

## I

My contribution to this opening debate on the Humanities in Australia assumes that Humanities scholars comprise a large and assorted professional grouping that is reasonably able to recognise itself, but still unused to self-justification in terms that exceed the disciplinary terms of our training and experience. We know what we do, and why and how we do it, but we may not have spent enough time thinking about how to convey this to our fellow citizens, to policy brokers, and to the wider world. However, having heard the Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford claim in an ABC interview<sup>1</sup> that his University has become excellent in research ‘over many decades and centuries’, the path seems clear for a bit of brainstorming. The VC’s claim is both fair enough and slightly problematic, as the concept of research is relatively younger than several centuries, although ‘scholarship’ is a much older precept and one that of course underpins the principles of research as we understand it today. The doctorate, arguably the bedrock of professional research, was actually an invention of the Islamic world that spread to European philosophy (not the Humanities in general and not the natural sciences at that point) in the Middle Ages, was eventually refined into a research qualification in Germany, and exported to the US in the late nineteenth century, and onwards to Britain in the early twentieth century. Decades then? But to nitpick is probably futile; we know what he means and why he means it – his job is to convince the alumni and the international parents out there – that their money is safer with Oxford than in younger hands. He also made a nice segue in the interview – linking the success of the now 20-year-old Said Business School to its association with Oxford’s traditions in the Humanities. Apart from teasing the VC of my alma mater (and everything I learned about the Qingming scroll is based on the education I received in the Ashmolean library), my point is that the politics of value are being played right across the sector. We are in it for the long haul, and laying claim to the grounds of the debate that surely will affect our survival is our responsibility. For example, I am at a University where doctorates based on arts practice and design principles are crucial to the development of the institution’s intellectual endeavour. This is the latest iteration of the doctorate. Standards and categories of knowledge need to be addressed, debated and critiqued to make it as robust and meaningful as any other higher degree. This is a great opportunity for the Humanities to be inclusive but rigorous, to acknowledge the implicit challenge of new forms of writing – visual, incremental, grounded, iterative, fictive, professionally transferable – but to maintain a common goal of an ethics of scholarship as our contribution to the world through our students.

## II

The notes I offer below are partial as they are couched in my particular areas of research, and drawn from my personal and professional observations of Australia over fourteen years of residency (including 12 years of citizenship). These factors (life, migrancy, scholarship, field research) are in turn informed by an abiding interest in the concept of mature public conversation. I would characterise mature conversation as an *agonistic regime of publicness (Öffentlichkeit)*, filled with the energy of passionate and ethically rigorous interlocutors. It is enabled by and constitutive of self-disciplined freedoms, and requires to be enriched by information. Humanities scholars should be contributors to that conversation, and so should social scientists, scientists, creative practitioners, politicians and professionals – indeed the citizenry as whole. This of course is an ideal scenario.

As Humanities scholars we have a responsibility to articulate our demonstrable value to the public good, but we should not necessarily do that only in terms of financial benefit or commercial viability, although nor should we eschew all pragmatics in the management of our own disciplines and institutions. Worlds change, new interests develop, and technologies of knowledge produce new ways of thinking. Humanities scholarship is part of that evolutionary process, and it is thus inevitable that the focus of what and how we investigate and teach will shift. That said, there are certain grounds for our work that seem immutable if we aspire to informed conversation: first, accurate description (of an event, a passage of literature, a film sequence, a biography and so on); second, understanding of the context of that description; and third, generic and specific modes of communicating the implications and resonance of our discoveries. Thereby we enable an historically acute critique of the character of the nation, the region, and world in which

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-07-28/vice-chancellor-hamilton-promotes-oxford-education/2813436?section=business>

Australians live, which I would argue is essential to the production and maintenance of a coherent and educated citizenry, and thus to a skein of values, expectations, ethical parameters and aspirations which are held *more or less* in common. Without the *publicness* that this ‘more or less in common’ represents, the way in which we do business one with another would be harder and crueller. The idea of ‘in common’ is neither essentialist, nor is it post-modern, rather it aspires to a sense of being able to converse, to do politics well, to make sense of one another. It refers us to Paul Gilroy’s requirement that fellow citizens in Britain make a commitment to understand each other *literally*. *There is no such thing as a foreign accent* – whether Yorkshire, West Indian, or Geordie. Hearing difference is one thing, using it as an excuse to decide whom to hear and when to listen is something else again. Australia has this problem too. It’s had it for a long time.

‘They sang to one another. Wunyeran initiated it, Cross accepting. It was a way to communicate, to say more of oneself than was possible with their limited shared vocabulary.’ (Scott, 2010, 129)

“Suddenly, he felt not fear, but a terrible anxiety. Faces - ... - had turned away from him. ... Figures at the periphery of Bobby’s vision fell away”. (Scott, 395)

### III

But none of this cuts much ice unless we can offer specialist knowledge. In the last section of my contribution I will quote from a paper I am working on at the moment. It is about markets: street markets, but also the market as an organising fiction and a political construct in Chinese visual culture. I am particularly interested in how the market is represented in films in China, but I also offer an example of how a larger national project is harnessed to cultural history. For our purposes here it serves as a reminder of how the Humanities are used to service power.

