

## Guest Editor's Introduction

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Why has Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian cultural theorist and philosopher, become so popular among intellectuals and even the mass media in China today? This question is especially relevant at a time when theory seems to play, at best, a marginal role in our increasingly globalized society. Since Žižek started publishing in English, more than twenty of his works have been translated into Chinese, despite the difficulty of his writing (or maybe because of it). A fair number of journal articles and monographs concerning Žižek's work have recently emerged.<sup>1</sup> A well-known Beijing conceptual artist, Wang Jianwei, even claims to have found inspiration in Žižek's theoretical writings.<sup>2</sup>

This special issue is partly a reflection of Žižek's popularity in China. Apart from Žižek himself, who contributed several essays, all the contributors are scholars of China studies; most of us have followed Žižek's work

for decades. We have often questioned our fascination with him; his theory attracts us because it encourages us to problematize both our own and Žižek's premises.

Before dealing with Chinese perspectives on Žižek — a subject that occupies several contributors here — I address how Žižek perceives China, since his two essays and lengthy response to Liu Kang's commentary summarize his highly publicized stance. The enthusiastic reception of Žižek's works by Chinese intellectuals apparently has not been reciprocated. The Slovenian author seldom mentions China, except in his introduction to Mao's *On Practice and Contradiction*,<sup>3</sup> and in three journalistic pieces on tradition, religion, and political economy, although he claims to see "China's current political development" as an interesting "live laboratory" for the world's future.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Žižek's visit to China in June 2007 did trigger some "experiments" in this "live laboratory." Following this trip, Žižek's writings on China were published in English and Chinese journals.

Žižek offered a *Beijing News* journalist an interesting explanation for his carefully maintained distance from China: "The more one likes this place, the less one dares get close to it, out of fear that the sense of mystery will disappear after it is penetrated."<sup>5</sup> Was this a polite remark to the host country or an excuse to avoid direct engagement? Whichever it was, his activities in late 2007 reveal an effort to "penetrate" the "mystery" of China — though this effort lasted barely six months. In summer 2010, Žižek returned to China for a second visit. It will be interesting to see what reactions the current trip provokes from him.

If the Chinese reception of Žižek's general theoretical works has been enthusiastic, his writings on China have been received in a much more ambivalent manner: many Chinese scholars view his writings on China with deep skepticism, if not hostility. On the one hand, Žižek had to explain to Chinese liberal intellectuals why he does not idealize China — especially Maoist China — their own *bête noire*.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, when I tried to publish translations of his three articles on China, Chinese journals turned them down because of "their politically sensitive nature." In 2008, when I forwarded Žižek's three short pieces on China to the Web site of *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* (MCLC), the reaction among sinologists was virulent. Several Chinese editors furiously criticized Žižek for writing on

a subject about which he was not sufficiently informed. One blogger asked how the star theorist dared act so irresponsibly in writing on Chinese tradition without knowledge of its language, without mentioning that of classical Chinese.

One possible explanation for the ambiguity of China's reception to Žižek's work is its purported desire for a "Žižek without Žižek" — "the desire to deprive a radical thinker of his excess and radicalness," as Kwai-Cheung Lo wittily puts it (this issue, 745). Or, does this apparently self-contradictory desire result from more complicated factors, since Žižek's audience includes not only China's official media within China but also the circle of sinologists outside China?

Žižek's introduction to Mao's work fares a little better. It was translated into Chinese — though only partially, and with a note from the translator to express his reservation on certain inaccuracies.<sup>7</sup> Despite their apparently opposite positions, Žižek's Chinese fans and detractors share a common trait: passion. Liu Kang's commentary on Žižek is a case in point. We invited Žižek to clarify his views on China in response to Liu's commentary; he penned an equally passionate defense, which helps us better understand both his own stance and the ambiguous reception he provokes.

Our fascination with Žižek's works, his somewhat ephemeral (hopefully renewable) interest in Chinese culture and politics, and the passionate reaction he provokes have created a complicated cultural phenomenon in China, one that may shed light on a more universal situation: the encounter between theorists (traditionally considered Western) and sinologists (traditionally confined to a hermeneutic world inaccessible to the uninitiated). As China emerges from its Maoist isolationism and rapidly integrates into the global capitalist market, it is no longer possible to preserve the rigid boundaries between these sides — a theorist with international standing can no longer grasp today's world while closing his or her eyes to China; a Chinese scholar can no longer take refuge in the mystery of Oriental culture, because intensified globalization has made the distinction between East and West almost irrelevant. This special issue embraces the gradual disappearance of these boundaries, a change that is beneficial and unsettling — beneficial because it enriches perspectives on either side, and unsettling because it forces us to go beyond our comfort zones.

