

Cultural rights: response to Wang Yiyan

Dear Editors,

How to define cultural rights? Wang Yiyan does not provide her own definition after raising the issue in her article 'The tyranny of taste and cultural citizenship' in *IIAS Newsletter* 34 of July 2004.

Cultural rights are clearly in the same basket as human rights when pertaining to the practice of culture in its widest sense – customs, religion, food, clothes and artistic expression, in fact everything that people regard as their own 'way' in their place of origin. To a certain extent people should have such rights in their adopted country as well, though it would be difficult to legislate. It is, however, doubtful whether one can apply the rights principle to immigrant artists, or indeed anyone who regards himself as an artist. If it were, it would smack of state-sponsored art for the sake of furthering political or socio-economic aims.

If it is true that the Chinese artists in Australia remain a closed community, that will hardly be noticed in a country harbour-

ing some two hundred different cultures, all vying for their share of public attention. But it would be a pity. Yet it cannot be true, as Wang Yiyan claims, that 'Chinese-Australian artists are largely irrelevant' to debates of what constitutes Australian art. She writes: 'The field, rather than the artists themselves, will decide whether Australian art history will write Chinese-Australian artists in or leave them out.' Only if the artists do nothing will this turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. No artist gains a place in art history without people, not just a narrow coterie of art critics, responding to their work. All it takes is to display one's work. This is not difficult in Australia where even school children exhibit their paintings at open air events.

One hopes the sample of Chinese artists interviewed by Wang Yiyan was very small. If 'The inability to speak English in Australia entails at least a partial deprivation of one's cultural rights', then the question is who should do something to remedy that situation. Opportunities to learn English are plentiful. The isolated Chinese-Australian artists may find out across the lan-

guage barrier that most Australian artists have to make a living by art-related means such as teaching and touring for subsidised projects. Cultural citizenship is an organically arrived at status. It requires hard work, persistence and a little luck.

It is very much up to Chinese-Australian artists to write themselves into Australia's art history. Although thirty years ago writers from non-English speaking backgrounds were not known in Australian literature and therefore not part of the critical debate of what Australian literature is, today all multicultural authors and their works are included in the national Australian literature database. Academics wishing to know more about Chinese writers and writings in Australia or writings about the Chinese in Australia, can find information via the AustLit Gateway: www.austlit.edu.au. A Bibliography of Australian Multicultural Writers can be accessed at: www.deakin.edu.au/library/colin/inforespol/amflc.html. ◀

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Cultural rights: response to Lolo Houbein

Dear Editors,

I thank Lolo Houbein for her letter, which gives me the opportunity to clarify the major points I wished to convey in my article in *IIAS Newsletter* 34.

Houbein believes 'cultural citizenship is an organically arrived at status... It is very much up to Chinese-Australian artists to write themselves into Australia's art history'. This cannot be true. Many artists, Chinese and non-Chinese, contemporary and past, work hard but have little luck, if by luck we mean the opportunity to exhibit in major venues and gain institutional recognition and public appreciation, if not reasonable market value.

My article explored why some artists are 'luckier' than others. By borrowing Bourdieu's notion of 'rules of art' and calling them the 'tyranny of the taste', I tried to show that it is not artists who evaluate themselves, but the art field, which includes market forces, funding bodies, curators, critics, and the general audience, in addition to artists themselves participating as producers, audience and critics. Artists produce

art, but others decide who produces good art. Houbein fails to grasp this. She suggests that as long as an artist produces and shows art work in public, one can establish oneself. This may at times be the case. Artists, however, cannot be equally successful; nor can they measure their own success. Successful writers and artists in Australia with non-Anglo-Saxon 'cultural' heritages need to have the label 'multicultural' or 'ethnic' dropped, and, like it or not, they cannot remove the label themselves. Cultural citizenship may be an 'organically arrived at status', but we need to know more about the process. Houbein's dismissal of the function of the art field underestimates the crucial role of art critics, curators, art historians and arts institutions in constructing art by creating historical canons.

