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# Response to Wong

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# Response

Wendy Guyot

## I. Introduction

An ancient Chinese proverb says:

To know what you know  
And to know what you don't know  
That is true knowledge....

I must indeed be truly knowledgeable, as I know that I know almost nothing about Chinese literature. Dr. Wong's essay confronts the novice with an impressive array of names, materials, and arguments. Given the state of my familiarity with Chinese literature, I have chosen to respond to the essay in the following manner. First, I will highlight what I deem to be the major contributions of the paper, which include his definitions of literature and imagination, the value of "national color" in the writings of the world, and his belief in the existence of common values and ideas among people of different cultures. Next, I intend to underscore some of the difficulties I had with this paper, as well as pose a few questions that I feel were left unanswered in Dr. Wong's thesis. My confusion and disagreement stem from his discussion of the role of the English language in Hong Kong, his proposed evolution from the era of computers to the era of globalization, and some of his explanations of concepts used in his examination of globalization. In the process, I will attempt to articulate and define my own perspectives on the topic of the Roundtable and the issues raised by the author.

## II. Contributions and Highlights

First, Dr. Wong stresses the issue of universalism. In his discussion of "literature," he quotes the eighteenth-century German poet and intellectual Goethe, who stated 150 years ago that "[n]ational literature is without much meaning; now it is the era of world literature." As the peoples of the world gain more access to the literature of the world and as the literacy rate

increases, it is obvious that this sentiment is becoming more true today than it was during Goethe's age. Literary themes and processes shared by writers throughout history and across national borders become more familiar to many, proving that people from different cultures share certain sentiments, beliefs, and values. One of the poems quoted by Dr. Wong exemplifies this idea:

Whose box is it, nymph, that squanders  
So many, many gifts on us?  
And what could man offer in exchange  
Except such holiday trash  
As empty beer bottles and broken cigarette packs?<sup>1</sup>

Although the poet is standing on a beach in China, the theme of environmental protection transcends national boundaries. Even my mental image created by this poem is international; I picture empty German beer bottles and broken packs of Camel Lights.

Dr. Wong stresses that Chinese literature, like others, is an "expression of both the heart and the mind, as concerning the individual and society, as variously sublime and graceful, and as blending reality and imagination."<sup>2</sup> I would like to affirm this, for such characterization is, in fact, a cosmic phenomenon noticeable in French literature, Nigerian literature, Bolivian literature. Any author, whether Chinese or Icelandic, uses writing to communicate the inner workings of her mind and the deepest emotions of her heart, to explore and define her interactions with the greater society, and to delve deeply into the creative visions in her head. Themes such as courtship, marriage, friendship, class struggles, hunting, agriculture, war, political protest, ruling classes, birth, and death can be found in the writing of any nation from any historical period, as can literary devices like metaphor, quatrain, and free verse. The appearance of common themes proves, in my mind, the existence of some common values among the world's different cultures.

Dr. Wong confirms this point. He writes that "[a]ll cultures cherish peace and harmony, regardless of nationalities and race, and we denounce hatred and war."<sup>3</sup> Because cultural boundaries are fuzzy and unclear, a level of interconnectedness exists between cultural groups. Such mutual influences could be any-

thing from ethnic foods to imported cars, from philosophic ideas to political behavior. I attribute, at least in part, these connections to the inherent universality of certain habits, needs, and values. These commonalities seem to undergird the development of a global agenda, which could express the broad interests and concerns of all international actors. Dr. Wong cites democracy, human and women's rights, and environmental protection among those universal goals.

I do, however, recognize differences between cultures. In my opinion, dissimilarity in perspectives, or what Dr. Wong calls "individual and national color," serves a very important purpose in the world of literature. A writer, as a citizen of the country in which she writes, can never truly separate herself from her cultural heritage. An individual author's distinct cultural and ethnic voice lends insight to the reader, an opportunity to experience a slice of life that might otherwise remain unfamiliar. I do not mean to imply that I or any other reader can reach a full understanding of a people or a culture merely by enjoying their literature, nor am I suggesting that any one author has the ability to express a true understanding of her culture. Rather, I am proposing that the literature of a particular cultural group provides the reader with an insight, however limited, into the lifestyle, beliefs, and value system of that community. More affirmatively, I cannot think of a better way to learn about a group than by reading the literature of one of its creative members.

Dr. Wong's views on imagination also provide us with food for global thought. He proposes that creative imagination holds "the power of recombining former experiences in the creation of new images, . . . a power capable of blending various images and experiences to produce something that has never existed before, a hitherto unperceived vision of reality."<sup>4</sup> Here, I suggest that the key word is "power." Unfortunately, Dr. Wong never engages the term. Consequently, I would like to suggest that, in the context of creative imagination, power can be construed as a gift, an ability inherent in some and not in others, to express this "unperceived vision." Those artists and novelists who possess the power to create share with the rest of us the vision of reality that exists in their imagination. We are able, then, through their work, to live in times, visit places, and interact with cultures

previously closed to us. In short, I would like to propose that a product of the creative imagination allows others to temporarily leave their experience and enter someone else's world.

