

Localizing the Global: Shifting Centers, Chinese Ideology, and American Studies

Wang Jianping
Institute of American Studies, Northeastern University

At the 40th Anniversary of Korean American Studies Association Annual Conference in October 2005, “American in Conflict,” at Jeongchu, Korea, I participated in a round-table, together with scholars from Ewha Women’s University in Seoul, University of Philippines, University of Tokyo, Nathaniel West from University of Montana, US, on the commonalities and differences of American studies in each separate country. So we have Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Philippine and American perspectives on the situation of American Studies outside the United States from the Asian context. We were surprised to see the divide in the respective agendas. In an article that came out just prior to the conference, “Language, the University, and American Studies in Korea.” (*American Quarterly* 2005), Min-Jung Kim (Ewha Women’s University) keeps this divide in view: America and American Studies, whether in Korea or China, has never been a stable, definable entity but always a subject that is full of contradictions and is born out of contradictions. America is variously experienced, strategically negotiated, and intensely contested. People who engage in American studies from different geo-political regions have much to share with one another: this kind of give and take constitutes an equally important dimension of American studies. Given the increasingly global role that Asia is playing in the international arena, American studies may be one of the many strategically constructed, mutually interested platforms on which Asian scholars may meet for cross-cultural understanding.¹

Kim maps out the development and disciplinary/organizational structure of American studies as well as challenges of the undertaking in Korean Universities. Kim’s insightful analysis of “nation space of Korea, political agenda, legitimacy and institutional/cultural determinants, Korean-U.S. relations and linkages of the formation of academic knowledge and social movements, political struggles and everyday practices share with my analysis of the Chinese situation. American studies cannot be limited to the United States, and that academics can do much in fostering sensitivity to “positions, stories and concerns through learning, unlearning and relearning existing knowledge” (Kim 459).

There is increasing recognition of such. In another round-table at 1999 ASA annual meeting, with Maureen Montgomery, Chair of International Committee of ASA from University of Canterbury of New Zealand, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Temple University, USA, Kiroko Sato, President of Japanese American Studies Association, Tokyo Women’s University, Gonul Pultar, Bkent University, Turkey converge on the same topic: while recognizing some of the commonalities among those Americanists not based in the US, the participants share the view

¹ Min-Jung Kim, “Language, the University, and American Studies in Korea,” *American Quarterly* 57:2 (June 2005): 439-462.

that “there are other, much more specific, contributions that arise out of specific contexts which make it imperative that we avoid thinking of the ‘rest of the world’ as contributing a homogenous American studies community. There are myriad permutations and diversities in the identities of those who constitute this community.”² For Professor Sato, the question is formulated as “How is American studies configured in your institution and local community?” (14).

This growing attention to local and communal responses to the quickly globalizing field has shown signs of a trend that turns American studies away from the object of attention to the diversity of non-U.S. based histories and peoples involved and consequently, a whole new picture is transforming the turn-of-the-century status of the field. In his “Presidential Address to ASA, 2000”, Michael Frisch sees the turning moment of the century as a “kind of prism”, rather than a beam, allowing us to inquire into the composition, distribution, and relationship of its various components. The proper metaphor to describe the situation, Frisch suggests, is that of the liberating prism, rather than imaginatively controlled and controlling prison of the historical narrative.³

With this recognition of the commonality of American studies and its respective differences, this paper delineates the trajectory of the changing attitudes towards the United States and ideological/institutional constraints that influence the shifting centers of gravity in Chinese academia. In so doing, I highlight residual traces of the shifting centers of political ideology that has legitimized American studies and motivated the drifts in this country. I will also supplement with a side note on the 1990s on American Literature Studies in Mainland China to suggest the inherent logic of Chinese response to the globalized phenomenon. In mapping out the ideological and geo-political differences in marshalling academic and administrative resources, I argue for the necessity, politics of institutional exchange, academic diplomacy, (a term coined by John King Fairbank in his life-campaign to draw American attention, public and private, to Asia.) and curriculum reform as a way of negotiating the boundaries of the local and the global. The purpose of this paper is less to produce a report of the state of American studies in mainland China, than to pay special attention to monitoring temper of Chinese political ideology and academia where cultural studies has globalized literary studies in the past decade.

