

Introduction

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Welcome to *Cultural China*, a unique annual publication for up-to-date, informed, and accessible commentary about Chinese and Sinophone languages, cultural practice and production, and its critical analysis. *Cultural China* is published by the Contemporary China Centre at the University of Westminster and builds on our weekly blog, launched in October 2019. It is structured around a selection of articles that speak with particular relevance, originality, and insight into the year under review, and that collectively provide an annual snapshot of what we refer to as Cultural China.

For many readers, our reference to Cultural China will call to mind philosopher Tu Weiming's famous essay *Cultural China: The Periphery and the Centre* (1991). Cultural China, according to Tu, comprised of three symbolic universes; the first consisting of societies predominantly populated by ethnic and cultural Chinese, such as mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore; the second of Chinese diaspora, or Chinese communities who have settled throughout the world; and the third of individuals, such as scholars, journalists, businesspeople, and writers (implicitly understood as non-Chinese by Tu at the time), trying to understand China intellectually and bringing their conceptions of China to their own communities. In Tu's conception, mainland China constituted the centre of a Sinocentric order, while all other elements of his symbolic universes made up the periphery. Writing in 1991, Tu claimed that 'the Centre no longer has the ability, insight, or legitimate authority to dictate

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the agenda for Cultural China.’ However, in his understanding, all constituent elements of the symbolic universes shared an interest in and commitment to reviving a declining cultural core.

Cultural China is a much critiqued and justifiably contested concept. Scholars have drawn attention to the concept’s essentialising and hegemonic qualities given its foundation in Confucian ideals, ‘common awareness’, ‘common ancestry’ and ‘shared cultural background’, and its subsequent wholesale inclusion or rejection of all those who are deemed to fall inside or outside those parameters (Ang 1998; Chow 1998; Chun 1996; Choy 2007; Lo 2005; Shih 2007). They further critique Tu’s image of a periphery, unaffected by its embeddedness in multiple and distinct grounded contexts around the globe (Chun 2017; Dirlik 1996) that might rescue and revive a declining Sinocentric cultural core. Thirty years since the publication of Tu’s essay, much has also changed in geopolitical terms, not least the People’s Republic reaffirmation of its position of centrality through vastly enhanced economic and military power. Tu’s observation, in 1991, on China’s often ‘negligible’ position in the international discourse no longer applies. Not only has ‘the centre’ reasserted its position in relation to the ‘periphery’, not least through controversial legislation that attempts to extend the PRC’s arm beyond its borders, but China has also shifted from the periphery to the centre of international power constellations.

Other terms to describe and analyse the various transnational flows, networks, and interconnectivities amongst Chinese peoples and communities around the world include ‘Overseas Chinese,’ ‘the Chinese diaspora,’ ‘China, broadly defined,’ ‘chiglobalisation’ (Jia 2009), ‘Greater China’ and ‘the Sinophone.’ Among these, Shu-Mei Shih’s concept of the Sinophone has been the most embraced in the Humanities. It critiques what Shih argues to be the homogenising orders underpinning other terms, which base themselves on notions of fixed identity, China-centrism, and the hegemonic call of Chineseness that ‘bind[s] the diasporic to the so-called homeland’ (2011, 713).

Our use of ‘Cultural China’ is a critical rather than deferential reference to Tu Weiming. Taking a cultural studies-based approach, it is a term we choose to express our focus on Chinese and Sinophone languages, cultural practice and production, and its critical analysis, from geographical areas, societies, groups, and individuals not confined by the borders of a nation state. Focusing primarily—though not exclusively—on the less attention grabbing, less hyperbolic, less over-powering developments and considerations across Chinese and Sinophone worlds, our use of ‘Cultural China’ signals our critique of all kinds of hegemonic discourse while acknowledging the now inescapable orbit of the PRC, whether discursive or otherwise. Taking our cue from Ien Ang (1998), Rey Chow (1998), Shu-mei Shih (2007, 2011), Deborah Madsen (2011) and Alvin Wong (2018), our ‘Cultural China’ is informed by a diverse range of positions including feminism, post-colonialism, communitarianism, and religious pluralism, to name but a few.

Cultural China is unique and distinctive in its approach. Our aim is to promote interdisciplinary dialogue and debate about the social, cultural, political, and historical dynamics that inform life in Cultural China today, offering academics, activists, practitioners, and politicians a key reference with which to situate current events in and relating to Cultural China in a wider context and to better inform their associated engagements and policy-making practices. Given the importance of the PRC, as a state and geopolitical power whose position has ramifications across the world, it is perhaps understandable that so much writing and analysis on China and the Sinophone emanates from the social sciences, and certainly the type of research that finds its way to audiences beyond academia appears preoccupied with the dominant and by now unoriginal question around the continuity or sustainability of ‘China’s rise’. We offer a different perspective. With this annual collection we want to aid the critical understanding of Cultural China from the field of the Humanities, concerned, by definition, with what it means to be human and expressions of this human-kind in different social and cultural contexts.

2020 was an unprecedented year for Cultural China. It started with the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, which soon spread around the world and led to a surge of racism and xenophobia against people of pan-Asian heritage (Yeh 2021). Beyond the headlines of Covid-19, 2020 will be remembered for much more. It was the year of in which the mass detention, surveillance, and everyday violence against the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities across China’s northwest continued, and of major protests in Inner Mongolia against proposed changes to language rights. In Taiwan, it was the year of Tsai Ing-wen’s landslide election win against the Kuomintang, while in Hong Kong, the brutal National Security Law came into effect, making it easier to punish protesters and reducing the city’s autonomy. And perhaps less remembered, 2020 was also the year of Taiwan hosting the world’s biggest in-person Pride parade, Singapore’s ‘hawker culture’ being added to the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the death of acclaimed writer Yu Lihua, who was known for her nuanced portraits of Chinese émigré in post-war America and the PRC’s first independent Mars mission. And the list goes on!

The articles in this Review speak to this turbulent year that was 2020 as it unfolded across Cultural China. They are organised across eight sections, each of which is introduced by academics from the University of Westminster’s Contemporary China Centre. Thematically, the sections range from celebrity culture, fashion, and beauty, to religion and spirituality, via language politics, heritage, and music. The sections on representation of China in Britain and the Westminster Chinese Visual Arts Project reflect our particular location and home. The special introductions contextualise each section and speak to the articles’ significance to contemporary Cultural China in 2020. The disproportionate focus on the PRC in this year’s Review, in contrast to our stated aims, reflects in large part the original intention of the blog, which sought to

contribute to ongoing discussion and promote interdisciplinary dialogue about the social, cultural, political, and historical dynamics that inform life in the PRC today. As the blog evolved and the idea for this book began to take shape, we realised the importance of probing into what we mean by ‘China’ and our own critical positionality as researchers in relation to this. Many of the articles in this book demonstrate the inescapability of the PRC, but they also draw attention to the multiple Chinese and Sinophone cultural practices that exist within, across, and beyond national borders.

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