What Kind of Knowledge Do We Need? An Interview with Kin Chi Lau

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Lau's recent articles include "Resurgent Patriarchy and Women's Responses in China," in *Resurgent Patriarchies: Challenges for Women's Movements in Asia*, ed. Urvashi Butalia, Neng Magno, and Kin Chi Lau (Hong Kong: ARENA, 1999), 101–36; and "China," in *The Dispossessed: Victims of*

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Development in Asia, ed. Vinod Raina, Aditi Chowdhury, and Sumit Chowdhury (Hong Kong: ARENA, 1998), 22–67.

Currently, Lau works in the Department of Cultural Studies at Lingnan University, where she teaches courses on contemporary Chinese literature, global culture, local governance, and negotiating violence. This interview is part of an extended conversation that began in June 2001 at the City University of Hong Kong.

Tani E. Barlow: Kin Chi Lau, I was struck by your earlier statement that you are not an intellectual. Let's begin by asking you what you meant.

Kin Chi Lau: For a very long period in China—including Hong Kong—people were largely illiterate. The sharp divide between the "educated" and the "uneducated" reflected the sharp divide between the ruling elite and the ruled, characterizing systems of power that denied the subaltern any position from which to speak, except revolt. However, the polarization as the breeding ground of contradiction also brought about conflicts within the self, leading some intellectuals to feel ashamed at the plight of those who were dominated for just innocently trying to lead a simple life. Hence there is a long tradition of the intellectual, that is, the "educated," made intelligible by the simple divide between the "educated" and the "uneducated," nurturing a conscience and the responsibility to stand up for and protect the poor and the wretched.

With the question of how to make a new China, a process in which ordinary people must be involved as principal agents, the idea was that intellectuals should go and learn *from* the people in their efforts to help educate the people. Help them become adequate to the task of building a new China. During the Maoist Cultural Revolution, the humbling experience of learning from and in the midst of the people turned into a coerced reeducation of intellectuals. The campaign of coerced reeducation can be read as the institutionalization of shame and negative connotations with regard to the concept "intellectuals." An effect of this process was that the reductionist simplification—the "educated" and the "uneducated"—became a kind of common sense. The simple image of intellectuals is that they are captive in a world of their own making, disconnected from the world of the people but maintained at the people's expense.

There is a certain truth to this picture, to the extent that intellectuals are very much a part of the system of power that accounts for the maintaining of relations of domination over the people. If the world of intellectuals is disconnected from that of the people, it is not because they, wittingly or unwittingly, have confined themselves within an ivory tower. Rather, they are deeply implicated in institutions and practices that are responsible for securing benefits at the people's expense. I do not like to identify with this historical formation.

However, to be critical of the social conditions supporting intellectuals is not to deny the importance of rigorous intellectual efforts; it is only to say that they should not be reduced to what is recognized as such within the academic field. Anyone concerned with issues of societal transformation in general, and transformation of the self in particular, is at the same time demanding intellectual rigor of oneself, otherwise one would not be able to recognize the possibilities emerging from within the boundaries for going beyond those boundaries to initiate new relationships.

None of us would deny that we are intellectuals. In the *Dushu* seminar we just attended, what I said was that, among academics, I am always seen as not being "academic" *enough*. However, I think it is important for us to differentiate between works satisfying academic norms without questioning the grounds of such norms, and works critical of such practices, works that refuse to be confined within such enclosures. What do you feel about this?

TEB: I concur.

KCL: My feeling is that, in the academic circles, there is a sense of what counts as scholarly work and what doesn't. When I am with activists, on the other hand, I am often seen as an outsider who writes good English and Chinese but who is far removed from the reality. They ask: What is the use of theory? What is the use of this intellectual work?

TEB: From the perspective of the activists, what is it that you are not seeing?

KCL: Wittingly or unwittingly, there is a certain common sense among activists with regard to intellectuals: intellectuals are people who speak in a sophisticated way, which prevents them from knowing reality in a simple and direct way. I think this is unfortunate, particularly when such a judgment

is actually leveled by intellectuals who call themselves activists against other intellectuals who are known as "intellectuals."

To me, anyone who is more or less actively working for ways of relating to one another and to nature other than the prevailing dominant modes can be regarded as an activist. If we allow ourselves this rough orientation, then those intellectuals who are concerned with the question of making a difference so that the world can become other than what it is should be seen as activists, too. People like Michel Foucault have shown us that the deployment of symbols is constitutive of our relationships to one another, to nature, and to the self.

On the other hand, there is no denying that activists are intellectuals. This applies not only to those who are educated—most of those who claim themselves to be activists are in fact educated. To make a difference is not to stumble upon it; it requires rigorous intellectual efforts in the face of the resultant forces produced by the actions of the various layers and fields of experience on one another in the production and reproduction of the status quo.

Thus, the question of the awkward relationship between the so-called intellectuals and the so-called activists is in fact a question of the individual intellectual/activist himself or herself in particular, and a question of theory in relation to action, to practice, in general. Anyway, the awkward relationship is more between intellectuals whose social position is so classified, and activists with a formal educational background—who often are graduates themselves.

Take, for example, this village in Jiangxi Province that I have been going to, where I interact with female peasants. I don't see in them the kind of resistance to theory that I see among many NGO organizers. For them, you come to the village, and they say, "It's too hard for you here; there is no flushing toilet, the food is very simple, and you will have to sleep on the floor." They feel that somehow you have "come down" from cozy urban life to stay with them. However, I can establish a kind of intimacy with them; they appreciate you because you care for them and try to make changes. They do not resent you for being an intellectual.

I think their experience has given them the ability to grasp the crux of the problem. One might ask, "What would a female peasant know about

the WTO or globalization?" I had an opportunity to go to India and Nepal with three Chinese female peasants for meetings about organic farming and the People's Alliance of Hope. I asked one woman what her impression was about this particular trip, and she said, "Whenever I hear the term *globalization*, I get a headache." She had the sense to know what "globalization" meant for her in real life, even though she did not understand the abstract concept. That is, the so-called "subaltern" are concerned about the various processes, lumped together as "globalization," working their way into their daily life, but they are not interested in constructing any global view with abstract concepts. As a concept, "globalization" gives rise to a binary opposition between the global and the local, to the effect that the local is increasingly seen as insignificant in terms of its ability to maintain autonomy in the face of global economic and political forces. Also, it holds that incorporation into the global process is not only desirable but is vital for the survival of local bodies. Debates among intellectuals about this concept are often polarized as "for" or "against" globalization. But for the female peasants exposed to analysis of the workings of the world, it is not a question of being "for" or "against" something of a transcending nature that is not within their ability to mold. Rather, so-called globalization is seen in terms of how their lives are going to be affected. That is, they are concerned not with working out a global view of a unified force field, but the various disrupting effects on their livelihood that will result from outside influences. Thus, there is no attempt to ensure an external position from which to gain a global view of the problem and formulate a global solution accordingly.