#### Scrolling back to the nation<sup>2</sup>

“As Barry Naughton points out in his analysis of Deng’s unprincipled pragmatism (in the face of Mao Zedong’s capricious approach to responsibility for failed policies), ‘Deng was a politician, a manager and a generalist whose most successful role was as the political godfather of economic reform’ (1993:492). Following the disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent famine (1958-1962) the policy direction to replenish China’s economy was agreed centrally and led by Deng and Chen Yun (Naughton argues that Deng himself was not an economist but he enacted economic reform suggested by those who were), but was only later seen as a direct criticism and threat to the power of Mao Zedong (see Figure 1). Thus it was related after the event to the instigation of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, and the concomitant humiliation, torture and imprisonment of rightists. Deng himself was ‘purged in October 1966, as the party’s number two revisionist’ (Walder, 2009: 265), apparently for advocating in 1962 that farmland could be contracted to individual peasant households, even though Mao had actually himself suggested this in Anhui (Naughton, 496). The condemned market-oriented interventions in the early 1960s and the reiteration of similar approaches in 1978 and since, were conceptually new, in that they sought to create a hybrid of planned and market economies to take China forward. Nonetheless, whilst the hybrid approach was contemporary - and related the successful strategies of Singapore in the 1960s under Lee Kwan-Yew and 1990s under Goh - it built on the experience of Chinese markets and capitalisation over many centuries, as indeed did Singaporean developmentalism and neo-Confucian rhetoric.

**Figure 1.** Mao Zedong, Chen Yun, Zhu De, clay figures at the exhibition to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party of China, National Museum of History, 1 July 2011. Sculptor Wang Gongliang, 2007. Photograph courtesy of the author.

The effects of reform, ironically given the CCP’s early focus on ameliorating the peasants’ land poverty, the push towards an accelerated mixed economy in the 1980s and 1990s re-awakens memories of the land

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<sup>2</sup> This section is extracted from my paper on markets and anti-realism in Chinese cinema, first developed as a discussion paper for the UQ closed workshop, *Markets, materiality and consumer practice* (May 26-27 2011), convened by Gay Hawkins and Anna Pertierra, and rewritten as ‘What’s Real? Markets and Memories in Contemporary Chinese Film?’ for the *Revolution, Realism and World Cinema Symposium*, convened by Richard Smith, University of Sydney, 21, June 2011.

management strategies of the T'ang and Sung dynasties (618 -960 AD; 960-1279 AD). At that time, the collectivisation for the few created great wealth for large landowners, and huge insecurity for the peasants. This is not a spurious connection, but one promoted by China's own market extravaganza. Indeed, for anyone who visited the remarkable China Pavilion at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, the highpoint was surely the animated version of the *Qing Ming riverside scroll* (*qingming shanghe tu*). This exhibit animated a famous Sung dynasty scroll-painting (Northern Sung 960-1127; and Southern Sung 1127-1279 AD). The activity of the scroll is set in a riverside city, and describes a street scene that flows through the city and beyond the city walls. The visual narrative flows from day into night, and celebrates the many trading activities: hawkers, small stalls and established shops that characterised a perfect southern cityscape of the time. Valerie Hansen (1996) expertly places the scroll in its twelfth century context, describing how the story of the scroll is a metonymical vision of the empire at its peak: a voluptuous feast of imperial trade routes and consolidated wealth. Every transactional scale is represented here, from men bringing raw materials on donkeys into the town, to ships bearing grain from other parts of the empire, to shops for knick-knacks and frippery; all are evidence that 'a complex network covered the entire empire, with some goods, like grain, salt and luxury items, being traded across regions' (Hansen: 2). Hansen also tells us that street markets had been strictly regulated up until the twelfth century, particularly in regards to times of access within the city walls. This was presumably to protect the integrity of city defences in walled towns. But by the time of the Qingming scroll, markets were apparently operating freely on either side of the city walls. The rural and urban worlds are not integrated in the scroll but the narrative suggests a sense of fluidity between the temporal and spatial management of the two populations.

Unfortunately, the reality underpinning any image of rural life consisted of land deprivation for the peasants and land accretion for the gentry. Etienne Balazs' famous account of Chinese agriculture and the peasantry tells a story of land appropriation and exploitation. Over the centuries preceding and during the Sung, the independent peasant farmer had become a tenant in most cases and a serf in others. Balazs quotes the Southern Sung historian Sima Kuang :

He [the peasant] is exposed to periodic catastrophes such as flood, droughts, frost, hail, locust and other insects. If the harvest is good, public and private debts [to the tax collector and usurers] use it up between them. Grain and silk cease to belong to him before they have even left the threshing floor or been removed from the loom. He eats the husk, wears coarse cloth, and remains neither nourished nor clothed' (1964: 124)

