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## Review

# Worrying about China: The language of Chinese critical inquiry

Gloria Davies

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Gloria Davies' book about the vocabulary, rhetoric, sensibilities and strategies of what she calls 'Chinese critical inquiry' (CCI) has much to offer political theorists, even those with no particular interest in China. It sustains an ambitiously self-reflexive account of comparative theorizing, in two ways: first, it carefully surveys a broad range of contemporary Chinese conversations about the substance and purpose of critical 'thought' (*sixiang*), motivated by 'patriotic worrying' (*youhuan*) that, in conferring on the author of such thought a sense of personal responsibility for nation's well-being (p. 16), assumes gaps between ideal and reality that can be sutured by the right kind of academic writing. These gaps are often but only imperfectly addressed by recourse to ideas originating from Euro-American academic discourse. Such ideas, Davies argues, are appropriated to satisfy the 'metaphysical longing for future perfection' that pervades CCI, an aim that runs contrary to the resistance to textual and moral closure that much Euro-American discourse increasingly promotes (pp. 28–31). Second, it structures a provocative and productive contrast between the already-comparative CCI and the Euro-American academic discourse in which Davies herself is embedded. Whereas CCI is characterized by assumptions of linguistic transparency and moral certitude, Euro-American critique largely turns on a faith in 'linguistic dispersal concomitant with the avoidance of any anticipation of transcendent unity' (pp. 237–238). She succeeds wonderfully in producing a 'consciously hybrid text' that, in weaving translated Sinophone formulations into the fabric of Anglophone academic prose (inspired by Derridan literary theory) (p. 5) is exemplary of comparative political theory at its best.

On another, related level, the book analyzes a complex, century-long conversation about the relationship of academic discourse to political reality. Davies maintains the scholarly integrity and autonomy of that discourse without reading it as a simplistic reaction to the dramatic structural changes in the Chinese state continuing throughout the twentieth century until today.

In the best traditions of Anglophone China studies, Davies' impressively nuanced and comprehensive account of CCI 'returns the gaze' by acknowledging the independent theoretical value of what are often unexpected Chinese receptions of Western scholarly theories; she sees them as new and revealing interpretations rather than 'mistakes'. For example, her discussions of postmodernist Sinophone discourse are at pains to show its seemingly contradictory presumption of a unitary correspondence between language and reality (pp. 28–31, 170–171). Rather than discredit this discourse as misguided, however, she instead explains how the reception in China of the postmodern thinker Fredric Jameson turns on his own (seemingly contradictory) faith in a transcendent critique. Jameson resonates in China precisely because he, like many of his Chinese Marxist interpreters, 'urges us to preserve a dialectical reconstruction of History as a guiding concept even though he formulates his argument with postmodern attentiveness to History as a truth-effect conjured up by the performative powers of language' (p. 173). In the interface between Chinese and Western academic discourses that Davies constructs, new dimensions of both come into view.

The book's argument proceeds in an introduction and five long chapters. The first chapter, 'Worrying about China', introduces the distinctive way in which the 'patriotic worrying' characteristic of CCI seeks more to enhance the cultural quality of the Chinese people than to pursue knowledge for its own sake. This moralistic impulse results in sometimes bitter academic factionalism, analyzed in Chapter 2, 'Divided over China'. Chapter 3, 'Theory and Taxonomy: A Post-Maoist Pursuit of Cultural Integrity', continues analysis of the moralizing character of CCI by interrogating its rubrics of 'scholarship' (*xueshu*), 'thought' (*sixiang*) and 'theory' (*lilun*). She argues that these rubrics do not advance scholarship that seeks, in a Foucauldian sense, to reveal the limiting conditions on what we 'see' and 'know', so much as to provide better ways of seeing and knowing. Chapter 4, 'Reasoning After Mao', turns to examining how Communist 'ideolanguage', politically enforced during the Maoist years, is resisted by many Chinese intellectuals but nevertheless enjoys an enduring power. Even criticisms of it, Davies argues, do not interrogate its language but act within its terms to pose alternative truths.

The last chapter, 'A Poetics of Inquiry', also functions as the conclusion. After surveying the sensibilities and rhetorical tropes invoked in Sinophone critical discourse, and reiterating many of the contrasts between Euro-American and Chinese inquiry posed in earlier chapters, the chapter and book end with a tantalizing statement: 'it has to be admitted that despite its philosophical brilliance, the obscure light of Euro-American self-reflexive inquiry casts so much in a hue of endemic equivocation such that those who feel a dire need of immediate direction are unlikely to regard its vertiginous possibilities as offering anything significant in terms of value' (pp. 240–241).

One possible criticism of the book is that it does not take up this more ambitious mandate for ‘immediate direction’. Doing so would perhaps involve considering the extent to which *all* theory-making (including Davies’ own) implicitly presumes its own claim to truth, however conditional. On this view – hinted at in many places but never thoroughly confronted in the book – the problem with CCI thus does not seem to be that it lacks deep self-reflexivity; such openness to contingency and perpetual internal reflection might be a luxury that only those living in stable, intellectually and economically dominant societies can afford. As Davies notes, Euro-American strategies of deconstruction require disciplinary conventions to deconstruct; in China, structures of such entrenched certainty have yet to come into being (p. 237). Rather, the larger problem with CCI might be its tendency to conflate moral with political judgments – that is, the proclivity of its producers to drift, in Davies’ words, from the claim ‘“I support X because I believe this is morally good” into “X must be good because I support it”’ (p. 186). Fully pursuing this line of inquiry would demand interrogation of the very grounds by which moral judgment is distinguished from political claims, requiring a self-reflexive deconstruction of self-reflexive deconstruction. This would move analysis *beyond* the series of contrasts between Euro-American and Chinese academic inquiry that the book so brilliantly poses, to transport us *inside* the very realm of moral and political contest that troubles Davies’ Sinophone subjects.

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