As an initial statement for an understanding of shifting centers of gravity, I wish to trace the rough trajectory of American studies’ inception as a discipline in China so as to place the current situation in perspective. This is essential if we want to appreciate the changing attitudes towards the United States and the ideological constraints that often influence what Philip C. Saunders calls the “shift in the center of gravity” in Chinese study of the United States in general,

² Maureen Montgomery, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Gonul pultar, Hiroko Sato, Bruce Tucker, “Roundtable: The Imagined Community of International American Studies,” *American Studies International*, Volume xxxvii (June 1999) 2: pp. 4-23.

³ Michael Frisch, “Prismatics, Multivalence, and Other Riffs on the Millennial Moment,” *American Quarterly*, 53 (June 2001) 2: 193-231.

American literature in particular.⁴ The emergence of American Studies as a professional discipline took place in the early 1960s as a response to the demands of the changing situation in domestic and international affairs. But truly interdisciplinary American Studies program that could “combine the insights of the diverse disciplines engaged in studying the United States, usually off in their separate corners of the campus and the mind” (John G. Blair), did not emerge until the early 1980s.

The initial stage of American Studies in this country began in the early 1960s and ended in 1966 when the Cultural Revolution broke out. During this period, China and the United States were still locked in confrontation. Added to this cold war atmosphere was the open conflict between the Soviet Union and China. Moreover, domestic economic reconstruction was, after a difficult time, beginning to recover. It was therefore in China’s national interest to study the United States. In answer to Chairman Mao Zedong’s call for an expansion of foreign studies, some research-oriented institutions and university-based teaching-research centers were established in 1964 with emphasis on American history, international relations, economy, and literature. (Min-Jung Kim describes the Korean situation of American studies: the kind of contradictions out of which American studies emerged: the desire to study English language and to train U.S. specialists who will be players in international business and Northeast Asia-U.S. relations. In the Chinese context, the cold war setting is one of the dominant factors that set the keynote for its direction).

The studies of the United States in this period had severe limitations, however. It was guided by a rigid ideological perspective, which was clearly felt in every field. Scholars suffer from a great deal of cognitive dissonance and most often simply look for evidence to confirm their preconceived notions of how the United States functions and bring all the attendant cultural, political and historical baggage to bear on their analyses of the United States. In literature, only progressive writers such as Albert Maltz and Michael Gold, and the so-called realist authors such as Twain, Dreiser, London, and Hemingway were introduced to Chinese readers. As research and teaching about the United States had been done behind closed doors, and because China and the United States did not have normal relations and communications, the sources that Chinese scholars relied on were either inadequate or outdated. This factor and others severely limited progress in scholarship. However, this initial stage laid foundations for the significant future development of American Studies, both institutionally and professionally.

The fate of American Literature is no more no less special than the fate of foreign literature in general. American literature as it evolves over the decades is nothing if not a searching, self-reflective and critical kind of local knowledge. It has helped define, discuss and cope with China’s own immediate issues and problems, social, historical and cultural; it is always transplanted, to use a phrase from Tatiana Venediktova, as “a searchingly self-reflective, critical, therapeutic kind of local knowledge of the cultural other (rather than of the cultural Self).”⁵ As

⁴ Philip C. Saunders , “China’s America Watchers: Changing Attitudes Towards the United States” (*The China Quarterly*, 2000); David Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972-1990* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 278-79.