None such penury is evident in the scroll. If, as according to Hansen is the case, the city is supposed to be an idealised city in a Han Chinese empire built on trade with the entire populace in harmony, that omission is not surprising. The title of the scroll is also disputed. It could mean 'going along the river', or 'festival of Spring by the river', or – as suggested by Hansen – 'peaceful times' ('peace reigns over the river'). Thus, she argues, peaceful times are considered times of abundance in trade and commerce, and, peaceful times are designated as periods of Chinese self-rule. This point refers not to a generalised image of trade and well-being, but refers (argues Hansen) to the downfall of the Northern Sung in 1127, when the empire was divided between the Southern lands and the lands to the north, which were occupied by the Jin dynasty, a non-Han incursion. Her suggestion is that the artist was working after 1127 and created an ideal cityscape as a subtle critique of the loss of empire and the destruction of the integrity of the Song. She further comments that this is an allegorical tactic that has been used by more recent Chinese artists and film-makers, a point that is supported by film scholars (Kraicer, 1997; Farquhar, 2002).

The story of the twelfth century Qingming scroll, and the decision to animate it in the 2010 China Pavilion gives insight on the evolving story of the Chinese market. It reminds us that China has an official cultural memory – or is creating one – and that this reiterates the themes of the Reform era. The animation of the Qingming scroll links a favoured *Han Chinese* imperial period to the present day, and to the precepts of *tianxia*, a term that means 'all under heaven', recently linked to sovereignty and patriotism, and is now engaged in China's soft power or 'charm offensive' (Callaghan, 2007:2) The patriotic blockbuster *Hero* (dir Zhang Yimou, 2002) is a *tianxia* inspired narrative, 'violence must be abandoned if peace (*heping*) within *tianxia* is to be restored, .. it is necessary to tolerate ... the unification of nations by force in order to pursue universal peace', (Chen and Rawnsley, 2010:78). The scroll, which was perhaps originally painted to

comment in the loss of sovereignty or '*tianxia*' in the Sung, is enlisted by the animation and the display in the China Pavilion to contemporary international relations as a new, muscular *tianxia*. The scroll's animated second life allies the idea of national integrity and peaceful harmony to an image of rural-urban cohesion and the image of trade being plied across the seas in a market organised and imagined by a benign Chinese empire. An empire that deals with its own regions on its own terms, and supports its own growth with its own wealth. Crucially the scroll portrays a land at peace, a land that is not frightened to breach its own city walls with the energy of tradespeople and peasant hawkers. China's constant message to its twenty first century citizens is that Reform China is a harmonious society (*hexie shehui*) that seeks to harmonise the nation through a peaceful commitment to inter-regional, and global, trade and economic development. The scroll at the China Pavilion links this mantra of harmony to the early glory days of the Song, leapfrogging backwards through time to avoid the embarrassments of the excesses of Mao, the long years of foreign dynasties, and promoting an image of peaceful regions linked by trade united as something called 'China' in perpetuity.

Ironically perhaps, the scroll also hides the precarious position of the peasant whose labour supported the wealth of the Sung gentry and tradespeople. Now again, the peasant-farmer is the most vulnerable social figure in the economy. The high rate of rural-urban migration (reportedly up to 120 million within and across provincial boundaries by 2005) is both a result of rural decline and a contributing factor to the vulnerability of workers on arrival (Tao and Xu, 2007). At a meeting of agricultural economists and social scientists in Beijing in 2003, I listened to a speaker, a psychologist by training, explain that the *nongmin*, peasants, were still the wooden blocs exemplified by the character Runtu, in Lu Xun's famous story, *New Year Sacrifice*. For a state based on agrarian revolution, the Runtu factor is an indicator of the uncertainty of rural subjectivity and value in China over many centuries, despite the laudations made to rurality and Chinese countryside in literature and art (Zhang, 1996). The peasant condition is one thematic that can be traced in Chinese film treatments of social change since 1978, and for good reason.

The animation of the Qingming scroll in 2010 lends historical legitimacy to the national narrative of the contemporary Chinese nation, which is now a much larger geo-political entity than the Northern Sung. The animated version of an ideal past gives the nod to the energy of market trading at the level of the street, it references popular cultural practice – ie the particular version of social shopping- flannerie of Chinese urban sociality (*sanbu – taking a stroll, usually in the company of the crowd*) - and it makes the accelerated development of Reform seem like a simple recapitulation of China's finest hours."

#### IV

The story I have offered is just that – a scholarly story – one that you must make of what you will, although I have framed it in a way that suggests my sense of its relevance. I am describing what I have observed, grounding that in the context of my education and my fieldwork, and suggesting that within my narrative there are implications for how we address the question of China, a place of extraordinary richness for the Humanities: art, literature, history, philosophy, but also a place which figures largely on the map of the modern world. But of course, like the Oxford VC's gloss on research 'over many decades and centuries', and like China's gloss on harmony and national integrity over several dynasties (if not all), so I am glossing China as always central to how we think about human endeavour, political rhetoric, and about our place in the larger world. It's a trick but it's a contribution. It pushes the conversation a little further from the shore.

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