《台灣學誌》第二期
2010 年 10 月 頁 1-26

North and South:
Reflections on a Spring Migration to Taiwan

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Abstract

In this paper I reflect on a six-week visit to Taiwan with a distinctively southern aspect and set of identifications. "North and South" becomes a metaphor for splits, always psychically loaded, in the practice of Cultural Studies. I describe a hierarchically ordered assembly of oppositions that can be summed up as critical theory versus local research, "universal" academic ambitions versus intellectual activity that serves a situated politics. These dichotomies – and a different North/South polarity – are familiar in my own experience in Britain, but were accentuated when I was obliged to take a southern perspective on cultural studies as itself a global cultural transaction. Two examples are explored in more detail: the circuit of abstraction (theory) and concretion (research and presentation) in the research process and the question of national identity in Taiwan. A case is made for the importance of democratic and egalitarian versions of the nation in opposing the global neo-liberal deformations and for a view of theory-and-research that is attentive to historical particularity and engages with contemporary political tasks.

Keywords: splits in cultural studies, theory/research, politics/academia, global/local, Taiwanese national identity, neo-liberalism, abstraction, concretion, different postmodernisms

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◎ 收稿日期：2010 年 4 月 30 日；審查通過日期：2010 年 6 月 23 日。

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Introduction: A Southern Aspect

From March and May 2009 I spent 6 weeks in Taiwan. The visit was planned in collaboration with Lee Yu-hsuan whose Ph.D. thesis I supervised when he was in England.[1] Because we already knew each other quite well, it was possible to plan a kind of bespoke visit, not only academic by any means and taking account of my particular interests.

I need to say something of these to make our choices comprehensible. Most of my academic energies have been spent in teaching and participant research in Cultural Studies. From 1974-1993 I was involved in the "collective work" that launched a version of cultural studies from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). From 1994 to 2004 I helped to design and teach postgraduate programmes in a Humanities Faculty (where the social sciences were also taught) at Nottingham Trent University. In a programme for beginning Ph.D. students, in particular, focussing on what we called "research practice", we sought to reproduce elements of the kind of postgraduate public, with its mutual support and shared debates, which had existed at CCCS.[2] At Nottingham I could give advice across the range of the Humanities and Social Sciences, with some involvement even in Art and Design. At the same time working across disciplines made me more aware of the transdisciplinarity of the study of culture today, and more aware perhaps of its varieties, boundaries and limits.

These were very privileged university experiences often in "good times". They involved intense engagements with thoughtful, critical people who had personal and intellectual projects on the productive margins of existing knowledge. I also participated in many research, reading and writing groups and in intellectual partnerships that often took new directions. Supervision, group work and co-writing mean that you do not do the work itself, or not all of it, but struggle rather over the work's directions. This is not "direction" in the corporate or managerial sense, but more a search for paths and pitfalls and a sharing an experience of writing and research.

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[1] I am especially grateful to the group who helped "Lee" to organise the visit. They included Chen Chu-po a leading activist of the Community University movement, Wang Yow-jiun of the Department of Taiwanese Literature at the National Cheng Kung University and Professor Lin and his many helpers at the Department of Chinese Literature at the same university. I am also especially grateful to Professor Lin Fang-mei who dialogued with me in Tainan, looked after me in Taipei and commissioned this piece. Many other people helped me and their contributions will be acknowledged in the longer account that I hope will be published in Taiwan in Mandarin as "the book of the visit". Of course the idiosyncrasies of this account are all mine.

[2] I especially want to acknowledge in this "we" my intellectual partnership with Dr Parvati Raghuram now of the Geography Department at the Open University in UK. For the book based partly on this course see Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram & Tincknell (2004).

The advisory mood can become a habit, so I find it difficult now not to be writing about "directions".

Working in a university always involves some tension between the demands of scholarship and the urgent claims thrown up by the wider political scene. In Britain, as universities have become marketised, this tension has become sharper, unless of course you approve of the main directions of neo-liberal "reform". Cultural studies has often provided some resolution of this tension. It is not too constrained by discipline, and founded in engagement with the contemporary. It has been broadly leftish in orientation. So it has reassured scholars, young and old, that intellectual pursuits are politically worthwhile, that cultural studies is indeed a kind of politics. I know that the rather wild scatter of my own intellectual interests comes from following immediate issues "out there", and also from being led by shared interests rather than consciously building an individual career.

When I retired from an actual job in the academy in 2004, I embraced, as a kind of release, a wider political life, mainly in a local setting, in this case the industrial or post-industrial East Midlands and in my adopted home city of Leicester. At the same time I missed the pleasures and exertions of struggling with a class in a teaching situation. So I became, briefly, an adult education tutor and for two years I taught classes (on politics and culture) for the Workers Educational Association (WEA), the largest voluntary sector provider of adult education in Britain. This gave substance to another long-term interest: in theorising and researching the history and practice of adult education, especially in its connections with popular politics.

Teaching research practice across the Humanities and Social Sciences, teaching adult students and being involved day-to-day in social movements all changed my relation to cultural studies. Cultural approaches are everywhere today in the Humanities and in the qualitative social sciences, but are differently inflected depending on the discipline they have become associated with: from media sociology or cultural geography to linguistics or English studies. In adult teaching, cultural studies and especially cultural theory must face the challenge of accessibility and pertinence to students' everyday lives and chime in with very diverse preoccupations. It is, however, ordinary political life, even in extraordinary times, that poses most questions to my older conviction that cultural studies is politically useful knowledge. Just as academic work is a very specific and limited practice, so is social movement politics. Writing academic cultural studies, for journals or collections, is a very

different activity to designing placards and leaflets, writing blogs or comments on on-line petitions, making speeches, or deciding on a movement's strategies, though theories and knowledges inform each. I am sure that my cultural studies (and educational) knowledges are relevant almost all of the time and that there are truths that cut across these social sites and discourses, but they always need *translation* and *application*. They are also often insufficient in their new more political setting, partly because of cultural studies' necessary initial disengagement from the old-Left override of economic process, but also because of the relative academic neglect for several decades of the many inequalities of class.

