

Editor's Introduction

positions: asia critique: twenty years after

With issue 20.1, *positions: east asia cultures critique* becomes *positions: asia critique*. This change opens wider the “Asia” or “Asias” contributors may expect to reference in their work. The *cultures* signifier has faded into the intellectual history of an earlier time; the word *critique* remains. The proposal that critique be the mark of an imminent apocalyptic claim to historical truth is not vacated. And finally this issue marks twenty years after the founding of the project and a moment when we invent an appropriate anniversary issue for this journal. All the essays here focus on the future and what, in light of our accomplishments as well as the passage of a full generation of scholarship, may be great issues on the historical horizon.

Rice University's Chao Center for Asian Studies hosted a workshop on October 21–24, 2011, to evaluate *positions* and its intellectual projects, past and future. Some scholars who received invitations could not attend.

Several essays are included in the issue because they addressed a core thematic, though the author had not joined the workshop. The initial criteria for inclusion were: experience having guest-edited a *positions* issue; having founded or served as the senior editor of a critical journal; having been a critic of the journal; and/or having joined the project at some point over the last twenty years. After days of presentation and intense discussions, the papers entered *positions*' double-blind review and were recast according to reviewer recommendations. At the workshop younger scholars asked me about the history of my involvement in founding the journal; the result of that discussion is a group interview with the senior editor.

I have edited these essays to provide contemporary readers a way of appreciating the ideological and intellectual conditions that attended the journal's founding, since the birth of a critical journal is one indication of chaos in the sign systems. In the first section of this anniversary issue, we focus on the term *area studies*, which appears in the early years of the publication as an imprecation, perhaps because the institutional and intellectual foundations of US area studies took so many years of archival, documentary, analytic, deconstructive, biographical, emotional work to excavate into the light of day. Harry Harootunian's "‘Memories of Underdevelopment’ after Area Studies" reviews what area studies meant to critical scholars of our generation and broaches some of the reasons why it so bedeviled early *positions* scholars and readers. Many contributors and readers then had mixed feelings about the ways they themselves had acquired language competency or financed their fieldwork. Some also felt ambivalent about having received such excellent mentoring from area studies specialists whose expertise stemmed from a missionary background or corporate imperialist family interests in Asia in the nineteenth century or even from US federally funded training in formal "area studies." Doubts and worries aside, the project of *positions* in the early years was to displace area studies' political epistemology, scholarly methods, historiographic traditions, and core analytic categories.

Rosalind Morris's "Populist Politics in Asian Networks" highlights *positions*' role in shaping these fresh alternatives and in opening many ways to reconsider the problematic term *politics* itself in scholarly analysis and criticism. Morris's approach embeds a critique of area studies, defined as an expertise that aggrandizes state projects on behalf of the United States and

its corporate arm. Her evaluation provides a critique of models of development and democracy that the area studies tradition had systemically applied to Southeast Asia and it suggests a new way of approaching the core question, “What is the political here?” Her essay is a testament to the ability of talented contemporary scholars to supersede the platform area studies imposed without abandoning the field of struggle over scholarly expertise, familiarity of life, and political expectations in other parts of the world.

The final essay in this first section comes from Naoki Sakai, whose essay “*positions* and Positionalities: After Two Decades” supplies an explicit retrospective criticism of models of “the political” in the work of both area studies development and of its nemesis, those savage critics of area studies who were, in fact, our teachers. Sakai’s essay seeks to displace the “national assembly” style of political representation (the Left, the Right, and the center) with a theoretically informed, intellectually viable way of fathoming positionalities in political criticism. Like the two previous essays, Sakai’s contribution examines a series of past intellectual practices—the author might say deadening intellectual ruts—which scholars in the *positions* project took as demanding interrogation and displacement.

The second general section of this twentieth anniversary issue points out viable directions of ongoing and future scholarship. My essay, “Advertising Ephemera and the Angel of History,” adapts Walter Benjamin’s immanent critique to evaluate Chinese vernacular sociological theories in relation to ephemeral, highly coded advertising containing social content and published in the new media throughout the first third of the twentieth century. The essay offers a systematic intellectual strategy for a postregional studies where the explicit stake is to critically investigate the political economy of liberalism’s rubbish in situ as it asserted social evolutionary political claims in a vibrant, pervasive, and compulsory consumer culture.

Rolando B. Tolentino’s “Positioning *positions* in the Writing to the Future” is a passionate brief to make history through future writing that disturbs the conceits of the fascist state and the fictions of globalization. Through a series of painful and sophisticated cinema experiments, Tolentino links the arts and thought in Philippine liberation movements to the fixations of the gridlocked capitalist system, where “shares” take precedence over property, the “ownership society” overrides land reform, and the numbers of activ-

ists assassinated and scholars derailed from their primary responsibility of critique, disclosure, and warning creeps upward. Perhaps of all these essays Tolentino's offers the fiercest optimism, for the time of debate does not pertain; only the time of writing into a future that must address life and death is germane.