Žižek does not speak Chinese—as the blogger at the MCLC Web site correctly pointed out. Similarly, our contributors have not undertaken a systematic study of German transcendental philosophy or Lacanian psychoanalysis, both of which are foundational to Žižek’s thinking; most of us do not read German or French, or, for that matter, Slovene. But we do not believe that we must master each other’s expertise or language before we can enter into dialogue.

Usually, cultural theorists who visit China avoid discussing its contemporary society. Žižek is an exception in this regard. Excited by what is happening in China, he wrote about it immediately after his first visit. The subsequent controversy over his writings has no doubt reinforced Žižek’s popularity in China, because he at least had the courage to speak from a position of imperfect knowledge, as a colleague (comrade?), and not as a masterful theorist safe within his comfort zone. The demands for perfection in his knowledge of China imply that outsiders to sinology have no right to comment on China in “serious” academic circles. This demand is one-sided. In most cases, we use critical theory not because we intend to become specialists in it; the contributors to this issue do not consider themselves Žižekian specialists. If we don’t need to perfect our background knowledge to take advantage of Žižek’s theory in forming our own conceptual framework on China, why should we demand that Žižek master an understanding of China before he writes about its post-Mao culture? Perhaps such demands arise from the assumption that the West represents universality (something everyone knows or should know), while China occupies a position of particularity (a mystery that needs serious study).

Like China in Žižek’s writings, critical theory has been part of our “live laboratory” for several decades. This special issue is an example of an “experiment” in this “laboratory,” into which we have invited Žižek, asking him to explain to us his experiment on China even as we explicate our own experiments with his theory. I hope that this issue will break ground for similar dialogues in the future; such mutual experiments enrich our critical perspectives in an increasingly globalized world.

Žižek’s first essay is an interesting combination of his three articles on China. These have been subject to censorship in Beijing and virulent criticism from my sinologist colleagues at the MCLC. Rather than studying Chi-

nese tradition as the venerable object of a “world museum,” Žižek remains in a strictly modern context. He prefers the Qin emperor and his legalistic legacy—usually the least favored Chinese tradition. Mao Zedong could have found theoretical support in Žižek’s work here, for his (m)Movement of Criticism of Confucius and Lin Bao during the Cultural Revolution, and vice versa. In this regard, Mao and Žižek are in agreement, as both consider this school a rupture from tradition—an instance of modernization, if not revolution. In dealing with the favorite topic of Western media and politicians—religious freedom—when they wish to chastise China for its totalitarianism, Žižek shows the extent to which this freedom is a “structural illusion” in both China *and* the West. Instead of singling out China either in terms of its really existing socialist past or its integration into global capitalism as a betrayal of its past, Žižek offers a complex picture of current Chinese economic development as a continuation (or repetition) of Mao’s Great Leap and links this development to the past and the future of Western democracy (and capitalism). Together, Žižek’s three articles frame contemporary Chinese culture not as a rupture from but as a continuation of Chinese classical tradition; they represent China not as the other (or a reversed mirror image) but as an integrated part of global culture and capitalism.

In the same vein, Žižek analyzes Mao’s successes and failures in political philosophy by integrating Chinese revolution with a Marxist “universality,” as one step in its continual development through exceptions: from a theoretical model of an advanced capitalist country to the October Revolution in backward Russia to Mao’s mobilization of millions of Chinese peasants. Depictions of Mao in the West tend to be one-sided. Critics of communist ideology demonize Mao as a dictator and disregard his political thinking, while Maoist defenders idealize the emancipatory potential without analyzing his works from a critical distance. Although Louis Althusser used Mao’s concept of principle contradiction and overdetermination, he did so outside the cultural and political context in which they were theorized.<sup>8</sup>