I do not wish to leave the impression Chinese-Australian artists isolate themselves and do not study English. Rather, I refer to the unattainability of higher socio-cultural linguistic competency in English. Not everyone, especially adults with Chinese as their mother-tongue, can achieve proficiency in English to

facilitate meaningful exchanges of abstract and artistic ideas. Houbein is right to see that cultural rights are, like human rights, difficult to legislate. But legislation is not what I argued for, although many others do, and rightly so. The importance of institutionalizing cultural rights is to establish social mechanisms that allow for cultural diversity; the aim is to broaden the narrow criteria of 'universality' in assessing artistic merit. This does not amount to 'state-sponsored art' – we are not dealing with the production but reception of art.

A multicultural society ought to establish mechanisms to enable migrants to become cultural citizens, to encourage their participation in cultural life beyond contributing their ethnic music and exotic food. Unlike the either-or situation of political citizenship, cultural and social citizenships have degrees and shades. The differences may be due to differences in individual ability and willingness, or may be the result of the social infrastructure. ◀

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Dear readers,

The *IIAS Newsletter* is for you, and we value your feedback. What would you like to see more of? What has grown old and tired? We are not an exclusive club – fresh faces and young writers are welcome, wherever you are. Please drop us a line, David Hymans or Natasja Kershof, with your letters, criticisms, ideas and questions: iiasnews@let.leidenuniv.nl

In 2005, the newsletter will be leaner and more frequent. September 2005 will see our first special issue devoted to History & Memory, a sixty-year retrospect on World War II in Asia and the Pacific, guest edited by Ethan Mark. The theme for our June 2005 issue remains open: prospective guest editors, please send us your proposals.

Four more years of W. will be a joy to behold.... But life goes on. In particular, we would like to welcome to the world newsletter baby #1. With #2 arriving shortly, readers can look forward to cutting-edge, interdisciplinary editorials on diapers, daycares and babysitters across Asia. Readers who want to pre-empt this, please send letters of your own, on the relevance of area studies for instance (pp.1&4 in this issue).

Many thanks are due to theme editor Gerard Persoon for mobilizing his enthusiastic team. My gratitude to John O'Sullivan for his dedication to the past two issues, and a big welcome back to Natasja Kershof. ◀

TDH
5 November 2004

Against ersatz colonial history

Dear Readers,

I would like to have your comments on an idea that, after discussion, I have formulated as: 'De-colonising the Re-colonisation of Histories of Former European Colonies'. My concern arises from a growing uneasiness over the way contemporary Dutch and other Western historians conceive of the history of Indonesia and the impact of colonialism – almost no impact at all, certainly no basic bad influence, regarded, even, as 'natural' events. Similar things are happening in other parts of Asia, although in India the field is probably more even and contested by Indian scholars. Rearguard actions against the trend are being fought in Malaysia and possibly in the Philippines. The same pattern is evident in Africa. Colleagues there confirm attempts to 're-colonise' East and West African histories. Probably something similar is happening in Latin America too.

The analysis of the 're-colonisers' is statistics based. It derives from so-called 'facts' that 'speak for themselves' (as if facts can speak). The concepts used are shallow: globalism, creating a national economy and so on. They are worse than just shallow. They are ideological. One academic journal hails this trend in Indonesian economic history as 'growing maturity'. Drabble's recent economic history of Malaysia portrayed colonialism as 'a transition to modern economic growth'. Much of this follows the earlier Cambridge History of South East Asia. To quote a recent editorial in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, all this 'attempts straightforwardly to sanitize – and hence to celebrate – imperialism'. None of this is the result of new evidence or enhanced scholarship, but of the general political movement towards the right in the world today. Despite the 'technical' excellence of many of these historians, it is bad history writing. Adapting a phrase of Edmund Burke from his more radical days: *The Power of New Colonial Thought has Increased, Is Increasing, and Ought to be Diminished*.

How would this be done? I suggest we use concepts like the following, derived from the insights of Andre Gunder Frank. Namely, that 'developing countries' were never undeveloped (a situation). They were underdeveloped (a process) by their relationship with the metropolitan countries. Even during colonial times a balanced and critical understanding of colonialism was not absent. The empirical recognition of colonialism for what it was an advance. Dependency and neo-Marxist theories recognise in different ways the peculiar 'twisting' effect that colonialism had on the colonised country, something that did not happen in the metropolitan countries.

I have received favourable responses to the above and am now seeking a wider hearing. The very least we can do is try to organise an international workshop to discuss the matter. If you are in general agreement with the above please send me comments/suggestions/references/proposed papers/names of other interested parties at: colhist@thai.com. ◀

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