⁵ Tatiana Venediktova, “Between Language and Discourse: Russian Americanists in Search of Definition,” *American*

Wang Shouren suggests, in the history of modern China, foreign literature has played a succession of roles: in the social reforms of modern China as anti-tradition discourse, instrument of political revolution and window to the outside world, exerting direct or indirect impact on the formation of modern Chinese ideology. In the age of globalization, American literature is expected to continue to influence modern value construction by strengthening sense of identification with indigenous culture, global awareness and opening vision. In other words, it will be continually localized and indigenous.⁶

At the end of 19th century and early 20th century, there was a wave of foreign studies. Foreign literature offered anti-tradition discourse and cultural hermeneutics for social reform. After Sino-Japanese War, national survival was imminent. Foreign literature had an explicit social function: awakening the Chinese for national renewal. Thus, works of realism that reflected the oppression of social outcast were prioritized.

During the May Fourth Movement, Renaissance in China, carried on the Western European renaissance tradition of humanism, aims at liberating man from the shackles of feudalism. Romantic and Enlightenment provide a paradigm for the aspiring generation of literati in the early decades of the 20th century. Ibsen, Shelley, Goethe, Byron, Whitman directly influenced May Fourth Movement cultural elite.

With the ebbing of the May Fourth Movement, the subject of individualism and liberalism were of diminishing importance. With the revolutionary situation in China, revolutionary literature became mainstream. After the founding of the Republic, China in its modernization process began to quit the European-American model to embrace the Soviet one. Russian literature came to national attention. Within the decade from October 1949 to December 1958, 3526 books of Soviet-Russian literature were translated with circulation of 2 million copies. Literature created during the Russian Proletarian revolution period exhibits rising, optimistic spirit and aspirations corresponded with China's situation.

In the 1960s, the Cultural Revolution decade, literature has become enslaved with politics, and foreign literature, American literature in particular, was virtually at a standstill. The decade of turmoil didn't end until after the mid-1970s. With the downfall of "Gang of Four," which terminates the decade of turmoil and China's open-door policy, there was revival of liberalism and interest in European and American modernism, which had been downgraded as decadent and corrupt. Political correct literatures were translated. Interest in modernist literature was revived, in contrast to social realism. American modernism was recognized rather belatedly, half a century after its inception in Europe and America.

In a sense, American studies has always been, to borrow a phrase from Paul Jay,

Studies International, XLI: 1-2 (February 2003): pp. 8-16.

⁶ Wang Shouren, "Foreign Literature, Modernity, and Traditional Chinese Values," *Foreign Literature Review*, 4 (December 2004).

postnational and deterritorialized. In the present age, It has become increasingly difficult to study British or American literature without situating it, and the culture(s) from which it emerged, in transnational histories linked to globalization.⁷ It is this concern with the topography of American studies that includes all of us today.

Cultural studies is edging into the spectrum owing to academic endeavor of the globalizing decade. Whereas an increasing number of scholars feel that there is something drastically changed about academic frameworks in which we study literature, there is a great deal of reservation with what Edward Said refers to as “revision” of existing frameworks. Said’s suggestion in “Globalizing Literary Study” is particularly pertinent to what’s currently occurring in literary studies: that two aspects of the intellectual frameworks in particular seem more in need of revision: the idea that literature exists with a national framework and the assumption that a literary object exists in some sort of stable or at least consistently identifiable form.⁸ As yet, the extent of its institutionalization in the academia is minimal in terms of curriculum change. One may perhaps notice a discontinuity of the open policy beginning from the 1980s to the end of that decade which still has an impact. American literature curriculum is most resistant to change. While the 90s has seen the reemergence of free intellectual setting and easing off of ideological bind that has been influenced by the cold-war tension in Sino-American relations, one should remember that the delicate domestic balance could be upset over any number of issues, national and international.

