

Chinese Voices on the Impact of Globalization

The impact of globalization on the social realities and cultural imaginations of people in urban and rural China is the focus of this collaborative project. The increasing penetration of national boundaries and local communities by globalizing forces, and the resulting political discourse on its effects, makes this research focus crucial in understanding everyday life in China today. An undergraduate research team will examine different aspects of globalization – the impact of global capital and transnational corporations on factory workers and retired people, changing educational goals and experiences among Chinese college students, the localization of business practices by transnational corporations in China, the gendered consequences of globalization, and the local use of new information technologies such as the internet – in Shanghai and a rural township in northern Guangdong. The major goal of this project will be to understand globalization from the perspective of individuals representing different sectors of the Chinese population. This field project will give participating undergraduates invaluable experiences of Chinese culture and a firsthand understanding of conducting research in China. These students will provide a kernel around which Butler University hopes to build a viable Chinese studies program. This preliminary fieldwork is designed to give students a better understanding of the complexity of the individual research questions that they bring from their diverse academic disciplines, helping them better design further fieldwork research trips in the future.

Research Problem

Although globalization has long been a part of local historical experiences (Wolf 1982; Mintz 1985), what makes globalization today a dominant social and political concern is the heightened rapidity and influence of transnational flows. Chinese communities today are more fully integrated into the global system by communication networks, world trade and market networks, and labor migrations, and are

therefore more dependent on events and conditions far outside their everyday experience (Featherstone 1990). Globalization thus increasingly challenges the boundaries of traditional Chinese social structures such as the family, local community and the nation-state (Wakeman 1988).

Analyses of globalization have emphasized one of two perspectives. One perspective is found in studies that have focused on what Strathern calls the “concrete models of globalisation” (1995:159) — the structural implications for the “world capitalist system” (Wallerstein 1974; Bartlett and Ghoshal 1991) of transnational organizations (Lozada forthcoming; Rudolph and Piscatori 1997). From this viewpoint, transnational processes are seen as invasions of national space, resulting in major political challenges to governments in an interconnected global environment (Sassen 1997, 1996; Duara 1997). Recent studies in China on multinational corporations have suggested (Lozada 1999), however, that globalization does not necessarily challenge Chinese sovereignty, and in many cases buttress state legitimacy and authority (Smart 1993; Oi 1992). The local benefits of globalization, however, are not evenly shared by people in China, resulting in a situation that Aihwa Ong (1999) refers to as a “system of graduated sovereignty,” wherein citizens with differential access to political and economic capital are subject to different state regimes (1999:214). The other perspective found in globalization studies has focused on the flow of cultural practices, in such areas as popular culture (Appadurai 1996, Morley and Robins 1995) and diaspora identity (Clifford 1994; Basch et.al. 1994; Olwig and Hastrup 1997). In these works, a more detailed analysis of the impact on culture of globalization takes theorizing about transnational imaginings beyond simplified models of cultural imperialism (c.f. Ritzer 1993; i.e., Hannerz 1996; Appadurai 1996). As a result, global cultural flows become localized, causing shifts in what Appadurai (1997) refers to as the “work of the imagination.” The work of the imagination, a process

specific to particular social groups, provides the cultural repertoire that structures how Chinese individuals pursue their visions of the good life.

This project will combine these two perspectives by comparing urban and rural subjective experiences of globalization from three different dimensions, each of which is critical in understanding its impact from the viewpoint of people in China. In China, the work of the imagination is most visible in changing patterns of consumption (Miller 1996) that reflect the penetration of non-local commodities. The presence of transnational corporations in China continues to be a realm of not only market competition, but also cultural contestation. In an examination of McDonald's in East Asia, James Watson (1997) finds that locals are indeed active in shaping both the business practices and cultural meaning of fast food. The localization of transnational processes, Watson concludes, is not "a unilinear process that ends the same everywhere" (1997:37), but instead varies with local contexts. Existing ethnographic research on transnational corporations has primarily focused on the perception of customers or the adaptation of non-local business practices (see contributors to Watson (1997) and Jing (2000)). This project seeks to understand how people in Shanghai negotiate and localize culture, revealing how localization impacts on the individual experiences of these "cosmopolitans" (Hannerz 1996).

Second, this project will examine the "locals" (following Hannerz's model) who work for the managers in transnational corporations. As protestors last year in Seattle and this year in Prague have so visibly argued, globalization has disproportionately benefited the elite in the developing world at the expense of the majority. An implicit assumption in these heated critiques of globalization is that locals have less agency in determining how globalization impacts on their everyday lives. This project will examine this assumption by conducting ethnographic research on factory workers, farmers, women, and

elderly, retired people. In the context of the maturing of China's economic reform, these groups in China are considered to be highly vulnerable to the stratifying impact of globalization (Yan 1995). The gendered consequences of globalization, furthermore, have made salient the social inequality produced by the interplay of global and local cultures. This project seeks to determine the attitudes held by these "locals" towards globalization and the increased dependence upon non-local social actors.

