

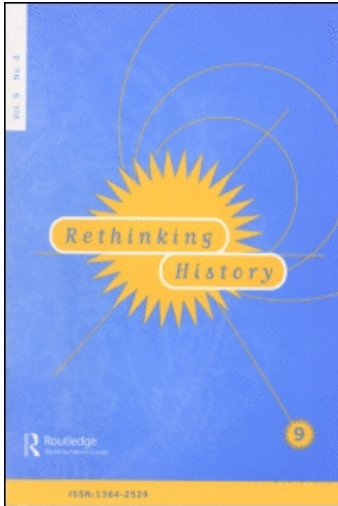
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Gotelind Müller^a

^a Centre for East Asian Studies, Institute of Chinese Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

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INTERVENTION

Some thoughts on the problem of ‘popular/public history’ in China

Gotelind Müller*

*Centre for East Asian Studies, Institute of Chinese Studies, University of Heidelberg,
Germany*

In this study, the author uses the example of China to point out the cultural premises that the current western notions of ‘popular’ and ‘public’ and a simple equation of both entail. Given China’s cultural and political layout, which differs from modern western societies, the author does not subscribe to the view of an antagonistic relationship between both in the Chinese case. Instead, she suggests that there is a need to develop a more reflected configuration of particular notions of ‘popular’ and ‘public’ and their relationship by looking into different layers of meaning on historical, cultural and political levels to situate the terms in specific contexts. Through a discussion of two recent examples of foreign history on screen in China, a television series on the ‘Great Powers’ since 1500 AD and a party-educational documentary on Soviet history, the way in which different modes of globalization are played out in Chinese ‘public’ history is examined. The author argues that the case of China is not just one other setting, but that the inner East-Asian flows, so important in ‘popular culture’ in that region of the world, urge us to think also in a more complex way about ‘globalization’ as a by no means necessarily or inherently western-defined process.

Keywords: concepts of ‘public’ and ‘popular’; Chinese media; history education; history on television; *Daguo jueqi*; *Ju an si wei*; globalization; East Asia

The problem of terms

The first thing one ponders, as a writer who specializes in Chinese studies, when asked to write something about popular/public history in China is: What do we actually mean by ‘popular’ or by ‘public’ in China? How do these concepts which might seem unproblematic and fairly straightforward in their English use, at least at first glance, translate into Chinese? Or rather: Which Chinese terms would correspond? In fact, there is a range of options in Chinese terminology, depending on what kind of ‘popular’ or ‘public’ one intends to express. Before going into terminology matters briefly, this paper

*Email: mueller-saini@zo.uni-heidelberg.de

first looks at how other colleagues in Chinese studies dealt with the issue of the ‘popular’ in China. In their edited volume entitled ‘popular China’, Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz start with the following comment:

This is a book about the people of China, not the abstract People as defined by the government of the People’s Republic, not the imagined subjects of a socialist state, but actual living, desiring, struggling people trying to make sense of who they are and how they should act in the rapidly globalizing economy and culture of the early twenty-first century. (Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz 2002, 1)

The book bears the subtitle *Unofficial culture in a globalizing society*. Now, why do the editors need to start like this? Obviously, the English term ‘popular’ is as a word connected to ‘people’, but what is not immediately clear is *how* this relation is shaped: is it *of* the people or *for* the people? And in China – above all – who defines who ‘the people/People’ are in the first place? By the capital letter, the editors express a differentiation between people and People, pointing at the claims of the Chinese socialist state to define who the ‘People’ (*renmin*) are (which has, for example, juridical implications: only those ‘counting’ as such enjoy constitutional rights), juxtaposing ‘their’ own notion of ‘people’. Via the subtitle, they furthermore equate *ex negativo* the ‘People’ and the ‘official’, and explicitly the ‘people’ with ‘unofficial’. To this they add the dichotomy of ‘abstract’ and ‘actual living’, thus offering the opposition of People–official–abstract vs people–unofficial–living as an opposition between discourse and practice. ‘Popular’ then means social (potentially subversive) practice vs ‘official’ state discourse, which brings to mind de Certeau’s notion of the ‘popular’ as tactics of resistance in the ‘art’ of living vs power-backed top-down ‘information’ (adding to mere conceptual distinction the perspective of active resistance from below) (de Certeau 1984). Thus, one of the points to keep in mind is whether this binary model works, or rather, to what degree?