### **III. Shortcomings or Questions**

Now I turn to the ideas that left me in varying states of confusion or disagreement, and to where Dr. Wong's argument strikes me as less than clear.

First of all, I was surprised to read that "Hong Kong, a British colony since 1842, . . . is particularly convenient for . . . a Western-style education."<sup>5</sup> Dr. Wong supports this assertion by declaring that Hong Kong is truly a bilingual city. At present, English and Chinese are taught for educational and commercial purposes, but I question whether this has always been the case. Because Hong Kong is a British colony, I had assumed that the English language is one of the things imposed on the residents of the city by the colonial order. Accessibility to a Western-style educational system is, of course, viewed as an asset by a scholar who subscribes to the "global village" theory. Obviously, advantages have come to many in Hong Kong because of its strategic location and bilingualism; it is now one of the major commercial and financial centers of the world. I wonder, however, if the encroachment of Western habits and influences is viewed as a blessing by most of those who live there, particularly the subaltern residents of the island. I do not have an answer, and Dr. Wong, as a resident of Hong Kong, certainly knows more about the subject than I do. However, having been taught to interrogate the full imprints of colonialism, I did not expect such a positive account of one of the most instrumentalist of its legacies. Will colonialism be viewed in such an affirmative manner two years from now, when Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China are reunited? Or will the reunification itself be viewed as an imposition on Hong Kong?

Dr. Wong suggests that the world has moved from an era of television to an era of space to an era of computers and, in the present moment, an era of globalization. Is technological evolution that simple and straightforward? Or is it actually a cumulative process? Both television and computer technology play an increasingly indispensable role in the processes of globalization.

Rather than becoming obsolete, as technology advances, existing knowledge and information trigger new applications as well as improvements. From an American perspective, it is impossible to overstate the importance of television in the exchange of popular culture among nations and people, though the flow continues to be dominated by the West. CNN, for example, is now more widely watched abroad than domestically, and *Baywatch* is the world's most popular television show. The *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, a favorite of American children, is in fact an export from Japan. Computers are the transmission belts for transaction in the world's largest commodity—money. And, of course, the World Wide Web ideally allows people to receive information about things of interest from all over the globe, just as electronic mail lets us instantaneously communicate with people anywhere.

But the pivotal role of the media and computer technology also underscores inherent dangers. In terms of television, power takes on Orwellian characteristics as very few people acquire the ability to directly influence hundreds of millions—if not billions—of people. Such unprecedented omnipotence by an elite can define reality according to particularly narrow interests and whims. In the United States, for example, access to the “information superhighway” is largely limited to those in business and to those associated with a governmental or academic institution. Furthermore, despite the appearance of personal computers in the classrooms of public schools, this is still a very tiny minority of the American population. In other countries around the world, the fraction of the population “logged on” is even smaller, and, therefore, inequalities in access to the technology are infinitely more pronounced. While this era of globalization is partially driven by the application of these new technologies, we still do not know the full consequences of these developments for all of us. Recently, my professor of anthropology asked us whether computer technology would follow in the footsteps of the telephone, a technological innovation that has gained worldwide acceptance and accessibility, or suffer the fate of the telegraph, which has become obsolete due to the fact that very few people had access to its technology. I did not have the answer then, and I do not have it now. I merely wish to propose that

accessibility is and will continue to be a very big factor in computer technology's role in the world.

Because I had some difficulties understanding the differences between some of the terminology and definitions used in Dr. Wong's paper, I will expand on some of these concepts to include my own understanding, ideas, and hopes concerning globalization. Dr. Wong states that decades ago, "Westernization" meant "modernization," and both of these terms implied advancement, as seen through the eyes of the industrial countries. Later, through linguistic evolution, the word "internationalization" was coined, intimating that progress could be achieved by all nations. Dr. Wong asserts that with the impressive economic success of the Asia-Pacific Rim and the growing recognition of the role of Asian cultures in the making of this prosperity, the concept of "globalization" is born. He defines "globalization" as the "technological and economic transformation of the entire world."<sup>6</sup> How does this differ from "internationalization," i.e., progress by all nations?

Dr. Wong's use of both "internationalization" and "globalization" subsumes words such as prosperity and progress, terms central to "modernization" and "Westernization." He states that "Westernization and globalization are two different concepts; yet, in substance, globalization, as it is now understood, does not differ much from Westernization."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, even if, as Dr. Wong proposes, "globalization" is synonymous with "global modernization," I fail to see how such a turn of expression distinguishes it from earlier and teleologically circumscribed concepts. Change of terminology can be calmativ, but it does not necessarily alter reality. Calling the former Third World by a new name, the "South," does not transform its location in the global hierarchy, just as changing the term "modernization" to "globalization" does not change the fact that, in reality, both seem to be heavily contingent upon economic criteria. Dr. Wong cites the fact that "Pierre Cardin, Mercedes-Benz, and IBM are still highly prestigious brand names coveted by consumers worldwide."<sup>8</sup> Yes, all over the world, many people may be wearing Nikes and eating Big Macs while Michael Jackson plays on a Sony stereo system, but this does not constitute a global community.

