



SUMMER GRADUATE RESEARCH, UNCATEGORIZED

# DECOLONIALITY IN CHINA: A SIDEWAYS GAZE

SEPTEMBER 24, 2018 | YEUNG PENNY PUI CHEE | [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

By **Rafael Vizcaíno**



*At the Great Wall, photo by Suzy Jung*

While the first time I read Roland Barthes's *Travels in China* I found it to be a cringe-worthy example of a type of postmodern orientalism, rereading it before my first trip to China led me to wonder if what he meant by the "sideways gaze" to look at China (neither Chinese nor Western) could instead be better understood as a type of *decolonial gaze*. After all, Chela Sandoval recovers Barthes and semiotics into the project of decolonization. From June 23 to June 29, I had the privilege of taking part in a scholarly and cultural exchange between Rutgers and Jilin University, where I presented my dissertation research and met humanities and social sciences scholars, graduate and undergraduate students from Jilin University. This exchange, as brief as it was, has **further** convinced me of the importance of strengthening South-South dialogues towards the development of that new gaze through which we can interpret our world-making practices beyond modern/colonial lenses.



*Opening ceremony*

The format of the scholarly forum consisted of concurrent colloquia across disciplinary boundaries. As the sole humanities scholar in the entire event, I was part of a group of psychologists and sociologists whose work analyzed how social identity markers of difference affect both the self-perception and the social role of marked subjects, e.g., biracial American college students or provincial Chinese women in urban settings. Such multidisciplinary audience was an ideal interlocutor for my work on the epistemic critiques decolonial thinking makes on method across fields and disciplines. Given the limited reception of decolonial thinking in that particular audience, however, I decided not to present my prepared paper on the coloniality of secularism and instead presented a contextualization of decoloniality vis-à-vis the historical formations of anti-colonialism and postcolonial studies. The ensuing discussion on the significance of importing foreign methodological frameworks to the analysis of an-Other socio-cultural and historical reality was very rich and conducive to future conversations across colonial/imperial differences, e.g., Latin American, African, and East Asian critiques of Western modern methodologies.





*Talking about decoloniality, photo by Zhang Si*

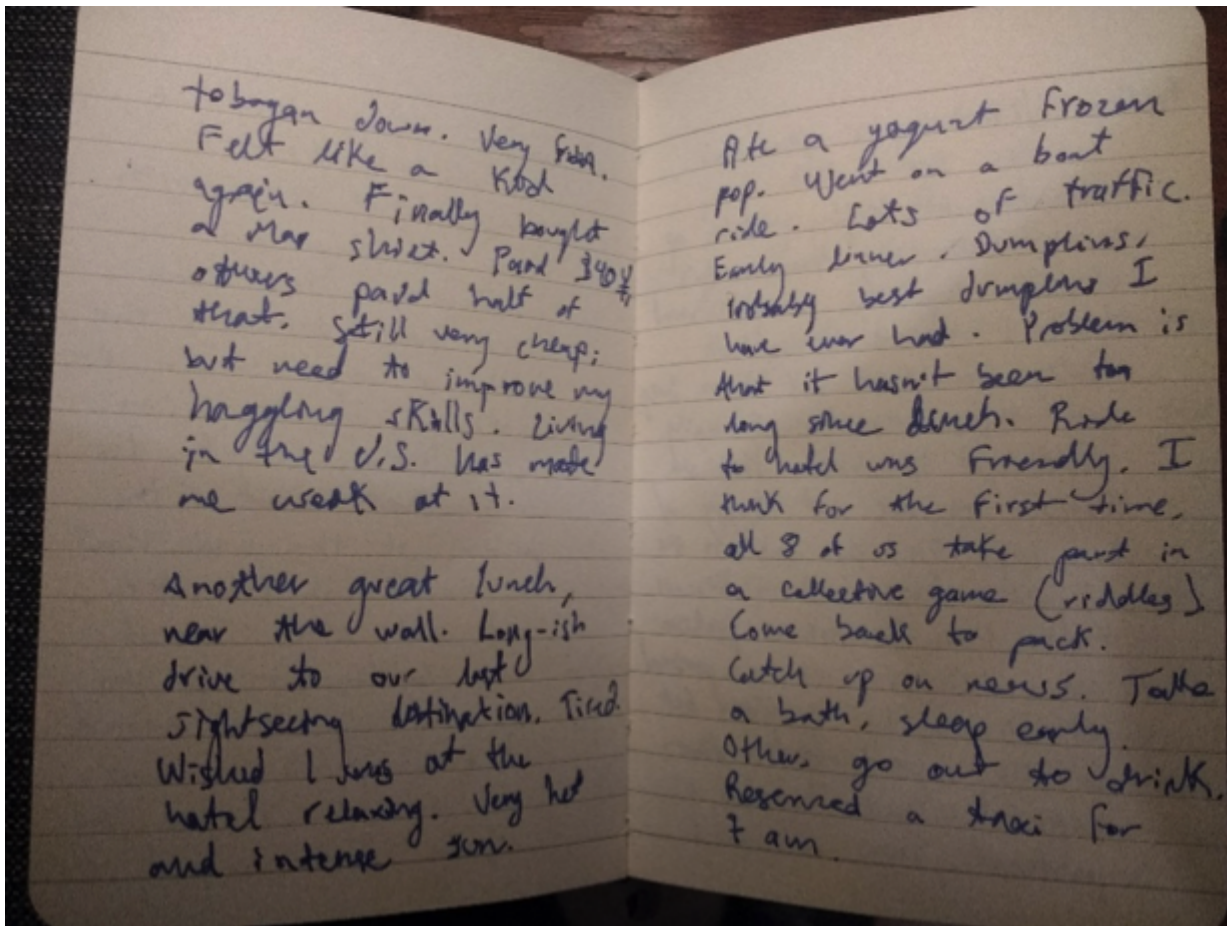
Besides the scholarly component of the forum, I had the opportunity of visiting several museums in the city of Changchun, as well as taking part in a cultural exchange with students from Jilin University where all of us learned about the educational systems of our counterparts. I found this event to be extremely fruitful because students' questions about the American university system were honestly answered by Rutgers doctoral students. Among these included very serious and difficult questions, such as intellectual theft or other abuses of power like sexual harassment by one's supervisors. After the event, there was an informal period of about ten minutes where we could have one-on-one discussions with each other. This proved to me to be the most enjoyable part of the forum, as I connected with many students interested in my areas of work, some of whom I remain in conversation today.



*Warm welcome from Jilin University, photo by Zhang Si*

The second part of the official visit consisted of a guided sight-seeing tour of Beijing not unlike the one Barthes describes in his *Travels*—indeed, I now laugh at the similarities. With a heat factor of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, we visited Tiananmen Square, the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, and the Great Wall over two days. The Great Wall is truly magnificent, and I hope to visit it again sometime soon. While I still cringe while reading Barthes’s descriptions of Chinese people, this trip has certainly given me new lenses through which to read his text, as well as concrete experience over what it could mean to look at China (and any other place of colonial difference for that matter) decolonially with a “sideways gaze.” I hope to continue building on these dialogues over the years to come.





My daily travel journal, a la Barthes

I would like to thank the Rutgers School of Graduate Studies and the Rutgers Global and China Offices for allowing me to take part in the Rutgers-Jilin Graduate Forum. Also, my gratitude goes to my student hosts at Jilin for their hospitality and incredible kindness.

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