former President Lee Teng-hui's regime, and in part to Taiwan's increasing economic dependency on mainland China.

In the opening chapter, "The Imperialist Eye," through analyses of several Taiwanese writers published in the *China Times* literary supplement "Human Space" (*Renjian*), Chen mounts a powerful critique of Taiwan's southward-advance policy (*nanxiang*) of economic expansion into Southeast Asia in the 1990s. He describes the effort as a "subimperial desire," driven by a nationalism positioning Taiwan as a neocolonial power, which reproduced the Japanese militarist discourse of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere." To resolve this issue caused by an absence of "critical reflection on de-colonization" (p. 63), he proposes "Third-world cultural studies," drawing from the work of Memmi, Nandy, and Fanon in the following chapter, "De-colonization." Attempting to rupture coloniser-colonised identification, Chen borrows the late Edward T. Ch'ien's notion of syncretism, formulated as a critique of Neo-Confucianism in the late Ming dynasty. Refashioning Ch'ien's approach as "critical syncretism," he believes it can be applied to the contemporary context and "actively interiorize elements of others into the subjectivity of the self," so as to transcend divisive positions historically constructed by colonial power relations through patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, or nationalistic xenophobia (p. 99). Chen postulates that critical syncretism can be a cultural strategy of identification for subaltern subject groups such as aboriginal, homosexual, and the working class. But to what extent and efficacy specific subalterns in Asia might deploy this strategy for their own purposes, the book does not elaborate in detail. There is an implication that agency is assumed for the subaltern subjects in question. Whether some subjects do indeed consider themselves subaltern is another question that begs asking. In other words, the book may want to consider

the changing possibilities of a person who could be part agent, part instrument, in various relationships in different contexts.

"De-Cold War," the third chapter, pushes the issue of de-colonisation further by tracing it to the devastating impact of the Cold War on ordinary people. Apart from analysing the work of the Taiwanese writer Chen Ying-zhen, the author cites a deeply poignant account of his own mother, who while diagnosed with schizophrenia insisted on setting aside a full bowl of rice and pair of chopsticks for the invisible "Father Chiang" (Chiang Kai-shek) during mealtimes. She also swore not to return to her native Beijing while it was still "occupied" by the communists (p. 117-118). Offering a moving analysis of two Taiwanese films, *Dou-sang: A Borrowed Life* (多桑) and *Banana Paradise* (香蕉天堂), the book also examines how the Cold War resulted in an irreconcilable rift between the *benshengren* (Taiwanese natives) and *waishengren* (Mainlanders who arrived in Taiwan later) in which "two structures of sentiment" never intersect (p. 156). Chen suggests that truce efforts between Taiwan and China have to move beyond political or economic terms and instead be redirected toward the mutual understanding of "each other's emotional and psychic terrain" (*ibid.*). Associated with cross-Straits relations is the issue of regional reconciliation with Japanese colonialism, which Chen, following the Chinese studies scholar Mizoguchi Yuzo, asserts should be about "confront[ing] the violence implanted in the very structure and formation of [Meiji] modernity" (p. 158). In the fourth chapter, "Deimperialization," Chen mounts a cutting critique of Club 51, formed by a group of Taiwanese intellectuals and entrepreneurs, some of whom were based in the United States. This group called for Taiwan to join the United States as its fifty-first state in the 1990s in order to "guarantee Taiwan's security, stability, prosperity, liberty, and democracy" (p. 162). While he does not let up his attack on Taiwan's dependency on the United States and American imperialism, Chen suggests that a new approach to the study of imperialism must avoid the pitfalls of the "old anticolonial nationalist and nativist positions" and "globalist position" through "rethinking the question of colonial subjectivity" (p. 165). This would involve different countries (including ex-colonies and ex-colonisers) actively collaborating on the rewriting of colonial histories (pp. 200-207).

