introduction

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The theme of this special issue of *Cultural Studies Review* is 'Cultural Research'. The essays included here emerged from an international research exchange between the Centre for Cultural Research (CCR) at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and the Department of Cultural Studies at Lingnan University (LU) in Hong Kong. Conducted over two workshops, this exchange involved both faculty and postgraduate students. The aim was to promote a cross-cultural, cross-institutional dialogue about cultural research as a new kind of interdisciplinary, collaborative research practice that engages with industry and community groups or partners, and thus involves concrete modes of action and intervention.

In 2001 the UWS Centre for Cultural Research and Lingnan's Department of Cultural Studies established an Academic Cooperation Agreement to facilitate research exchange and collaboration between the two Universities. Internationalisation is, of course, one of the buzzwords of the day in many parts of the world and academics are encouraged—indeed, in Australia, enticed by a new raft of funding schemes and initiatives—to go out in search of 'linkages' and connections with their counterparts around the world; no longer simply a by-product of the conference circuit, international networking, it seems, has reached a new level of intensity. While one of the motivations of our Agreement was to set up a framework that could authorise collaboration in research development between the two institutions some time in the future, it was also envisaged as an exercise that was more experimental than pragmatic, more informal and exploratory than strategic. In fact, in many respects the Agreement was actually more *curiosity-driven* than anything else, motivated as it was by an interest in simply finding out more about the innovative research cultures being developed at both

institutions, and a desire to explore and share these new research practices within the context of an international exchange.

We say *innovative* research cultures and *new* research practices (two very overworked terms in the global research climate, we do appreciate) because both the CCR and LU's Department of Cultural Studies have, over recent years, developed a way of operating that is recognisably and significantly different from most traditions of humanities-based scholarship in each place, and the modes of working favoured by those traditions. Frequently conducted through partnerships with a range of non-academic sectors including government departments and agencies, community groups or cultural organisations, often involving (in Hong Kong) collaboration with NGOs, schools or the social work sector and (in Australia) often beginning life as contract or commissioned research, *cultural research* is characterised by, amongst other things, both its *mode of interest* in the world (with research problems being generated and projects initiated from concrete, non-academic contexts of social life and experience) and its *mode of involvement* with others (collaborative, cross-sectoral and cosmopolitan). Both features enable cultural research to be a style of self-reflexive, interdisciplinary, and *engaged* knowledge and analysis that, precisely because it is conceived of and carried out within the practical complexities of everyday life, is able to make connections beyond the academy.

While the term 'cultural research' has been taken up by both institutions to describe such initiatives, it would be wrong to see it as necessarily meaning the same thing, or even leading to the same results, in their very different research environments. For example, while opportunities for contract or commissioned research in Australia are fostered by the governmental 'Industry Linkage' concept (presently the fastest growing program of funding within the Australian Research Council), they are rarely available to humanists in Hong Kong, where medical, techno-scientific, and, as Kit-ling Luk points out, 'problem'-driven social research predominates in a generally much more parsimonious research funding system (although the article by Po-keung Hui and Stephen C.K. Chan explores collaborative work with secondary schools enabled by Hong Kong's Education and Manpower Bureau). Given such differences, the first outcome of the Academic Cooperation Agreement mentioned above was an international exchange involving two workshops on cultural research, the aims of which were to explore what it means to do cultural research; to reflect on the processes involved in actually doing it; and to discuss the different ways in which both institutions had developed and pursued this as a *research practice*. The first workshop was held at the CCR in Sydney in 2002, the second at Lingnan in Hong Kong in 2004, and the experience of those workshop exchanges (complex as it was, in ways that Fiona Allon's essay explores) forms the basis of this special issue. As editors, our rationale has been to use this opportunity to 'showcase' some of the exciting projects presented and discussed during the exchange. However, in shaping from these a collection of essays, many of which implicitly or explicitly address

the enormous changes now reshaping our research landscapes—including the very conditions in which the production of knowledge is socially organised today—we also see this issue as providing an important contribution to some of the recent debates about humanities research internationally.

