

‘Including China’ in Postcolonial Literary Studies:

An Interview with Bill Ashcroft

Lili Zhang, Nantong University

Abstract

Bill Ashcroft is a renowned critic and theorist, a founding exponent of postcolonial theory and co-author of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), the first text to examine systematically a field that is now referred to as ‘postcolonial studies’. He is author and co-author of 16 books and over 160 chapters and papers including *Edward Said* (2001), *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2002), *Caliban’s Voice: The Transformation of English in Postcolonial Literatures* (2008), *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (2016). He is on the editorial boards for various journals, such as *Textual Practice*, *New Literatures Review*, *JASAL*, *Postcolonial Text*, to name just a few. The interviewer met Professor Ashcroft at the 16th International Conference of Australian Studies in China (21-23 June 2018, Beijing) and they had a preliminary discussion on the issues concerned in this paper; they agreed to complete a formal dialogue via e-mail. In this interview, Bill Ashcroft clarifies his area of study in postcolonial literatures; he relates world literature with postcolonial literatures and analyses the problem in the interdisciplinary study of world literature; finally, he discusses why and how to include China in postcolonial literary studies.

Keywords: postcolonial literary studies, Bill Ashcroft, world literature, cosmopolitanism, transculturation

I. Postcolonial Literary Studies

Zhang: Professor Ashcroft, thank you for joining me in this discussion on ‘Postcolonialism and China’. As I know, you spent three years at the University of Hong Kong and got a distinguished researcher award there. So firstly, would you please share with us your expatriate experience and your impression of China and Chinese intellectuals?

Ashcroft: I spent three years as Chair Professor at the University of Hong Kong and many of the Chinese scholars I interacted with were from various regions: China itself, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, as well as Hong Kong. Apart from their industry and facility with English literature the thing I noticed most was their appreciation of the complexities and subtleties of language.

1

‘Including China in Postcolonial Literary Studies: An Interview with Bill Ashcroft.’ Lili Zhang.
Transnational Literature Vol. 11 no. 1, December 2018.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Writers in these places use forms of English such as ‘Singlish’ and ‘Chinglish’ which was of great interest to me because it directly reflected the postcolonial processes of appropriation and abrogation. Since then I have been familiar with the work of Chinese scholars on Australian studies, such as Wang Labao, Peng Qinglong and Cheng Hong, and I have been impressed with the ways in which they have come to grips with the cultural differences between Australia and China. In addition to this I have been very impressed with the range of interests in Australian literary culture shown by Chinese scholars.

Zhang: Edward Said has been regarded as an initiator of postcolonial theory; I note that you also have one book on Said. Would you comment briefly on Said’s legacy to Australian literary studies?

Ashcroft: There is a persistent myth that Edward Said initiated postcolonial studies, when in fact he only ever used the term once. Said is better credited with initiating colonial discourse theory which was an antecedent of postcolonial studies, which, in *The Empire Writes Back* is a theorisation of the various literatures written in English by formerly colonised peoples (previously called Commonwealth Literature). It was only then that Bhabha and Spivak took on the term. Of course, Said’s work in *Orientalism* on the representation of Europe’s others is foundational, as is Frantz Fanon’s, and in particular Said’s work is important for his emphasis on the link between culture and imperialism and for his theory of worldliness. Although I have written a book on Said I had not read his work when *The Empire Writes Back*¹ was written so he had no specific influence on the development of postcolonial studies.

When it comes to Said’s influence on Australian studies I can say there is very little of specific influence but postcolonial studies in general has had a marked impact on Australian literary studies. Settler colonies demonstrate in clearer form what is true of all postcolonial societies: that the colonised can be the colonisers, the marginalised can be the marginalisers, that imperial power circulates and produces rather than simply confines. When we understand that ‘being colonised’ does not indicate a coherent and predictable state of being but a wide range of cultural, political relationships, we are better able to see the network of strategies that constitute the ‘condition’ of postcoloniality. Settler colonies develop strategies of resistance and transformation that are similar in *process* to those of other colonised societies while being very different in content. The struggle between filiation and affiliation; the struggle to represent self and thus obtain cultural agency; the inheritance of forms of subject formation such as nationalism and ethnicity; the ambivalent and contested representation of place: all these experiences outline spaces of contestation shared by all colonies.