TEB: When you go to the village and people appreciate you as an intellectual, how do they understand your being there?

KCL: They may find us very knowledgeable and are particularly impressed with our command of the "wormlike language"—which is how English writing appears to them. I think they understand me as a promoter of innovative practices and women's empowerment. They see me as the vehicle for these two things. They show appreciation. Some of them said that they had never met anyone from the capital, Beijing, not to mention from Hong Kong—which at that time was regarded as overseas. It took time to build a relationship of mutual understanding and confidence. In my clumsy way,

with my "intellectual" comportment, I tried to explain that it was not for patriotism or compassion that I came, nothing of that sort. I said I wanted to learn about how they live in the countryside and how they envisage life, and that would help me understand and find ways to change things. In this relationship building, where we come from different contexts and different starting points, we do not talk in abstract terms about "equality," but we act with mutual respect and reciprocity. I hope they are convinced that I mean it when I say that I have learned a lot from them, from their courage in handling adversity, from their ability to make do with the limited resources they have, and from grasping my complicity in a status quo so detrimental to their well-being. But the relating can sometimes be quite awkward because of the immense differences between us.

TEB: There is a long tradition of ruralism in Chinese Marxism, and the idea that somehow the intellectuals should be able to learn something from the rural poor. Do you consider yourself to be connected to that tradition in any way?

KCL: When I was young, I was maybe more influenced by the Marxist precept that "the working class is the most revolutionary class." Since I am from an urban setting in Hong Kong, the most progressive class I could learn from was the workers. From their stories, you are reminded not only of the different histories that official success stories seek to silence but you are also called upon to question "truths" maintained at the expense of the working class, which is so manipulated that they literally have only their labor power to rely upon.

After I graduated from university, I went to public housing estates regularly to pay visits to workers' families to see how they lived. For me, it was not about the rural poor, but rather the proletariat. I don't know what it is like with intellectuals on mainland China, and how they see the so-called alliance between the workers and the peasants. I guess the peasants are somehow always seen as backward, as obstacles to modernization, and the approach has been to turn peasants into workers, or at least farm workers, or members of collectives, so that they can be rid of their "small peasant mentality." The overriding scheme is modernization and the exploitation of natural resources. Surely, in the last two decades in China, environmental

and feminist ideas have done a lot in critiquing this kind of development. But for me, having the opportunity to stay in a village and come to see the difference was eye opening.

It was 1994, one year before the World Forum on Women in Beijing. Since everyone was talking about women's empowerment, a group of volunteers from Hong Kong, working through the China Social Services and Development Research Centre [CSD], undertook a joint project with the Women's Federation of Jiangxi Province to carry out alternative trade to help market in Hong Kong organic lily bulbs. Women in a credit-union cooperative in the village started cultivating these nutritious items, which are also said to have medicinal properties. The profit was returned to the village for the women to use in health, education, and collective projects. It was fun, but also hard work: imagine us—two hundred teachers, students, and volunteers selling four tons of fresh lily bulbs at the ferry piers, subways, wet markets, flea markets, Buddhist temples, tourist spots—everywhere in Hong Kong—for two full months during summer vacation. The scale of the marketing was trimmed down after the 1997 financial crisis.

Every year since 1994, CSD has organized groups of people from Hong Kong to study in the village. We strive to prevent this from becoming a kind of one-off, touristic exposure for intellectuals, and because we return we are able to establish a rather long-term relationship with the village women. The village women had thought we would come just once for curiosity and never come back. So when we came back year after year, they were surprised and happy. It has been a process of nurturing an affective relationship and coming to know each other better.

Most of the village women are my students' age. One woman, then twenty-five and the mother of two children, confided her stories in me, and I could not believe that she had gone through all that in her twenty-five years. I thought to myself, what had I done when I was twenty-five? I was doing my master's thesis, but had not encountered major challenges. This young woman, whom I very much admired, had endured and survived unspeakable hardships. Her first child was aborted at seven months because she was not yet married. Several men from the township government stood right there to watch the doctor do the job. When she recounted this story, she was sad but not bitter. I told myself I had to drop my own ideas on privacy, dignity, and

justice. I tried to expand my capacity for understanding rather than seeking comfort in quick judgments or condemnation.'

She married, had one daughter, and again got pregnant by accident, three years before she was entitled to have another child. Hiding in the mountains, she delivered her child in very poor conditions after a labor so painful that she wished she were dead. Fortunately mother and child were safe, though she had to pay a penalty. She was happy that it was a boy, showing gratitude rather than complaining about her fate. The details that she told me were astounding and dramatic, but her tone was calm; she tried to smile to cover up the pain of the memories, but sometimes she could not help but cry.

I felt very privileged, not so much to have won her confidence, but to be related to her as a sister, sharing her joys and sorrows, her care and love. Her courage has been a source of inspiration for me. It is not at all a feeling of personal triumph over authoritarianism but a feeling of having faced the adversities and atrocities of life. Sometimes when I talk to my friends I refer to her as "this female peasant," but she never comes to me in that image. It is the image of a young woman, singularly strong and adamant in her ways, but not confrontational or aggressive. It is through her, and with her, that I appreciate perseverance in living.

She is an intellectual. That is how I would define it. Of course, she would burst out laughing if I told her that I see her as an intellectual. She would say that she finished only junior high school, though she is among the few better-educated women in the village. She has an agile mind and a capacity for understanding. In my interactions with her, I was concerned to hear her problems, to see the reality she was caught in, her perception of her situation, and what sort of possibilities or alternatives she could come up with. Her innovative spirit, manifested again and again in the impossible situations in which she found herself caught, is also a transgressive spirit that refuses to resign her agency to the domination of fate. When she decided to keep her baby, she was not simply reacting in defiance to a prohibition dictated by the authorities but not acceptable to her. Her decision was also a decision to bear whatever punishment her action might provoke. Even more than that, the decision was a decision to risk herself, to go beyond herself at the risk of losing herself completely in the act. This act of putting herself to the test was a productive act of her agency emerging from something positive within her.

You might call it love, a power of a completely different nature from that of the negative force that reacts against an objectified, external other.

We do not act as funders usually do. That is, as someone coming from the North with funding and technological support to help those in the South improve their living conditions. We are offering help and seeking help all at once. The polarizing effect of modern development in the "North" and "South" brings us to them to seek their help in building cross-border cooperative relations, not only in abating the impoverishing effects of the hegemonic mode of modern development on our souls, our bodies, and Earth itself. But we can also build new communities with a completely different logic from that of capitalism. In view of the rapid unfolding of processes of modernization and marketization in China, the idea of forms of rural reconstruction for enhancing social spaces toward autonomous participation in self-management is both timely and untimely. The rural is the place the prevailing processes of modernization seek to displace their tensions and contradictions, making the rural into a ghost that keeps haunting the urban. Thus we also see the rural as strategically essential for the development of alternative practices.

