

Envisioning cultural commoning: New Cultural Commons editors' dialogue on Global South perspectives, inclusivity and Cultural Studies

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Siao Yuong Fong** 

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Siao Yuong Fong (Rong) and Jian Lin joined the editorial team of EJCS in 2023 as Co-Editors of Cultural Commons and Book Reviews. The following is a conversation, conducted over email in late 2023 and early 2024, between the two editors to introduce themselves to the journal.

Who we are and our relationship to Cultural Studies and EJCS

Rong (11th November 2023, Lancaster):

My relationship with Cultural Studies started quite late. My academic background is in communications, and I spent a good part of my twenties working in television and theatre. I was introduced to Cultural Studies by accident when I took an optional module at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) whilst doing an MA in Film Studies and I credit it for eventually sending me down my later path towards a PhD and an academic career.

I think my attraction to Cultural Studies perhaps stems from my background in Singapore where, in my opinion, research is often depoliticized, or perhaps, where

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research politics is often imagined in a very specific way as tied to ‘instrumental’ research problems and practical solutions. I found that limiting in terms of where I could take my research and theoretical curiosities and desired a research approach grounded in its commitment to politics while being imaginative in how that political engagement could look like. Cultural Studies, as unabashedly both a theoretical project and a political project, offered me that opening that helped me think about the kinds of questions I was interested in relation to my research interests in media production politics in Asia.

Having been exposed to Cultural Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, where I read Stuart Hall in conversation with writings in Continental Philosophy and Anthropology, the contours of my understanding of the discipline were later influenced by the works coming out of the decolonizing project that is *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. Currently, the Media and Cultural Studies programme I teach is housed within a Sociology department. This sometimes uncomfortable occupying of, this amorphous going in-between and always exceeding of multiple intellectual spaces is how, I think, Cultural Studies continues to invite us to consider possibilities and potentialities beyond boundaries, whether disciplinary, cultural, political, or otherwise. I hope we can continue to do and invite this kind of work with the European Journal of Cultural Studies (EJCS), in line with the call for openness and more possibilities from our current editors (Chow and Saha, 2020; Kay, 2024).

As a scholar who has made use of ethnography in my research, I have always wrestled with that tension between theory and the lived experience (Hall, 2019: 75–76). And I think the potential afforded by that tension is something so valuable that Cultural Studies offers as a theoretical discipline interested in issues of power grounded in empirical analysis. The European Journal of Cultural Studies’ vision that theorizations should emerge from lived experience is why EJCS is one of my favourite journals. Imagine the joy I felt when Helen Wood and Chow Yiu Fai invited me to join the editorial team! I was really excited to join the team.

Having been in this editorial role for a few months now, I have been reflecting on our work so far. I think the fact that the both of us took so long to write this piece speaks to the demands of the academic profession in this current conjuncture and the forces that often pull us away from the kinds of work that may not fall within our professional Key Performance Indicators, to use capitalist corporate speak. In the UK academic system where I am currently working, this can be any writing that is not subjected to the blind peer-review process and therefore not REF-able. Both the Cultural Commons and the Book Reviews sections that we edit fall within this broad category. So, with so many demands on academics’ time, how can we provide not just a *publishing space* outside of the usual academic publishing environment for exploring pertinent issues but also create an inviting *thinking space* that compels scholars to engage? I think this is one of the key challenges that I see for us as editors of Cultural Commons in EJCS.

Perhaps this is something we can reflect on together as editors on how we would like to shape the section moving forward. But before that, I would like to hear more from you, Jian. How did your relationship with Cultural Studies and EJCS start?

Jian (11th December 2023, Hong Kong):

Thank you, Rong. I must apologize for the delayed initiation and progression of this conversation. Somehow, I find myself emulating what Berg and Seeber call a ‘slow professor’. (2016) Rather than deliberately contesting the prevailing ‘culture of speed’ that characterizes contemporary academia, my status as a junior scholar frequently seizes me by a plethora of roles, obligations, and, to mirror your terms, our professional ‘KPIs’ for publication and tenure.