As the politics of identity and the nationally grounded system of education remain at the core of what most of us do, despite changed boundaries and objects of research (Said 68), because education is solely a governmental effort and because it is closely tied to other goals, if rather abrupt political shifts continue to occur in China as they have over the past decades, further discontinuities could occur in educational policy. For over a century, Chinese leaders have consistently displayed ambivalence concerning an appropriate degree of involvement with the world of scholarship and education beyond China’s borders. While the specifics of interchange have changed greatly over the past century, there remains a strong sense that there ought to be limits of “penetration” and the preservation of a cultural or national essence, be it the set of Confucian principles of social order of a century ago or the socialist ideology of today. In practice, however, there can be no objective assessment of where one ought to draw the line in this matter, and specific policies will merely reflect the current balance of opinions on the subject. As Americans are worried about, the dramatic shifts in policy over the past years suggest the wide range of possible opinions on the issue of foreign ties. Scholars remain sensitive to the possibility of changes in the opinion balance.⁹

Changes in American literature studies in the past decade has reflected what Suzanne Pepper refers to as the kind of “experiments in democracy,” particularly in the improvement in the institutional framework within which American studies must operate as well as in the way one relates to the authorities who manage such institutions. Since American studies has proliferated

⁷ Paul Jay, “Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English,” *PMLA* 116: 1 (January 2001): 32-47.

⁸ Edward Said, “Globalizing Literary Studies,” *PMLA* Volume 116, 1 (January 2001): 64-68.

⁹ In *Introduction to Education in the People’s Republic of China and U.S.-China Educational Exchanges* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People’s Republic of China, National Academy of Sciences, and the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs, 1980), pp. 5-6.

to the point where it now embraces behavioral studies, minority studies, women's studies, popular culture, etc., and institutional and curriculum changes have begun to assimilate American literature, the opportunities to develop the current interest are virtually unlimited. American literature textbooks and anthologies published in China over the decade have shown signs of going beyond the ideological bind of the early decades. When American studies was launched in the sixties its proponents conceived of it as a way to explore the interstices between history and literature to study American culture, it carried with it the cold-war ideological baggage which is still manifest in the post-cold war hunger for information of all kinds about the United States, and in curriculum drill. If, as Professor Daniel Aaron, a renowned American studies scholar at Harvard, said that "there is no single way to approach the study of the United States. Foreign countries study the U.S. for their own purposes and in their own way,"¹⁰ what distinguishes American literature studies in China from its counterpart in the U.S. is that the former is, as Jay W. Gildner put it, "inherently comparative,"¹¹ which means global in present day terms.

This recognition, which understandably encourages a multiple grid within traditional interdisciplinary approach, means a generous acceptance of ideological differences and geopolitical constraints in terms of marshalling academic and administrative resources. Any approach to "American studies" (which on most Chinese campuses includes English teaching as in the so-called "Applied Linguistic Model) must therefore begin with zero-based planning, which must take into account limitations of resources as well as various bureaucratic factors. Even at this stage, at the administrative level, the Chinese academia are still vague and somewhat uninformed about the specifics of its legitimacy, its global nature. This does not mean the academia is resistant to change; it simply means that it is beginning with single disciplines – language learning (to name the most pragmatic), history and literature – and planning to move gradually into the social sciences, a term which is not understood in China in the same sense the expression is used in America. In China, the term covers just about everything that is not a natural science (this is clearly indicated by the titles of the two most prestigious research organizations in China: the Academy of [Natural] Sciences and the Academy of Social Sciences (which includes the Institutes of American Studies, World History and Foreign Literature).¹²

The inherent Chinese view of the relationship between language, history, and literature here implied requires some historical understanding. In the fifties, the "Soviet model" of specialized institutes includes everything from metallurgy to language. Institutes of Foreign Languages and foreign language departments (which are mostly where American literature instruction in English language happens in the Chinese context) studies language as a technical skill and does not include the culture and area studies found in the normal liberal arts college programs of the United States). What happens as a result is that American literature teaching now has several limitations even as the academia goes multidisciplinary, and cultural studies become global, and Americanists are making a hell lot of noise (e.g. American studies program is under applied

¹⁰ "American Studies and China," *Report for the CSCPRC*, March 1981, p. 13.