An important and controversial subject in Australian studies is that of Indigeneity. Settler colonies, being both colonisers (of Aboriginal people) and colonised (by Britain) are a particularly ambivalent colonial phenomenon. Of course, Aboriginal people remain colonised,

¹ *The Empire Writes Back* was first published in 1989, almost at the same time as Said’s *Orientalism*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

but postcolonial doesn't mean 'after colonialism' it means 'after invasion' and is a way of reading rather than a chronological or ontological term. Aboriginal writers employ the same language and narrative strategies as other colonised people. Postcolonial analysis remains relevant in a wider sense as classical imperialism continues the function of economic dominance through global capitalism.

Zhang: As you said, 'We live "after" colonialism but never without it ... and there is more than one "postcolonial condition".'² Does that mean critical position is a 'becoming' instead of a 'being'? From your list of publications, one can find a route from an opposing 'writing back' to a negotiating 'transformation' and then to a promising 'utopianism'. Can you summarise these phases of your research and your critical position?

Ashcroft: Yes of course – all critics need to develop their ideas, but I must say that my various positions have been underpinned from the beginning by a belief in the agency of the colonial subject. I can't say that I have ever identified the postcolonial with simple anti-colonial opposition but have always advanced the colonial subject as instrumental rather than abject. The striking thing about colonial experience is that after colonisation, postcolonial societies did very often develop in ways that revealed a remarkable capacity for change and adaptation. A common view of colonisation, which represents it as an unmitigated cultural disaster, disregards the often quite extraordinary ways in which colonised societies engaged and utilised imperial culture for their own purposes. I have always been concerned with how these colonised peoples responded to the political and cultural dominance of Europe. Many critics have argued that colonialism destroyed Indigenous cultures, but this assumes that culture is static, and underestimates the resilience and adaptability of colonial societies. On the contrary, colonised cultures have often been so resilient and transformative that they have changed the character of imperial culture itself. This 'transcultural' effect has not been seamless or unvaried, but it forces us to reassess the stereotyped view of colonised peoples' victimhood and lack of agency.

A natural consequence of this belief in the capacity of colonised peoples to transform the technologies used to suppress them has been an examination of the vision of the future that compelled such transformation. Utopianism has a long history and in the twentieth century has been driven by a combination of Marxism and science fiction. While anti-colonial utopias in colonial thinking and writing focused on the prospect of an independent nation, the postcolonial vision of utopia is rather the persistent belief in a transformed future. In Ruth Levitas's description, this is 'the desire for a better way of living expressed in the description of a different kind of society that makes possible that alternative way of life'.³ Postcolonial literatures were underpinned by a hope that runs counter to the usual accounts of moral and social oppression that motivated colonial resistance. Indeed, political resistance could not have continued without such a belief in a radically transformed future. Postcolonial utopianism arises from an

² Bill Ashcroft, 'Threshold Theology,' *Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theologies: Storyweaving in the Asia-Pacific* ed. Mark Brett and Jione Havea (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 3-20.

³ Ruth Levitas, 'The Future of Thinking about the Future,' in Eds. J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Robertson and L. Tickner *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995) 257.

unrecognised but powerful reality: that successful resistance is transformative, and transformation rests on the belief in an achievable future. Writers from colonised cultures continue to have a vision of hope for the future.

Zhang: In 2015, Australian critic Arianna Dagnino published a monologue on transcultural writers and novels, in which she argues that ‘the specific developments in the transcultural paradigm expand its range of action and analysis by transcending the binaries of dominant versus subordinate, mainstream versus minoritarian/marginalised, and coloniser versus colonised cultures overemphasised by the interpretations of transculturation proposed within a postcolonial paradigm.’⁴ Do you think it a challenge to postcolonial studies?

Ashcroft: Dagnino has not read much postcolonial analysis I am afraid. She has certainly not read my work. The transcultural, transformative perspective has always been an integral feature of postcolonial studies. Many people use a confected idea of postcolonial studies to push a different agenda, but the transcultural has its roots in postcolonial theory. What disturbs me is that the original meaning of transcultural has come to be replaced by something more like ‘cross-cultural’. The transitive and transformative nature of transculturality are its most important features, it is not simply cross-cultural.

Zhang: I see, your understanding of ‘transcultural paradigm’ is included in postcolonial studies. Like Deleuze and Guattari, you are a ‘generator’ of theoretical terms, but sometimes the similarities in terms are so confusing to us beginners. ‘Postcolonialism’ is already problematic with multiple implications, you have initiated two other terms ‘postnational’ and ‘transnation’. In what way is ‘postnational discourse’ different from ‘postcolonial discourse’ and ‘transnational discourse’?

Ashcroft: ‘Postnational’ is not a chronological term. A better way to circumnavigate the arguments surrounding the postnational is to see postnationalism, like postcolonialism, as not *after* nationalism, just as postcolonialism is not *after* colonialism, but within its archive, engaging with it, contesting and transforming it. The postnational perspective exists within nations.