But what makes my work as a teacher and academic profoundly enriching has to do with cultural studies. My first encounter with it was in 2012 upon relocating to Shanghai to undertake my Master’s degree in Cultural Industries Management – a discipline that enjoyed significant popularity in China then, spurred by the government’s aspiration to reconfigure the Chinese economy with a focus on creativity and high technology. In a fashion both serendipitous and peculiar, I encountered critical theories and cultural studies, which apparently take cultural/creative industries as objects of critique rather than celebration. During my secondary education, I did not epitomize what one living in Mainland China would traditionally consider a ‘good student’. In some respects, I was similar to the archetype of the British working-class youth of the 1960s as depicted by Hall – rebellious, angry and devoid of channels to a broader awareness of the world. Fortunately, the Chinese universities of that era, albeit bureaucratically analogous to the institutions of today, retained a semblance of the academic freedom and openness that had been fostered since the 1980s; a generation of humanities scholars held a genuine curiosity and fervent enthusiasm for social and critical theories originating from the outer world. I found myself amid this probably last vestige of academic leniency, equipping myself with the conceptual tools of Williams, Hall, Benjamin and Foucault to critically apprehend and reflect upon my existence within Chinese society.

In 2015, my academic journey led me to Amsterdam, where I received more rigorous training in cultural studies, earned my doctorate and solidified my resolve to pursue a career as a critical scholar. Reflecting upon my research endeavours since that time, I recognize that cultural studies have instilled in me an appreciation for the nuances, complexities and contradictions inherent in our world – a world that, much like the contemporary domains of culture and media, is fraught with fractures. I share your conviction that it is the disparity and tension between theoretical constructs and the realities of lived experiences that render cultural studies both invaluable and distinct.

While the EJCS has long been a source of inspiration for my work, my direct engagement with the journal only materialized during the early stages of the 2020 pandemic. Jeroen, Yiu Fai, and I collaborated on a short reflection on a pervasive sentiment at the time, which we conceptualized as bio-political nationalism (Kloet et al., 2020). This reflection was subsequently included in the Cultural Commons’ special section on COVID-19 where it garnered relatively considerable recognition. This foray into the publication influenced my perception of the Cultural Commons as a space committed to providing timely, empathetic responses to a world undergoing divisions and transformations; an endeavour that necessitates transcending the conventional doctrine of academic publishing. This approach, I believe, aligns seamlessly with the ethos, if not the legacy, of cultural studies.

Thanks to the generous invitation from Yiu Fai, I am now privileged to collaborate with you as an editor for the Cultural Commons. This role indeed presents challenges. Our objective, it seems, lies in forging connections with like-minded scholars, cultivating a community of knowledge yet ensuring its accessibility to the broader populace. Although the world today bears little resemblance to the era of Stuart Hall, I believe his call for ‘organic intellectuals without any organic point of reference’ (Hall, 2019) remains relevant to those of us aligned with the principles of cultural studies.

What do you think? Perhaps you can share more about your vision of Cultural Commons, especially cultural studies in our time.

Reflections on how we envision Cultural Commons

Rong (13th January 2024, Lancaster):

Thank you, Jian. That was a great piece you co-wrote with Jeroen and Yiu Fai. I remember reading it in the midst of lockdown in Singapore and thinking how great it was that EJCS houses critical responses written in a way that we were not seeing elsewhere. In a sense, the global pandemic around which the first Cultural Commons pieces were commissioned provided a unique opportunity for ‘commoning’ – a collective creation of a freely accessible pool of resources outside of state and market articulations responding to a globally collective experience. This presents a particular challenge for us as editors coming on board at this time. What does a Cultural Commons mean now that we’re past the pandemic? I really like your emphasis on the Cultural Commons encouraging ‘empathetic responses to a world undergoing divisions and transformations’ as this raises for me the question of Commons for whom?