Remaining for a moment further with ‘popular’, the term is already ambiguous in English: Do we intend that something is ‘popular with’ many individuals, do we intend ‘popular’ as opposed to elitist, as amateurish vs specialist or as societal vs state connected? Depending on which aspect one focuses upon, one would represent it differently in Chinese, e.g. ‘*shou huanying de*’ or ‘*liuxing de*’ for ‘popular with’, ‘*tongsu de*’ for ‘non-elitist’ (with a slightly derogatory nuance in Chinese), ‘*minjian de*’ as opposed to ‘state-connected’, etc. ‘Popular culture’ can be rendered differently, but usually would be represented/translated by ‘mass culture’ (*minzhong/dazhong wenhua*), reflecting ‘ideological’ influences in Chinese terminology, whereas from the above-named ‘*renmin*’ (people/People) one may as well construct the adjective (*renmin de*). It simply depends on what kind of ‘popular’ one intends.

As for ‘public’, things are a little less complicated, but still one should briefly reflect the term: the first thing that comes to mind is ‘public’ as

opposed to 'private', something that is to be seen by or is accessible 'openly' to an indiscriminate number of people. However, 'public' covers also the notion of something connected to authority (the state). Depending on how the 'public sphere' is working, i.e. which actors are entitled to participate, the 'societal' or the 'state-connected' meaning is more decisive. In fact, in Chinese, to render 'public', one usually would choose between various combinations, with the main character 'gong', in itself having an 'official', state-related connotation. Thus, not surprisingly, for China there is an intensive debate going on in Chinese studies about whether China ever developed a 'public sphere' in the past, if so, when and in what sense (since Habermas' conception reflects the specific conditions and historical experiences of European bourgeois society not one to one transferable to other cultural or political contexts), and how the present situation should be evaluated in this regard. (Cases often discussed recently include the contested impact of the Internet for furthering the development of a 'public sphere' in present-day China) (Yang 2009; see also Berry 2010).

Clearly, in today's China, for 'public' history, which is the focus of reflection here, the role of the state is still central. History is seen as an important area of identity formation and self-representation. This not only grows out of socialist governance, but also has deep roots in Chinese tradition. The whole range of history education is therefore tightly controlled. History is also transported via state-sponsored media, museums etc., whereas the participation of non-state actors in the history 'market' is still secondary and only possible as far as it does not openly collide with the state's claim to interpretative monopoly.

Thus, when one talks of 'popular/public' (the slash representing an 'and' or 'or', not a 'vs'), this approach is problematic in the Chinese case, since 'public' does not go well with 'popular' in the sense of 'unofficial' here. However, owing to limited opening-up, there are also non-governmental actors involved in the 'public' now, complicating the earlier alternative picture of 'public' = 'official'. In fact, one of the things that challenge someone working on history education and history in the Chinese media of today is the constant cross-over between the 'official' and the 'unofficial' in social practice, thus troubling the above-cited clear-cut binary model of Link et al. as well. Obviously, state censorship in China is a structurally limiting factor to the development of a 'truly free' 'market of opinions' also on history, history education itself being a central pillar of identity politics, closely monitored by the state. But within these limits there is much negotiation going on. However, this negotiation not only consists in a simple testing of these limits, as is often assumed in the west (and here also the limits of de Certeau's point of consumers' 'resistance' become evident), but one notes also a strong 'popular' support for official views on history, being deeply engrained via streamlined history education, except for some dissenting views which usually get more publicity in western media reports

on China. Thus, the opposition of ‘official’ but not-believed history views vs believed but too-cautious-to-be-openly-acknowledged unofficial ones is largely a western construct – or just wishful thinking. Reality is more complex, representing a web of interrelations between the ‘general public’ and the state. One of the links between the two is certainly nationalism, but it is not the only one. Psychological factors are important as well, since the ‘normal’ populace has become accustomed to ‘official’ interpretations and has largely internalized them without questioning. Economic factors (what kind of history sells?), consumerist passivity (I prefer never to get challenged on my acquired ‘beliefs’), entertainment issues (this is for fun; if it is done well, who cares about ‘truth’ in that context?) or sometimes the sheer fun of difference (which should be distinguished from conscious ‘dissent’) play a role as well. Thus, the picture today is much more variable than it used to be.