Third, this project will examine how globalization has shaped the experiences of college students in China. The culture of youth and children are domains of fierce contestation in many parts of the world by different social groups seeking to implement their particular visions of the future by shaping childhood experiences (Stephens 1995). Chinese education in particular, a system that caters to a new elite, is an essential element to processes of social stratification in that Chinese children themselves participate as both subjects and as symbolic objects for adults. As I have previously argued in a study of Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beijing (Lozada 1999), children and youth are the primary consumers for the work of the imagination. Enormous amounts of family resources are being devoted to children and youth in the hope of their future success in Chinese modernity. They are also the primary consumers of the new information technologies that serve as the embodiment of modernity –computer technology like the internet serves as a key symbolic commodity in the Chinese cultural performance of distinction. One computer science graduate from Qinghua University reflected back to his first computer purchase and asserted that “about 90% of my friends’ families who bought computers bought them for their children, for educational purposes” (Miller 1998:57). This project then will examine how college students, standing in the interstices between childhood and adulthood, pursue a course of study and get involved in social activities that reflect their own vision of the future. By examining how they navigate through

their university education, we can understand their attitudes and perceptions of the impact of globalization upon their own lives.

Field Research Methodology

The research group consists of six undergraduate students and myself, an anthropology professor with extensive field research experience in China. By the summer of 2001, the six undergraduates will have had at least one year of college-level Mandarin; one of the undergraduates will have completed two years of Mandarin, and another student has already visited China. We plan to conduct preliminary fieldwork for at least six weeks in the summer of 2001 in urban Shanghai and in rural Meizhou prefecture in northern Guangdong Province, with time divided equally between the two locales. In Shanghai, I have worked with academics from Fudan University, Shanghai University, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and with local cadres from a Shanghai “street committee” that includes a joint-venture workunit (Volkswagen). I have been a visiting scholar (1996-1998) at Jiaying University in Meizhou and have lived in a village of about 1,000 people in a county to the north of Meizhou City. These contacts will serve to facilitate the fieldwork that will be primarily conducted by the team of six undergraduates.

This project will begin with a series of meetings with cadres from the Volkswagen work unit in Shanghai. All the students will first meet with cadres in Volkswagen’s labor union and other workers for informal semistructured interviews (Bernard 1994) to gather basic demographic information and people’s attitudes towards working for a joint-venture operation. The selection of informants will be a stratified sample, reflecting gender, class, and age differences. We hope to tour one of the Volkswagen plants, examining the work environment and divisions of space that workers experience. The students will then talk to residents in the Volkswagen apartment complex in Shanghai’s Wuliqiao district to

determine living conditions, residence patterns, and household composition. Households that have children and retired elderly will be specifically targeted for more in-depth semi-structured interviews to determine attitudes concerning the costs and benefits of working for an urban joint-venture company. The group will also tour the facilities made available for Volkswagen workers such as an affiliated day care/kindergarten on site at the apartment complex. The students will also visit individual households to observe domestic spaces.

In Meizhou City, students will conduct semistructured interviews with students at Jiaying University to determine their backgrounds, why they chose their course of study, and their career goals. Each Butler student will be partnered with a Jiaying University student from one of the seven counties in Meizhou to explore in more detail the strategies they pursue to attain these goals. A visit to the homes of their partner students will also be included, to observe the backgrounds and family history of the students. Butler students will also meet with representatives from the different departments of their partner to compile the classes required for the majors.

In both locations, students will examine shopping malls and markets to observe the selling and marketing of consumer goods in Shanghai and Meizhou. Students will specifically examine advertisements in the print media and on billboards on city streets to collect data on the range of commodities available, the target group of particular advertisements, and the general tone of the consumption discourse from the marketing perspective. Students will also examine particular stores and market areas to collect basic observational data on who is buying what products – by gender and by age. Students will then discuss such observations with their informants in Shanghai and Meizhou to collect their reactions to these collected observations.

Background of Group Participants

Students participating in this project have been selected from those attending Butler's new first or second year Mandarin Chinese classes. Butler recently hired a visiting assistant professor of Chinese, Dr. Caroline Li-chun Lee; her position may be converted to a tenure-track position based upon the success of her language program. In her first year thus far, she has attracted two sections of students in first-year Chinese. If funded, this field project can ensure the continued success in the building of a Chinese studies program here at Butler University. These students – mostly sophomores and juniors – can provide a core for Chinese studies, attracting other students to Chinese studies and the study of Chinese language. All students will have had coursework in their respective disciplines that will help them to understand the social and cultural processes they are observing. Most of the students have had classes in Chinese society, history, and culture (anthropology, history, religion, or political science).

(individuals; to be filled in later when I receive them from students)

Plans for Future Research

This field project is designed to serve as preliminary fieldwork for the participants' thesis research and is clearly inadequate in answering the research questions. Such preliminary fieldwork is necessary, however, for the students to later conduct successful fieldwork in China. This experience will give them a personal familiarity with Chinese society and culture, building their confidence to meet and discuss ideas with people outside their own culture. It will also provide them a basis for focusing their own individual research questions on globalization and choosing research sites; for example, having experiences in both an urban and rural setting will inform them as to which areas are most suitable for their individual personalities and interests. Follow-up fieldwork will be necessary for future thesis work

that can be conducted during a study-abroad program in China. Butler is currently finalizing reciprocal agreements with Lingnan University in Hong Kong, and is in the process of negotiating terms with Jiaying University in Meizhou. These students, if given the chance to conduct this field visit in the summer of 2001, could also be the first to attend these study-abroad programs.

Overall, this field project could help change students' general perception of China. With our small student body, other students who may have been intimidated by their unfamiliarity with Chinese culture can clearly see the possibilities of studying Chinese through the success of their peers on this project. If funded, this project can greatly help us strengthen and expand student interest in Chinese studies here at Butler University.