



# Building Your Own Cross-Border Worlds

**Wu Qi:** “Building your own cross-border worlds” is an interesting expression. Today, young people from all walks of life have this opportunity, and maybe they are engaged in it. How do you think we should build these worlds? What do they ultimately mean?

**Xiang Biao:** Max Weber said that rationality can be an iron cage, so we all yearn to resist the system through our own little organic, human worlds that get us closer to our reality. As I said before, the more diverse and plural a small community is, the stronger its power of resistance, and it will be all the more organic. If it is transnational, this first means that it will be quite diverse. An important feature of any system is that it is spatially closed, and can be closely linked to the state and bureaucratic structures, which means that this type of system cannot easily be transnational. Transnational should mean that you can’t readily figure out where the borders are. The logic of transnational is that you can break through state and national systems to create an alternative space. This collision of multiple visions can be a powerful stimulus to your thinking.

A little world is not a cozy nest. For scholars, a little world is first a process of construction and next a process of constant agitation. You build it, but then it forces you, stimulates you to think about yourself, to criticize yourself, and constantly breaks down how you used to understand things. The more active and agitated it is, the greater the feeling of security it will give you, because you live to think, and if you have the feeling that you are always thinking, you won’t feel fearful, because your

mind is alive. A transnational community gives you more stimulation and a greater sense of security. A meaningful little world necessarily obliges you to constantly doubt yourself, reflect on yourself, change yourself, and surpass yourself, but at the same time, it all happens quite naturally.

**Wu Qi:** What is the true function of this kind of transnational network for local scholarly output, thought, and practice? Even if it produces rich and beneficial exchanges, can these truly be absorbed locally?

**Xiang Biao:** In terms of knowledge production, how the local engages with the global without being consumed by the global is indeed a challenge. The anthropologist Anna Tsing (b. 1952) has talked about the evolution of the global knowledge system. For example, in the botanical classification system, the Swedish biologist Linnaeus used Latin to create a global nomenclature, but the foundational knowledge on which this system relies comes from everywhere. African plants were surely originally described in African languages, including their names, uses, and significance, but when the world knowledge system absorbed this information it used the Latin-based classification system, simply replacing African and Asian specificities. This means that the formation of a global knowledge system equals the elimination of local knowledge. Once the system is complete, if you want to study botany, you have to know Latin. So first, we need to be wary of what we call “international” or “global,” because these are man-made systems, and what is truly global only exists in countless places scattered throughout the world. Beethoven belongs to the world, but he first was European, not African, and not Latino. Why should European music be more “global” than African music? This is a problem.

Second, we have to be clear about what “local” means. When we meet our friends from Uganda and Scotland, we want to understand their “local” experiences and at the same time we want to build commonalities, and at that point, the question of “scale” becomes crucial. The question of scale asks when and how locality becomes trans-local commonality. Where do we start to overlap? In the commonality that we build, what experiences are abstracted, refined, and eliminated? We need to be clear about all of this. Both “global” and “local” are man-made. When you put together a transnational community, this doesn’t mean you are bringing anything extra to the local players, but instead recognizing the rich meanings that the local had all along, and energizing its capacity.

**Wu Qi:** Might the research you did for *Global “Body Shopping”* serve as a concrete model for teasing out relations between the local and the global?

**Xiang Biao:** The point of *Global “Body Shopping”* was that the global expansion of the economic system is built on these local foundations. It is partly because of its caste system and its marriage system that India provides the human resources that sustain the global system. The global IT economy is of course man-made, so we have to ask who is doing the work behind it? How are they able to do it? Where do the people come from? Why do they do that? You have to look at questions like personality, ethnicity, and training systems. This might be a pretty good example to look at the global system from a local place, trying to see how it was put together step by step.

**Wu Qi:** How do you view the scholarly framing of “East Asian modernity?” A priori, this would mean seeing China, Japan, and Korea as a whole or as a unit, which does not seem to accord with where you are going.

**Xiang Biao:** You are right that I am not promoting the idea of an East Asian community. Some people are doing that, and there is nothing wrong with it, but I don’t see the value, because this is not creating an organic community, but rather a label.

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