History and globalization in China

Many observers of China have attested to the great appeal which historical topics have to Chinese audiences – something not only with a long tradition in China, but also to be found all over East Asia. History soaps are on prime time television, sometimes reconfirming officially cherished views of history, sometimes challenging them.¹ Bookshops sell a lot of books on historical topics, mostly related to biographies. Museums and memorials are mushrooming all over China (Denton 2005; Vickers 2007). Theme parks with historical topics have started to appear (e.g. in Xi’an on Tang dynasty times), and even in city planning ‘fake’ traditional architecture is promoted (Broudehoux 2004; Meyer 2008).² DVDs or VCDs on historical topics, recently often historical documentaries ‘telling the truth’, are sold on the streets. Old photographs and regional history are ‘in’, demonstrating a drive towards more pluralism in views of history, claiming to be an opening up of who ‘owns’ history and who is represented by it. The government itself promotes chosen historical sites via ‘patriotic education’ and encourages ‘red travel’ tours to places crucial for the Chinese revolution and its agents. All these activities reflect ongoing negotiations on the domestic history ‘market’, often connected to questions of national or regional or personal identity, and – at times – to ‘new nationalism’ (Gries 2004), which serves as a surrogate for Marxist ideology, to which most Chinese today only pay lip-service at best.

What is a fairly new feature, however, is the recent interest in more historical information about *foreign* history. This, of course, can be connected to identity politics as well (as a model to emulate or as ‘the other’, delineating and profiling the ‘self’), but it also has the potential of freeing history from the direct ‘service’ to national identity. (Remember the dictum current in Mao’s time of ‘using the past to serve the present’, mainly

being directed towards the *Chinese* past, since everything should ‘serve the [Chinese] People’ (*wei renmin fuwu*), including history.) Paying attention to foreign history is therefore a double-edged enterprise (negatively attested to also by a temporary downgrading of education in foreign history during earlier PRC times, namely in ‘leftist’ periods – except for ‘world revolutions’ and similar ideologically acceptable topics).

A case in point is the recent television series *Daguo jueqi* [Rise of the great powers] in late 2006. This series was launched with great fanfare, assisted by a book collection (CCTV 2006, 2007) and works modeled on it, creating considerable excitement. In school, all children in China get acquainted with ‘world history’ to some degree, thus rendering certain images of foreign history familiar with the Chinese pupils (and, to be fair, one should stress here that knowledge on foreign history in China is definitely much higher than the other way round, i.e. than knowledge on Chinese history in other countries, at least in western ones) (Müller 2011). However, as the popularity of the series *Daguo jueqi* made clear, there is a perceived longing to ‘know more’ about other countries, especially if they were and are ‘successful’, presenting a mix of touristic and historical curiosity, mingled with nationalist feelings of ‘knowing the other for surpassing it in the future’. The television series presented a new format to the Chinese audience, attracting it via well-known images, e.g. from the world history textbooks everybody read in school, but being much more lavishly illustrated, blending touristic highlights in the countries discussed (Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, the UK, France, Japan, Germany, Russia/Soviet Union and the US) with historical information provided by the narrator, interviews with ‘international scholars’ (including Chinese), computer-generated imagery, animations of famous paintings or other visual tricks for entertainment, and present-day street scenes, thus deliberately blurring past and present. The basic ‘ideological’ idea is to ‘understand the miracle of the rise of nations’ – in order to copy it. However, it is disputable whether the audience shared this view throughout, since many just took it as a welcome introduction to ‘the world’ in front of the television at home, often not yet being well-off enough to do trips to foreign countries themselves (which goes well with de Certeau’s observation on the need to acknowledge the autonomy of reception).³ The television series was also a socially respectable entertainment, since it catered to the ‘cultural formation’ of the viewer, and not mere tourism, by its claim to historical ‘education’ and meticulousness in including ‘expert’ comments. Furthermore, since Chinese history is especially closely monitored, new information of others’ history appeared to be very attractive, being also full of new visual experiences, at least to those viewers not personally familiar with foreign countries. So there was also hope for getting something less ‘ideological’, but still of historical interest to enjoy, a kind of new, unmitigated window onto the great world.