The postnational coincides with my theory of the transnation, which will be my next book. It is not that the nation doesn’t exist, nor that it no longer has a claim on our lives. Many argue that the nation is still of pre-eminent importance in conveying citizenship, human rights and economic justice. We can see immediately that this is not universal but nevertheless the nation has a claim on all citizens. The postnational describes the position of subjects who circulate around the structures of the state. This is the condition of the transnation. Transnation is the fluid, migrating *outside* of the state that begins *within* the nation. It is a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who live in between the categories by which subjectivity is normally constituted. The transnation represents a constant realignment and contingent associations that transcend any political affiliation. While the potential for resistance against the

⁴ Arianna Dagnino, *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2015) 158.

state is present in all nations, the transnation hinges on a much more subtle form of dissidence that occurs in the flow of people's ordinary lives.

Zhang: As citizens of a settler colony and an immigrant nation, Australians tend to take a cosmopolitan identity. However, the cosmopolitan identity seems contradictory to a 'sense of belonging'. An Australian sense of belonging seems more complicated than other nations. Will you please illustrate your understanding of an Australian 'sense of belonging'?

Ashcroft: This is a very big topic and one on which I am focused at the moment. the question of belonging in Australia seems to exist squarely in the conflicted space between Aboriginal and newcomer, both settler and migrant. But what is belonging? Above all, what is it to belong in a migrant nation such as Australia? Is it not also intermittent, a fluid production, a concept haunted by history? Who belongs, and belongs to what? My theory is that belonging is something people *do*. This can be deeply affected by the gaze of others, but to briefly sum up my position, belonging doesn't just happen, nor does it occur because the state offers us citizenship – it is a complex act, but it is performative.

II. World Literature

Zhang: The study of world literature is an interdisciplinary project which attracts interests from linguists, literary critics and cultural theorists. Their analyses has their own characteristics. How would you distinguish your focus of study (Australian postcolonial studies) in relation to these similar disciplines?

Ashcroft: The strategies of transformation and circulation that I regard as central to postcolonial studies provide postcolonial scholars with a useful set of strategies to deal with globalisation. The question then is, 'What use is globalisation theory to postcolonial studies?' One way of testing this is to consider the growing global phenomenon of World Literature. Ironically, while the cultural turn in globalisation studies was driven by the dissatisfaction with dependency theory and centre periphery models, such a model – in Wallerstein's World System – has re-emerged as a theoretical basis for world literature. Unfortunately, Wallerstein's World System Theory rests on an outmoded geometric view of centre and periphery. As a model, it shows the reliance of the rich nations on the poverty of the poor, but this condition is rhizomatic rather than geometric. Whether we agree with Goethe that 'poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times,' the idea of a literature transcending national limits is one that leans inexorably towards the Eurocentric myths of greatness and universality. The privileged place accorded by Goethe to European literatures has led directly to an almost parodic Eurocentrism in theories such as Pascale Casanova's, in which the Paris-centric structure of world literature rehearses one of the more outmoded aspects of imperial geometry.

With David Damrosch we can take world literature 'to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, ... a work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original

culture.’⁵

Given this, my contention is that postcolonial literatures are a prime example of ‘world literature’. By appropriating and transforming the language of colonial domination, postcolonial writers were able to take control of their own representation and circulate it in the form of literary works throughout a world of English speakers. I would see this as at least the first way in which Australian literature may be read in a world context through its shared response to, and transformation of the various dominating discourses of imperial control. By interpolating already existing modes of production and circulation these writers made use of the economic network of imperial relations to enter the world, so to speak. And by entering the world in this way postcolonial criticism became a distinct form of proximate reading in which proximity was provided by the shared reality of colonial domination.

What made this ‘world literature’ and not just an extension of English literature was its institutional exclusion from the English literary canon, an exclusion that allowed it to ignore any continuous *filiative* relationship with the texts of English literature in favour of its social, cultural and political *affiliations*. In many respects this was immensely liberating, for though provincial writers may be ‘cut off’, they are freed from the bonds of an inherited tradition.

Zhang: The interdisciplinary nature in world literature leads to a problem in theory application. For instance, both postcolonial studies and semiotics can be regarded as a way of reading in transcultural literary analysis. However, a semiotic approach might be regarded as outmoded structuralism; while a postcolonial approach might also be accused of as lack of textual analysis. The disparity between theoretical framework and textual analysis has been a common problem for beginners. But how do we get out of this predicament in theory and practice?