Here, too, there are complex differences to be noted between the Hong Kong and Australian contexts. Across Asia generally, cultural studies has been enjoying a period of development, expansion and consolidation since the early 1990s. The LU Department of Cultural Studies was the first to be established in the Chinese world, and the challenges that it faces in developing cultural research (discussed here by Meaghan Morris) derive in large part from the impact of educational policies of globalisation on school and university systems where 'the Humanities' in the Western sense have always had a fragile hold, and in which cross-linguistic and cultural problems of great complexity confront researchers, teachers and students alike. These problems include those of conforming to the demands of the Western cultural studies academy in its gate-keeping role of controlling admission to 'international' achievement in the English language (through refereed journals, for example), while also negotiating the varying dilemmas imposed by 'post'-colonial government and nation or community-building agendas.

In contrast, for the discipline known as cultural studies in the Western English-speaking world, the past decade has been a particularly rough time. In Australia, cultural studies has not only had to negotiate the broader restructurings of higher education and the redistribution of resources away from so-called 'pure' research towards 'applied' research and other more economically 'productive' activities, but it has had to do so while grappling with the discipline's own sense of endemic, internal 'crisis'. And, all *at the very same time* as sustaining 'head-kicks' from across the public spectrum by everyone from the Prime Minister and the Minister for Education to various shock jocks and newspaper hacks. For years, cultural studies has been singled out to blame for everything from theoretical obscurantism and moral and cultural relativism to distorting Australian history and giving rise to 'postmodern' right-wing politics. For one relatively 'narrow' discipline, this is quite a feat. While some critics have lamented the abstruse language and others have ridiculed the 'frivolity' of certain topics and objects of analysis, still others have gone even further, questioning the 'national benefit' of such projects and intervening directly in funding outcomes.

Meanwhile, over recent years, these pressures from outside the discipline have everywhere been matched by a deep sense of anxiety and reflection about the best methods of working *within* it. While this may or may not be new for cultural studies, stressing the newness of the current situation against a background of continuity would be the least interesting approach to take in the transnational context established here. Rather, we have chosen to emphasise those questions of 'use', 'usefulness' and 'utility', 'relevance' and 'practicality' which are raised

now by the rhetoric of globalising reform in many different education systems, and which within cultural studies have become increasingly insistent over the past few years; many of the essays here refer directly to, and are informed by, related debates in both Australia and Hong Kong. Using a very different kind of language, one as far removed from the shadow of Australian economic rationalism as it is from the Australia-influenced modalities of Hong Kong's educational reforms within a Chinese context, this is what Stuart Hall, borrowing a term from Edward Said, has called 'the question of the "worldliness"' of cultural studies. As Hall explains, this means thinking about intellectual work 'as a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect'.[1]

It is precisely this question of *worldliness* that motivates the essays included in this issue. For Ien Ang, for example, Hall's emphasis on 'worldly' intellectual practice provides a way of framing and defining what is distinctive about cultural research as a form of engaged scholarship. Taking Hall's suggestion on board, Ang argues, means not only considering seriously how cultural studies can be made to circulate outside its usual restricted zone of influence, but also means prioritising agendas that emerge from *outside* the academy, whether from social workers and residents in a tiny squatter village threatened by urban develop-ment (in the work of Chan, Ip and Leung), or from a municipal council wanting to promote a successful multicultural image (Dreher), and from the convergence in Hong Kong Disneyland of disjunct government needs, corporate desires and local Cantonese middle class dreams (Choi) to the burgeoning anti-ageing industry (Neilson). In her essay, 'From Cultural Studies to Cultural Research: Engaged Scholarship in the Twenty-first Century', Ang herself provides a number of examples of cultural research as 'community engagement', where projects have been designed specifically to address community needs, from issues as diverse as road safety (discussed in this issue by Sarah Redshaw) and domestic water use, to the impact of backpacker tourism on residential communities in the coastal suburbs of Sydney. Like those conducted at Lingnan, these projects carried out at the CCR demonstrate what happens when intellectual work is opened up to questions from the outside, and put to use in particular contexts of social practice. Carried out in this collaborative way, with a diverse set of community contacts or 'industry' partners (many of whom bring their own expertise to bear on the issue at hand) this research necessarily involves moments of failure and exhaustion, as the authors variously show, and yet it can be genuinely interdisciplinary and political, leading to the creation of both new knowledge and specific practical agencies.