¹¹ Jay W. Gildner, *Educational and Cultural Affairs*, USICA, April 1, 1981, p. 1.

¹² Evidence is shown of quasi-multidisciplinary approach in China in the flourishing of "social science" magazines published since 1977. World Knowledge, for instance, international in scope and covers political, economic, and cultural topics. Many other "social science" journals discuss education, literature, and language, and a wide variety of other areas.

linguistics, a category that is, often falsely, equated with and upgraded from, ESL).

The English department, which is where Amlit teaching happens, faces the same problem of structural constraints following the waves of institutional merges that has occurred nation-wide in the 1990s decade. Those merges that integrate technological institutions into multidisciplinary campuses have led to an alternate situation, either the language-focused faculty from technological university's language center are integrated into English department, or English faculty incorporated under the Foreign Languages Department framework. This has created the need for hierarchy in curriculum design and the need to either degrade humanities syllabus or encode Amlit into language-focused programs.

The applied linguistics (language) category under which American studies program develops is limiting in several ways, particularly in deciding the canon, given that a prominent feature of cultural studies grid consists in the questioning and reordering of the canon. The notion of a standard English language predominates the linguistic approach to the canon of what is considered "good" English and to a large extent determines the frequent controversy over the criterion of text selection of American literature, from which certain authors and texts, particularly ethnic American authors and texts (Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Watch*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Alice Walker's *Color Purple*, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, etc.) are considered deviant and therefore unteachable (in addition to other politically and/or morally offensive reasons such as overt sexual and abnormal behavior and psychology).

My view of the situation of a globalizing cultural studies rubric in China can only be cautiously optimistic. It tends to be globally comparative. What cultural studies can do, and what it actually has done, for American literature studies, is little, even though Chinese scholars have had doubts about the traditional approach for years – the basic skills approach did not prepare the graduates for sophisticated cross-cultural translation and interpretation – and are only gradually moving to a broader curriculum offering such courses as history and literature.¹³ Even within linguistics, what is now generally called "applied linguistics," the understanding of "cultural studies" and of the relationship between language and culture is superficial.

On the other hand, however, the desirability of using subject-study in literature and history as the platform on which to effectively develop language ability has facilitated the strengthening of American literature curriculum in reassuring ways, to the extent to which sometimes American literature program can only go ahead within language-focused institutions with no other alternative. Given the situation, the language component remains a very important aspect of an integrated program.

Just as the past decade saw American studies expand to an extent and depth that have exceeded any previous period, American literature has enjoyed a boom in the area of national literatures. But the status and function of American literature and literature in general is no longer the same. There may be several reasons for its reduced visibility, as Wang Shouren has

¹³ John J. Deeney, "The State of American History and Literature Studies in the People's Republic of China," USICA, Office of Research International Communication Agency, USA, 1982, p. 7.

suggested, it no longer enjoys the centrality because it is no longer the major or only means of looking on to the world. The other reason is that literature's social role and function have changed. As the country moved into consumer and mass culture, literature and foreign literature have been increasingly marginalized. The academia need to calculate its own response to an increasingly globalized subject in marshalling its own resources. For one thing, the politics of identity and the nationally grounded system of education remain at the core of what most of us do, despite changed boundaries and objects of research. In that sense, valuable knowledge about America, at once uniform and variable, can still be produced in Shenyang, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Seoul, Moscow, or Istanbul as well as California, London, or Berlin. One reminder from Said, with which I wish to conclude, is of "the importance not of synthesis and the transcendence of opposites but of the role of geographic knowledge in keeping one grounded, literally, in the often tragic structure of social, historical and epistemological contests over territory—this includes nationalism, identity, narrative and ethnicity – so much of which informs the literature, thought, and culture of our time."¹⁴

¹⁴ Edward Said, "Globalizing Literary Studies," *PMLA* Volume 116, 1 (January 2001), p. 68.