In his essay on revolutionary violence, Žižek offers a close reading of Mao’s works to explain the endless political struggle of the Mao era as an absence of negation of negation in Mao’s philosophical thinking. As a child of the Cultural Revolution who had to study Mao’s works as a daily ritual in a period of seemingly endless struggle, I am struck by Žižek’s analysis,

offering as it does a different angle from which to examine this history in the context of global politics. Žižek attributes the frenetic development of capitalism in post-Cultural Revolution China to Mao's failure to accept the negation of negation. Instead of "swallowing" his enemies — "a big fish eats small fishes" — as Mao would have hoped, his refusal to integrate former enemies prepared the road for post-Mao China to be swallowed by the biggest fish of all — global capitalism. Mao's mistake was not isolated; from the beginning, Marxist tradition has underestimated the capacity of capitalism to develop productivity — the contradiction at the heart of capitalism is that it is the engine of, not the obstacle to, the frenetic development of China's economy in its mad dance with global capital. In China this past summer, Žižek directly connected Mao's concept of permanent self-revolution with the inherent dynamisms of capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

Using a similar logic and Žižekian theory, Zhang Yiwu explains China's development of capitalism since 1980. As a member of a former socialist country, Žižek, in his analysis of real, existing socialism, sheds light on the change of attitude among Chinese intelligentsia toward Western humanism. Just as in Eastern Europe, "when dissidents denounced the existing Communist regime on behalf of authentic human solidarity, they unwittingly, for the most part, spoke from the place opened up by Communism itself — this is why they tend to be disappointed when 'actually existing capitalism' does not meet the high expectations of their anti-Communist struggle."<sup>10</sup>

In the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals sought a solution by taking a humanistic notion of subjectivity as an anchorage against decades of Communist Party dominance. By the 1990s, the subject had materialized into an individual, a diligent producer of surplus value and an eager consumer of commodities. At the same time, commoditization of the labor force, including intellectual labor, laid the foundation for China's impressive economic prosperity and political ascension in the international arena. Thus the revelation of productive labor — which advanced capitalism tries to conceal, according to Žižek — has played a major role in constituting China as a threat to the West, as made concrete in the ubiquitous label "made in China." This label has been one of the most important contributors to the political ascension of the most populous (nominally) socialist country in the world. Zhang makes a shrewd comparison between China as a rapidly developing economy and

Žižek as a theoretical superstar, revealing the controversial positions toward global capitalism vis-à-vis commodities that are “made in China” and theoretical inventions that are “made by Žižek.” Toward the end of his essay, Zhang remarks that “Žižek is the China of theory for the age of global capitalism, while China is the real Žižek” (Zhang Yiwu, this issue, 737).

While Zhang Yiwu juxtaposes Žižek and China in their relations to global capitalism, Kwai-Cheung Lo compares Žižekian theory with one Chinese subject that Žižek *did* study in his essay: religion. According to Lo, the Chinese government “respectfully tolerates but no longer takes seriously” both religion and Marxism (Kwai-Cheung Lo, this issue, 739). Lo regards the enthusiastic reception of Žižek in China as part of a conscious effort to sinicize Marxist theory. In the post-Mao ideological vacuum, nationalism has become an important trans-individual value system for China’s government in its efforts to preserve its legitimacy. Marxism, which questions capitalistic economic infrastructure, paradoxically remains the only ideological (or theoretical) justification for the state’s pseudo-socialist superstructure.

As a Marxist theorist who is deeply skeptical of liberal democracy, Žižek plays a symbolic function in contemporary China: he represents a progressive West that is close enough to be sinicized. As Lo puts it, “Perhaps what the Chinese want from Žižek is a ‘Žižek without Žižek’ — the desire to deprive a radical thinker of his excess and radicalness: that is to say, an obscene joke without the critical theory behind it” (Kwai-Cheung Lo, this issue, 745). At the same time, China’s successful state-led capitalism, which has generated many problems, including an increase in the gap between rich and poor, needs Žižek’s “radicalness” more than ever. Lo raises interesting questions: can Žižek resist this “sinicization” and preserve his much-needed radicalness? Will he go all the way in his dialogue with Chinese intellectuals to bring them not only his superstar performance but his great critical power vis-à-vis global capitalism, of which China has become an integral part? In other words, is Žižek *with* Žižek possible in China?

