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Response to Wong

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Response

Anu Kuistiala

I. Introduction

In my four months as a World Press Institute fellow, I have had the opportunity to be in Judge Ito's Los Angeles courtroom to cover the O. J. Simpson trial, I've flown in a tiny airplane over the Olympic Peninsula in Seattle, I've seen the amazing amount of gold in the basement of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and I somehow managed to enjoy my first American baseball game at Wrigley Field in Chicago. And now I am asked to join you in a consideration of one of humankind's greatest gifts—creative imagination.

Reading Professor Wong's paper taught me a lot about Chinese literature as well as made me think about the power of the mind and the effects our cultural roots have on us as writers or scholars. "[T]he poet can never separate himself from his traditional culture," Professor Wong says.¹ I also share his feelings of anxiety over the increasing Westernization of non-Western cultures. For centuries, Finland, a country of five million people, has struggled to preserve its language and cultural traditions against the might of its neighboring cultural giants, Russia and Sweden.

Global culture should mean the blending and coexistence of different cultures, but I agree that too often Western culture dominates, and the strengths of other cultures are remembered only in festive speeches and occasions. As Professor Wong says, "globalization is semantically neutral,"² but I do think that it is not always easy to distinguish from Westernization.

While I concur with many points raised in the essay, I feel it has some shortcomings that ought to be registered. For instance, I had hoped that Professor Wong would provide a more insightful overview and critical analysis of the pressures of Westernization as reflected in Chinese literature and, consequently, of the tension between Eastern and Western cultures. I also expected to learn more about what is happening in contemporary Chinese literature and how writers are coping with the contradict-

ing thrusts and demands they face, particularly from the outside world. In what follows, I would like to share my own thoughts on my brief sojourn to the United States. This is a country whose history, as well as contemporary aspirations, seem to the rest of the world to be the paragon of multinationalism. In view of this, any notion of globalization as a lived reality can benefit from a discussion of U.S. society.

II. Notes on Globalization and Ethnic Fragmentation

From my perspective, creative imagination is indeed a remarkable human power—a power that can be used to promote good as well as evil ends. During my four-month travel across the United States, I have seen incredible beauty and goodness and met with wonderful people. But, too often, I also heard sad stories of cruelty and violence—also products of our creative imagination.

Journalists are called many things—in many languages! But one of our positive labels is that we are inquisitive—or, if you prefer, nosy. We want to know not only what people are doing, but what is on their minds, what keeps them awake at nights, what makes them happy or sad, what the things are that connect them to us, and what makes them unique.

Above all, I am fascinated by our need to draw lines in our world—lines that define us as individuals and separate us from each other. Sometimes we don't even realize how we do that. It can appear as an unconscious act, a human act that has nothing to do with whether we are Finns, Germans, Nigerians, Australians, or Americans.

I have always viewed the United States as a great example of a window on global or multicultural society. From a Finnish point of view, the United States is endlessly fascinating with its ethnic diversity and cultural variety. Viewing the United States from abroad, one can believe that a land so vast, so rich, so free must surely be the promised land of tolerance and understanding.

To my great personal sadness, bigotry and racism are also prominent throughout the United States, though not everybody is ready to admit that. During my journey across the width and breadth of this country, I realized very clearly what Professor

John Powell of the University of Minnesota meant when he said to us that the idea of the United States being a great melting pot was meant only for Europeans, and was not to include Blacks or Latinos or Asians.

In Los Angeles, Professor Leonardo Estrada of UCLA told us that the relations between different ethnic groups are so tense that he wakes up every morning in wonder that violence and extensive uprisings have not yet become the order of the city. According to Professor Estrada, many ethnic groups have formed such exclusive communities that they don't have anything in common with others. They live in specific areas, speak their own languages, patronize their own shops, read separate newspapers, and watch carefully selected television stations. For Professor Estrada, Los Angeles is an instructive example of the Balkanization of the United States.

Another example comes from Atlanta, where the daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Reverend Bernice King, said, "There's no physical segregation, but there's still a lot of separation. Everybody knows which part of the city is white and which part is black. We work together on the same premises, but it usually ends there. We don't see each other during our free time."