Ang prefers to use the term 'cultural research' rather than 'cultural studies' to describe these projects, seeing cultural research as 'a kind of post-cultural studies, building on the competencies, achievements and aspirations of cultural studies but taking it into a more con-cretely social and practical direction'. But, rather than seeing cultural research as coming

after or *following* cultural studies, we'd prefer to see it as a kind of intellectual practice that asks us to revisit many of the questions that motivated the formation of cultural studies in the first place. In the Hong Kong context, Choi does this when she asks why 'consumption' matters now as a topic for cultural research, while from a social work-inflected background Luk explores the genesis from a social work-inflected background of a desire for *cultural* research on a terrain (older women in public housing) more usually given over to 'social movement' and resident action studies. Hui and Chan address the difficult issue of what 'practicality' can be made to mean within a bureaucratic educational culture which invokes this value rhetorically while shaping practice by other imperatives, and the study by Chan, Ip and Leung of the nexus of the culture of community politics and the culture of business in the village of Lei Yue Mun (constituted as it is historically in a complex flow of migration between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland since 1949) revisits the much-discussed dynamics of 'the local' and 'the global' to show how the project of cultural research itself may be caught up in those dynamics in ways that do not easily lend themselves to any clear resolution of community problems, however concretely defined.

In the essays from Australia, the authors similarly demonstrate how *cultural* research—equipped as it is with a 'tool-kit' derived largely from cultural studies, including fundamentally its interdisciplinary methods of working and concern with questions of power, representation and contested meaning—approaches a range of exceptionally complex environments and issues where the interests of a number of constituencies converge but don't necessarily concur or correspond. Redshaw's research on young people and driving, for example, makes a direct intervention in an area (Road Safety) dominated by psychological and behavioural research, arguing for the importance of looking at driving as an embodied practice located within specific social and cultural contexts, and the importance to all involved (researchers, road safety officers, and local authorities alike) of developing more consciously 'cultural' accounts of the relationships between car cultures, automobility and young drivers. Dreher's study of 'Tune in to Fairfield', a multicultural driving tour developed by Fairfield City Council, analyses the politics of representation inevitably involved when a culture or place is turned into a consumable tourist object. Focusing specifically on the dilemmas the cultural researcher faces when she aims not merely to analyse but also to intervene in the representational politics around cultural diversity, Dreher considers the difficulties, including the failures, involved in attempts to move beyond a critique of public discourse and to develop alternative modes of representation. Neilson meanwhile brings together perspectives on population ageing, gerontology and global finance, showing how the different discourses and scales of analysis involved in exploring anti-ageing cultures provide a new way of looking at the intersection of biopolitics and globalisation. In conclusion, Ang considers cultural studies' self-declared and oft-recited claim to be a politically informed type of intellectual

practice, suggesting that collaborative cultural research projects actually provide opportunities for cultural studies to be developed, and taken seriously, as more than just critique, as enabling in fact a crucial shift from the study of culture to the politics of cultures. All of the essays included here in this special issue respond to and explore this suggestion, with many obstacles, complications and pauses for reflection encountered along the way. For this reason alone, and at a time when engaged research and collaborative research partnerships are becoming increasingly central to research agendas everywhere, this special issue provides a timely opportunity to discuss some of the challenges and difficulties raised by this kind of intellectual work.

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1. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical
    Legacies', in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson
    and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*,
    Routledge, New York, 1992, p. 286.