There is a fundamental rift in purposes in the values that inform the practices. The academy, especially in and around cultural studies, validates work that is critical, "new" and often deconstructive of existing ideas and practices. It is all about "re-thinking". Perhaps the key moment in political practice is deciding what to do in an assemblage of circumstances that is usually very complex and impure, containing elements which are emergent, but also traditions and residues that may be very old, but active nonetheless. Critical thinking is important here but there is a point where questioning has to be qualified in order to act and where construction or reconstruction becomes vital. Nowadays I often read critical texts, full of intellectual life and ideas, which, however, give few glimpses of alternatives. This is all right in a way: it is up to others like myself to translate and apply, and therefore select, transform and extend. I just wish there were more of us.

So, to return to the invitation to Taiwan, it came when students like Lee Yu-hsuan knew that my heart lay not only with cultural studies or research practice, but also with social movements that opposed war, sought the control and ultimate abolition of nuclear weapons, or were seeking alternative social paths to the gross and growing inequalities of today's neo-liberal de-formations. So this had to be a visit that included academic commitments but also brought me into contact with the extraordinary vitality of Taiwan's social movements and its developing civil society. Academically I was placed – and funded – in the Departments of Chinese and Taiwanese Literature at the National University of Cheng Kung in Tainan. Here and at other universities in the south of Taiwan I gave lectures to undergraduates, participated in workshops with staff and postgraduate researchers, and was a main speaker in conferences about interdisciplinarity and cultural studies. It was also very exciting to participate in meetings and gatherings of movement activists, to attend cultural events in two cities and even get involved in some political actions. Taiwan's unique Community Universities (CUs) were at the centre of the visit, partly as a form of adult education, but also because they evidently link

socially engaged academics and movement activists (who are often the same people!). I attended classes, spoke at the annual conference, and discussed educational organisation and philosophies with the movement's National Association (NAPCU) and its local activists and leaders.

A key feature of the visit was its Southern aspect. This was not deliberately planned but it increasingly resonated with aspects of my identity at home, perhaps too readily. I spent most of the time in Tainan and in Kaohsiung, travelling frequently between events in these two contrasted cities: the old capital and religious and commercial centre, and the big industrial city and port. I also visited university departments and community networks in Chiayi, went to a folksong concert in the Hakka town of Meinong, and talked to the region's activists, had discussions with local politicians, pastors and environmental activists in the indigenous people's village of Wutai in the mountains, and sampled the seaside resort of Kenting on the eve of its international music festival. I arrived in Taipei only for a two and a half days at the end of my visit, too exhausted to attend the May Day rally and only too glad to be kindly supported there with a minimum of work assignments. My guess is this visit reversed the usual academic tour, with Taipei and the north first, and south and east only after that, if at all.

I realise now that being a sort of spring migrant to the south and being "adopted" there, chimed with my own "northerner" or non-metropolitan self-ascriptions at home. "The North" in England (which includes the city and one-time port of Hull where I was born and bred to the age of eight) is commonly identified with the working class, with manufacturing and mining, then with de-industrialisation, with Labour or socialist politics and also with a certain human warmth. London and the South East are often identified with the private-school educated political elite, the super-rich of finance and the City, and, of course, a certain coolness and sophistication! My own dis-identifications with the south are all the stronger because my ambitious northern businessman father sent me as a deeply unwilling child to southern boarding schools precisely as an entry, via Oxford and Cambridge, into the national centres of power and status. So initially perhaps my sentimental affiliation to the south of Taiwan had little to do with Taiwan's own social and political geography, much more to identifications in my own life which have been articulated through a geographic or spatial metaphor. This rather odd but strongly felt sense of belonging helped me through the initial culture shock of being for the first time in an East Asian country, and outside of the global North or West. Later, perhaps, I continued to identify with the south of Taiwan, because switching the emotional compass in this way helped to make sense of the internal differences and power relations of

Taiwan's history and current politics.

In what follows I will continue to use the North/South metaphor as a way to organise my arguments about cultural studies, but several caveats should be entered first. I am aware – as already indicated – that there is a strong psycho-social dimension to my own and others' constructions here and I know this is one of those binary sets that need to be deconstructed. Yet there is too much of the truth in these oppositions, even in exaggerated or provocative form, for them to be too quickly abandoned. Second, I am aware that I am oddly placed in this geography of power, coming from a country in the global north, speaking and writing in the language that is hegemonic in the power relations of the academy, and speaking about a discipline that some see not as migrant, but as actually invasive. The idea that cultural studies could be an *imperial* discipline was what appeared with a new sharpness to me from the south of Taiwan. The discomfort with this positioning, of course, made me want to deal with the issues. Third, the dichotomies I will describe are recognisable in Britain too and reappear recurrently in cultural studies there; they are not peculiarities of Taiwan or even of its position in the global knowledge economy. Finally of course as "my friends from the North" now argue, on my next visit I need to spend longer in Taipei.

In what follows I will describe the typical dichotomies that seemed to be arranged on a North/South axis, focussing on cultural studies and associated disciplines. Then I will take two examples to look at more closely: first, the opposition between locally rooted and politically directed research and theory-led inquiries' and second, the opposition to the nation as a main locus of politics and identity.

Familiar Oppositions (in a New Place)

I was confronted early in my visit with the idea that cultural studies *is* Theory, with different versions of "postmodernism" in charge. In this account, cultural studies is held to prioritise theoretical argument and exposition, subordinating research to an illustrative or exemplary role. Either that or research is textual or text-bound, often literary, both in its attention to the texts of theory and in its choice of literary examples. It is oriented politically and in its linguistic complication to discourses in the academy, even where it presents itself as "critical" or engaged. It prefers to address the global rather than the local, seeking very consciously to go beyond current thinking which it sees as nation-bound: hence the importance of categories like transnationalism, postcolonialism, diaspora or cultural hybridity. It is notably

critical of a preoccupation with national identity, tending to identify this with (conservative) nationalism and essentialist theories of identity more generally. It is a form of discourse that tends to the abstract and generalising, even while it addresses issues of diversity and difference. Above all, perhaps, it is disengaged, agnostic or unendingly questioning about the more particular and located of political issues and struggles. It is neither rooted nor stable enough to engage with the circumstances that effect most people in their everyday life.