In going to the same village almost every year since 1994, I have learned about the problems that the peasants encounter. For example, the ups and downs in prices. Normally, each family raises two to three pigs for manure for fertilizer, and for the profit of about three hundred yuan that they get by selling the meat. Also, the family would keep some pork for its New Year celebrations. Around 1996, the government promoted large-scale rearing of pigs fed on fodder. The village head, being the one with the most resources, went for it and allocated himself a primary school classroom in which to rear a hundred pigs! Of course, it was a total failure, given the expensive fodder and the crowded environment, which caused many pigs to become ill and die. For some time, each family was given a quota of pigs that they had to raise, and they were required to pay tax on that number of pigs, whether or not there actually were any pigs. After two years, no one mentioned large-scale pig farming in the village anymore. Worse still, even for the few pigs that individual families were raising, the market had become very bad. The reason is that, when the government promoted large-scale rearing of pigs, almost every government unit in the county, including hospitals and

schools, took it up and assigned, for example, doctors, teachers, and staff to take turns looking after the pig farms. This caused a sudden increase in the supply and a big drop in the price. The village simply had no buyers. Why should merchants go to a remote village to get pigs when they were available in large numbers in or near the towns?

TEB: So what did the people in the village decide was the best strategy?

KCL: They couldn't decide on any strategy. It's not the kind of strategy that they can decide at their level. Through this, I came to understand their vulnerability. There are different government policies for promoting pig farming, promoting this, promoting that. But there is no guarantee of a market. We need to understand that there has been a breakdown in the collective system. Whereas in the past you had collective marketing, now individual households are vulnerable to unpredictable market forces. There are indeed a lot of policy analyses on a macro scale. But when I go to the village, I see the problems in a micro way, in their impacts and effects on individuals. It is sometimes in this kind of "seeing" that many people become pessimistic. Yes, there is a deep pessimism among the peasants. The only hope they have is going to work in the cities.

In this particular village, in around 1996 or 1997, about one-third of the women were working outside the home. Except for young women still in school, every unmarried woman was away. In subsequent years, even married women left their children in the care of the grandparents and went to work in the cities. Some of them came back with tragic stories of how they had been harassed, cheated, or abused. One young woman, escorted back to the village by the police, swore she would never leave again. The lightbulb factory she worked in, which was in Zhejiang Province, was like a prison, and the young women workers, mostly in their teens, were locked in and threatened with beatings and murder if they did not obey. They did not get paid. Some workers managed to climb out the window and get the police to rescue them. The moment she was back in the village, everybody knew—you know how rumors spread like lightning. I went to see her; she was in tears and still very panicked. But the next week, she was gone again because she couldn't find a role in the village. This is a dilemma. There is this cultural question of people reluctantly placing themselves in extremely exploitative

conditions, but they cannot come back because there is no opportunity for them in the village either.

In this project, working with the female peasants, we contribute our voluntary labor in marketing lily bulbs and we raise funds among friends in Hong Kong. The women, through their own discussions and mostly voluntary work, have taken up various projects to improve their own lives. Most of the women have two kids and are keen for the kids to be taken care of. So they started a kindergarten for the kids to learn to read, write, and do arithmetic before they go to primary school; the mothers have more mobility when the kids are at school. Later, we helped them set up a small village library with audiovisual materials for kids and women, books on farming, health, romance, science fiction. . . . The women also decided on a collective project to install electric grinders and threshers to reduce the burden of women's farm work.

TEB: As you continue working with individuals in this village, do you consider it intellectual work?

KCL: I didn't go to the village in order to collect data from "informants" to write refereed journal papers, so the kind of intellectual work I have been doing in the village may not be regarded by my university as such. However, going to the village and being privileged enough to be accepted as a friend by the female peasants is significant for my intellectual development. Before I had the actual experience of being in a village in mainland China, I had written about rural issues, informed by secondary data. For example, in *Asian Exchange* [vol. 10, 1994], I wrote "Reform and Resistance in China," and stressed that we could not talk about China's development without paying attention to the plight of the peasants. I had a lot of reservations about the coerced individualism and competition engendered by market reforms, because peasants were compelled to fall back on their individual household resources when they encountered the increasingly challenging market forces.

The effect of the market reform dictated from above seems to be turning things into their opposites while leaving the coercive mode of their coming into being across the society unchanged. If, before market reforms, individuals were regarded as existing only for the collective under the leadership

of the Communist party, now, with market reforms, individuals are encouraged to pursue their self-interests as entrepreneurs under the shadow of the Communist party. Turning concern for the well-being of the collective to which one belongs into an interest in making money and becoming one of the nouveaux riches is a blessing bestowed from above, a green light for the mobilization of the self-preserving energies and resources of the individual in the building of a self-centered world of prosperity. Ironically, the energies and resources of self-preservation were churned out alchemically in the crucible of the period of enforced collectivism. The transmutation of the professed spirit of selfless collectivism into a hollow recess of self-preservation was accomplished by shattering the bonds of trust and the values of reciprocity. This left only the most courageous and noblest spirits unsusceptible. The consequences of these traumas are recesses produced in the selves of individuals, inscribed by the violence of the coerced collectivism that they have suffered. Those empty spaces are open to supplements in the forms of material possession and sensual gratification.

That the market reform is far from creating social spaces where people can freely engage in conversations leading to cooperative social relations for enhancing life is a result of the instrumental rationality of self-preservation that comes from the control of the other. Wittingly or unwittingly, the decision-making body of the Communist Party has turned the Chinese people into instruments. They are to lead China out of the cul-de-sac of building China into a modern world power according to the criteria and models set up by the Western mode of development but without the market mechanism. Market reform is the rectification of past erroneous moves. Market reform seeks to place people into positions that will serve the function of establishing China as a world power.

Now we were trying to explore rural alternatives based not so much on injection of foreign funding as on self-reliant modes making use of local resources. The project started as an experimental or pilot project in which we could see if the women themselves would feel a need for collective action and actually undertake collective projects. The positioning of the people as instruments of state projects in market reforms is at the same time the institutionalization of privatism of the population in general and the marginalization of the subaltern in particular. We hope that this small

experiment can come up with a different logic than that of the market reforms.

The interaction with the female peasants has been a most important learning experience for me. I share their aporia, sorrow, wisdom, and spirit. These women are often confronted in their daily lives with problems that are the result of a specific intersection of forces. Their specific conditions arise from a context larger than the local context of their daily lives on the one hand, and the forces and conditions specific to their local context on the other hand. For me, it is a question of proximately grasping the "impossible" in their situations. Without such an effort, no elaboration of a different logic that turns impossibilities into possibilities is possible. Without such an effort, theoretical attempts are susceptible to being confined to two opposing positions: that of an abstract global view that is blind to the specificity of the context and that of the abstract valorization of women's agency that is as blind to the specificity of the context as the former position.