If we are meant to cultivate a ‘community of knowledge’, as you say, how can we navigate the issue of inclusion and exclusion from this community? This question of who gets to define ‘the common’ is a particularly urgent one in the current climate of global divisions and geopolitics. While I am aware that we have the word ‘European’ in the name of our journal, which I have learnt from EJCS’s founding editors was more an indication of the locatedness of the journal rather than boundary setting (Hermes et al., 2017), it seems important that we have more conversations on what doing Cultural Studies from/of the Global South might mean if we are to take the idea of ‘commoning’ seriously. The two ideas – commons and the Global South – are not necessarily contradictory if we move beyond thinking about the Global South just in terms of geographical regions but also as a ‘placeholder for conditions of dispossession and survival . . . ultimately rooted in particular localities’ (Shome, 2019: 203). Taken in this sense, contemporary global conditions of dispossession are shifting, expanding and transforming the geographical boundaries of North and South, while deeply entangled in the very historical encounters that created them in the first place. If, like Raka Shome (2019) argued, ‘the Global South today is everywhere’ (p. 203), this double reading of the Global South as both place and condition seems to me like a productive starting point for exploring the opportunities, tensions and possibilities of ‘commoning’ in this era of identity and geopolitics, while ‘staying with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) of finding better ways of co-existing.

Looking at ‘commoning’ through the lenses of the Global South, I find two questions that emerge particularly compelling. The first has to do with Cultural Studies’ concerns

with giving voice to those excluded from the enclosure of neoliberal capitalism. With the penetration of global capitalism in all aspects of life and the encroachment of Global South *conditions* 'everywhere', the traditional boundaries between the power centres and the rest (whether conceptualized as popular cultures, working-class subcultures or the subaltern) are blurring. In this case, where do we locate and how can we imagine the strategic sites for engaging in cultural practices of 'commoning' and 'talking back' to the power centres? While there is no easy answer to this, I find Melani Budianta's (2019) idea of the 'smart kampung' inspiring. Budianta's (2019) research on Javanese villages in Indonesia drew on the idea of kampungs as 'marginalized but strategic nodules of critical interventions into the march of global capitalism' (p. 249). Embedded between the rural and urban, yet wired into transnational networks, kampungs are situated both inside and outside the system. Budianta envisioned political re-futuring in the 'smart kampung' as a doubling strategy, through concurrently staying within and engaging the system, and circumventing it through hegemonic reframing. I find these practices of bottom up critique, of carving out spaces for unsettling power relations within hegemony, particularly interesting in my own work and relevant for a vision of community-based commoning from within. I hope the Cultural Commons can become a sort of 'smart kampung' for those interested in Cultural Studies.

Second, in the spirit of 'commoning' as a means to forge coalitions 'from below', how can Cultural Studies hold on to the singularity of historical experiences while building translocal epistemologies and interventions, particularly when Cultural Studies from southern perspectives often run the risk of being ghettoized from theory building traditionally reserved for locales with claims to universality? Apart from making visible such differential power relationships, how can we move beyond recycling the idea of a commons as a theory in search of different geographical examples to also consider what 'commoning' means in different realities? As someone who struggle myself when writing about a region often deemed irrelevant for theory making, I think there are insights recessed in the tensions that come with the double consciousness of navigating and amalgamating multiple worlds. I particularly like Sarkar's (2019) call to find the potentiality in 'the production of impossible worlds and knowledge structures through the creative articulation of incommensurable cosmologies' (p. 229). I would love to see pieces experimenting with different ways of such 'creative articulation' being submitted to the Cultural Commons. How about you, Jian?

Jian (12 February 2024, Hong Kong):

I cannot agree more. The metaphor of the 'smart kampung' aptly captures the ethos of the cultural commons. The principle of commoning underscores the spirit of openness, in the hope of bringing cultural studies back into public life. As Jilly Kay (2020: 281) articulates in the first edition of 'Cultural Commons', we 'seek to act as a community of scholarship, discussion, and debate . . . that is against intellectual enclosure and extraction, and [that] encourages forms of intellectual experimentation'. In fact, all our CC pieces have been published with open access, and we explicitly invite timely and sharp provocations that are written in publicly accessible language.

