

Displacement, Differentiation, Difference: A Critical Perspective on Globalization

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In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai argues that electronic media and migration have caused an epochal rupture between the modern and the postmodern, creating transnational, transterritorial, and translocal solidarities of taste, opinion, and pleasure, and radically weakening the control of the nation-state over subjectivities and discourses decentered, mobile, and deterritorialized in nature. Globalization is not the story of homogenization; modernity at large is modernity fragmented, differentiated and uncontainable by definitive boundaries. Part of the implications of Appadurai's notion of modernity at large seems to be that vast numbers of historically formed cultural and ethnic localities and identities constantly brought into contact and conflict with one another by media and migration have catalyzed a stampede of uncontrollable micro- and macro-modernities. Like the figure of Derridean differance, the trope of modernity is susceptible to infinite splitting or protean transformation. Appadurai's conception of globalization as a process of radical fragmentation or differentiation of modernity recalls Jan Nederveen Pieterse's assertion that globalization, a process of hybridization which gives rise to a global melange, constitutes "the framework for the amplification and diversification of 'sources of the self'" (45, 52). In Pieterse's view, "there are as many modes of globalization as there are globalizing agents and dynamics or impulses" (46). Appadurai's and Pieterse's definitions of globalization are somewhat echoed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, authors of *Empire*, who describe global capitalism as "a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule," which "establishes no territorial center of power" (xii), and as an empire of fragmented, hybridized, mobile, and violated multitudes. The New Empire, which is

global capitalism renamed, rules through strategies of displacement, differentiation, mobility, and fragmentation. This empire feeds on difference, for “[m]arketing itself is a practice based on differences, and the more differences are given, the more marketing strategies can develop. . . . Every difference is an opportunity” (152). I find the view of globalization as a story of fragmentation and differentiation shared by these critics illuminating and misleading at the same time. It offers a certain cognitive mapping of the global reality under investigation, but it risks glossing over the *Zeitgeist* of global capitalism—that is, what globalization globalizes is the economic and cultural logic of global capitalism itself. As Marx noted 150 years ago, “The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. . . . And as in material so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property . . . from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature” (46-7). A global literature, a global culture, this is exactly what global capital is making in the world today. Global economics creates a capitalist culture, and as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, in what Ernst Mandel calls the purer stage of capitalism, which is our own, the distinction between economics and culture has disappeared and “[c]ommodification today is also aestheticization” (“Globalization” 53). Indeed, one cannot separate economics from culture. How can someone drive a Mercedes Benz, wear Jones New York, and use Motorola’s cell phone in New York, Beijing or Istanbul be innocent of consumerist culture-ideology? As Leslie Sklair has succinctly pointed out, “When a global brand establishes a set of meanings for us and our friends and many others we do not know personally, we are engaged in a typical culture-ideology transnational practice” (8).

Radical displacement and differentiation are two defining features of the age of global capitalism. Digital telecommunications has thoroughly deterritorialized and decentered our geographical sense of the globe; electronic media and migrations have created vast numbers of borderless, transnational and transimmigrant communities, diasporic, mobile and uncontrollable. Global flows of commodity, information, finance, biopower, images and technology have triggered no end of displacement, differentiation, and hybridization. Western spatial, commercial, discursive, political, and ideological language is transported into non-Western spaces; non-Western or indigenous cultural resources, craftsmanship, and images are consumed in the West. Various non-Western ethnic images, themes, and narrative plots are appropriated by Hollywood and various Hollywood photographic and soundtrack techniques, themes, and plots displaced into the non-Western cinema. Theory, ideology, and technology are translated, and transplanted. Spaces, images, and concepts are displaced and differentiated. However, all these displaced and differentiated ideas, images and commodities amount to little more than manifestations of the same economic and cultural logic. In *The Seeds of Time*, Jameson remarks that, in the postmodern age, the same persists thorough absolute difference, and absolute change equals stasis. Post-Fordism and postmodernism are synonymous, for post-Fordism designates products in such a way that precisely suits the tastes and needs of local consumers--design, shape, color, size, etc. Thus these products cease to be original. So the binary opposition of identity and difference are no longer oppositions; they constitute an antinomy. Global difference today is the same as global identity, for difference today has become standard or standardized in that difference is being (re)produced uniformly and standardly (Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* 17-19). Differentiation is not equivalent to difference and differentiation

does not necessarily create difference. If global capitalism deploys and depends on the strategy of differentiation to penetrate the world market and to spread consumerist culture-ideology, then what it promotes is ultimately capitalist globalization itself. The cultural logic of global capitalism is marked by the “return of the sameness over and over again, in all its psychological desolation and tedium” (Jameson, *Late Marxism* 16). And this cultural logic defined by commodity reification and depthlessness is, I will argue, what is truly at large today and it marches hand in hand with global capitalist economics. It has relegated innovative modernism to historical archives; it is erasing all forms of Otherness resistant to its development, colonizing nature and the unconscious. In this paper, I will argue that displacement and differentiation do not lead to difference, but breed sameness at the level of cultural logic. I present this argument through the optic of the impact of globalization on contemporary China.

