Introduction

Peter Dicken (2004) lamented geographers’ missing out on globalization and becoming more parochial in terms of research, and called for a revitalization of regional geography. Indeed, I often feel unsettled by the fact that, from time to time, geographers have to defend the position of geography, especially in recent response to the argument that globalization means the end of geography. Some of those influential pieces are coming from popular media, by popular journalists and columnists, most recently, New York Times columnist Tom Friedman (2005) in his bestseller, The World is Flat, which once again reinforces “the end of geography thesis”. Given the fact that the globalization train is moving forward without any immediate stop sign, such a thesis, in varied forms, will be circulated and speculated about again and again in the future.

It is also clear that the significance of geography is not really appreciated by some in the media, intentionally or unintentionally. I have been puzzled by why so few geographers are writing popular books discussing, or even defending, the implications of globalization on geography. This may have something to do with geography as a discipline itself. Why cannot we geographers play a more active role in the globalization debate? In this commentary I argue that such a position has a lot to do with the struggling academic status of regional geography, including the geography of China. I also discuss the roads that geographers, especially those working on China, may take to improve their academic status, which may have important implications for the survival and even revitalization of regional geography.

“The world is flat”

The first time someone mentioned Friedman’s best seller to me was in early 2005. A retired labor worker who was auditing my Geography 332 China course was quick to embrace Friedman’s idea that the world is flattening out. I was busy with teaching and research, so I did not really pay much attention to the book, although I had heard about it. I thought it was just another post-Ohmae speculative book that would lose its popularity soon.

But in late May a retired history professor and I had a meeting with two representatives from the City of Milwaukee (Special Assistant to the Mayor and Deputy Commissioner of the Department of City Development) regarding the mayor’s upcoming trip to China. During our discussion the historian talked about Friedman’s idea and suggested the mayor read the book if he hadn’t already. This time it drew my attention. The impact of this book had gone beyond my expectations; it had reached regular people, regular professors, and eventually administrators.

Unlike Kenichi Ohmae’s (1990) volume, this book is thick, with 488 pages, and is written by one of the most influential names in the media, who is based in New York. He covers the buzz countries of both China and India, the buzz topic of the challenge/threat of globalization to US hegemony, and builds upon his previous best sellers and popular New York Times columns. For him, the world is flat; it is shrinking, connecting, and empowering individuals, flattened by the convergence of ten major political events, innovations, and companies. This convergence has allowed for multiple forms of collaboration in real time, without regard to geography or distance, and in the near future will allow for collaboration without regard even for language.
In a way, the thesis is not new; it is just echoing and expanding on what has been written previously (for example, O’Brien, 1992; Ohmae, 1990), about which geographers have been fiercely in defense. The concept of the world as flat is not new also because in classical location theory, whether it is Von Thünen’s agricultural location theory, Weber’s industrial location theory, or Christaller’s central place theory, a flat plain is often assumed, although not as much about connection and convergence as is emphasized by Friedman. Geographers themselves have from time to time assumed the world is flat, although you may argue that I cannot compare Friedman with von Thünen, Weber, and Christaller because Friedman’s flat world is entirely different in meaning from the classic assumption of isotropic plains.

Geographers got nervous in the early 1990s when the globalization promoters predicted convergence, global villages, and the end of distance, location, places, and geography. You can find defenses coming from the media and the business world, social sciences, and especially geography (for example, Cox, 1997; Yeung, 1998). The basic arguments, as summarized by Yeung (1998), are as follows: first, the world economy is not a singular global production factory, but a regional world of production and contested by regionalization, reterritorialization, and geographical embeddedness, and regions, including high-tech regions and global city regions, have emerged as the major motor of the global economy (Scott, 1998); second, convergence and global cultures have further accentuated the awareness of local differences and cultural responses; and, third, globalization does not indicate the demise of nation-states as the primary locus of political governance.

Geographers’ message, including numerous publications on scale, somehow, can hardly reach the minds of nongeographical convergence thesis promoters. Therefore, the end of geography thesis goes on; the challenge and debate continue. The lack of dialog between systematic geographers and regional geographers has lessened the impact of the work of geographers on the impact of globalization.