Of course, I found this (self-) placing very uncomfortable: this was not the cultural studies which I came to talk about or practice. The oppositions, however, were hardly unfamiliar. Just before leaving Britain I had read two books, one of which I reviewed, about how cultural studies must go back to theory, in order to rethink what politics itself might be. The editors of a volume entitled *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* (Hall & Birchall, 2006) identify a current mainstream in cultural studies that is over-concerned with the practical and tends to the un-theoretical. They list some convincing reasons why this might be so, including the stress on a narrow version of usefulness which is indeed currently being employed to dethrone in Britain the Humanities in general. In a mock apologia they write "we would like to begin by apologising for, in effect, pointing out the sharkfin of theory just when you were beginning to think it was safe to go back into the surf of cultural debate." (Hall & Birchall, 2006: 1) Homage is paid to older theoretical debts but mainly we are invited to consider the relevance of the work of Slavoj Zizek, Giles Deleuze, Giorgio Agemben and Alain Badiou to rethinking cultural studies and are offered articles on particular new "adventures". I found all the essays in this volume intelligent and interesting. Several had a real bite when addressed to current modes of politics: I took the points especially of Joanna Zylinska's questioning of the moralism of Left and Right and Neil Babington's insistence than a residual humanism limited the ability of the humanities to engage with the present. With one or two exceptions, however, there was little detailed address to particular situated political problems. The editorial introduction (in a book written before the Obama presidency and the global financial crisis) is pessimistic about contemporary politics believing "that we now occupy a period when the victory of capitalism's free market economy and defeat of political alternatives to neo-liberalism seem somewhat assured".

One of the most politically engaged of the authors collected in this volume – Jeremy Gilbert – later published an extended exploration of the relevance of cultural studies to anti-capitalist politics. (Gilbert, 2008) Though I agreed with much of Gilbert's argument and also his politics, this was cultural studies through a philosopher's or theoretician's eye. The

links with politics were made through theoretical work, not the detailed studies of particular cultural forms, institutions and other sites that constitute a large part of cultural studies research. The vital linking Chapter 5 where the author passes from cultural studies to more directly political concerns is not exactly cultural studies: it pays most attention to the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Of the many forms of more concrete cultural study only one is foregrounded: "conjunctural analysis" or the analysis of relationships of force and forms of hegemony in overall (national) situations. The well-chosen text here is *Policing the Crisis*, the first analysis of the political formation later named Thatcherism. (Hall et al., 1978) If we stay only with Birmingham in the 1970s and 1980s, this omits, however, almost all the more sectoral studies - of education, media and their audiences, the family, the gender order and the lives of women, historical and contemporary working-class cultures, popular and official memory, the state, and literary genres and visual forms. These omissions have partly to do with the chosen level of abstraction, partly with an associated preference for macro- over micro-politics, partly perhaps with an academic preference for individual authors. Yet I would argue that these more sectoral studies do have political significance. The work on education for instance, including the educational practices of CCCS itself, engaged in a continuous dialogue with teachers and others over the transitions in educational policy to a managed quasi-market system, cultural approaches in the curriculum, and the experience of schooling in the lives of working-class girls and boys (e.g. Griffin, 1985; CCCS Education Group, 1980, 1991; Willis, 1977). It is arguable that the theoretical work of CCCS was primarily a work of transmission, interpretation, "mapping" and, at its most creative, synthesis. Theoretical practice was strongly valued and we upheld it in the polemics of the late 1970s, but it was not seen as an end in itself. It was a *means* especially to knowledge of key historical transitions (like those 1940s, 1950s or 1970s) or the power-and-culture dynamics of particular social sites (schools, the family, the state, the literary apparatus etc). It was itself treated, notably in Stuart Hall's hugely influential theoretical work, as an object of cultural study itself, not as an overarching and privileged discourse.

We could go further back and much wider in tracing these oppositions, back indeed to the early years of the New Left. The tone of argument is much more gentle today, but in substance I am reminded of the late 1970s, when so much anger and shame was condensed in the question of Theory, especially theory and the writing of history. Again theory (especially in its structuralist and rationalist forms) was aligned in critic's minds with a narrowly academic stance that was a-political and wielded, paradoxically perhaps, oppressive powers of exclusion.

Of many memorable phrases of E. P. Thompson on these and other subjects, his attack on CCCS as a place where politics "scarcely seems to enter the door" still haunts me sometimes (Thompson, 1981: 399, and more magisterially, 1978). I don't suppose it is a coincidence that I became active in a cause that was central to his own politics – the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Cultural Studies as "Northern Theory" in the Global Context

So what was new about these oppositions within cultural studies as I experienced them in Taiwan in 2008? I was now in a country and a region that was wholly new to me, yet I was in dialogue with people with whom I had much in common. I was forced to look at cultural studies through different, "southern" eyes. Perhaps I had moved from a point of dissemination to a point of reception? Certainly, I was encountering the effects of the global dissemination of cultural studies in a new and different "local". Cultural studies sometimes appeared under the familiar title but sometimes under others, testimony to national or regional specificity. It took me a while to realise that I could understand the study of "Taiwanese Literature" as a form of cultural studies.

Always such dissemination involves transformations, though I don't think the changes in what Edward Said called "travelling theory" are always negative (Said, 2001). But what seems specific here is that the cultural studies I learnt at Birmingham has often been twice – or more – transformed. In particular it has been taken up and then re-exported via the huge and hierarchical academic world of the USA. Here it is most commonly assimilated to critical theory, especially in its more politically derived forms – postcolonial theory and queer theory for instance. Certainly its more abstract (and therefore arguably transferable?) elements have been accentuated, wedded especially to literary studies and textual analysis often of fairly familiar literary or visual works. I know that this is not the only version of cultural studies in the United States. Not only are there tensions within postmodern theory, there are also more "social" or even sociological versions especially around ethnography, education and media studies. In the 1980s I was sometimes invited to debates in the USA to represent this more "social" point of view.