Ashcroft: Well, you have raised several issues here. The question, ‘why apply a theory?’ rests on whether the point of the essay is the theory or the text, that is, whether you are using the text to demonstrate the theory or vice versa. Unfortunately, it is more often the case that a scholar advancing a theory is more interested in the theory than the text. This is a delicate balance and it doesn’t matter if the author is clear about the aims of the analysis. The question we must ask in using a theory to read a text is, ‘does it provide a deeper understanding of what the text is saying? Does it provide a useful context for reading?’ I would agree that semiotics is transcultural, but I am not sure that semiotics is always the best way to apprehend a literary text.

When I lecture on theory I usually apply it to a text to see how the theory works. But when publishing books and articles I am concerned to expose the ways in which a literary text reveals the social, political and cultural complexities of its culture of origin. This, in a sense, is the purpose of postcolonial analysis. The more implicit the theory becomes in a reading the better.

Zhang: It is generally accepted that postcolonial perspective aims at difference and world literature is targeted for cultural affinity. The contradiction makes it inappropriate to take a postcolonial perspective in the study of world literature. Do you agree with that? How can we

⁵ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003) 4.

apply postcolonial theory in the study of world literature?

Ashcroft: I think this might be over generalising both world literature and postcolonial studies. But certainly, we could say postcolonial studies is concerned with questions of cultural difference and how these are addressed by writers – even when using a dominant language to reveal them. World literature on the other hand might be more interested in diversity. The problem with world literature of course is the question ‘which world’ and for many critics the world is still seen in imperial terms, as centre and margin. I am not sure that we need to apply postcolonial analysis to world literature unless it is of the literature of formerly and presently colonised people. But having said that, we must remain aware that the economic motivation that drove the imperial invasion and conquest of the world still exists today. Neoliberal capitalism is the latest iteration of imperialism and postcolonial analysis is developing its tools to address this. This, in effect, would be the way in which postcolonial analysis could be applied to world literature, by showing the ways in which all are subject to global capitalist imperialism. So in this sense postcolonialism and world literature meet at the point at which they both interrogate the imperial spread of neoliberal capitalism.

III. ‘Including China’

Zhang: Postcolonial studies has been controversial in China. Some critics hold that postcolonial theory is not relevant to the China situation and there is no need to include China in postcolonial studies. In your 2013 paper ‘Including China’,⁶ you show us an example of how to include China in postcolonial studies, but your argument might not be inviting among Chinese readers. As a Chinese studying Australian literature, a better way might be to look at the Australian representation of China. Now have you got better ideas?

Ashcroft: To determine whether Australian or any other writing is postcolonial, we must ask why we might use such a framework and see that postcolonial is not an ontological category but a way of reading. How then, do we perform a postcolonial reading of China. On one hand, China has regarded itself at least since the Opium wars as being victimised and colonised by the West. Several regions of China, most notably Shanghai (along with over 80 other Treaty Ports) were colonised by European powers, which goes a long way to explaining the attitude of Chinese ruling elites to the West. This attitude of victimhood has been inculcated in many Chinese subjects. Yet it is clear that since the middle of the Twentieth Century, China, regardless of the political complexion of its rulership, has exerted what amounts to imperial control over the many regions and ethnic groups over which it has hegemony. It is an incremental empire with the ambition of becoming a global empire. So there are different ways of including China, different ways of doing a postcolonial reading.

No doubt this won’t be attractive to our readers but I would say my sense of China’s imperial pretensions has grown stronger since that article was published. But this still leaves the

⁶ Bill Ashcroft, ‘Including China: Bei Dao, Resistance and the Imperial State’, *Textual Practice*, 27. 3 (2013) 357-377.

question of how China should be included. The situation is very different from British colonialism where writers who were forced to learn English took the language and turned it into a tool of self-representation to a world audience of English speakers. Is that happening in China? I think state control of both language and publishing makes that unlikely. The forms of postcolonial resistance in writing are going to be much more subtle, such as we see in the poetry of Bei Dao.

The representation of China in Australian literature is a well-rehearsed topic and is supported by the writing of Chinese migrants in Australia. Certainly, this may be amenable to a postcolonial reading although it fits better in the field of diasporic literature. But I would like to see Chinese postcolonial scholars analysing the work in Putonghua of ethnic minorities. If such writing doesn't exist, then it is up to postcolonial scholars to ask why. Apart from that, of course there are great opportunities for Chinese scholars to provide a postcolonial analysis of Anglophone writing.