The fifth chapter is possibly the finest in the volume. It is entitled "Asia as Method," which Chen describes as "multiply[ing] frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview" through the unique histories and cultures of Asian societies while acknowledging the West as constitutive of Asian subjectivity (p. 223). By comparing Partha Chatterjee's "political society" with the notion of *minjian* in Taiwan, he sees this as recourse to the Western notion of state-civil society in order to address gaps in understanding the working-class in Asian societies. Mapping the three principles of the paternalistic state, namely *qing* (sentiment), *li* (reason), and *fa* (law) in ancient Chinese society, Chen demonstrates how these ideas continue to define contemporary governance through the example of the Taiwanese government's rebuilding efforts during the 21 September 1999 earthquake. He persuasively argues how certain social conduct will be tolerated or even carried out if it is regarded as compassionate (*qing*) and reasonable (*li*), even if it is illegal or "extralegal" (p. 238). Chen points out how earthquake victims were in part helped by independent banks in Taiwan complying with the state's request to absorb part of their unpaid mortgages, and in part supported by the relief efforts of nonstate mutual-aid systems, such as clans and religious organisations whose history may be traced to *minjian* spaces since the Ming Dynasty. Through the inter-referencing of multiple cultures, histories, and spaces of Asia,

the book suggests new possibilities of doing postcolonial studies and cultural studies.

Notably, the book does not clarify what is meant by "Asia," though the scope can be inferred from the many references made to East, South, and Southeast Asia more specifically. A definition and problematisation of the term "Asia" right in the beginning would be appreciated, especially when Chen's project assumes the ambitious task of decolonisation and deimperialisation; considering how the concept was first coined by the West and is continually evolving as a construct, this is all the more necessary. Loaded terms also deserve more scrutiny, such as the assertion that French civilisation represents "the pinnacle of the mysterious and romantic Western culture" in "the Chinese world" (p. 40). It is not clear which Chinese world is being addressed here, especially the issue of how Chinese people in different countries and regions variously imagine themselves and the French; these issues alone would already warrant further book-length analysis. Underlying other similar generalisations is the overarching anxiety of how the ideologies of neocolonisation and neoimperialisation are preventing East Asian subjects from fully realising the "true" nature of their being and psychological entrapment. The assumption that xenophobia and imperialism are found in the "unconscious" is itself an oxymoron. Who is then authorised to de-imperialise other subjects without being affected by the pervasive effects of imperialisation and racism? Concomitant with the notion of the "unconscious" is how rifts in cross-Straits relations are understood by discordant "structures of sentiment," which may be unable to address the contingency of how different subjects on both sides variously view each other in different contexts. An appreciation of the implication of increasing numbers of Taiwanese people working or even settling in the mainland in the last few decades, and their interaction with their mainland counterparts in different fields of Chinese society, would constitute an area worth exploring in the future.

Nonetheless, Chen has produced a significant work that raises many critical questions through effectively interweaving arguments with a wide range of theoretical threads. It is not very often one comes across academic writing that is so passionate and engaging, yet attains self-reflexivity. The book will also serve as a useful resource for scholars and undergraduates of cultural studies, East Asian studies, and the Cold War. Although bearing a 2010 imprint, the book was actually first published in Chinese in 2006. While much has transpired in the past few years, including the financial meltdown in the US and Europe, an even stronger Chinese economy and its growing presence in Africa, and more recently, the debate of the "Beijing Consensus" versus the "Washington Consensus," followed by rising cynicism toward the former's sustainability, the ideas proposed still remain pertinent today. As Chen so sharply points out, "the severe competition for global power would bring China back to the old binary logic of China and the West, and Sinocentrism would once again cause China to ignore the rest of the world" (p. 13). Indeed, for those who wish to adopt "Asia as method," theoretical self-reflexivity and vigilance against neoimperialism are critical.

■ How Wee Ng is a PhD candidate at the China and Inner Asia Department in SOAS, University of London (nghowwee@gmail.com).

Books received

Gloria Davies, *Lu Xun's Revolution: Writing in a Time of Violence*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2013, 448 pp.

Xuefei Ren, *Urban China*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, 218 pp.

Stéphane Gros, *La part manquante. Échanges et pouvoirs chez les Drung du Yunnan (The missing part. Exchanges and powers of Yunnan's Drung people)*, Nanterre, Société d'ethnologie, 2012, 592 pp.

Michael E. Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia - A History*, London: Routledge, 2011, 210 pp.

Sherman Cochran & Andrew Hsieh, *The Lius of Shanghai*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2013, 431 pp.

Micheal Keane, *Creative industries in China*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, 234 pp.