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**No alternatives, always more, willful optimism: New editors
of the European Journal of Cultural Studies in conversation**

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No alternatives, always more, willful optimism: New editors of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* in conversation

Yiu Fai Chow, Anamik Saha

The following is a conversation, conducted over email in late 2019 and early 2020, between Yiu Fai Chow and Anamik Saha, the two incoming editors of *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Yiu Fai (November 14th, 2019, Hong Kong):

When *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (*EjCS*) asked me to become their new editor, I was of course honoured. At the same time, I remembered, somewhat uncannily, how I came to know the journal. It was the start of my PhD project, some 15 years ago, and *EjCS* was one of the first journals, if not the first, that I got to know and read. For a long long time, I thought the journal was meant for, indeed, European(-based) researchers, or researchers concerned with European issues. A couple of years later, I came in touch with *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, a formation, a movement and a journal that is precisely grounded in its geopolitical epithet; my impression that *EjCS* functioned likewise hardened. It was only much later that I realised that my impression was more of an assumption. The journal has always been open to submissions from and about anywhere in the world. That it had “European” in its title was historical and contingent. From what I learned from Joke Hermes, who was there from the very beginning as a founding editor in 1998 (see Hermes et al 2017), the journal *Cultural Studies* already existed at that time and had made its “universal” claim, while two other new journals on cultural studies were also starting. One would call itself *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and the other was to be called *Crossroads*. However, during the proposal review process, Sage, the publisher, suspected that *Crossroads* might be mistaken for a British soap opera; and so the epithet “European” was suggested for the title of this new cultural studies journal, which would also signal its locatedness.

I used the word uncanny to describe my feeling of becoming editor of *EjCS*, this little journey from assuming an outsider position, to embodying an inclusive paradigm. As someone born

and growing up in Hong Kong, someone who would probably be identified as Asian or Chinese, I am one of two new editors of *EjCS*. I am curious as to what you would have to say in this regard, Anamik, as the other new editor, you know, also non-white. I guess what I want to do, to contribute to this very well-established, well-run journal – well, I learned about its high load of submissions, sadly, only after I accepted the invite haha – is my experience and expertise in this geopolitical thing called Asia and in particular China. I think I would urge anyone, but most specifically those colleagues working on Asia-related subjects who may have the same assumption about the Europeaness (if not Eurocentricity) of our journal, I would urge them to consider us; I would like to go to conferences and identify possible panels for compiling special issues for us, etc., etc. In short, I believe it's important to insert the Asian expertise and experience in cultural studies, whether European or not. It's essential to document and learn from what is happening there, here. It's part and parcel of knowledge production, and a recognized English-language journal such as this is a major site. While I am writing this, my city of Hong Kong is in turmoil. But when I read the “quality” Dutch newspaper I subscribe to, there is so little coverage of Hong Kong.

Anamik (January 6th, 2020, London):

In terms of my entry to cultural studies as a field, my formation was very much shaped by studying at Goldsmiths in the late 1990s. The Department of Communications, as it was then known, had strong connections to the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, including staff who were former students of the Centre, such as Angela McRobbie, Bill Schwarz and David Morley. Paul Gilroy was also in the Sociology department at the time. While Stuart Hall was not employed by Goldsmiths, his presence loomed large, and remains so: the department is now based in the *Professor Stuart Hall Building*. But this was also the time of the so-called political economy vs cultural studies wars (the Communications department had many preeminent scholars working in the latter tradition too). Thankfully, when I first entered university, media scholars had begun to see the futility of such a debate and I was not expected to take sides. But the impact of learning in such a rich, critical environment was that I was encouraged from the outset to think interdisciplinarily, and against the current, rather than to nail my colours to the mast of a specific approach.

