

Asian postmodernities and their legacies : introduction

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Special Section: Asian Postmodernities and their Legacies

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Introduction

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The four papers included in the following special section of *Asiatische Studien – Études Asiatiques* are all revised versions of talks that were originally presented during the international Graduate Student Workshop “Asian Postmodernities and their Legacies.” This conference took place at the University of Zurich on the 30th and 31st of March 2012, and was jointly organized by the University Research Priority Program (URPP) “Asia and Europe” and the Institute of East Asian Studies of the University of Zurich. Seventeen young scholars contributed to the workshop with papers that all stressed the criticality of theories and research methods derived from cultural, postcolonial and gender studies for opening new perspectives in contemporary East Asian and South Asian Studies.

Postmodernism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a new, influential and transdisciplinary movement in social science and the humanities in Western academia. Postmodern sensibilities did not accommodate established metanarratives of universal truth and criticized many assumptions of Western philosophy. Among these assumptions were those concerning the basic structures of Western social and political economy, and also the modernist concept of historical progress. Not to be forgotten is also postmodern theory’s initial focus on the description of a wide range of esthetic practices involving pastiche, playfulness and hybridity, as well as its fondness for popular culture.

In general, since the 1980s the notion of “postmodernism” has tended to be used in three broad senses: to designate the cultural epoch in which we live, as an esthetic practice, and as a development in thought that represents a critique of Enlightenment and universal reason.¹ Postmodernism as a critical practice offered the opportunity to revise some modern claims: for example, that the political project of liberation of humanity could be achieved through scientific and

¹ See Waugh 1992: 3.

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technological progress. The legacies of postmodern critique could therefore be perceived as a questioning of valid legitimations of currently legible economical and political power structures, modes of production or implied gender subject-positions. This crisis of legitimation should not, however, be equaled to a necessary withdrawal from political commitment or ethical reflection.

In 2012 contributors to the workshop mostly focused on postmodernity as the contemporary condition by which we are all affected as it generates particular ways of being in the world. Their presentations examined the validity of crucial features of this shared postmodern experience: globalization and diasporic modes of existence, the re-writing of modern grand narratives, the process of dealing with unstable and multiplied subject positions and the growing impact of the digital universe on all spheres of social life. Speakers engaged with all these aspects of postmodern condition and reflexivity, which have emerged from the “unfinished” project of modernity, and, moreover, they also made clear that the arrival of postmodernism was a global phenomenon. Accordingly, Chinese and Asian postmodernities are part of Asian and global modernities.

These topics are all pertinent to the selected papers presented in this section, albeit they all share the regional focus on “Greater China” and as such do not faithfully represent the geographic diversity covered by all papers presented during the 2012 workshop. Nevertheless, the range of issues discussed in the following articles suffices to demonstrate the potential hidden in the enterprise of thinking through postmodernity with the help of “China as a method.”

References

Waugh, Patricia (ed.) (1992): *Postmodernism. A Reader*. London: Edward Arnold.