We must labor to move near them, to earn the right to be let into their world as part of their scene—though marked by an element of foreignness and irreducible difference. To embrace irreducible difference is to allow one's self to be disrupted and modified, and this works for us as well as for them. In our relation to them, we are unavoidably informed by our preformed imagination, understanding, and prejudice. However, this more or less precipitated formation is being unsettled as our friendship grows.

As an example, we can look at the importance they attach to having a house that they are proud to call their own. To us this pride sometimes even verges on the absurd. The women in the cooperative decided to build their own "clubhouse," a three-story building, in the third year of their organization so that they need not pay rent to the village committee to use the public ancestral compound; though the compound is in principle owned by all villagers, including the women, they had come to see it as a place for the men. For us, it would be more primary to set up points of identification on the basis of collective efforts to deal with forces and conditions from both without and within that adversely affect their lives and relations with one another. The erection of a building theoretically owned by all the women of the cooperative may, from our view, fail to constitute any substantial point for solidarity building except a facade of togetherness. For another example,

individual households, with or without money, tend to use all their resources to build a house for their children in the village, though they also wish the children to be well educated enough to go to town and never come back to the village. This is a paradox: what is the house for if they want their children to be out of the village?

TEB: Did you talk to them about that?

KCL: They have their own understanding. I think the house is not only for functional use but is also a symbol of prestige and status. It represents a sort of achievement that gives them a sense of dignity, makes them feel proud of themselves, and hence constitutes a powerful point of identification with transformative effects.

When I say I learn a lot from them, I do not mean that I am there as a passive listener. However, I do not think the term "action research" explains what we are trying to do. It is a process of interactive challenge to bring about positive change through concerted efforts in larger context than what is conventionally considered the immediate locality. Certainly, we have ideas about organic farming, sustainable livelihood, environmental conservation, and so on, and in the village, we would go around asking specific questions about these matters. For example, we asked old and young peasants about the soil. We were told it is less fertile than before. Some blame the porcelain factory upstream; some blame the chemical fertilizers, or mono-crop practices. While we try to understand how they understand the depletion of natural resources, we also go to different experts and find out about various factors and see what kind of intermediate or appropriate technology will need to be brought in to be of help to the peasants.

We also focused quite a lot on cultural issues, such as the question of individualism. Apparently, many people resent anything to do with the "collective," so one may infer from this that individualism is championed as a rejection of "communism." However, it is not as if the "collective" past of two decades can be written off in one stroke. For example, in the women's group, their practice of coming together to engage in projects on a volunteer basis is not understood as it might be in other countries. Elsewhere in the world, this type of collective would be called a cooperative. But the women disliked the term "cooperative." It alludes to the practice of involuntary

collectivization of the 1950s–70s. So they prefer a "trendier" term: credit union. But what they have is not a "proper" credit union, because the members do not contribute sums or take out loans. They just love this term.

Mainstream market reform means openings are emerging for borrowing from discourses of individualism that measure an individual's abilities to create material wealth, qualities that one supposedly possesses in oneself. Hence differential distribution of benefits is seen to accrue to individuals on the basis of their respective differential abilities, and the social existence of an individual is seen as a set of calculations in terms of gain and loss to the individual self, thereby defining one's well-being self-referentially. But you would be surprised how the women uphold notions of justice and fairness that still adhere to the tradition of believing that the well-being of those others, who together with the individual herself comprise a collectivity, is the condition of the well-being of the individual.

The way they came to a meticulous formula regarding the dividends might shed light on what I mean. When, in the first summer, after the two hundred volunteers from Hong Kong sweated to get all the fresh lily bulbs sold and triumphantly returned to the village with a profit of forty thousand yuan [US$5,000], the women's "credit union" set aside 40 percent as a collective fund for income-generating projects. They deposited 30 percent into a fund for education and health projects. But the remaining 30 percent was divided among members using a complex formula: half this sum was divided equally among all members, 30 percent was divided equally among all those who contributed some labor to the lily bulb project, and 20 percent was divided according to the numbers of days that members had worked on the project. This complex formula has been revised in subsequent years, to cater to both a sense of egalitarianism and the principle of rewarding each according to her labor. The way that the members discussed how to take turns operating the grinders and threshers, how to divide profits or bear repair costs, and so on, also testified to the cultural imprint of egalitarianism, which is not simply state or party rhetoric, but is ingrained in perceptions of justice and fairness. The major difference this time is that all the members have a role, big or small, in defining or changing the terms of the codes that they live by, and they are self-governed rather than subject to rules or regulations dictated from "outsiders."

It is amidst these specificities of how the women cope with running their own collective and negotiating with dispositions that are effects of the past still inhabiting their present—trust, mistrust, generosity, greed, jealousy, reciprocity, and so on—that I have come to be an insider-outsider. I try to make sense, to understand, to intervene, because I do not see this as "their" project or "my" project. We share a common concern: helping ourselves and helping each other in a transformation that might constitute an adequate resistance of the destructive forces of the prevailing mode of modern development.

In this interaction, we are often caught between trying not to impose our ideas on them—making an effort to rein in interventionist impulses and guard against the inclination to think that we know better—while also not relinquishing our responsibility and our role of working on a macro understanding and a vision that those on the ground who are just trying to survive may not embrace. In other words, I think we have a special role, but it is not a position of superiority. Rather it is a position blessed with different perspectives and understandings of the interconnectedness of problems. There are tensions and negotiations, which help us look at the problems and find ways of tackling them.

I feel that the people on the ground are not as anti-intellectual or cynical as community organizers or NGO workers. With the latter, I usually have problems.

TEB: Who are the NGO workers?

KCL: Well, for example, they are the educated, medium- or low-ranking cadres, who may be technicians, agriculturalists, Women's Federation cadres . . . though not necessarily all of them are like this. While the official discourse is that "the people are the masters," "the laboring people are wise and great," nonetheless, this remains rhetoric, and rather than respect for the general masses, there is contempt. Contempt for their ignorance—their inability to read well; for their backwardness—their uncultured and uncivilized ways of life measured against imaginations of modernization; for their primitiveness—they do not follow modern hygiene and they are greedy, selfish, corrupt, and uncanny. These are seen as the properties of the subaltern. I am not denying that workers may gamble, beat their wives, get drunk. But

NGO or community workers would, on the one hand, say that they respect people's choices, which are assumed to be rational, but on the other hand, they have contempt for the people. They do not seem to want to grapple with such contradictions.

TEB: On the one hand, the local organizational elite is contemptuous of peasants, and on the other, they are resentful of outsider intellectuals like yourself coming in?

KCL: Yes. I do not think we can generalize to say that the subaltern is like this or like that, has inadequacies in this and potentialities in that. I am interested in seeing the individual as both specific and general at the same time, and seeing theory and practice being activism.