To talk about the China’s engagement with globalization is certainly first of all to speak to the displacement of the Chinese, to borrow terms from Appadurai, from their traditional ethnoscaples, technoscaples, fianacescaples, mediascappes, and ideoscaples, to speak to their geographical, social, and cultural, and institutional deterritorialization. Global capital is penetrating into every social and political space, and China is becoming “a fully capitalised society” and has been completely brought “into the global capitalist mode and relations of production (Wang 26). Never before have the Chinese been so awe-stricken by the Western world’s perceived superiority in technology, economy and ideology, and never before have they been so anxious to give up their centuries-old cultural, ethical and political legacy for the eternal now of consumerist jouissance and fulfilment. Global capitalism, unlike erstwhile forms of capitalism, is conquering China through multinational capital and

through the complicity of its people's uncritical acceptance of Western culture. There is a general, multiple displacement and deterritorialization happening in China: Geographically, tens of millions of the population are moving from the country to the city, becoming the lumpenproletariat—the mobile, shifting, homeless, placeless, and faceless *liumin*; tens of thousands of Chinese are immigrating to the West, and in both movements, the Chinese have finally cast off their centuries-old east-or-west-home-is-the-best ideology in choosing to space over place, borrow terms from I-fu Tuan, cosmos over hearth, freedom over security.¹ Culturally, the Chinese find themselves radically shocked out of and displaced from their previous horizon of imagination and expectation, their previous modes of feeling and representation, their conventional literary and artistic repertoire and topography. Politically a radical rupture in their political imaginary has displaced them from the Maoist project of modernity. Socially, they find themselves displaced from their traditional and familiar spatial, communicational, communitarian, interpersonal language, discourse, and relations. All of a sudden global capitalism sweeps the Chinese with their long-repressed desire for consumer commodity off their feet, throwing them staggering into the geopolitical and geocultural space of global capitalism, decentered, deterritorialized, disoriented, and displaced. The past two decades have witnessed the coming back or emerging of all kinds of cultural practices, ideologies, modes of production, religions, customs, and modes of representation in contemporary China, and all these incompatible phenomena are reconciled and unified by one desire and one logic—the desire for profit; the logic of capital.

Global capital towards the end of twentieth century is wiser than the British warships in the 1840s. It knocks open the China door not with cannons but with Canons; it invades the forbidden space of central kingdom mentality not with troops, fleets, and

artillery but with ideas, images, and consumer goods. It customises, modifies and renames itself to make it welcome to the Chinese. When Coca Cola and Pepsi were first imported to China, for example, few people liked them, for they taste so different from Chinese tea which has been China's national soft drink for over two thousand years. Then transnational capitalists had Coca Cola and Pepsi transliterated into "*Kekou Kele*" and "*Baishi Kele*," which respectively mean in Chinese "good taste and great joy" and "all enjoyable." Then they quickly became popular in China, because the Chinese set great store by sounds and names of things--what Western cultural critics call "symbolic wish-fulfillment." All such adaptations to a differential locality are, again, strategies of globalization invented to open the door of the Chinese market. To say that capitalism feeds on difference is to say that capitalism grants areas, nation-states, and communities of different races, cultural practices and ethnic traditions uniform memberships of the capitalist club, to subsume them into the global Empire of capital, and to ultimately integrate plural trajectories of modernity into one single route of development. When we talk about capitalism feeding on difference, we refer to those concrete strategies and practices of customizing commodities to suit local preferences and tastes, of building Chevrolets, Toyotas, BMWs, Boeings, Airbuses, Toshiba lab-top computers, refrigerators, NECs, and computer softwares to meet local needs and likes, of fostering capitalists and technocrats with different racial features, wearing different ethnic costumes, and eating different ethnic foods, of creating the America-centered structure of feeling and commodity fetishism in Nigeria, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Tibet, Taiwan, Indonesia, Canada, Columbia, and Yugoslavia.