With my interest in ‘new’ British South Asian ethnicities, I was naturally drawn to cultural studies, and the work of Paul Gilroy was particularly formative in that regard. It was Gilroy

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who first drew attention to cultural studies’ ethnocentric roots, in that its initial encounters with race and ethnicity were, by, as he put it, often by default rather than design. The dominant topic of those early cultural studies was white, working-class masculinities and their engagement/appropriation of black culture. Women were marginalised and Asians even more so – when they did appear it was as victims of ‘paki-bashing’ rather than active agents in the making of British culture. Thus my relation to cultural studies from the start was profoundly ambivalent. It was a natural home, but also one that needed transforming. In the same way that Gilroy conceptualizes the Black Atlantic as a *counter-culture* of modernity – both a product of and an intrinsic challenge to modernity, I see my relationship to cultural studies in the same way - a product of it, but going against its grain, not least in centralizing issues of race. For this reason it really was an honour to be invited to be editor of *European Journal of Cultural Studies* – and gratifying to see you had been invited too Yiu Fai! Not that we will be expected solely to do labour around anything to do with race/the non-West, but if we can - alongside the existing editorship - simultaneously destabilize and expand cultural studies approaches, then I am happy to be part of that project!

Before we discuss what we want to bring to the journal Yiu Fai, how do you see the state of cultural studies today?

Yiu Fai (25th January 2020, first day of Lunar New Year, Hong Kong)

First, kung hey kung hey¹. Wow, what a question. It’s good that I picked a festive day to continue this conversation – I need some festive energy to help me take this up and respond. My immediate sense is that I don't think I have much to say about the state of cultural studies today. What I can say is probably how I feel about the state of the world around me; I feel a world in need, in crisis, in flux, in hate and in love, in a state that constantly baffles me, challenges me, and in some twisted manner, empowers me. Not so long ago, I was, probably like many colleagues, dismayed and rather demoralized by the increasingly powerful and ubiquitous monstrosity called TINA – there is no alternative. But then, in Hong Kong, the ostensibly hyper-capitalistic and politically apathetic city I moved “back” to in 2011 (after living in the Netherlands for 20 years), massive numbers of people joined pro-democracy rallies and the occupation in 2014, known as the Umbrella Movement. In 2019, despite or

¹ Cantonese equivalent to “Happy new year”.

precisely because of the crackdown and “defeat” five years earlier, it happened again. And it’s not only Hong Kong; it’s happening elsewhere in the world. For me, there was a time when I did wonder if cultural studies was still relevant – after decades of brilliant work, what have we achieved and what kind of world have we managed to co-construct? And now, I would say: relevant or not, we make it relevant, we have to. In tandem with wondering what cultural studies has become, I think of what cultural studies can do. I would allow myself to reiterate the question I learned when I started my cultural studies, the question Meaghan Morris put forward: What do cultural studies *do*? (Morris 1997).

And, what do I do? Deliberating on the political responsibilities of cultural studies, Lawrence Grossberg writes the following, which I always find very compelling: “The project of cultural studies is to tell better stories about what’s going on and to begin to enable imagining new possibilities for a future that can be reached from the present – one more humane and just than that promised by the trajectories we find ourselves on” (Grossberg 2010, 241). I think I am attracted to this idea of, this necessity for, telling better stories, not only as an academic writer, but also as a creative writer. I started writing lyrics for Chinese-language pop music three decades ago. I continue doing this, even now that I have become a “full-time” academic. This is my way of doing cultural studies and trying to tell better stories, in my dual capacity as a cultural studies student, and a cultural producer. As I wrote in an autobiographical essay on this duality (Chow 2009), sometimes “I, a lyrical writer, try to write what I have read from cultural studies into a cultural product”; while other times, I invite myself, “a cultural studies student, to read the product back into cultural studies”. In the end, I do remember the Deleuzian mantra of TIAM: *there is always more*. Well, I am not a Deleuzian scholar at all, but I am fascinated by this way of thinking: that there is always more (see Todd 2005). When contentment means no need to go further, and hopelessness also means no way to go further, I often find myself in the landscape in-between, sometimes bleak, sometimes vibrant. I think I like to do my cultural studies in the vastness of this landscape. There is always more.