At the same time, as you and our other journal editors have reiterated, the EJCS and the Cultural Commons in particular, should proactively give voice to the marginalized, excluded and vulnerable, especially those from the Global South. Our envisioning of the

Cultural Commons aligns with the previous Inter-Asia (Chen, 2010) and Trans-Asia cultural studies projects (de Kloet et al., 2019; Iwabuchi, 2019) to offer alternative epistemological paradigms that decolonize and dewesternize cultural studies. What Chow and de Kloet (2014) call ‘the specter of Europe’ still haunts today’s global knowledge production and cultural studies. The rest of the world, be it Asia or the ‘global South’, has been regarded for too long as only providing empirical data and footnotes that ‘either validate or invalidate Western theoretical propositions’ (Chen, 2010: 226). To decolonize and deimperialize knowledge production, Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) takes ‘Asia as method’ and calls for increased dialogue and inter-Asia referencing without being ensnared in the myth of ‘catching up’ with the West. The shared yet divergent historical and material conditions in Asia lead Chen to believe that multiplying frames of reference across neighbouring societies within Asia will dilute Western dominance and knowledge-power.

As a journal situated in the West but not identifying as ‘Western’ or ‘European’ (Hermes et al., 2017), the Cultural Commons of the EJCS should be regarded as creating a space to combat the enduring Anglo-Eurocentrism and its postcolonial knowledge-power. In this vein, we welcome contributions that employ the above-mentioned approaches and beyond to weaken the discursive power of the Europe/West. Moreover, we encourage our authors to embrace a global or ‘trans-global’ approach – to borrow the prefix from de Kloet et al. (2019) – highlighting the undercurrents and transformations brought about by border-crossing connections, flows and conjunctures. Our intention is not to endorse nativism, nationalism, regionalism or any form of academic parochialism, but to facilitate an inclusive co-imagination of future global subjectivities, which are multiple, fluid and deeply reflexive.

This means that the Cultural Commons rejects the view of the Europe/West as a natural progenitor of universalist theories, nor should we consider Asia or any part of the Global South as essentialized, exceptional localities. In other words, we might need to interrogate how Europe is conceptualized and where the boundaries of Asia, Africa and other parts of the world are defined simultaneously in our discussions about global cultural studies. It is equally imperative to maintain vigilant scrutiny over global hegemonies, along with regional disparities and power dynamics. To follow up on the point you raised, within the disjunctive process of globalization (Appadurai, 1990), the imagined boundaries between the so-called Global North and South are not only becoming blurred but increasingly irrelevant. Neoliberal globalization engenders its discontents in both the South and the North (Stiglitz, 2017), and our diagnosis of the associated challenges cannot be complete without inter-referencing across the globe. From where I am located, categorizing China within the Global South may be overly simplistic; a critical examination of its regional hegemony and associated knowledge-power likely requires extensive referencing with the histories of both neighbouring societies such as Japan and South Korea as well as global powers such as the United States. The struggles and anxieties of Chinese migrant workers in Foxcon Zhengzhou during the COVID lockdown in 2022 may prompt new inquiries when compared to the American working class’s grievances regarding job loss and the rise of far-right wing politics in the United States. Likewise, the stories of Chinese social media and e-commerce sellers expanding globally and their

exploitation of the Southeast Asian market and labour may shed light on the threat posed by China's tech power, as well as the renewed dynamics of global capitalism.

In my view, it is essential for the Cultural Commons to establish an intellectual environment that fosters the development and expansion of these alternative epistemological paradigms. This implies the need for a more courageous departure from the professional constraints constructed by academic institutions and disciplinary boundaries, as well as a more proactive facilitation of conversations across diverse communities. Relatedly, this suggests the need to encourage more inquiries into themes that may not immediately align with traditional cultural studies but are becoming increasingly urgent in our time, such as climate change, environmentalism, post-humanities and new media technologies.

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Biographical notes

Siao Yuong Fong (Rong) is a Lecturer of Global Media and Inequality at the Sociology Department of Lancaster University. Her first book *Performing Fear in Television Production: Practices of an Illiberal Democracy* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022) is an ethnographic study of authoritarian media production in Singapore. Her current research focuses on production geopolitics in the Southeast Asian Sinosphere with the global rise of China. She joined EJCS as co-editor of Cultural Commons and Book Reviews in March 2023.

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