The McDonald's corporation today has 25,000 franchises in 115 countries, and every day there are 1% of the world's population eating at Macdonald's. Those overseas

franchises are locally run and conform to local needs. They regularly modify their regional menus to conform to local tastes. McDonald's in Egypt, for example, serves a McFelaful; McDonald's in Japan offers "seaweed burgers"; India's McDonald's deletes beef from their menus. Some French McDonald's restaurants serve rabbit.² Up to now there are 460 franchised Macdonald's restaurants in 74 large and medium cities in China. The first one started in Shenzhen in 1990 and the second appeared in Wangfujing, the busiest shopping and commercial district in Beijing, the largest one in size in the world by then. McDonald's in Beijing serves Sichuan spicy chicken, red bean porridge and other local things. In tandem with Macdonald's are KFC, Pizza Hut, and Starbucks in Beijing and other cities in China. They all regularly alter or we say customize their menus to attract local customers. At Pizza Hut in China, for example, one can have Peking Duck served in the same manner as is Quanjude Peking Duck restaurants in Beijing. The displacement of McDonald's and other American fast food corporations cause differentiation or localization not only in terms of the menu but in social value and function. McDonald's and KFC in North America, for example, are truly working class fast food restaurants. But in China, they are now symbolic urban spaces where ordinary people have their affordable symbolic taste of America, and to many Chinese it is a once-in-a-while treatment—the fulfilment of some deep-seated desire, the amorphous, primordial desire for the new, the modern, the exotic, the access to some kind of social and cultural capital. Western wines and liquors to the majority of Chinese do not taste as good as their familiar Chinese counterparts, but they are avariciously consumed for the symbolic capital attached to them and, served in a Chinese manner, French or Californian red wine, for example, would go with ice cubes in it, something unimaginable in North America. Indeed as John Short says, "while the same images and commodities are

found around the world, they are interpreted, consumed and used in different ways” (11). So much effort has gone into altering those displaced spaces’ architectural style, modifying their menus and recipes, and redesigning their interior. But underneath all these surface modifications and diversifications runs the same capitalist economic and cultural logic. Capitalism feeds on difference only to create sameness at the other end. It even breeds difference in different forms, but it is all to serve the purpose of converting lands into territories of a global empire, peoples into its appendages, and cultures and artefacts into commodities.

Western consumer or mass culture is penetrating the world’s largest market. In large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai holidays like Spring Festival and among the younger generations Christmas have become big consumerist seasons, when the stores, especially the joint-venture ones, make efforts to promote consumerist spending. All kinds of consumerist ideas and stratagems prevalent in the West are being quickly reproduced in China. TV Commercials, commercial billboards, and advertisement in all media emerge everywhere-- in the homespace, streets, shopping centres, stadiums, and all kinds of public places. McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, KFC, John Bull Pub, Ha’agen Dazs, Paul’s Steak and Istanbul, BBC eggs, as well as BBC American Cowboys, Hum-Phry, eminu, I’go tm, JeansWest, Metersbonwe, rise Paris, etc., all these are found in Beijing and Shanghai. These displaced consumerist images, commercial urban spaces, advertisements, and billboards all appear differentiated and hybridized in design, organization, and language (Chinese and English), but they all carry the same consumerist ideology, the same commodity fetishism, the same commercial syntax and grammar, and the same underlying recognition pattern that are encountered in urban spaces of the other parts of the world. True, contemporary Chinese

forms of mass culture such as Karaoke, MTV, televised soap operas, gongfu and sex, and love-murder fiction in terms of medium, setting, content, plot and motif are widely divergent from their Western counterparts. What makes Chinese mass culture further differentiated is the incongruous conglomeration of global capitalism's cultural imaginary, Maoist revolutionary cultural legacy, and the indigenous Chinese heritage of folk traditions and customs. But, again, most of the products of Chinese mass culture today are unmistakably defined by what Jameson terms depthlessness of meaning, eclipsed historicity, and the repetition of sameness. They celebrate nihilistic hedonism, parade consumerist values and images, appeal to the audiences' innermost desire for bloody violence, fill them with dystopian nostalgia, and immerse them in the oblivious moment now. True, many of the faded revolutionary images, neglected Maoist songs, and traditional folk art forms have come back, but they are displaced, recontextualized, divested of their original experience, and recruited or incorporated primarily for the sake of commercial profit. They are so incompatible with contemporary mass cultural forms, but capitalism itself is the magic and rationale for bringing incongruities and incompatibles together, reconciling nonsynchronous temporalities by the logic of commoditization and consumer fetishism.