The Australian social theorist, Raewyn Connell, lately in Taiwan, argues very convincingly for the hegemony of what she calls "Northern Theory" and for ideas from the periphery, from Africa and South America for instance, to be properly recognised and for

resistance and collaboration in and from the global South. Her main target is universalising but actually Eurocentric theorising associated with the sociological tradition of grand theory and today with social theorists like Giddens and Beck. She uses a type of core-periphery model to establish the flows of knowledge and power, instancing the difficulty of publication *from* the peripheries and *about* the peripheries, in the most prestigious academic spaces of the centre – especially the USA and Europe (Connell, 2007).

Although this identification is sometimes made, I do not think that cultural theory in its predominately postmodern mood is the same thing as sociological theorising which is still so preoccupied with the issue of modernity, early or late. Much cultural theory is at least uncomfortable in its western or northern or white skin; it often the work of intellectuals from the global south who have settled in the north. Even so, it is disconcerting to see cultural studies, associated in my mind with resistance and with alternatives, as apparently occupying a place of global dominance. The continuing shift of academic firepower to the United States, however, is also uncomfortable for "British Cultural Studies" that now starts to call itself that name. (e.g. Morley & Robbins, 2001) Cultural studies in the USA is also profoundly marked by a national belonging but it very rarely speaks its name in this way: "US Cultural Studies" – I don't think so! This asymmetry in naming suggests a lot about the changing world relations of the UK. Has British cultural studies entered a subaltern, junior officer relationship with cultural studies in its unmarked but actually American form?

This prompts three comments on Connell's analysis, more extensions than criticisms. Because the transnational take-up of cultural studies has been very largely an English-speaking development, cultural studies is sometimes associated with a global academy hegemony that is also an *Anglophone* hegemony. As an Australian and an English speaker, and, perhaps, as a social theorist rather than a cultural analyst, Connell does not fully recognise the problem of Anglophone dominance in the representation of academic work. Since English is positioned as the principle academic language those who speak it as a mother tongue have built-in communicative privileges unless careful countervailing practices are developed. Although work in other languages – historically in French and German especially – has been so significant in the formation of cultural studies, it often reaches the rest of the world in English translation. From the perspective of Anglophone dominance, Connell's own Australia is in a quite specific space, postcolonial in one of its many senses, but with more linguistic and cultural access to the dominant than say Latin America, or East Asia or indeed Southern Europe. Importantly, the issue of translation arose in each and every encounter of my visit and

we arrived, quite rightly in my opinion, at the difficult option of translation at every stage from English to Mandarin and/or Taiwanese and, for my benefit, vice versa. I also learned of the dependence of colleagues on publishing in an English language academic press and even of the need to connect their studies with particular academically-approved theories, a requirement sometimes conveyed through editorial advice and the peer review of journal articles. Translation – its difficulties and its necessity – is a significant issue in international campaigning too. It is only very recently that a mass of local research, published first in Russian and Ukrainian on the disastrous health effects of the Chernobyl nuclear accident of April 1986, has been made available, first in Britain and then in the USA (see especially European Committee on Radiation Risk, 2006). This trans-linguistic non-communication has been a major factor in the cover-up of the health impact of Chernobyl by national and international organisations.

The dominance of the English language seems particularly paradoxical in East Asia. To come as a European visitor to Taiwan (and to China) is to enter a *world of characters*, a beautiful mode of signification completely different from the alphabetical. I understand that many characters are mutually comprehensible across different languages – "one text, many voices" as it says in the Taiwanese Literature Museum in Tainan. After listening to Connell's talk in Kaohsiung, I wondered how this vast diverse cultural region of characters, embracing the largest nation in the world and two of its largest economies, could possibly be considered "peripheral" in a knowledge economy. If it can be so, this says something startling about the imperial state of the global knowledge apparatus.

Second, global intellectual relations are all being massively shaped by the neo-liberal, so-called reform of the academy (Canaan & Shumar, 2008). The attempt to create an academic market and reconstruct universities as business corporations pressures us all towards competitive relations with each other, introduces new academic hierarchies between types of institution and areas of work, creates systems of academic stars and international celebrities, and generally accentuates the exchange value rather than the use value of our knowledges. In a well-known "free market" paradox, it intensifies all forms of managerial control and furthers the split of management and intellectual labour. In all subjects we are taught that research rather than teaching is the surest way to higher status and rewards. Moreover, in the humanities and social sciences the most valued currency of status and reputation academically seems to be theory, perhaps theoretical innovation, perhaps only a certain versatility in the handling of others' ideas. It is this medium particularly that connects with an "international reputation", a

prerequisite for a high rating in the highly-managed British research assessment system. The tendency for theory to become the main medium of academic exchange is thus accentuated even in a subject like cultural studies, where local or group organicity and political specificity are also part of the tradition. I am not sure that the priority of theory corresponds to any real superiority of intellectual effort or skill. Is it easier to grasp the latest general idea, or seize on it as an -ism or as a post-, or to struggle to understand someone else's very different local reality?

The Southern as the Local in Taiwan

When Raewyn Connell gave her paper in Kaohsiung, the main audience consisted of social researchers at the Medical University there and from the new Graduate Institute of Sociology at the National Sun Yat-sen University in the same city. The main respondent was Ho Ming-sho of the Graduate Institute who was also the author of a manifesto for "Southern Sociology" in Taiwan (Ho, 2007). The session was infused by an assertion of southern-ness, defined by Ho in three different ways. First, southern sociology is defined in terms of a geographical location which "allows our local participation and observation to accurately understand the life beat of the grass-root people in the south" especially "local social experience ignored by the North". Second, Ho aligns social research with "the disadvantaged ethnic, class and gender groups in a society" and with an egalitarian and transformative popular politics. In particular the south is identified as the home of assertive social movements. It is a south which "never asks for mercy from the North" and which has taken a leading role in the socio-political development of the island as a whole. Thirdly, there is a larger alignment with the "Global South" that involves a sharp recognition of the repeated invasion and colonisation of Taiwan and a society "constantly shaped by external forces". Crucially for our discussion here, Ho argues that this stress on the local stands against two tendencies: the first older tendency to see Taiwan as a mere substitute for the study of Chineseness at a time when China itself was closed to western research, and the second to apply western theories "in a rather dogmatic way". Both strategies led to the ignoring of "unique Taiwan social characteristics".