TEB: You mean both theory and practice?

KCL: Both my practice of theorizing and the villagers' practice of making do, I would call activism. In a sense, as Gramsci would say, everyone is a philosopher in their making do with their environment.

Perhaps there is also the dimension of everyone being an artist. One example: the women's credit union, supposed to be operating on principles of transparency and accountability, elects its five-member management committee. Over the years, it has devised various ways to hold the election in a more satisfactory way, always by secret ballot, but sometimes by having smaller groups of members nominate candidates, sometimes by allowing each member to write any five names on the ballot. They also made it a rule that all accounts be announced so that there will not be charges of corruption—since its inception, there have been no accusations of corruption, though there were allegations of favoritism. I had an opportunity to read the minutes of meetings taken by the secretary of the management committee. They were by no means the businesslike, matter-of-fact, professional minutes with which we are familiar. I felt like I was reading a drama script. They probably had never seen the minutes of meetings, but feeling that they should keep a record of their meetings—something that appeared proper and in order—they meticulously recorded the details. There was one case of serious dissent. The women had serious differences about how to use the collective fund. The record read like the script of a play. So-and-so said

something, in a particular tone, and so-and-so retorted, and one person who was being questioned lowered her head, not daring to look at the others, because there were allegations of conspiracies to use the money on a project supported by only a minority. When I was reading the minutes I could imagine how flushed one person was from all her shouting, and how embarrassed another one was from being challenged, lowering her head and not saying a word.

The way they wrote their minutes, I could imagine myself there. I found their method innovative, because they were not following any established way of doing things. However, I wouldn't describe them as "indigenous ways," as some people might.

TEB: Why?

KCL: I have problems with the term itself. For example, there are obviously many ways by which the local people understand relationships and codes of behavior. For example, when the person questioned dropped her head and didn't say a word, it alluded to an element of shame, and the minutes' recording this as something "factual" rather than something moral or ethical assumed common understanding of certain disapproved behavior, which is, however, not explained. The question of shame and honor is very much a factor shaping life in village culture. If a particular person has done something seen to be unacceptable, then she will find it difficult to face the others when questioned in public. So, if we analyze this particular incident, we can say a lot about the different understandings of behavior, values, and expectations about what is proper and what is not proper. But do we call these "indigenous ways"?

TEB: Are you saying that the term "indigenous" does not work very well? Does the same hold true for the term "empowerment"? It seems from your perspective that these terms are vacuous—empty shells—and that your analysis of what you see around you is different from the perspective encoded in the terms "indigenous knowledge" and "development."

KCL: I am not an anthropologist, and I have problems with the way that anthropologists relate to the so-called indigenous. What I am questioning is the idea of the "indigenous" as some sort of essential property. Nothing

is immune to outside intervention. What we sometimes see as "indigenous" is already a mix. If we remember this, then the term "indigenous" can still have a counterhegemonic function: the affirmation of people's doing things according to a different logic than that of the hegemonic Western mode of knowing and doing. When I go to the village, I do not think I am really that much of an "outsider." The ideas that I espouse may or may not be familiar to some villagers, but they are always already "informed" by stories narrated by various individuals, as well as by the media, producing in them imaginations about "outsiders"—like me—but when I am there, action on action produces a multiplicity of possibilities going beyond the boundaries of imaginings.

My sudden appearance, intruding into their lives without permission, is not an uncommon experience for them or me. Commercials are always doing this to us. Commercials try to seduce us. I'm a bit like that, too, trying to seduce them. So I do not burst into their lives as a sort of authority holding the key to their future. It is not a question of whether I decide this or plan this, because "this" is nothing that I could have planned. Unless of course I said, "I give you this money, so you must do this or I will pull out." That would be a different form of intervention. With my kind of intervention, I know that I already have a certain understanding of what the problems are in the countryside, and what the changes in China over the last century have been.

About the relationship that I try to establish with the villagers, for convenience sake, we describe this as a relationship between "intellectuals and activists" or "intellectuals and the subaltern." How has this relationship evolved? How can we understand the problems in the relationship? There are coincidences or contingencies that inexplicably bring us together. The practices and interactions between villagers and us render many concepts uncertain or fluid. For example, the minutes of their meetings reveal the dynamics of the group, including their values and conceptions of shame, which seem to be constant, yet such dynamics make village life possible for some, but impossible for others who want to go away because they can't stand the kinship hierarchies and corruption. This question is very complex. As for the term *empowerment*, it is not that I am against the idea, but I would prefer a term that conveys agency that does not come from outside. As it currently stands, it carries too much of a connotation of "consciousness-raising."

The phrase *indigenous knowledge* has more or less come to refer to knowledge that has been replaced, substituted, or eliminated. When we first went to the village, we had all these assumptions about "indigenous knowledge," so we asked them, "What do you know about herbal medicine?" What is more indigenous to the Chinese?

TEB: How funny!

KCL: Of course, Chinese, herbal medicines! Then we were disappointed. They still use some herbs, but, unfortunately, rather few because both the varieties and the quantities have become much more limited. There are now fewer handy and locally available herbs in the countryside, and not many people know about them.

TEB: Has Chinese medicine become a point of nostalgia?

KCL: Medical treatment in the cities in China now generally combines Western and traditional medicine, hence Chinese medicine is still in use, but it is not a happy marriage because of the hegemony of Western medicine, which carries with it the air of being modern, advanced, and scientific. In the village, Western medical treatment is not so readily available and would be too costly for many anyway. We expected that Chinese medicine and barefoot doctors would play a much bigger role. However, we were disappointed. The primary health care system was much eroded after the Reform was launched, primarily because it became a profit-making business and hence was monopolized by the local hospital authorities. In the village that I went to, all practicing village doctors were integrated under the so-called supervision of the local hospital, in the name of quality control. Medical care has become more and more unaffordable to the ordinary villager.

Let me give you an example of what I gathered from my experience in the village. We talked to the women in the village about questions of health, the body, sexuality, and attitudes. We found that the problems of women's back pain and vaginal infections were particularly serious. So, we encouraged the women to use their collective income-generating fund to get an electric grinder and thresher, so that they need no longer carry grain all the way to the stream to use the water-propelled grinder. In the village, a girl of sixteen can carry on her shoulders a rod with two sacks on each end, weighing

eighty kilos. But the heavy work also causes serious back pain when they get into their late twenties. At the same time, we introduced a health project combining evening lectures and discussion groups with medical checkups and treatment. This was done in partnership with the county health bureau, which would send a team of six doctors and health care workers to the village to volunteer, while we donated to the bureau a very modern machine that uses a kind of beam to efficiently diagnose and immediately treat vaginal infections. Only two such machines were available in the whole of Jiangxi Province at that time, and needless to say, only in the provincial capital. The machine cost about US$1,500. This is, again needless to say, beyond what a peasant woman could afford to treat vaginal infections. This small project was very successful; about 70 percent of the women were found to have various degrees of vaginal infection, and they were happy to come for this "scientific" treatment.