The massive displacement of workers leads to the rise and further commodification of migrant biopower. The peasants' limited gains in what is called the Dengist economic reform are likewise being reversed, resulting in more rural unemployment and penury. Large numbers of women are becoming displaced, commoditised, and economically and sexually exploited. Millions of rural people have been transformed into the lumpenproletariat hired as wage workers by transnational corporations, millions of *liumin* (migrants) emerging in coastal or metropolitan cities like Shenzhen, Beijing, Shanghai, and

Guangzhou, where they are reduced to a ghostly, spaceless, homeless existence. No wonder Slavoj Zizek writes that "The USA is turning into a country of managerial planning, banking, services, and so on, while its 'disappearing working class' . . . is reappearing in China, where the majority of US products . . . are manufactured in ideal conditions for capitalist exploitation" (*Revolution* 290). As the majority of the people are marginalized economically, they automatically become disempowered politically. In the process of globalization, culture has become a special vehicle for the expansion of capital. If globalization can be defined as the Global Empire of Capital, it sucks everything into its omnipresent machinery, preserving and canceling them at the same time. Capital feeds on difference and syncretism, turning everything it touches into a commodity. Rickshaws, ancient sedans, Manchurian costumes, rebuilt Tang dynasty streets and shops, imperial family gourmet, emperors' robes, ancient wedding ceremonies, ethnic minorities' tea rituals, ancient gardens, and pre-modern landscape, all these are being revived or recruited to serve the desire of capital, along with other consumer goods such as Pierre Garden, Jones New York, Calvin Klein, Nike, Toyotas, Bentz, cell phones, computers, French wines, German beers, etc. It is well arguable that almost all modes of production coexist in China at the present stage--from the most primitive to the most advanced, including feudal, socialist, and capitalist--all of which are adjusted through capital or controlled by capital. It is capital that takes the primitive products of mountain villages to the supermarkets in cities to be sold together with high-tech commodities and makes the incompatible modes of production linked to each other. In such a way, the developing countries and advanced countries can coordinate through capital and form a new economic order--globalization.

The radical changes in the Chinese social, political and cultural imaginary can be best registered in urban spaces. As Anthony D King and Abidin Kusno note, for China “to become part of the world of global capitalism is to accept and contribute to the same urban symbolic language, to participate in the same symbolic economies, to speak in the same architectural and spatial terms, as exists elsewhere in that global economy, and especially in the United States” (59-60). Over the past fifteen years or so, about 70 percent of the old streets and neighbourhoods, traditional geopolitical and geocultural spaces, and pre-modern buildings in Beijing, for example, have been cleared by real-estate developers to make way for high-rise apartments, office buildings, and shopping centers. In adopting a spatial language to formulate its modernity, the Chinese not only borrow the language and architectural codes of American capitalism but fervently reproduce Western urban spaces. A catalogue of the names of apartment buildings such as Manhattan Garden, City Plaza, Parkview Tower, Global Village, Rich and Famous, Golden Land, Green Lake Garden and of villas such as the American, the Nordic, the Baroque, the Mediterranean simply points to a “crossing-over of certain Euro-American urban artefacts, such as skyscraper office tower, the luxury apartment building, and the suburban villa, to the urban space of China” (King and Kusno 43). They feel like urban and architectural forms “cut” from Western cities and cultures and “pasted” into Beijing and Shanghai and then “edited” to be localized transnational spaces in these cities (47). Those transnational spaces as well as the imported architectural styles, images, and names, which mark China’s full entry into the geopolitical and geocultural space of capitalism, are indicators of multiple displacement—they have been dislocated from their original experience and context, and from their original psychological, emotional, political and ideological investment. These regional mimeries

have an effect of constituting difference due not only to their re-contextualization, but to their architectural modifications and altered symbolic significance and functions. Many of the high-rise office towers in Beijing, for example, are capped with Chinese-styled domes, and their interior furnishings and decorations are localized as well. If “[the] heart of a culture involves attachment to place, language, religion, tradition and customs,” and if “the identity of self, group and nation is bound up with ideas and representations of particular space” (Short 11, 17), then such places or culture-specific spaces are being erased in Beijing and elsewhere in China. Displacement and differentiation are transforming places into spaces.³ Most of the Beijing-specific *siheyuan* (a compound with houses around a courtyard), *hutong* (lane or alley), and teahouses or other traditional public spaces have disappeared. In the newly built streets, high-rise office towers, apartment buildings, and supermarkets, what one encounters are consumer commodities, seductive advertisements, and transnational images.