It is not surprising that Connell's arguments about northern and southern theory connected so powerfully with this audience. As I gained more knowledge of Taiwan's history, I could appreciate more of what was at stake in the history of sociology in the south: its connections with the opposition to the military rule of the Kuomintang from its northern

capital, the continuing if mitigated Green block/Blue Block divide, the particularly close association of intellectuals, including sociologists, with the growing independence movement and the role of writers, film makers and sociologists in defining and constructing distinctive features of Taiwanese society from the 1970s onwards. I also learned that the tension between a modernism that looks to western ideas and literary forms and a "nativist" construction of what is indigenously Taiwanese has been a feature of artistic and intellectual debates in Taiwan since the later years of the Japanese occupation. (Yip, 2004) The version of social research in play at this session, however, could not be described as localist, nativist or nationalist. Contributors were acutely aware of the global southern setting and the way southern Taiwanese experience was permeated through and through, at the everyday level, with Asian and Western globalities or regionalities. In this discourse a North-South opposition of intellectual purposes and styles was both constructed and, at the same time, critiqued. (See especially Ho, 2009)

A False/Real Dichotomy: A Summary

So very early during my stay I experienced a series of oppositions, partly familiar, but made very sharp and keen in Taiwan by recent memories of oppression and resistance with a distinctive north/south axis. I find it helpful to summarise persistent cultural structures of this kind in diagrammatic form. I have used the following diagram in a number of contexts in Taiwan – and often found it *recognised*, which does not mean it is *agreed with*. It is recognised so to speak as false but real. All of us, I would suggest, feel some pressure to understand our intellectual worlds in something like these terms, to align to a "Northern" or metropolitan theory and a postnational hyper-modern excitement on the one hand and a "Southern" concrete local affiliation on the other. This doubling, related to the distinction between "flows" and "places", seems characteristic of our world. It allows us to switch or ping-pong back and forth between the different poles depending on the conversation. There is also a logic in the *combination* of features portrayed here, though perhaps the looser logic of an "assemblage" in the Deleuze and Guattari sense, rather than harder logic of a "structure" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). To take two elements in the assemblages, the problem of ideological thinking is closely linked to the preferred levels of abstraction of some forms of Theory. Abstraction (on the northern pole) allows us to falsely universalise a particular experience, without acknowledging our own embodied "situatedness" (Haraway, 1991). On the other side this theoretical dominance may be answered – inadequately – by a combination of empiricist research and a dedicated localism.

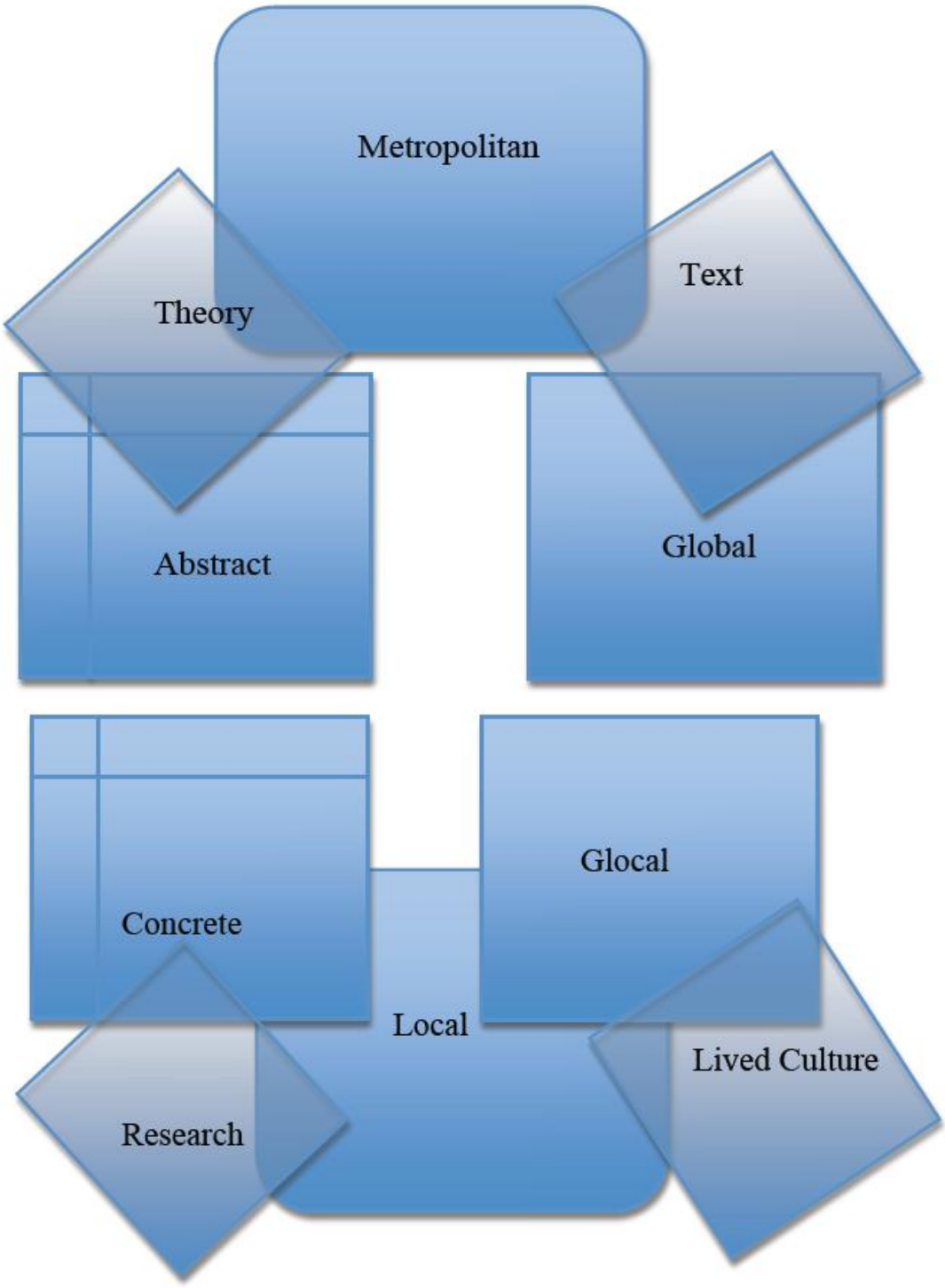

Figure 1. The False/Real Split of Cultural Studies

In the rest of this article I want to concentrate on what is false and unhelpful about these dichotomies. I will take two main examples.