We had two concerns after the checkup and treatment. One was immediate, that on the advice of the doctors, they should not have sex in the two weeks after the treatment to allow time for complete recovery. The second concern was how to prevent this high rate of infection in the first place. So, in the evening discussions after the first checkup, we said to the women, "You shouldn't carry heavy loads or have sex in the next two weeks. You have to say no to your husbands." Then they started talking about all the possible ways of saying no to their husbands in the bedroom. You can imagine the kind of talk we had about sex, with the women conspiring and trying to find reasons to say no. The chairperson of the women's credit union said the men couldn't care less, they would say that their wife looked normal and healthy enough, and they would insist, and you can't just say no. They felt they could not educate the men, so, eventually, they came up with the idea of talking to the village head and telling him to tell the other men. The chairperson said, "You have to exaggerate the consequences. You have to say, 'If you have sex, the woman will die.'" We never found out how many women managed to refuse sex for two weeks.

TEB: Were they cured?

KCL: Yes, the recovery rate was quite high. But then, because of frequent sex, they would be reinfected. We talked to them about hygiene and asked

questions like: "Does your husband wash before you have sex? Do you insist that he wash?" And they would say, "He was so dirty and sweaty." We could discuss sexuality and violence up to a certain point. Some women would talk only with one or two persons present, not with the whole group. We tried to find ways to prevent the infections. The chairperson showed us a modern medical drip that she used to wash herself. She said this was very good hygiene, but unfortunately could not be recommended to most of the women because it cost money. But she went on to say that there was another way: you could simply go up the hill, only ten minutes away, and get a certain herb, soak it in water, and then wash, and it would be just as good.

TEB: So she knows that.

KCL: Yes, she knows. We asked younger women in their twenties and thirties, and none of them knew about it. So we said to the chairperson, "This is a good indigenous way." We were so enthusiastic that we got her to talk about it in the evening session and then take the women to the hillside to pick the herb. She said, "It's just everywhere in this area." I asked, "Why don't people use it?" She couldn't tell me why and didn't know why this kind of knowledge hasn't been passed on. For herself, she said she didn't use it because she has this modern stuff that the others can't afford.

TEB: So the modern stuff is easier?

KCL: It's easier, but they also feel it is more effective. Whether the modern commodity really is more effective, you don't know. Taking again from this example, when a woman knows a little bit more about how to take care of her own body with local resources, do I call this "empowerment"? Sure, I can call it that. But the word *empowerment* isn't quite adequate to describe the kind of changes in both attitude and behavior that help her feel more self-confident and be more attentive to certain issues like health or her relationship with her husband. I think that to rescue these terms from the conventional leftist discourse, it has to refer to something concrete and specific, which we sometimes term as "local."

With the word *empowerment*, there is also always the association with organization, especially having people "be" organized. In the trade unions, if you are organized, you are empowered. But you can't say this to a village

woman, because her life, relating to her family and kin and relating to the land and contract work, and so on, is entwined in an intricate web. Moreover, the authorities enforcing "law and order" in the countryside are not quite the same government and police and law court that you have in the cities, even though there are supposedly concepts and practices of national or public security applicable to the population of the entire nation.

"Organizing" village women for health or income-generating projects is quite a different matter from organizing as a general conceptual idea, usually associated with the history of the organizing of the proletariat as the reference point. Since 1949, the Communist Party in China has organized trade unions, women's federations, youth leagues, old people's groups, urban neighborhood committees, and various "democratic" parties, but it has, for various reasons, not organized peasant societies or rural groups. What is the outsiders' responsibility if the women get thrown in jail for organizing that is perceived by the local authorities as somehow threatening? What is the outsiders' responsibility if the women get beaten up by their husbands for organizing themselves to refuse sex, which the husbands never doubt is the wives' obligation and their own right? This is a question of the ethical dimension of interventions and changes in their lives. So, we have to consider all these questions: the risks, responsibilities, and ethical dimensions, and the idea of indigenous versus modern technology; all of these are related. These are my concerns, but I have never really talked about them until now.

TEB: That surprises me, since it's clearly something you have been thinking about for a long time.

KCL: It's been there, but in a fragmentary form. I have been trying to make sense of certain things, to find ways to express and articulate the question I always have, which is "What am I doing there?" "What effect am I having?" Then there is the other challenge when we talk about projects like this one, which is that people say, "What is the relevance of a project that affects only a village of one hundred women?"

TEB: You seem to be exploring the ways in which crisis and description and evaluation of your work are all tied up together. When you describe your reservations about terms like empowerment, I agree with you, although I

have no experience and probably feel uncomfortable with these terms for a whole different set of reasons. But your description is powerful. When you reflect on a "problem in the crisis of language use," is this something you think intellectuals should be paying attention to?

KCL: There are two dimensions. "Empowerment" and "indigenous knowledge" are problematic terms if taken to be absolute. They are employed to affirm the agency of the subaltern and the marginalized and their right to follow a different path of development than that dictated by the imaginations, standards, knowledge, and practices dominant in the West. What is affirmed is the capacity to resist and the freedom to become other than what is scripted for them by systems of power that systematically subjugate and marginalize their experiences—and that marginalize the knowledge they inherited or invented themselves in the face of adverse circumstances, with living in a state of emergency having become the rule in their lives. Hence the positive value of these terms is predicated on their negating power against forces of domination, rather than on some sort of substantial essence in itself. The moment we give them some sort of transcending value, we are bound to run into trouble. As terms denoting resistance, they are specific and local. They never presume to offer any global view of general problems affecting a totality, such as a nation, and hence do not offer a general solution—such as more education for the eradication of poverty—to resolve those problems.

For resistance that is not a mere negation of what is resisted against, but is rather a negotiation in the elaboration of a different practice according to a different logic than what is admissible to relations of domination, I think that whether such resistance can achieve a scale large enough to confront relations of domination head on is not the essential point. Contained in resistance is the liberating instance of a will to be different, a will to be different from that which seeks to posit itself as the center and to prescribe how things should be totalized. What is more, scale implies growth by way of accumulation; a liberating instance does not follow the calculating logic of accumulation. Instead, it multiplies by spreading like fire, not ascribable to the work of any careful planning, depending more on contingencies like the wind.

The other dimension is how the women in the village will be able to acquire understanding and make sense of their own practices, because their

practices involve lots of contradictions and daily life tensions, particularly their way of dealing with problems. It's not as if they could simply continue as before, and we could remark, "Oh, so this is how the subaltern lives." My question is how they could use different concepts to possibly form perspectives and visions that bring about transformations. That is why I feel that there has to be linkage. We—the village women and I—can offer each other certain things. Coming together, we enlarge each other's spaces and possibilities to invent resistance. It also brings personal transformations, and I think that is something relevant to cultural studies. What is cultural studies about if it is not about personal and social transformation?