Is regional geography dead?
The discipline of geography has been constantly searching for its own identity, debating over geographical theories and methods, and looking for ways to move forward. Those debates include disciplinary identity and directions (for example, Turner, 2002), social and policy relevance (for example, Hamnett, 2003; Martin, 2001), fuzzy critical geography (Markusen, 1999), and internal fragmentation and conflicts. The debate about the nature of regional geography (for example, Bradshaw, 1990; Holmen, 1995; Thrift, 1990) and Eurocentralism in academic practice (for example, McGee, 1991; Wei and Lin, 2002; Yeung, 2001; Yeung and Lin, 2003) is probably the most relevant to this comment. Over the years, geographers have promoted spatial science, Marxism, political economy, postmodernism, critical social theory etc in regional geography, what has been missing is ‘regional’ (Holmen, 1995). Regional geography has been marginalized, and the high days of regional geography are gone. The discipline of geography has become more disciplinarily bounded and less tied to area studies. Theoretical and methodological turns in geography, policy distance, and Eurocentralism all have contributed to the decline of regional geography.

Dicken (2004) lamented the missing geographers in the globalization debate. This, on the one hand, is related to the decline of regional geography, and on the other hand, is related to the lack of meaningful communication between regional geographers and systematic geographers. In fact, many regional geographers study varied facets of globalization, but few of their publications are cited by nonregional geographers. Despite continued call for inclusiveness and the critique of Eurocentralism, the status of regional geography is not improving. Regional geographers, if they want
to publish in top geographical journals, must embrace and embed themselves in Western mainstream theories. The morale of regional geographers is low, and indeed many area specialists prefer themselves to be called systematic geographers, such as economic geographers or urban geographers. The call for ‘new’ regional geography has effectively killed the ‘old’ regional geography, and turned regional geographers into systematic geographers.

Today not many geography students, at least in the United States, are doing study abroad and work as regional geographers, although many students take regional geography courses. In most of the US geography departments, substantial course credits are from regional geography courses. But many regional geography courses are taught not by full-time faculty members, but by ad hoc instructors or graduate students. Some of them have little training in regional geography and have never even visited a developing country. Some students taking those courses, especially those majoring in area/international studies, may have more international experience than their instructors. The situation is probably not much better in the United Kingdom, since Cannon (2000) has lamented the lack of British geographers working on China.

**Long live regional geography!**

If geographers want to participate more actively in the globalization debate and area studies, regional geography has to be revitalized. Without a revitalized regional geography and improved communication between regional geographers and systematic geographers, geography’s position in international and globalization studies cannot be improved. We simply do not have enough manpower in economic geography, urban geography, or political geography alone to engage in the studies of globalization. If we are ‘to take the rest of the world seriously’, we must acknowledge that an in-depth study of world regions does require area-specific knowledge, years of language training, and substantial international experience.

The developing world is dynamic and intriguing, from newly industrialized countries to the emerging markets of China and India. In fact, China’s transition and transformation have become key subjects of enquiry in social sciences. Books on China are among the best sellers; Friedman’s (2005) *The World is Flat* talks extensively about China. There are also increasing publications on China, not only in disciplinary journals but also area journals, and by top publishers. China and other developing countries do matter. Harm de Blij (2005) argues that the rise of China is one of the three challenges facing America where geography matters.

Regional geographers are well positioned to write books reaching out to a broad audience. The rise of China and its challenge to US hegemony is a hot topic in the media and popular magazines such as *Foreign Policy*. Other disciplines and the media rarely read professional geographical journals. Regional geographers are better positioned to take on this task, but the potential has not yet been realized. My department website sometimes even omits China from my research interests, although on campus, the administrators are more interested in my China expertise. I was even invited to give a quick course to the Mayor of Milwaukee and his delegation on geography, demographics, and regionalism in China. I am probably the only geographer in our department who has profiled a geographic region for the mayor.

The identity of geography is forever associated with regional geography, whether you like it or not. The reviving or surviving of regional geography depends on improvement in publication, hiring, education, and other general academic practices, and, most importantly, the efforts to become ‘better’ geographers. Doing research on developing countries, including China, is challenging: researchers must face limited funding, harsh fieldwork conditions, lack of institutional support, and Eurocentrism (for example, McGee, 1991;
Yeung and Lin, 2003). Regional geographers do need to engage in the broad debates and issues, broaden our research agenda, and make efforts to improve communication with nonregional geographers, other social science disciplines, and even the general public.