Jesook Song's "Positioning Asia in a Global Future? An Example through Rethinking Finance" points out our responsibility to analyze new capitalist formation and question how finance works in theory and in everyday life. A social scientist, Song works on the broad question of finance through the question of how different kinds of Korean women secure habitation. In Song's elaboration we see a kind of work that a generation of scholarship has made possible. That her subjects are female renters in the real estate market instead of hopefuls on the marriage market is now an unremarkable, though still fresh and underdeveloped, topic for general research. One learns about the general through the female subject here, just as if she were the universal subject.

Lisa Rofel addresses the question of how *positions* got so queer. In her "Queer *positions*, Queering Asian Studies," Rofel tracks the journal's history of establishing the politics of sexual liberation and everyday sexuality. In her own writing she has developed through the decades a means of knitting together a number of strands of critical theory to suggest ways that queerness demands attention and ways that existing projects require the revivification of sustained critique. She presents a notion of queer Marxism and thus points her essay toward the future while rooting her comments in the history of the journal's path-breaking publications.

Angela Zito is also mindful of the practices of the journal and its record of publication. In "Reading as Watching: What We See and What We Get," the author presents herself as reading and in relation to the practice of reexamining the distinctive visual appearance of the journal. She comments on both what has happened in the selection of *positions*' visual attributes as well as what, given our circumstances, should happen in the next decades in light of advanced technologies. In this sense, Zito opens up the question of why the journal is so oriented to a certain style of art in its communication with readers.

As a relative newcomer to the journal, Boreth Ly's deceptively informal

“Buddhist Walking Meditations and Contemporary Art of Southeast Asia” draws the reader into questions regarding the religiosity of political commitment and remembrance. The spiritual practice of walking meditation is the framework for his contemplation as well as an opening rumination on what is encoded in the arts that he presents. His suggestion that decoding contemporary arts requires an understanding of the spiritual in every day reminds us of the intimate uses of scholarship.

This preoccupation surfaces in a different register in Tina Mai Chen’s “Asian Boundaries, Documentary Regimes, and the Political Economy of the Personal.” A robust historian’s prose animates this historical case of how reading border documents enables her to speculate not so much on the subject of a discourse, but on the political economy of the personal. Here the evidence is startling in its obviousness and banality and leads Chen to a most sophisticated consideration of how migrants negotiate political strictures and labor pressures to sustain the personal and to express it.

In the third section of the anniversary issue, Wang Hui addresses his association with *positions* as one of the journal’s founding affiliates in the short essay “Is a New Interationalism Possible?” His reminiscences can be read as a reflection on what negotiations are set in motion through intellectual engagement. I, too, recall my work with him, this unfamiliar editor of another journal, as a process of stumbling—socially, linguistically, and emotionally—toward responsibility. That we spoke our mother tongues to one another while understanding the speech of the guest is a testament to how such negotiations take place.

A translated interview, “A Dialogue on *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought: Liberating the Object and an Inquiry into the Modern*,” introduces Wang Hui in his capacity as historian. It provides the backdrop to Claudia Pozzana and Alessandro Russo’s “Circumstances, Politics, and History,” which argues that the process that *positions* and other scholarly projects have pursued these long years is changing the conditions for writing and interpreting history; how to grasp the categories that structure thought, how to negotiate the era of declining hegemony in the academic world of US-dominated Asian studies, and how to evaluate new historiography are all at stake in these dialogues.

There are finally several more informal elements of this issue that bear

comment. First, “‘A Relentlessly Productive Venue’: Interview with Senior Editor, Tani Barlow,” enables me to respond to questions from associates. Not everyone that was asked to participate in this interview was able to do so. My criteria for engaging interlocutors were to invite queries from singularly positioned intellectuals, to vary their inquiries, and to address particularly questions about how the project works. As per our custom of publishing commentary, Norman Spencer’s documentary, “Ten Years of Queer Cinema in China,” shows in black and white photographs the passage of a decade of experimental arts in the People’s Republic of China. Maya Kóvskaya’s “Traversing Thresholds—A Showcase of Contemporary Art from Across Asia” gives a milieu and logic to the spectacular vision of contemporary arts debuting in this first issue of the renamed journal. New names, new technologies, new economies, new avenues for the difficult common expression of a current painful conjuncture are the ground for Kóvskaya’s curatorial project and make it possible for the journal to publish these remarkable artists’ work. Finally, in the spirit of what never ends—journal production, ghosts, memories—we close with Christophe Robert’s “The Return of the Repressed: Uncanny Spaces of Nostalgia and Loss in Trãn Anh Hùng’s *Cyclo*.”

Tani Barlow, Senior Editor