I feel that with my experience and the opportunities I have been privileged to have—my contact with different theories, different practices, different contexts, and the understanding through friendships with people from different backgrounds and persuasions—I feel somehow there is a particular way in which I should be able to contribute; and that contribution I see as an intellectual contribution. I started by saying that the way I engage in my intellectual enterprise is not quite recognized in academia. But it is a realm of freedom for me.

TEB: The kinds of practices that you are talking about that are not recognized in a full way, like editing, like translation, have traditionally been gendered work. Maybe because they have less power attached to them, they are often feminized. Who knows what the logical relationship is? You are a professor of translation, after all.

KCL: For twelve years I worked in a translation department, and now I am in a cultural studies department. The funny thing about academia is that once you move out of the translation department, your translation practice may no longer be recognized as "academic" work. I still do quite a lot of translation, of course. But, for me, the question is not so much recognition, but whether my work will help bring about change: change in China, in different parts of Asia, in different parts of the world.

Recently, I have been trying to encourage activist friends to "retreat" into the university to study. There is a paradox there, because activists are particularly critical of academic institutions for being removed from reality and, even worse, for being hypocritical. Their approach to intellectual work

is also problematic—for example, the "normal" way to write your thesis or do your research work. But I still value the academic institution as a place in which knowledge is generated, and it should not be forsaken to the mediocre. An important question is whether there are dynamic communities of intellectuals, people that we call intellectuals, who try to theorize, make sense, crystallize their experience and articulate it in different ways. Many activists, having been in the movement for ten or twenty years, feel this urge to problematize or theorize their experience. They see problems in the movements, problems within their own NGOs, problems in the lack or slowness in cultural change—in the change in attitude and behavior. There is a desire to conceptualize this, and yet, where? The reason why we still privilege the academic institution is because it has become such a hegemonic site of the production of knowledge. The question for me is to what degree this particular establishment displaces other forms of knowledge generation. Also, the question is not so much of the academic institution as of the activists. Why is there not much dynamic, rigorous intellectual work going on outside academia? Sometimes we explain this away as activists' being too drawn into the immediacy of problems. You have to campaign against unjust arrests, torture, the war, genetically modified food, and so on. But you see that among activists there is a sense that these same activities are futile . . . or not very effective.

TEB: That is different.

KCL: Bordering on the futile. The reason they see it this way is because they have seen that despite all the movements, they are confronted with more poverty, more social inequality, more abuses from big business and the powers that be. How are we to grapple with this? A friend of mine from Mexico, who is still very much involved in activism, particularly the sustainable livelihood movement, recently said to me, "I have been fighting poverty for fifty years, and poverty continues to increase." That doesn't mean he is giving up. But I think it tells us a lot about contradictions. I feel that with activists there is a need to see that had we not done all this antipoverty work, things could have gone worse. That poverty is ever increasing does not mean that the work we have done is not effective. This issue has been on my mind: How can activists, especially community organizers and NGO

workers, understand their own experience and be able to articulate it in relation to those with whom or for whom we claim to work? What kind of knowledge do we need in order to understand the complexities and find alternative ways of intervening?

TEB: If not in the university, then where? How do you imagine those possibilities in the future?

KCL: For me, still working in the Department of Cultural Studies at the university, my colleagues and I have been making an effort to make ourselves relevant to the community. We have had many social workers and activists come to us for undergraduate or postgraduate studies. They feel that perhaps with us they can better understand their own experience. I hope they will not be too frustrated. There has always been a strong skepticism about so-called academics. There is this weird phenomenon in which a respectable academic on the Left has to have some kind of relationship with social movements to supplement his or her academic affiliation. So, we have Professor So-and-So, who is a professor of something or another, but who is very active in this or that. It has become a sort of a trend, hasn't it? People have activist affiliations as if they are also doing some practical work, which, somehow, in some way, implies that they are in touch with reality. But it is a rather strained way of thinking.

How can we have a more organic relationship between academic and social movement work, especially regarding how we understand learning from workers, peasants, the poor, and the marginalized? I feel there is a lot to learn—and that is why I am fascinated by the experience I got from my involvement with ARENA, which is a network and forum of Asian scholar-activists. For example, I have been talking to People's Scientists from India, who see themselves not as scholars, but as activists. They are PhDs and nuclear physicists working in the People's Science Movement and trying to figure out how to make science a part of people's lives. They try to use their knowledge to change people's material life, so they invent many things, like an energy-saving starter for fluorescent lights, a smokeless stove, a hot box, and so on. They use scientific knowledge in ways that are relevant to people's daily lives. On the other hand, they pay tribute to people's concepts and use of science. What is science? When you talk about science, must it always be

something Western? Can we say "science"—for indigenous knowledge is also scientific—to refer to villagers who are herbal practitioners?

Maybe among the humanities people that we are, theory is cultural, sociological, anthropological theory, and we have given up on the whole question of science and technology. But I think we need to confront the central question of scientific knowledge and the forces that sustain such knowledge. The superstitions about "science" among peasants are quite strong. In the village, we questioned the local doctor for prescribing one vial of antibiotics. We said that antibiotics should be prescribed as a whole course. He said he knew it could make things worse, but patients wanted "antibiotics," and since they could not afford a whole course, he just gave them one vial for three yuan [US$0.37]. We tried to find out where he had come from. It turned out that he was once a technician trained to repair X-ray machines; when the village health system broke down, he took a correspondence course and then started practicing. Sometimes I think the villagers would be better off with an ethical barefoot doctor. And then there is all this drive for profit.

When I hear these stories, I think, "How can I not do something about this?" There is outrageous, flagrant corruption, people with power can do anything they want, and many people live in despair. In the 1950s, despite the lack of material goods, at least people could hope that the next generation would live in a better world. Now, what can they offer their children? If they make enough money, they hope to send their children abroad so that they have a better life in the United States and never come back to China, because China is going to be hell. It is this kind of thing that sometimes makes me angry and desperate. What can you do, and how is change possible? But, of course, you mustn't be overwhelmed by this despair. You still need to understand and see things in a different light. That is why we are now looking at alternative practices.

We try to look at alternative practices in actual use partly because people don't believe in words anymore and partly because alternatives are like substitutions. They are locally situated in an entangled web of subjugation and resistance. So much propaganda, so much use of rhetoric, that words have lost their force. Now I would like to tell stories, for example, about Kerala in India, where scientists work with the villagers to develop appropriate technology; where people try to map their own resources and do local

planning; where women are involved in decision making in different ways, and manage women's self-help groups. These endeavors may be micro in a sense, but if the whole Kerala state is doing that, then it is no longer micro. It may have been micro and local twenty years ago, but it has spread far and wide. There is the influence of Gandhism, and there is a strong desire for self-reliance. However, these values do not seem to exist in China.