Dicken is one of the very few geographers who have recently ventured into developing countries, writing about China, in his case. The list of well-known scholars engaging in the research on China is expanding, which now includes economist Jeffrey Sachs, planner John Friedmann (2005), and sociologist John Logan (2002). These three gurus not only study China, but also actively promote its research and have even organized conferences and research projects dealing with the country. Geographers should take a central role in studying the transition and transformation of China, should publish more not only in geographical journals, but also books and in area studies journals, and attend area studies conferences and other interdisciplinary professional activities.

Economist Sachs not only publishes papers about geography and regional development in developing countries, but also books and popular articles, which reach out to broad audiences. Although ‘infamous’ for his ‘shock therapy’ to market transition, Sachs has done much to raise the awareness of geography, and his address at 2004 AAG meeting called for more attention from geographers to the significance of geography in development. Although not a regional specialist, Sachs talks about geographical and regional issues in many occasions, even including development strategies in Sri Lanka, a topic I believe geographers can do effectively as well.

I have been teaching courses on geographies of China and Asia, and I am struggling with the lack of geographical textbooks on these regions. We need more regional textbooks and popular books! While I was at the 2005 AAG meeting in Denver I chatted with P P Karen, one of the leading Asian geographers. He was lamenting the lack of geographers attending Asian studies conferences, which are often dominated by historians and, to a lesser degree, political scientists. I challenge more geographers to attend such area studies conferences.

I think there are five paths a regional geographer, especially a China geographer, can take. First, test Western theories, which is what many nonregional geographers who study the non-Western world have been doing. Second, falsify Western theories: the situatedness of geographical theories in specific Western contexts leaves room for criticism, as did the work of China geographers on Guangxi (for example, Leung, 1993). Third, develop context-sensitive theories, as promoted by China geographers (for example, Fan et al, 2003; Ma, 2002), or “adopt a theory-conscious ‘arena perspective’ in regional geography” (Holmen, 1995). Clifton Pannell (2003) asked whether our conceptual models and working theories are adequate to accommodate the dynamics and complexity of transitional China. The recent call for theorization among geographers working on China/Asia to some extent reflects the theoretical turn in geography (Lin and Wei, 2002; Yeung and Lin, 2003). Sociologist Victor Nee’s market transition theory is a good example of theories situating market transition in general and the Chinese transition in particular (Guthrie, 2000). Fourth, be an orthodox Sinologist: China is rising, and you can do equally well by reaching out to area/international specialists and the public, like many historians and political scientists do. There is a ‘rich’ world out there beyond the academic ivory tower. Finally, you can simply be a better scholar: ‘Publish or perish’. As long as you can publish with influential publishers or respected journals, or if you can get more grants, you will be doing well. Many influential publishers and area studies journals do publish regional pieces without ‘grand theory’, and many funding agencies are interested in empirical and policy-oriented projects.
I am therefore less concerned with which perspective or approach to adopt, although Dicken (2004) promoted a revitalization of ‘regional geography’ within a relational framework. Frameworks come and go, and the relational framework does have critiques. Perspectives in the field of regional geography reflect shifting paradigms in human geography, and every geographer would argue for the significance of his or her own perspective. Therefore, for Rob Potter (2001), development geography is the proper organizing framework for regional geography, and for Laurence Ma (2002), it is political economy. A social theorist would argue for social theory.

My message is therefore that we should be more active, productive, and inclusive: let one hundred flowers blossom! We need a revitalized regional geography, whether it is ‘old’ or ‘new’, because nothing is absolutely ‘new’ and neither alone works. Empirical work has its value, not only because it’s required in developing and testing theories, but also because it has the potential to reach out to the policy body and the general public. I hope this piece stimulates more thinking and discussion regarding the status and revitalization of regional geography.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Professor Larry Ma for his comments on an earlier version of the paper, and Professor Henry Young for his encouragement. The usual disclaimer applies.

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