Zhang: I can see your point here. Of course, we have such writings in Putonghua by ethnic minorities. It will be interesting to have a postcolonial analysis, but I am not sure if the censorship is tolerant enough to publish such papers. What's more, the task is on the Chinese department or the department of social sciences, not the school of foreign languages. So you might not be able to read what you expected from us Australian literary scholars. Well, let's divert our attention to the future. If 'utopia' is to provide a vision, what is your vision of Sino-Australian relations and the future of postcolonial studies in China?

Ashcroft: I think you may be right about the difficulties surrounding the appropriation of Putonghua, however the growing interest in postcolonial studies in China is most interesting. At the moment this is limited, I believe, to scholars in English literatures. The emergence of a widespread postcolonial literature – a world literature – has provided a rich source for Chinese analysts. However, there are a number ways in which Chinese postcolonial studies might proceed: an investigation of China as a proto-imperial power; associated with this, an investigation of language transformation by writers from ethnic minorities in China; an investigation of the work of Chinese diasporic writers, whether in English or other languages; a continuation of Chinese scholarship in Anglophone postcolonial studies; and an analysis of Chinese literature as a world literature. A postcolonial perspective on this last form of scholarship would raise some interesting and innovative work. I have no doubt that Chinese scholars are on the verge of a major development in this field.

I believe in the future of postcolonial studies in China and, considering the quality of Chinese scholars and the fact that this is already happening, it may be a goal that is well on the way to being achieved. I would like to see, for instance, a Chinese analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* which is set in the British Empire driven relationship between India and China. The historical relationship between China and the British Empire is complex and intriguing and is represented to some extent in literature. But we should remember that postcolonial studies is not limited to literature even though it was given birth in literary studies. My vision of Sino-Australian relations is that artists and writers should show the way to politicians and represent

hope for a united future.

Zhang: To conclude this interview, would you please say a few words to young scholars in postcolonial studies?

Ashcroft: For those interested in postcolonial studies I would say that a major feature of the field has been its ability to analyse a vast array of cultural developments: race and racism; expressions of anti-colonial nationalism; the paradoxical dissolution of the idea of nation along with the continuous persistence of national concerns; the question of language and appropriation; of the transformation of literary genres; the question of ethnicity and its relation to the state; the growing mobility of formerly colonised populations. Despite breathless claims about the end of postcolonialism, the field has not only flourished but has embraced its critics, channelling even their objections into the broad collective agenda of the creative cultural engagement with imperialism in all its forms.

Postcolonial studies now extends far beyond the original moment of colonisation. The field has come to represent a dizzyingly broad network of cohabiting intellectual pursuits, circulating around the general idea of an ongoing engagement with imperial power in its various historical forms. Clearly, the power dynamic of that originating moment and the forms of transformation it generated are still relevant to the range of areas of study in the field today. Postcolonial analysis has always intersected the study of race, gender, class, but these intersections have generated an ever-increasing range of specific interests, overlapping and cohabiting within the field.

Zhang: Thank you very much for sharing with us your ideas. This interview gives me much illumination and I am sure it is not just for me but for global postcolonial readers. Thanks again for your time and patience.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill. 'Threshold Theology.' *Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theologies: Storyweaving in the Asia-Pacific*. Eds. Mark Brett and Jione Havea. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 3-20.
- '. 'Critical Utopias.' *Textual Practice* 21.3 (2007) 411-31.
- '. 'Including China: Bei Dao, Resistance and the Imperial State.' *Textual Practice* 27.3 (2013) 357-77.
- Dagnino, Arianna. *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2015.
- Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature?* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2003.
- Levitas, Ruth. 'The Future of Thinking about the Future.' Eds. J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Robertson and L. Tickner. *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. London/New

York: Routledge, 1995. 257-266.

Lili Zhang (tewaterlilyz@163.com) is a PhD candidate on 20th century Australian literature at Soochow University and lecturer at Nantong University. Her research interests include Australian transnational writings, comparative literature and translation studies. Her recent publications include: 'Cultural Misreading and Literary Variation: From Six Chapters of a Floating Life to The Red Thread' (2018); 'Transcultural Writing in Avenue of Eternal Peace (2016)' (Co-author with Professor Wang Labao); 'Ouyang Yu's Bilingual Writing and Bilateral Reception' (2015). This paper is a periodic fruit out of her recent research projects: 'A Study of Transcultural Narratives by Nicholas Jose', a Youth Program for Humanities and Social Sciences (18YJC752048) sponsored by China Ministry of Education; 'Cultural Representation in Australian Postwar Fiction' (2017SJB1222) funded by Jiangsu Province Office of Education.