Anamik (January 30th, London)

When I read your powerful response Yiu Fai, I can’t help but think of an infamous quote from Stuart Hall, where he essentially condemns the cultural studies project and what it has become: ‘what in God’s name is the point of cultural studies? At that point, I think anybody

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who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we've been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything' (Hall 1996). Hall, if I recall correctly, was writing this in relation to the AIDS epidemic, where he reflects upon how little impact cultural studies scholars are having on the world, let alone in matters of life and death. I use this quote to ask what is cultural studies doing and what do we want it to do? I have not encountered that quote from Grossberg that you cite but it resonates strongly with me, and seems a useful response to Hall's exasperation and dismay at how cultural studies was unfolding at the time. In our conversations in between editorial meetings, Yiu Fai, I have particularly enjoyed learning about your side-career as a renowned pop lyricist! I myself am a musician – not as accomplished as you I hasten to add – but I wonder how many cultural studies scholars have these creative projects on the side, bearing in mind our desire to tell stories about the world, and to imagine better futures?

But saying that I do feel a dismay at the solipsistic, parochial forms of cultural studies that I still occasionally encounter. I love nothing more than a sharp deconstruction of a single cultural text, but only if it speaks to what is happening *conjuncturally* and what it reveals about how power operates within a particular historical moment and social formation. My PhD training in sociology has engrained issues of validity and reliability of findings deep in me, yet cultural studies does not always share the same concern (I remember a dear friend on my PhD programme who once ironically said in class 'Cultural studies? They just make stuff up!'). I am by no means demanding that cultural studies produces 'fool-proof', scientifically generated samples that allow for generalisable arguments to be made! Rather, I would like to see more scholars reflect upon what is being said, what claims are being made and on what grounds. When I re-read what I have written it seems like I am being very negative about the field! But I should add that thankfully, most of the time I still feel very inspired by what I read in cultural studies – not least the papers that I edit for the journal. I feel especially inspired by your notion of *there is always more* and the idea of looking for knowledge in the liminal spaces. Gramsci's idea of pessimism of the intellect/optimism of the will continues to frame my approach, though we could absolutely do with much more *willful* optimism in times like these.

To finish off, maybe we can discuss what we hope to bring to the journal as new members of the editorial team? The words 'decolonizing' and 'dewesternizing' get thrown around a lot

these days, and run the risk of becoming banal. But considering the ambivalence around the word ‘European’ in *EjCS* – which all the editors share – I look forward to, as I say, destabilizing some of the normative terms that shape our field, not least by bringing issues of race and intersectional experience into the foreground. I should add that this has always been part of the project of the journal, and what drew me to this role in the first place. But I look forward to mining the margins and bringing them into the centre. Not just for the sake of shining a light on neglected topics, but for the way that such a focus can transform the discipline in its entirety. There you go, that is some willful optimism right there!

Yiu Fai (2nd February 2020, Hong Kong)

I love your *willful* optimism. It’s good to end with that, otherwise we run the risk of becoming two grumpy (old) men talking (I reserve the epithet ‘old’ exclusively for myself, don’t worry Anamik). And I do believe, after all, that cultural studies is still one of the very few disciplines I know of that would accommodate, or even encourage what we just did – questioning, doubting, critiquing what the discipline is doing. So, we move on, we keep trying, we *will* ourselves to believe in more, to be, in that sense, optimistic, or at least not pessimistic. Right, what I may bring to the journal? I mentioned earlier that with my own background, I may help to insert the Asian expertise and experience in cultural studies, and hopefully to this journal (I also want to flag the interestingly different ways we mobilize “Asian”). And I wrote, “It’s essential to document and learn from what is happening there, here.” In this juncture, I want to add two things. One more “conceptual”: it’s also essential to realize there is never a clear demarcation between “there” and “here”. When we started this conversation in November 2019, Hong Kong was in the midst of protests. And right now, the city is in the midst of a virus outbreak, or at least the fear of one². Clearly, this is a global issue; its global ramifications are not only medical or pathological, but also cultural and political. I refer to the growing instances of discrimination against Chinese populations, or Asian populations at large. What is there, is here. The second, and last thing I want to lodge is an appeal to the readers of this conversation between us. If, after reading our conversation, you consider that this journal might also be yours, submit your work to us. See, I remain hopeful. Allow me to play my Chinese card one last time. You know, “future” in Chinese is 未來; the literal meaning of this is: “yet to come”.

² The coronavirus 2019-nCoV.

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