The first is basic to many versions of the opposition: that between theory and research or between the abstract and the concrete. I want to argue that we can get beyond the theory/research opposition by focusing on *levels of abstraction* and on the process of the production of knowledge. Like other cultural processes, this can be thought of as *a circuit* in which research and theorising are mutually interdependent actions. In this all-to-brief account of the processes of research I draw on different sources: on Marx's scattered discussions of a materialist method, on feminist standpoint theory especially the stress on the "situatedness" of all knowledge, and on hermeneutic philosophy for its view of research as a dialogue between self and another. But I am also trying to theorise some aspects of my own 'best practice' and that of researchers whom I have taught.

Second, I want to take as a more particular example a debate which I find active in discourses around Taiwan's history and politics: the tension between constructing a national identity on the one side and deconstructing it in the light of transnational and global processes on the other. This more particular issue is I think aligned to the larger split I am describing, though not necessarily so. I want to argue only part of a case here: that we do not need to think that a concern with national identity is necessarily an essentialism, nor an entrapment in conservative ways of thought. To argue in this way involves a particular critical deployment of theory that is not sufficiently concerned with history and political contingency.

Abstraction and Concretion in Research Practice

We need to think less about theory and research and more about levels of abstraction.[3] All representations are abstract in the sense that we cannot possibly represent all the aspects of the real in their complexity, interrelations and movement. We make sense of everyday acting and suffering through particular cultural forms: a story, a metaphor, a compressed image, or what is usually called a theory. But all accounts are more or less abstract: they presuppose or blank out more or less of this complexity. The advantage of abstraction is that it allows us to think more clearly or logically about a few relations or conditions, so that what is termed

[3] This discussion of abstraction is based on my own study of Marx's method which was inspired by earlier work by Stuart Hall on Marx's Introduction to the *Grundrisse*. (See Johnson, 1982; Hall, 1973). A translation of Johnson 1982 will shortly be published in Taiwan in "the book of the visit".

theory involves a relatively high level of abstraction. Typically social theories abstract what are seen to be *the main social dynamics*: we might think of Marx's *Capital* or sociology's theorising about the main features of modernity as key examples. There are, however, forms of social representation that are much less abstract. For the purpose of political calculation and knowing what next to do, for example, they seek to come closer to the complexity of everyday living and decision-making. In Marx's own *oevre* we might contrast much of *Capital* itself, especially Volumes 2 and 3, with his more concrete political writings like the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. It is interesting that even in Capital when Marx wants to attend to political processes his accounts become much more concrete, witness the historical sketches – on the Factory Acts for instance – in Capital Volume I.

In themselves neither of these forms of representation – more concrete or more abstract – are true or false or inherently superior or inferior. Both are subject to what we may term ideological effects: the kind of universalising theory or "thin abstractions" of which Marx was particularly critical or what he also called "chaotic abstractions", empirical jumbles of facts or factors without critical thinking in terms of logic or process. Gramsci has a similar insight when he contrasts common sense and philosophy. Commonsense or everyday philosophy is incoherent and "composite" though shot through with elements of realism; philosophy may have coherence and intellectual elaboration but it may also lack any purchase on material processes or popular experience (Gramsci, 1971: 322-343). The greatest error and a feature of universalising ideologies, is to mistake a theory for a more concrete account. Social theories frequently do this, so that social dynamics that appear in variant forms in different nations or regions are made to seem universal or serve only to rank societies as more or less "modern". This ideological effect is rendered all the greater when theorists are less than conscious of their own social placement whether in class, gender, geographic or other terms. Of course critical theories are not exempt from this collapse of theory into the concrete, notably in the presentation of Marx's own "laws of development" of capitalism as saying all we need to know about social and cultural formations.

We can better understand the process of knowledge production in terms of a circuit which passes through moments of abstraction and concretion. When we begin on a new project or encounter a new situation we are immersed in new particularities, often in concentrated detail, much of it unfamiliar. In the Marx-Engels correspondence, an important source for their method, they write of being "buried up to the neck in English newspapers and books" (Engels in 1975: 21) or having to "force down my gullet an enormous amount of material, statistical

and otherwise" (Marx in 1975: 188). Apart from the sheer volume they attest too, both men were struggling to understand a country which was relatively new to them. Being in a new country is an extraordinary immersion in detail of this kind, much of it strange, even shocking. In Taiwan I was like a (rather active) sponge, *taking in* all the time, filling four notebooks with translated material and thoughts from other people's speeches, grasped through mists of translation and cultural difference, trying to make sense of elementary but basic things like different and wonderful food, the surge of scooters on the streets or off the little ferries, the different organisation of public and private space. In Capital Volume I Marx (1976: 102) calls this process "appropriate[ing] the material in detail". Of course, our existing knowledges and categories are already a pressure in our observation or reading, but if this is really "research", finding something new, there is an Otherness about the new material, something we have not encountered before, something we must listen hard to, in order to learn. The tradition of hermeneutic philosophy expresses this beautifully under the term of "understanding" which is an ethical as well as epistemological principle. Research is a dialogue across differences of time or place in which "the question" and listening to an answer are the crucial moments. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it at its most general:

> In human relations the important thing is… to experience the Thou as truly a Thou – i.e. not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us… Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so. (Gadamer, 1989: 361)

In critical versions – in feminist standpoint theory, in the social linguistics of the Leningrad circle and of course in Marxist theories of ideology the understanding of alterity is complicated or even shut down by power and interest. We can object to Gadamer's gendered pronouns and also want to extend his conception of understanding to the non-human, (including the animal in the human), yet his stress on otherness and the situatedness of the researching self – for Gadamer in time and history especially – seem to me important starting-points in understanding the "empirical" moment in research.