According to Alvin Toffler, the trend or pattern of the 1990s is acceleration and demassification. By that, Toffler means that things are changing faster and faster while we are looking for more and more individuality in our everyday lives. During the past eighteen months, I have had the privilege of observing this trend in very different parts of the world. In my recent journeys to Great Britain and Russia, Cuba and Scandinavia, and finally throughout the United States, I have come to the conclusion that the concerns of many of the people I have met are basically very similar: how to preserve one's own identity in this quickly changing world. How can one define oneself and know one's "friends" and "enemies" in the midst of all this globalization and transnationalism?

Sadly, I would say, the general response seems to be fragmentation, a common tendency to gather ourselves into small groups opposing other groups. Ethnic divisions in the great cities of the United States are one example. A similar inclination can be seen in Europe, where enlargement of the European

Union has triggered an enormous integration process. This year, Finland became a member state, along with Sweden and Austria. Most Europeans agree that the creation of a large common market to facilitate a free flow of people, services, and goods is a laudable initiative. But, ironically, very few are really ready to let go of their national identities and borders. Each member state worries more about how to keep its cultural features and to increase its influence within the Union, and less about how to make the European Union work smoothly as a single entity. For example, the French want to keep their historic distance from the British and the English language; the British want to prevent the Germans from becoming too powerful in Central Europe; the Greeks demand that more attention be given to the Mediterranean area; and we Finns are trying to figure out just where we fit in. And in the shadow of such a cacophony of voices is the tragedy of Yugoslavia — undeniably the saddest dimension of the vicious circle of ethnic hate and nationalistic desires.

A different example of fragmentation is “the revolt of the rich” — a term coined by Alvin Toffler to describe the desire of the wealthy in countries everywhere, from Canada and the United States to Russia and Italy, to distance themselves from the problems of the poor nations. The people who are well off seem to wish they could leave the peasants, the poor, and the immigrants behind and concentrate on building up and enjoying their prosperity in peace.

Now, I am not saying that group identity or particular affinities are always nefarious. On the contrary, we need intimacy and belonging, which, in the end, includes some and excludes others. It is my sense that, if discussions between groups are grounded in openness and mutual respect, we can enjoy the richness and diversity of life. Unfortunately, such an attitude has always been subverted by the ubiquity of stereotyping, suspicion, and ethnocentrism — the sources of hate and mutual estrangement.

Here in the United States, as in many other countries, clanistic, nationalistic, and ultraconservative forces are especially eager to manipulate differences and exploit intolerance. Envy and fears of the unfamiliar are used by people with small minds and large egos to gain power. Globalization could exasperate all of this, particularly the liabilities that come with shifting consciousness and circumstances.

III. Conclusion

I now return to the power of the human mind, which, I firmly believe, is one of the greatest forces in the world. Everything, the good and the bad, starts in our minds. The finest literature, the cruelest crimes, all have roots in our creative imagination.

Ideas, visions, and dreams are the bases of most of our actions. Our deeds come from our thoughts. Unfortunately, many people have lost touch with themselves as well as with each other. Many never stop to listen to themselves, to analyze the reasons behind their emotions, or to ponder their motives and dearly held preconceptions.

Some people say they sometimes hear a small voice, the so-called inner voice, but do not dare to listen, as the inner voice often tells us very unpleasant things. It reminds us of our disappointments and frustrations, points out things we would prefer to forget, shows us the futility of our lives. So we suffocate or silence that voice.

Unfortunately, at the same time, we bury our greatest source of wisdom, our greatest teacher. As the philosophers of the East say, the greatest wisdom is in our heart, and the mightiest power is in our mind. And the only way to get that wisdom is to be still and listen. "It speaks when you are still. If you speak, it's still," goes a Chinese saying.

Professor Wong says that "poetry is the expression of the heart and the mind; its functions are to instruct and to amuse; it aims to help make society harmonious and peaceful; the creative imagination and a well-wrought form are essential to good poetry."³ It is my hope that good journalists, like wise poets and creative thinkers, can touch the human soul by promoting tolerance and understanding in a world that is going through fantastic changes.

Notes

1. Wai-leung Wong, "Chinese Literature, the Creative Imagination, and Globalization," *Macalester International* 3 (Spring 1996): 54.
2. *Ibid.*, 50.
3. *Ibid.*, 52.