The challenge, then, is to separate "Westernization" from "globalization." To do so, we must move away from the erroneous view that people everywhere are consumers in a global shopping mall, and rid ourselves of the popular notion that the world is united by a common, global economic language. In such an effort, Richard Falk has identified two types of globalization. The first, deemed "globalization from above," "[reflects] the collaboration between leading states and capital formation"<sup>9</sup> and captures the efforts of political elites and transnational businesses to economically and politically homogenize the world. Currently, according to Xabier Gorostiaga, the Group of Seven, with their 800 million inhabitants, control more technological, economic, and military power than the nearly five billion people of Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America/Caribbean combined.<sup>10</sup> "Globalization from above" is destined to further exaggerate these inequalities, compounding as well as expanding the domination of the wealthy and powerful. In contrast, Falk's second type of globalization, known as "globalization from below," "consists of an array of transnational social forces animated by environmental concerns, human rights, hostility to patriarchy, and a vision of human community based on the unity of diverse cultures seeking an end to poverty, oppression, humiliation, and collective violence."<sup>11</sup> This approach to the workings of the world aims to "restore to communities the power to nurture their environments; to enhance the access of ordinary people to the resources they need; to democratize local, national, and transnational political institutions; and to impose pacification on conflicting power centers."<sup>12</sup>

I find Falk's discussion of "globalization" sobering and instructive. While the exclusivist forces of "globalization from above" are already at work in making the world in their own image, Richard Falk and others have provided alternative visions and possibilities. As we quickly approach a new century, a new millennium, many established habits and structures are changing. The end of the Cold War, the fall of communism, an increasing number of ethnic conflicts, and shared environmental problems constitute a time for the human community to make strategic choices about the future, and about whether globalization "from below" or "from above" will prevail.

Dr. Wong believes that at this historical crossroads, “[t]he brave new world is a globe, which is as big as the planet Earth and as small as a village.”<sup>13</sup> I am not willing to share such a utopian and optimistic view. I am disturbed by the increasing hierarchization and polarization. Richard Falk’s analysis and vision is a corrective to a prevailing celebratory treatment of globalization.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

I recognize that a transition to “globalization from below” will not be easy. But the creative imagination can play a significant role in this process. To repeat Dr. Wong’s definition, “the power of recombining former experiences in the creation of new images, . . . directed at a specific goal or aiding in the solution of problems, is creative imagination.”<sup>14</sup> From my perspective, “former experience” is global history, the ecological, political, economic, and ideological structures that have led us to these crossroads. The “specific goal” or “solution of problems” is most linked to designing effective ways of ameliorating, if not arresting, severe power inequalities and, particularly, economic domination inherent in the current form of “globalization from above.” The “creation of new images,” then, is the assignment in front of us. Dr. Wong believes that imagination “is capable of . . . [producing] something that has never existed before.”<sup>15</sup> I concur, and wish for the flourishing of an insurgent and multicolored universal consciousness — one that will usher in a world, as imagined by Falk, that is “delightfully heterogeneous, yet inclusive of all creation in an overarching frame of community sentiment, premised on the biological and normative capacity of the human species to organize its collective life on foundations of nonviolence, equity, and sustainability.”<sup>16</sup> While I have no illusion of the difficulty of the project, I must confess that this alternative has taken hold in my own imagination.

Invention, inventiveness, and creativity have always been the source of the human difference. Given what is at stake and the choices with which we are confronted, I see no more opportune moment to call on the imagination and intelligence of all of us.

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**Notes**

1. From Yu Guangzhong, "Shell's Sand" in his *The Night Watchman: A Bilingual Selection of Poems (1958–1992)* (Taipei: Chiu Ko Publishing Co., 1992): 121. Quoted from Wai-leung Wong, "Chinese Literature, the Creative Imagination, and Globalization," *Macalester International* 3 (Spring 1996): 54.
2. Wai-leung Wong, "Chinese Literature, the Creative Imagination, and Globalization": 38.
3. *Ibid.*, 51.
4. *Ibid.*, 38–39.
5. *Ibid.*, 48.
6. *Ibid.*, 50.
7. *Ibid.*, 50.
8. *Ibid.*, 50.
9. Richard Falk, "The Making of Global Citizenship" in *Global Visions: Beyond the New World Order*, ed. Jeremy Brecher, John Brown Childs, and Jill Cutler (Boston: South End Press, 1994): 39.
10. Xabier Gorostiaga, "Latin America in the New World Order" in *Global Visions: Beyond the New World Order*: 68.
11. Richard Falk, "The Making of Global Citizenship": 39.
12. Jeremy Brecher, John Brown Childs, and Jill Cutler, *Global Visions: Beyond the New World Order*: xv.
13. Wai-leung Wong, "Chinese Literature, the Creative Imagination, and Globalization": 50.
14. *Ibid.*, 38.
15. *Ibid.*, 39.
16. Richard Falk, "The Making of Global Citizenship": 50.