Surveys seem to indicate that the audience of such ‘serious’ historical television presentations⁴ mainly consists in well-educated, fairly well-off

urban males in their 30s or 40s, but as blogs suggest, there was a particularly broad interest in *Daguo jueqi*, obviously because it also addressed the public via many channels, including the accompanying book series and other items, also marking a new quality of marketing such products in China. Thus, one could inform oneself with books on specific countries in more detail, but also follow the whole itinerary of the Chinese film crew, who again represent fairly young, well-educated, urban people. They wrote about their work, what they experienced and how the interviews were done. Thus, one seems to get closer to the whole process of creating such a television series than merely enjoying its result. Rather, one may accompany the film crew through the process and – above all – their experiences of living in foreign countries.

Interestingly, on closer scrutiny, the series was not homogeneous at all, thus *not* providing a unified ‘moral of the tale’, e.g. politically more ‘sensitive’ topics, such as the part on the Soviet Union, were done in a more ‘traditional’ way, having a lot of ‘Chinese experts’ providing the ‘correct’ (orthodox) understanding of that state, whereas parts on Portugal and Spain (with less contemporary ‘salience’ – and of course fewer Chinese ‘experts’, these countries being rare subjects in Chinese academia) were much freer to focus on historical matters and touristic highlights. As occasional talks with a Chinese colleague involved in the series suggest, although the teams worked mostly separately, general decisions were taken beforehand on which topics should be addressed. Consequently, for example, the ‘most important’ countries were presented in two installments, whereas ‘less important’ ones were covered in one or – as with Portugal and Spain – in only half an episode. Thus, it was the UK, the US and Russia/the Soviet Union that received more intensive treatment. However, when watching the series, viewers get very different impressions of, for example, the US. Whereas the US-dedicated installments draw mostly positive conclusions, the Soviet Union episode continuously attacks the ‘wrong’ system of the US in the twentieth century, highlighting the Stalinist counter-model. Thus, in the series itself, a space is opened up for reflection on the part of the audience as to what conclusion should be drawn from these two different ‘historical experiences’, whereas in other installments ‘problematic’ issues are simply skipped (e.g. the one on Germany does not even deal with the GDR, but jumps from 1945 to reunification, or the one on Japan very hastily moves over the 1930s and 1940s, drawing a lot of ‘public’ criticism for doing so).

What is provided by such a series, however, is a cautiously more globalized outlook of historical views: foreign ‘experts’ can be heard in the original voice (the Chinese subtitles sometimes being tendentious renderings, but to those able to understand the particular language some ‘direct access’ is provided at least) and ‘original’ places can be seen. By linking up with popularly known images, such as those already encountered in school, these

images are reinforced. In this sense, there in fact is a more global ‘historical literacy’ also in China: the Mona Lisa and the French Revolution do mean at least something to an average Chinese, though western art is at the ‘cultural capital’ extreme, the French Revolution at the ‘ideological’ one (with a complicated trajectory of evaluation in the PRC, by the way, but today being simply hailed as ‘the Great French Revolution’). Interestingly, there are shifts going on even in ‘official’ history education, which tends to integrate now more recent and ‘popular’ features of foreign cultures as well, namely American ones, breaking up the canon of established ‘high-culture plus world revolution’ issues ‘worth’ knowing (e.g. in middle-school world history, pupils now also learn about Hollywood, jazz or Picasso) (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Jiaoyubu 2001, 32).