When we oppose research and theory in the false dichotomy we often imagine that theory is *applied* to research only. Of course, researchers always have pre-knowledges or theoretical starting points, more or less articulated. An important aspect of supervision is often to persuade thesis writers that they are also *producing* theory. Of course students and their teachers are rarely in the position of a Marx who discovers a whole continent of new knowledge. It is very

common, however, for Ph.D. research to produce intermediate categories that specify the particular historical forms of a type of social formation otherwise expressed more abstractly: not patriarchy as such, for instance, but a specific form of “separate spheres” for men and women, a particular division of labour and allocation of social value, not capitalism in general but significant local variants. In order to contribute to theory in this or other ways, researchers must abstract from their own (already “digested”) material. Perhaps from my historian’s background when working on contemporary issues, I often start with a chronological time-line or narrative as a primary way of processing the material. Only later do I abstract particular “themes” or dynamics that might be at work there and express them more theoretically. As I write this I am thinking concretely of the struggle to understand the perils of current moves towards a so-called “nuclear renaissance” in many countries. A chronology can put a lot of things together – the privatising the whole nuclear cycle in Britain with the health dangers of nuclear technologies for instance. We need a more abstract model however to grasp the dynamics of the neo-liberal restructuring of state and capital relations which is clearly relevant here. We can point for example to threats to planetary health that may come from cutting costs on safety and loosening regulative regimes.

Marx (1976: 102) calls this process “analys[ing] different forms of development” and, for him, it involves “tracking down their inner connections”. We now take some distance from the immediate results of research and abstract some elements from it. To return to my visit to Taiwan it was only later that I was able to make sense of the mass of “material” – the notes, the photos, the documents, the readings and the memories – that I brought home with me. Helped by more reading, (of works in English only!) I could make sense of my observations. I could see how a history of colonisation and the imposition of identities and a present struggle for a more autonomous future underlay the many-sided cultural production of a national identity on the island. I could also start to understand my own experiences of cultural difference and commonality and how they modified my own frameworks and sense of myself as an intellectual. Of course, my experience of Taiwan’s democracy-in-the-making coincided quite spookily with the crisis of an old democracy in Britain that was at its height when I returned.

Of course there is a sense in which we do “apply” theory to detailed research whether derived from our own abstractions or from theoretical readings of other ideas. Marx thought of this largely in terms of “presentation”, which can also be understood as concretion, a movement back from theoretical abstractions to making sense of the material already

consumed. Presentation also involves the critique – or revision or extension – of other theories and accounts, in Marx's case of political economy. Critique is very powerful in Marx because it is not criticism merely but presentation of an elaborated alternative account which also explains where and why political economists are mistaken. If we take this practice as exemplary, we can see the limits of theoretical work *without* research, as also of research without theoretical awareness and critique. To return to our North/South theme, this means not only that southern theory is needed, to grasp the local/global relations, but also a critique or extension of northern theory in the light of research from the south that has been consumed theoretically.

This is only a sketch of a view of method described at length elsewhere (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, & Tincknell, 2004; Johnson, 1982), but I hope it is enough to insist on the unhelpfulness of splitting off cultural theory and cultural research, or of working only at high levels of abstraction, criticising without also constructing an account that can contribute to action. Actually something like this combination has been characteristic of the best in cultural studies in both Britain and East Asia (e.g. Chen, 1998; Chen & Huat, 2007). I also hope that my way of writing this account – which may seem awkwardly personal to some – has made visible an important starting-point of method – the recognition of the social and historical situatedness of the researcher. This should not be treated only as "bias", though it is indeed a limit. It is however a *resource* and also an injunction to dialogue with others and an invitation to the conversations that should follow.

Holding the National Frame, Making a Nation, Differently

In an interesting study of the films of Ho Hsiao-hsien and the tradition of Hsiang-t'u literature, the US scholar June Yip argues a recognisably postmodern case about Taiwanese national identity. *Envisioning Taiwan* was one of the most stimulating and informative accounts of Taiwanese national identity that I found published in English, but what was difficult about it was another rather cut and dried opposition: that between the nomadic, mobile, "disseminated", "thin" or empty subject of a version of postmodern theory and a view of identity as fixed, bounded and homogeneous. Yip applies these two familiar models from identity theory to a whole nation arguing tenaciously for the first. As the reviewer of her book in the *Taipei Times* put it "Taiwan represents the fluidity of the idea of the nation-state, she argues, more, perhaps, than anywhere else on earth." (Winterton, 2004.11.28). Yip's argument is more complex than this but my difficulty is not with her account of the fragmented and

dispersed nature of identity in Taiwan but with the difficulty she has in envisaging a Taiwanese national identity that is not essentialised, bounded or closed.

Yip follows the postcolonial mainstream in quoting Frantz Fanon's critique of national identity as "folklore" that testifies to "a people's true nature". She includes the later part of this famous quotation:

> A national culture is *the whole body of efforts* [her emphasis] made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. (Yip, 2004: 245 quoting Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* through Stuart Hall)

"A people" certainly had and often still has a distinctively mono-ethnic and racist connotation in European nationalist discourse. Certainly also the construction of national identity always involves a social politics which has often been conservative, hierarchical or excluding in both class and gender terms. It is a kind of secondary action on other social relations. It arranges us according to social categories of class and region, gender and sexuality, race, ethnicity and nation of origin. Narratives and discourses of the nation are themselves deployments of power; they involve recognition and misrecognition. They are accompaniments of the articulation of power through state and governance in the shape of law, education and coercion. It is true that the nation is often conceived of primarily as a unity, even with an essence in terms of a religion or some other expression of "character" or "values". What I take from Fanon but also in a different way from Gramsci, however, is the view that qualitative political distinctions may be made between different versions of the nation that are in competition in bidding for hegemony or counter-hegemony. These versions may be more or less inclusive, more or less democratic, more or less egalitarian, and also, we might add, construct different kinds of relation to other places and people and to some place in the wider world. There is not just one essentialist nationalism but a great variety of different ways in which the national space may be constructed, more or less justly and commodiously for those who come to live there.

