

Writing in the margins

Gen Y and the (im)possibilities of 'understanding China'

KELLY DOMBROSKI WRITES ON THE UNEASE FELT BY YOUNGER SCHOLARS FACED WITH THE CHOICE BETWEEN 'CHINESE STUDIES' AND THE DISCIPLINES. DOMBROSKI IS A LECTURER IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY AT MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY, AND IS IN THE FINAL MONTHS OF HER PHD THESIS (DRAWING ON FIELDWORK WITH MOTHERS IN QINGHAI PROVINCE) AT THE CENTRE FOR CITIZENSHIP AND PUBLIC POLICY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY. THIS PIECE IS PART OF A LONGER ARTICLE IN PROGRESS LOOKING AT THE ETHICS AND IMPOSSIBILITIES OF 'UNDERSTANDING CHINA'

At the 2011 annual conference of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia, keynote speaker Professor Kevin O'Brien of the University of California Berkeley pointed to a 'hole' in the centre of Chinese Studies. Increasingly, he says, 'bright young graduates' are deserting to the disciplines, their research framed in disciplinary terms and addressing disciplinary concerns, rather than taking a big picture approach to China. Some audience members pointed out that this was not the case in Australia, but as a 'young graduate' living and working in Australia, I am not so sure.

You see, I too feel this pull to disciplinary concerns. And I spoke to a number of other 'young graduates' at the conference and elsewhere who alluded to this pull in their own work. On returning home after the conference I started to ponder the push and pull factors at work on young graduates studying aspects of China – those of us who identify less and less with 'Chinese Studies', as well as those of us who feel very much within that framework but are entertaining other options. My academic career has mostly been on the margins of Chinese Studies, having studied Mandarin and things China in a much more patchwork and haphazard way than those whose undergraduate studies majored in Chinese Studies or Chinese, and having researched mostly non-Han people and places in China's multi-ethnic west. So perhaps I am not a good example of deserting to

the disciplines, since in one sense I was never really embedded in sinology or Chinese Studies. But for what it's worth, I offer the following comments.

Deserting to the disciplines

From my perspective on the margins of Chinese Studies, I see two primary reasons for the tendency of young graduates to desert to the disciplines (and here I include other non-Chinese Studies interdisciplinary groupings such as environmental studies or gender studies). The 'pull' factor is the global context. In philosophy, sociology, anthropology, geography and politics there is a groundswell of Generation Y scholars (born after 1977 on some counts and 1982 on others) interested in coming up with new ways of being in the world, of addressing global concerns of social injustice and climate change, among others. While the research on Generation Y is sketchy to say the least, one thing that is coming out is that Gen Y feel they have inherited the problems of the previous generations, including global crises in economic, social and environmental terms. Research must somehow therefore contribute to a new, better world.

This where we get to the 'push' factor. Chinese Studies appears to require young graduates to be overly focused on (the somewhat colonial impulse) of correctly documenting, delineating, and 'understanding' China. Despite Liu Xin's point that the mere accumulation of empirical knowledge with regards to China does not necessarily amount to 'proper comprehension' (Liu, 2009: ix), the accumulation of empirical knowledge documenting China's changes sometimes seems to be the acceptable limit to a young researcher's contribution to Chinese Studies. In some cases this is to such a degree that creativity and the imagining of future possibilities for both China and Chinese Studies are crushed in the relentless drive to first prove oneself as having progressed far enough along the road of understanding China. This falls into the trap of promoting a rather essentialist perspective of 'China' that does not appear to appreciate the



A photograph taken by the author after conducting a research interview with the older woman. Her daughter shows her how the voice recorder works and she hears her own voice for the first time. Xining, Qinghai.

diversities inherent in regions beyond China proper – I have seen young graduates working on China’s multi-ethnic west questioned on the validity of their findings when they do not reflect or document what commentators know of ‘Chinese society’, and others questioned on their ability to teach Chinese Studies.