Another example of global influences in present-day China is the re-use of foreign soundtracks. International blockbusters such as *Titanic* or recently *Avatar* are also doing very well in China, though subject to many restrictions (e.g. only to be seen for a very limited time in cinemas; however, pirated DVDs are immediately on sale). When soundtracks of such western blockbusters are re-used in Chinese official filmic productions, they are to appeal unconsciously to a Chinese audience impressed by Hollywood style. A rather surprising case in point is a Chinese official historical documentary on the ‘perishing’ of the Soviet Union (*Ju an si wei* 2007). Although the documentary was explicitly ‘for internal use only’ to educate cadres, i.e. not a production intended for the ‘broad masses’ like *Daguo jueqi*, but a heavily ideological piece of cadre streamlining before confronting ‘the People’, it nevertheless re-used soundtracks from capitalist blockbusters, namely *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Pearl Harbor*, *The Rock* and *Troy* – as a film-loving student of mine immediately realized. Except for the usual quick accusations directed towards China of property theft and except for reasons of simple embellishment of a dry piece, what does it mean to have such ‘western consumerist’ soundtracks accompany an (in that case) heavily ideological historical documentary? Is it intended to appeal to subconscious feelings to making viewers ‘swallow’ ideological contents more easily – or at least make them bear hours of auctorial commented documentary pieces on Soviet history far below anything worth considering film art, given the fact that cadres could not but participate in the viewing? It is not very probable that it was only a convenient device to avoid bothering about composing their own soundtracks, since on closer scrutiny the use is deliberate: ‘bad’ figures are always introduced by sinister (western) musical pieces, whereas the good ones are represented by Russian folk music or marches, and the constant re-use of the same pieces works for emotional reinforcement of intended messages. (Whether in reality the use of such soundtracks also works sometimes in an unintended subversive manner is of course open to speculation.⁵)

Thus, from these two examples of (1) a ‘public’ history also ‘popular with’ the ‘people’ (*Daguo jueqi*) and (2) a ‘public’ history explicitly intended

as the state's educational message for the 'People' represented by their supposed leaders, the cadres (*Ju an si wei*), one may argue that both 'types' are not simply to be opposed to each other: on the one hand, there is convergence, e.g. when both 'public histories' intersect in content (in portraying the Soviet Union in 'orthodox' fashion), but on the other hand, there is also divergence, which, however, does not necessarily follow the line between both. Rather, 'global' elements, including visual and audio ones, work on different levels and for various interests in Chinese 'public' views on history: they might work to open up new windows, spiraling free from ideological straight-jackets and catering more to 'popular' taste. But they are also put to use by the authorities to bolster their historical 'public' views. Both ways of 'glocalization' twist the 'original', be it in a 'touristic gaze' or be it in using 'capitalist' elements for propagating 'socialist' contents.

Furthermore, as the above-cited examples, especially that of *Daguo jueqi* intended for the 'broad masses' and its new visual design testify, the chance to watch foreign film productions has had a competitive technical impact in China: more attention to visual lavishness, CGI, animations etc. are today expected and appreciated also by a Chinese audience. Whereas the figure of the auctorial narrator is very well-known from 'official' propaganda (the 'expository mode'; Nichols 2001, chap. 6), the reference to interviews with 'experts' to 'scientifically prove' interpretative points, and the general fad for seemingly 'unmitigated' documentaries which counterbalance the fashion for historical dramas or soaps (which from the outset are obvious 'remakes') are new. This reflects the double-bind of 'popular' history to the desire for 'objective' information, on the one hand, and entertainment, on the other. And both promise to provide more tangible experiences of history to their audience than those that the latter knew from school. Even state-sponsored 'traditional' educational pieces for party members (such as *Ju an si wei*) have to attune – if only for 'tunes'.

This general picture began to emerge mainly from the 1990s – not the least because the Chinese Government realized in the context of the end of the Cold War that it had to face competition with western influences and models. Thus, for example, in history education, while stressing 'ideological correctness' of contents and promoting 'patriotic education' to appeal also to students' emotions (e.g. documented in then-president Jiang Zemin's intervention to that purpose in 1991) (Kecheng jiaocai yanjiusuo 2001, 607–8), the layout of history textbooks was seen as 'too outmoded'. Teams were sent around the world to investigate history education in different countries, leading to some experimenting with more open forms of history teaching and more investigative elements in textbooks, besides modernizing the layout. Similarly, film and – to a lesser degree – television have followed international trends more closely, and semi-privatization (in terms of funding) has given a further stimulus to cater to the expectations of an audience nowadays familiar with non-Chinese productions (Zhu and Berry 2009; White 2005, chap. 4).