I experienced the emerging national identity of Taiwan as a relatively open identity of this kind. I certainly observed the intense energy, in the academy and outside, which was flowing into producing a cultural nation in Taiwan, a decolonisation through cultural work, that seems partially blocked in international relations by Chinese claims and military dependence on the

USA. I found a desire to chart and to value the *many* streams that flow into daily life on the island: "Chinese" religions and sciences of a healthy life, Japanese public architecture and food, and the many historical layers of settlement and of linguistic diversity for example. At the same time, there were definite breeches, at an everyday life level of the usual conservative multicultural solutions where differences coexist in hierarchies specified by the powerful. I agree very much with Yip that the cultural syncretism on the island is extraordinary and dazzling, including the eagerness to borrow ideas with a rather endearing insouciance about copyright! Nor is this, as is sometimes implied, only a feature of the northern cityscape. This energy and its manifold differences is held together by a widespread and popular commitment, that crosses even Blue and Green, to a view of Taiwan as at least a *cultural* nation. If there is a centre or essence to this it must be a commitment to democratic politics and to the building a civil society that runs through the social movements and is central in the declared role and detailed curricula of the community universities. Democracy here runs alongside the other collective wish – to be, in contrast to the colonial past, in charge of the island's future.

Of course it is more than possible that my experience of the island is as much an idealist projection as Yip's postnational object of desire. If I could read the texts of nation construction in Taiwan no doubt I would find the openness conveyed to me in conversations challenged by the closures of official discourse. But I do perceive, especially perhaps in contrast to my own country, a pattern that suggests a relatively open collectivity of this kind. I was struck for example by the high level of social trust I experienced on the streets of Tainan and Kaohsiung and in everyday encounters with people from different walks of life. One exception, perhaps, was a certain rigidity and an accompanying fear among my friends at points of intersections with the state's bureaucracy.

In an important international study of the relation of inequality to social pathologies, it is argued that indices of equality and social trust are closely correlated in the "developed" world. The percentage of people agreeing that "most people can be trusted" is higher in more equal societies. Market-led societies like USA and UK do conspicuously badly in terms of inequality and its correlated social pathologies. (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) Unfortunately Taiwan itself is not included in these comparisons which are largely based on data collected through the United Nations, but there is evidence of relative equality in Taiwan at least until the 1990s, especially as compared with other rapidly developing societies.

If the neo-liberal deformations lead to great inequality and less secure and happy societies

it is important to ask how its global impacts can be resisted and where in the world alternatives can be developed and sustained. It may be that I simply lack the imagination to see how such a process can be resisted or reversed without a strong sense of unity at the national level, associated with democratic political arrangements. I know of no force except popular movements that can secure outcomes of this kind, and to flourish these movements require a well-entrenched civil society and civil and human rights. I am, as it happens, also a participant in global/local movements, like the World Social Forum, which has more than an echo in my city. These transnational forms, however, are at best still emerging. One important strategy must remain the construction of national (and local, e.g. city) spheres of political action that are democratic, egalitarian and open to outsiders and the usually excluded.

Conclusion: Varieties of Postmodernism, Theory and Strategy

Finally some points about varieties or readings of postmodern theory and the ways they are deployed.

While some strands in identity theory stress the flux, indeterminacy and "impossibility" of identity in post- or late-modern conditions, other strands extend and deepen the concept of social relations and power inherited from Marxism and flowing from emancipatory movements. They elaborate more subjectively, for the interior social spaces, an older socialist contradiction: the need for co-operation and social dependence, yet the tragedy of unequal relations and exploitation. These accounts of identity are typically dialogic, dialectical or inter-subjective. They explore the psychological consequences of power and inequality. So for instance I tend to read both Fanon and Homi Bhabha (another key source for Yip) in this second way rather than the first. Especially through psychoanalytic borrowings, anticipated by Fanon, these readings add a "thickness" to more narrowly discursive versions of the subject and draw attention to psycho-social aspects of power and dependence. In our understanding of both individual and collective subjects we need to have theories that can grapple with continuity, memory and forgetting as well as the hypermodern flux. Unlike theories of dispersal and fragmentation this social postmodernism or psycho-social reading works theoretically to counter the elaboration of the neo-liberal subject for whom autonomy, choice, elite nomadism and personal evasiveness are celebrated. (For an interesting juxtaposition of these versions along with more sociological accounts of identity see Du Gay, Evans & Redman, 2000)

Although it is true that concepts of identity underlie our conceptions of what counts as politics, it must also be true that our political loyalties and our assessments of political needs and conditions must introduce a contingent or strategic element into our evaluation of theories. This approach to theory is rather different from an attachment to their logical pursuit and application. Maybe there are times when it is possible or safe to deconstruct, and times when it is desperately necessarily to construct or reconstruct, times to fall apart, and, in the English middle-class demand, to "pull yourself together!" This may certainly apply to groups, movements and individuals. Perhaps it applies to nations too?

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南與北：行旅台灣的反思

Richard Johnson

摘　要

筆者在本文中回顧訪台六週期間的經驗，並以南方觀點與認同來反思這些經驗。文化研究具體地負載著許多分裂，筆者以「南與北」來托喻這些分裂。本文首先提出一組高低二元對立的概念，例如：批判理論 vs. 地方研究；或是普世的學術宏圖 vs. 關懷具體政治的知識實踐。這些二元對立——以及南與北的兩極——在英國極爲常見，在筆者旅居台灣時更被週遭學者所強調。在全球文化轉運的情境下，本文試圖以南方觀點來呈現文化研究，並詳細探討兩個案例。首先是抽象理論與具體研究二者間的循環，其次是台灣國族認同的議題。筆者說明民主與平等的重要性，據以抗衡新自由主義的扭曲。本文也提倡一種理論與研究整合的觀點，呼籲二者皆應具有歷史特殊性的敏感度並能參與當代的政治任務。

關鍵字：文化研究的分裂、理論／研究、政治／學界、全球／地方、台灣國族認同、新自由主義、抽象、具體化、差異的後現代主義