To obtain a full picture of capitalism feeding on difference, one should say that capitalism has always relied on differentiating strategies, creating the capitalist class and the working class in the first place, engendering widening gaps between poor and rich, dividing the world into unequally developed areas, and establishing and exploiting gender and racial difference as well as social difference in its designation of differential wage and employment standards. All these differences are, however, deployed only to serve capitalism's global project of converting all populations into its wage laborers. Capitalism may be apparelled in different ethnic costumes, speak different languages, differentiate the class structure at different points of history, and employ different mechanisms to contain opposition, but none of these changes the basic fact, that is, capitalism, as Adorno warned

thirty five years ago, remains the same as it was 150 years ago--production for the sake of profit (5). To anywhere it set foot on, capitalism disseminates alienation, exploitation, commoditization, and consumerist sense and sensibility, threatening to ultimately colonize everyone's unconscious or psyche. The train of capitalism, to extend a metaphor from Fukuyama's hand, will take along all populations as its passengers. All this was best described by Marx and Engels themselves: "In one word, [capitalism] creates a whole world after its own image" (*Manifesto* 47). So what is being globalized in the day of global capitalism is capitalism itself with all its social relations and consumerist culture-ideology. Such unification of the world by capitalism logically results in what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call a new Empire, a transnational, deterritorialized, interconnected Empire of capital. However, global capitalism, as we have seen, is much more thorough in both differentiating and homogenizing our social life than perceived by critics like Hardt and Negri. While creating and feeding on differences, global capitalism's ultimate goal is to eliminate all times and spaces of Otherness.

Arjun Appadurai is correct that electronic media and migration have caused an epochal rupture between the modern and the postmodern. The epochal rupture has occurred not only in epistemology as Derrida declares, but in our structure of feeling, in the modes of communication, representation and material production and in what Henri Lefebvre calls the everyday. Every encounter between self and other displaces both self and other at the same time. And every displacement catalyzes a moment of differentiation. Culture is always a concept of otherness. Identity is difference and difference is contrastive identity. Every nation, culture, community, and individual have undergone displacement, differentiation and hybridization. But displacement, differentiation and hybridization, paradoxically, engender

sameness instead of difference in the age of capitalist globalization. The whole question hinges on the concept of the economic and cultural logic of capitalism. If the whole world today is a transnational space of global capitalism, and if the transnational images, goods, information, fashions, and technology are globally consumed, then how can they remain unaffected by the cultural logic of transnational capitalism? True, the nation state has lost control over the mobile, shifting populations and, because of collapsed or porous national borders as well as digital telecommunications, people have become virtual global citizens beyond any nation-state's ideological and political regimentation. Equally true, postmodern differences assume the form of mobile, deterritorialized, diasporic solidarities of experience, opinion, taste and pleasure, which are trans- or post-national in kind, uncontainable by nation-states and subversive to totalizing powers. However, if critics like Fredric Jameson and Wim Wenders are correct that capitalism in its global stage colonizes nature and the unconscious or the human psyche,⁴ then should we not say that even those mobile diasporic, transnational communities risk living with canceled or castrated differences? Transnational diasporics carry a multiple history, culture, and sensibility as well as an ambivalent subjectivity in themselves; homeland-bound nationals undergo radical displacement and differentiation in their structure of knowledge and feeling; transnational corporations' locally based representatives overseas find themselves no longer able to be loyal to any singular geocultural space in culinary, aesthetic, and social norm. Constantly shifting encounters between the known and the new, self and other, home and cosmos, and place and space, leads to infinite displacement and differentiation—endless production of liminality and hybridity, or the infinite splitting of the self. All these processes of infinite displacement, differentiation or splitting certainly give rise to increasing cultural diversity,

but ironically, they end up engendering a universal consumerist psychology and ideology, because no matter what ethnic passport one carries, no matter where one is located in the networked global space, as long as one is involved in the capitalist processes of production and consumption one the way or the other, one is within the sphere of the cultural logic of commodity reification and fragmentation, production for profit, and work for money, which is the true supranational law, pointing to a supranational, virtual empire—the total system from which no easy escape is imaginable.

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Notes

¹ For more discussion of space and place and their differentiation and significance in Chinese culture, see I-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 3; *Cosmos and Hearth: A Cosmopolite's Viewpoint*, 1-2.

² See Radley Balko, "Globalization & Culture: Americanization or Cultural Diversity?". January 19, 2004. <<http://www.aworldconnected.org/article.php?id=486&print=1>>.

³ For perceived distinction between space and place, see I-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 3-7; *Cosmos and Hearth: A Cosmopolite's Viewpoint*, 1-14; John Penie Short, *Global Dimensions: Space, Place and the Contemporary World*, 11-19.

⁴ See Fredric Jameson, *Syntax of History*, 47; Wim Wenders, *The Logic of Images: Essays and Conversations*, 98.

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