However, it might be important to add here something often overlooked when speaking about globalization in non-western countries, which usually is interpreted as the joining of and subscription to 'western' (i.e. above all US) defined 'global' discourses and standards. Even though this might often be the case, it is important to look at East Asia more closely, since it provides an example that complicates that picture: in fact, especially with 'popular' culture, the inner-Asian flows are very influential as well. Namely, Japan has in many respects played the role of the trendsetter, be it in karaoke or manga. And to mainland Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwan (already having 'digested' elements from the 'west' as from Japan themselves) are important models as well (even reflected in language by creating the common denominator '*gang-tai*', i.e. Hong Kong/mandarin: *Xiang gang* and Taiwan, e.g. '*gang-tai* music', etc.). In the sector of television dramas, Korea has recently joined in and created a frenzy 'wave' on its own. Furthermore, given the fact of a substantial overseas Chinese community present in different places in Asia as in the 'west', and with intensifying relations between them and the Chinese 'motherland', their role has to be counted in as well. For example, returning to cases taken from historical television series which are not only aired but also distributed as VCDs or DVDs, these are widely circulated among overseas Chinese who also participate in discourses about such productions via the Internet, etc., and by buying them (or not) also have some influence on the economic 'success' of the latter. In short, 'globalization' in China does not mean a one-sided (heading 'west') movement from local to global, but a process on multiple layers and in various directions.

Conclusion

In sum, what the Chinese case might contribute to thinking about 'popular/public history' is at the most obvious level the decisive influence of socio-political contexts, preventing the presupposition of the ubiquitous working of a 'western' market system together with a corresponding 'public sphere' dominated by society. However, even if 'popular' (if taken in the sense of 'unofficial' as in Link et al. (2002)) and 'public' are not only *not* working parallel here, but rather used in opposition to each other, globalization has changed the local situation, complicating the relationship between both. Thus, a clear-cut divide between top and bottom is simply misleading. The picture which emerges is rather that of a web of interrelations, cutting across 'public' and 'unofficial/popular', government and the people, discourses and practices (both in the plural), regions, generations, gender or types of media, held together by various knots, ranging from new nationalism over psychological habits to consumerist expectations. It is still too early to speak of any kind of 'cosmopolitanism' in China, but as the few examples referred to above have suggested, globalization has of course also taken

place in the 'history market', though in a multidirectional way. This might again help to avoid thinking of globalization as being inherently 'western-defined', leading to a more varied understanding of the latter, paying attention also to (East Asian) intraregional models and flows. And one should not overlook the fact that, as de Certeau (1984) aptly observed, structural changes do not yet provide an answer to the question of how individuals perceive them. China here serves as a reminder of the inherent complexities in the interplay between structures, intended messages and individual reception.

Notes

1. For the contested case of a historical television drama on Chinese modern history which ended up being taken off the screen, causing a major incident of unexpected financial loss for the official CCTV (China Central Television), see Müller (2007).
2. A good example is Beijing's face-lifting mainly connected to the Olympics to showcase 'true' Chineseness, though apparently appreciated more by its own people thrown out of their old traditional courtyard houses to relocate in modern concrete apartment blocks than by foreign tourists, who bemoan the 'Disney' character.
3. One might add that today well over 90% of Chinese households all over the country possess a television and that watching television is one of the top-ranking spare-time activities.
4. In China, there is a strict divide between self-proclaimed 'serious' historical presentations which are scrutinized closely before going to the screen, and 'entertaining' renderings which from the outset make clear to the viewer their completely fictional character, only using historical settings.
5. For example, at least to a western eye, the smiling, open face of an easily chatting Gorbachev in the documentary thwarts the ideological 'negative' comment and the sinister soundtrack, rendering the whole enterprise of debunking that particular politician as the scheming gravedigger of the 'first socialist state in human history' more than unconvincing. (The problem behind this was simply that the footage had to be taken from international or Soviet media of the time, which had no reason to present him in a negative light.)

Notes on contributor

Gotelind Müller is Professor of Sinology, Institute of Chinese Studies, University of Heidelberg. Recent major publications include *China, Kropotkin und der Anarchismus: Eine Kulturbewegung im China des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts unter dem Einfluß des Westens und japanischer Vorbilder* [China, Kropotkin and anarchism: A cultural movement in early 20th century China under the influence of the west and of Japanese Models] (2001), *Representing history in Chinese media: The television Drama 'Zou Xiang Gonghe' (Towards the republic)* (2007) and *Designing history in East Asian textbooks. Identity politics and transnational aspirations* (2011, ed.).

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