TEB: Aren't these Maoist values?

KCL: Yes, these are the Maoist-Gandhian values in Kerala.

TEB: Does this not exist in China anymore?

KCL: I am not sure, since what is Maoism in people's minds? Is it the idea of collectivism? Even in Maoist thought, the whole idea of the countryside besieging the city still places the city in the center, even though Mao advocated a more even distribution of resources. I think in Kerala, their understanding of Maoism does not so much concern the issue of heavy industry, but more the idea of learning from the masses, going to the masses, barefoot doctors, and so on. In Kerala, I see interaction between intellectuals and the subaltern. If it was possible in China in the fifties, then why should we say it is impossible in the twenty-first century?

TEB: Can you say a bit about your work as a professor in the Department of Cultural Studies?

KCL: I did all my studies in Hong Kong, and got my PhD in comparative literature from the University of Hong Kong. This is my fourteenth year teaching at Lingnan University. I began in the Department of Translation and later came to the Department of Cultural Studies. We have many ideas for exciting projects, including a new master of cultural studies program, aimed mostly at secondary school teachers, journalists, and media workers. I think critical pedagogy is very important within cultural studies. We are also thinking of producing a Chinese journal in cultural studies that includes Hong Kong, mainland China, and Taiwan. It may be a journal or a book series, to make sense of the phenomena of local contexts. Perhaps the journal can be a meeting point for young intellectuals. We are still working on the Cultural and Social Studies Translation Series.

TEB: Is that project located at Lingnan?

KCL: Yes, but it is not institutionalized, so this gives us the space. We have to support it with our own money and time. We have published six volumes in this series, with titles such as *Disciplines, Knowledge and Power*, *Illusions of Development*, *The Rhetoric of Social Sciences*, *The Politics of Languages and Translation*, *Anti-Market Capitalism*, and *Decolonisation and Nationalism*. The next two will be *Feminism and Nationalism* and *Subaltern Studies in India*. We publish both in Hong Kong and on the mainland. The translation takes a lot of time. Of course, I also do studies in the Chinese village and in Kerala.

TEB: The village is connected to your university work?

KCL: The village is connected to the work I do with the CSD on issues of adult education, poverty, gender, and health in China. The organization is small, but it is the one that developed the project with the Jiangxi Provincial Women's Federation. We have conducted training courses for the Women's Federation on how to do social research. We have translated materials about the experiences of women from Asia—the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, Grameen in Bangladesh, and self-help groups—and have also taken a critical look at development issues.

TEB: Then there is your ARENA work.

KCL: Before we go to ARENA, there is the magazine *Alternative Discourses: Hong Kong Culture and Critique*. At first it was a quarterly, but we didn't manage to keep it up, so now it's published sporadically. This is an attempt to have discussions and interactions between so-called intellectuals and so-called activists in Hong Kong. Most of the topics are about Hong Kong, though occasionally we talk about China, development issues, and so on. Or we translate articles about the farmers' struggles against the Narita airport, or about organic farming. It is a kind of popular magazine, although we are not selling many copies.

TEB: What does ARENA stand for?

KCL: ARENA is Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives. We have seventy fellows from different countries in Asia. Most of us are academics

or researchers. Most of us work with grassroots groups or movements; for example, some fellows work with the Pesticide Action Network, the Asian Rural Alternative, the Kerala People's Science Movement, the Assembly of the Poor, and others. The idea of ARENA is to provide a platform, a forum for people to come together.

We have been running different programs, and one is on alternative regional schools. That is our idea for generating knowledge outside academic institutions, knowledge for teaching people to resist the scripting of their fate by the hegemonic irrationality of the Western capitalist mode of development. Right now we don't have a school with walls, and basically we run two-week or three-week workshops bringing people together on a particular theme. We are developing modules on specific themes, such as local governance. It is not simply to compile learning materials, but to bring people together so that they brainstorm, argue, and develop new ideas. We hope that the alternative regional school will facilitate exchange and generate new resources. Maybe we can start working with local partners to create a real school where we can offer resource materials and recommend resource persons from the outside on alternatives. ARENA also has other programs and produces the journal *Asian Exchange* and some bulletins and books.

TEB: Does ARENA have a United Nations NGO structure?

KCL: No. We have quite a few regional NGOs based in Hong Kong, and they are mainly concerned with migrants, workers, women, and students. ARENA is kind of a regional group of concerned scholars and intellectuals. Of course, ARENA also engages in certain kinds of campaigns, for example, the Bhopal campaign after 1984.

TEB: When was ARENA founded?

KCL: 1980. The organization has gone through various stages. I became involved in the late eighties, specifically because of what was happening in China. I became their resource person on China. In 1994 ARENA restructured and I became the chair of the executive board, serving two terms, for a total of six years, and then I thought I could get away. But last year at the congress I was elected chair of the council of fellows, and I am still on the executive board.

Partly because it is not one of those international NGOs in the UN system, ARENA does not have adequate funding. The staff is quite small, only two full-timers and three part-timers now, and we are burdened with a lot of work.

TEB: Did ARENA make the decision not to connect with the United Nations NGO system? Obviously, there is a lot of money at stake, and if you were a United Nations NGO, maybe you would have much bigger operation. Did you make a decision not to pursue that path?

KCL: No, no one ever considered that. It was never part of our agenda or discussions. At one point we were trying to get accredited so that we could attend one or two of those sessions. I think that's all. Apart from that, we have nothing to do with the UN and mostly just interact with individuals.

TEB: One striking thing about ARENA is its inter-Asian quality, in which intellectuals do not mediate their relationships through the United States or Europe.

KCL: Yes, ARENA has been trying to have bilateral exchanges within Asia. So we have had, for example, a China-India exchange and a China-Vietnam exchange, where we try to compare situations in various sectors in the "Asian" context. It's not as if we can define it, "Asia," or "Asian" territory. We constantly talk about what we mean by "regional perspective." It is stupid to confine ourselves to geographical "territory," though the question has been raised as to whether or not Turkey should be included in one program. I think the question of how we define Asia concerns the history of imperialism. The history of imperialism, colonialism, and world wars brought calamities to the people of so-called Asia, setting off nationalist movements for the establishment of a modern independent state. Thus the notion of Asia seen as a contradistinction to what is conventionally named as the West is largely a statist conception. I think that for the intellectual-activist articulations that build up ARENA, there is a sense of disillusionment with statist apparatuses and institutions. Institutions such as the United Nations and parliamentary democracies are seen to be part of the cause of people's miseries. Hence, to combat the wretched fate thrust upon people as a consequence of their pursuit by these institutions, the inventive energies, intellectual as well as

practical knowledge, and experiences emerging from the people who are still suppressed and marginalized by statist practices and imagination, are the resources to draw from for the building of what was then called the "new alternatives."

Note

Riki Thompson transcribed the interview from the initial tape recording.