From a perspective on the margins—generationally, geographically, methodologically—Chinese Studies comes off as a somewhat hierarchical, gate-keeping community of researchers that harbours a core set of values that come off as being realist, nit-picking, and essentialist—and not able to contribute to thinking up a better world. Ouch! But it’s true—Chinese Studies looks rather uninspiring to the average Gen Y scholar, and not just because learning Chinese requires hard work (as Geremie Barmé quipped via Linda Jaivin ‘isn’t there an app for that?’). And while I recognise the value of encouraging young graduates to learn Chinese and to develop their empirical and textual skills in researching things China, I want to insist that we do not *blame* Gen Y for not being interested in Chinese Studies or assume they are avoiding putting in the hard yards of studying Mandarin. We need to recognise that *culturally* Chinese Studies in its current form is broadly unappealing to ‘bright young graduates’ (who probably went to Mandarin classes while still in nappies). To the accusation *ni bu dong Zhong Guo*, ‘you don’t understand China’, the Gen Y scholar is likely to answer *suan le!*, ‘whatever’, and take off to the disciplines. The ‘seductions’ of the

understanding China project, of becoming an old China hand, just do not have the same pull as it does for the more competitive Gen X scholars. Research in to managing Gen Y in the workplace has shown that Gen Y are confident and see little reason to submit to someone *merely* because they have experience or are older—they need to prove their worth in what matters like anyone else (Huntly, 2006; Sheahan, 2005). Thus I suspect that working to first prove themselves as scholars who ‘understand China’ before being able to contribute as an equal is a meaningless task for Gen Yers; in fact it may very well be a push factor in ‘deserting to the disciplines’, where they can be the expert on China among those who know very little about it!

The (im)possibilities of ‘understanding China’

If Chinese Studies is wanting to attract and better engage with ‘bright young graduates’, convincing Gen Y of the relevance of what we do may involve some reframing of the goal of ‘understanding China’. We need to steer clear from that imperialist urge to document, delineate, and fix ‘other’ peoples and places, and to move towards engaging with ‘Others’ (ethnic, generational, disciplinary) in collectively building a new kind of world that is more economically, socially and environmentally livable.

What would this look like? Geremie Barmé, in the inaugural annual lecture of the Australian Centre

on China in the World at the same conference, proposes that in a 'new Sinology' we explore the ways in which 'China's presence as a country and a civilisation confronts us and causes us to interrogate our own understanding of the world, our principles, our values, our intellectual trajectory'. Elsewhere Barmé has insisted on the importance of recognising the 'autochthonous value and richness' of the various interconnected peoples and histories of the larger Chinese world, the Other(s) both internal and external to 'China proper'(2008).

Here is a Chinese Studies project potentially attractive to Gen Y researchers, a project contributing to the creation of new cross-cultural understandings of the world, along with new understandings (and performances?) of principles, values and trajectories. And as long as our work does not stop just at understanding but also includes thinking and enacting possibilities based on this co-produced knowledge, I think here we can see something for Gen Y and other scholars alike to 'get their teeth into'. If 'new Sinology' can incorporate researchers able to fill the apparent silence around the role of non-literary methods of engaging with the space of China, I think we have got something to promote!

Writing in the Margins

As a non-sinologist, Gen Y researcher of marginal spaces in China, I eagerly grasp the olive branch held out by 'new Sinology'. Like Barmé, I want to emphasise the importance of engaging with 'Chinese' understandings of China in the World – but here I include the understandings of ordinary people trying to make sense of the world, people who may or may not be intellectuals, may or may not be Han, but who are interested in being part of rethinking their world and ours. It may be that those living and writing on the margins are ideally placed to contribute to this project: elsewhere I have written of the ways that through cross-cultural awkward engagement, women in China's multi-ethnic west are reworking and experimenting with their own everyday understandings and practices of being in the world – that is, producing new knowledges that have global consequences (see Dombroski, 2011 and forthcoming). It is in (marginal) engagements such as these that we see that the 'world of China... is not the Chinese world; it is a symptomatic moment of our world at the present time' (Liu 2009: viii), a world that is in desperate need of some serious, collectively- and culturally- engaged new thinking.

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A mass wedding in Shenzhen, at the minority nationalities theme park. 100 couples married simultaneously and repeatedly according to the traditions of many different minorities, all dressed in western style wedding dresses and tuxedos. Photograph: Kelly Dombrowski