Instead of sinicization, my essay uses Žižek’s concept of parallax view to interpret Taiwanization in Chinese language communities in a Taiwanese film. The Japanese colonial period, which has been closely associated with collective suffering, plays an important if controversial role in the reformulation of cultural identity. As a historical emotional trauma, Japanese

colonialism is often unsymbolizable in its excess; thus to impose meaning using collective suffering requires a parallaxic shift. As a point of reference for identity formation, the unsymbolizable nature of suffering invites continual reinterpretation, as in the case of Japanese colonial history in Taiwan. Ironically, control of the discourse of suffering is equivalent to ideological dominance in Chinese communities, in the strange “logic of wound,” to borrow Rey Chow’s expression.<sup>11</sup> This logic typically serves dominant ideology, while dividing the population through its various loyalties to political parties. In the changing political map of Taiwan, the reconfiguration of cultural identity through collective suffering has coincided with the reinterpretation of colonial history to satisfy the needs of dominant ideology. Six decades after the migration of the nationalist government to Taiwan, the arbitrary initial division of Taiwanese and mainlanders still shapes the political landscape, despite their common origins and shared geopolitical spaces.

If Kwai-Cheung Lo compares China’s attitude toward Žižekian theory with its treatment of religion, Yang Huilin uses an unexpected angle—their respective approaches to religion—to, by contrast, explain the closeness between Žižek and Chinese intelligentsia. Post-Mao culture has witnessed many radical changes, notably in the area of religion. In Mao’s China, religious practices were, with few exceptions, forbidden, and religion was considered the “opium of the masses.” Now, the number of churchgoers likely surpasses that of Communist Party members.<sup>12</sup> As a historical materialist, Žižek writes extensively on Christianity and claims that Christian tradition can only be salvaged from a materialist perspective. Traditional theology has been perverted by links made between the weakness of human beings and that of the Christian God, instead of his all-mightiness. Materialism, which Žižek considers the perverse core of Christianity, serves as a powerful connection between Žižek and Chinese religious scholars like Yang. Žižek’s claims of perversion go much further than claims of “perverse theology” by neo-theological scholars. Žižek does not believe in the existence of a positive Christian theology, since its perversion is situated at the heart of Christian theology, in its implicit acknowledgment of an unbridgeable gap between the symbolic order and the impossible real, between the “structure and its event,” to use Yang’s Badiouian terminology.



## Notes

1. See Han Zhenjiang, *Qizeke yishixingtai lilun yanjiu (A Study of Žižek's Theory on Ideology)* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2009).
2. See Wang Jianwei's Web site, [www.wangjianwei.com](http://www.wangjianwei.com), especially "Dilemma: Three Ways of Fork in the Road" (accessed June 1, 2011).
3. Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: Mao Tse-Tung, the Marxist Lord of Misrule," in *On Practice and Contradiction* (London: Verso, 2007), 1–28.
4. Chen Ying and Tang Shi, "Zhuanfang Qizeke" ("Interview with Žižek"), *Practice and Text*, September 14, 2007, [www.ptext.cn/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1866&Itemid](http://www.ptext.cn/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1866&Itemid).
5. "Zizek Is a Legalist," *Beijing News*, June 15, 2007, [www.kellerstrans.com/blog/?p=27](http://www.kellerstrans.com/blog/?p=27).
6. Ibid.
7. See "Qizeke lun Mao Zedong zai Makesizhuyi fazhanshishang de diwei" ("Žižek on Mao Zedong's Position in the Historical Development of Marxism"), trans. Wu Dake and Zhou He, *Foreign Theoretical Trends* 9 (2007): 74 (quoted by Kwai-Cheung Lo).
8. Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic," in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1990), 210–12.
9. See the opening paragraph of Žižek's speech at Renmin University, May 17, 2010, [www.philosophyol.com/pol/?action-viewthread-tid-26706](http://www.philosophyol.com/pol/?action-viewthread-tid-26706) (accessed June 1, 2011).
10. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Anybody Say Totalitarianism?* (London: Verso, 2001), 130–31. Quoted by Zhang Yiwu in his essay.
11. Rey Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," *Boundary* 2 25 (1998): 3–10.
12. According to a 2005 article in *USA Today*, official statistics count 16 million Christians—counting only registered church members. Church groups in Hong Kong and the United States estimate an additional 35 to 150 million unregistered Christians. See Calum MacLeod, "Christians in China Persevere despite Religious Restrictions," *USA Today*, November 17, 2005, [www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-11-16-china-churches\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-11-16-china-churches_x.htm).

