

Commentary

Contending the Popular: Party-State and Culture

David S. G. Goodman

Consideration of the “popular” in the contemporary People’s Republic of China (PRC) immediately confronts the methodological problem of universalism, as the essays in this issue demonstrate. The popular has certain connotations in the societies from which our analyses emanate that may or may not be commonly applied in and to contemporary Chinese society. It is, for example, often equated with both democratic and demotic developments, both of which are highly contested discourses in post-Mao China, not least because of their apparent Westernness.¹ The concept of popular culture may be similarly challenged, though perhaps differently, not least since in that usage *popular* is more than simply an adjective, as both Li Hsiao-t’i and Jing Wang make explicit.

Academic inquiry, and particularly its language, must necessarily assume this universalism even as it dissects the popular and associated phenomena in

order to assess whether and to what extent such assumptions might be justified. All societies are *suis generis*. Nonetheless, the application of generalized concepts and approaches can help characterize a society by identifying the similarities and differences against such implicit yardsticks. The end result might conceivably be a justification of this universalism, but it is perhaps more likely to identify differences that will require the amendment of concepts and theories if their general explanatory power is to be maintained.

The constant need to adjust concepts and approaches as the focus of comparison widens is particularly important at present when considering the interactions of political, economic, social, and cultural change in contemporary China. Post-Mao China has coincided with dramatic political changes internationally, especially during the last decade, that have all but universalized the project of modernization around a single model. It has become increasingly difficult to inquire, as was once extremely fashionable, about the convergent or divergent trends in the various patterns of relationships between state and society.² Convergence is now more or less assumed as a corollary of internationalization, with debate focusing on different paths and stages of development.³ All the same the homogenizing impact of globalization may yet prove to be an overstatement, with convergence appearing either somewhat premature, or a function of the level at which generalization is attempted.

These prefatory comments are in many ways the necessary background to the question raised by some of the articles in this issue and by discussions at the workshop where they were first presented, as to the relevance of theory developed in a European context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social and political revolutions to China's still-Communist Party state and largely agrarian version of postsocialism. However, they also highlight some other key questions that attend the discussion of the development of contemporary popular culture, as well as some of the assumptions made in some of the descriptions of those developments. In particular, they draw attention to the changing relationships between politics and culture, and the identification of new agents of cultural change, as well as to the nature of the Chinese state's authoritarianism and the timing of its developmental process.

The post-Mao era, and even more the period since Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched themselves on their reformist

path at the end of 1978, has seen significant changes in the relationship between politics and culture. Necessarily, this relationship has changed in response to the CCP's adjustments to its ideology. However, at the same time writers, artists, and the producers of culture were not slow to exploit the opportunities these changes permitted, and indeed by effectively lobbying ensured increasingly greater scope for their activities.⁴ Perhaps the most important change was that which altered the system of political censorship from an active vetting before publication to a more passive regulation after the event.⁵ Particularly during the 1990s, after Deng Xiaoping's Excursion to the South in 1992 and its provision of further direction to the reform agenda, culture became less didactic and more concerned with entertainment, more commercialized and more commercializable.

At the same time, there are also continuities in the relationship between politics and culture that cross the watersheds of both 1978 and 1992. Perhaps the most important is that the CCP has always been, and remains, concerned with popular culture. Li Hsiao-t'i's account of the emergence of a concern with "proletarian" literature during the 1930s highlights the process that led the CCP to see the advantages in both using and controlling the content of popular culture.⁶ The *yangge* described by Jing Wang in her article and practiced by the elderly in Beijing during the 1990s is itself already a dance form proletarianized and homogenized by the CCP for its own purposes from a series of different popular origins in North China during the 1940s.⁷ As Li Hsiao-t'i suggests, this concern preceded Mao Zedong's address to the Yan'an Forum in May 1942. Moreover, as Jing Wang explicates, while the CCP's perspectives may have been adjusted during the last twenty years, the party's concern with the management and articulation of popular culture has not changed. Nor, for that matter, has the party closed down its internal propaganda hierarchy.

Consideration of the mechanics of the relationship between politics and culture also suggests that there are continuities as well as change. While the party-state has certainly moved from greater direct involvement in cultural affairs to greater regulation during the reform era, it would be easy to overstate its monopoly of cultural production before 1978 and to understate its involvement during the 1990s. Even at the height of the Mao-dominated era of China's politics, creators of culture did not have to be previously

state-sanctioned in order to have access to public outlets such as museums, journals, or publishing houses. Unlike in the former USSR, writers, for example, were not required to be members of the official writers' association if they wanted to be published. The initiative for writing and translation was by no means monopolized by the party-state, and, for example, George Orwell's *1984* was already available in Chinese before the reform era started, having been translated by an English-speaking freelance translator.⁸

In the reform era the party-state, for its part, has by no means surrendered completely its role as a creator of culture of all kinds. In part this is a qualitative argument. The electronic media—television in particular—became considerably more accessible and dominant during the 1980s, and yet they remain almost exclusively the province of the party-state.⁹ In the print media, the number of journals has certainly increased since the mid-1970s when every province had a literary magazine and an “art and culture” journal that mirrored the national standard-bearers. The largest growth occurred in the following ten years, and by the mid-1980s there would have been about seven thousand such magazines.¹⁰ Certainly, too, there are now magazines and journals published outside the resources of the party-state. However, the party-state remains a significant publisher and producer of culture. The main outlets for writers, for example, remain the party-state's now much larger stable of literary magazines and its publishing houses.

The party-state's influence is also far from absent, in a number of ways, in the formation of those new agents of cultural transmission to emerge in the 1990s. The explosion of popular culture has covered a diverse range of activities, from popular religions and the popularization of religion, through the creation of new forums for popular interactions, such as private restaurants, to pop music and magazines. The commercial environment is a major stimulus, and in most cases new companies have been established to develop these activities.¹¹

Few of the new agents of cultural change have had no connection with the party-state. Many have worked in the party-state and taken their connections, and sometimes their training and expertise, in an appropriate activity into the nonstate sector. Particularly during the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, and especially in south and east China, as the economy began to grow, many local officials found themselves losing ground economically to

their peers. One strategy for some was to experiment in the market sector of the economy, and many (though by no means all) private restaurateurs came into their new roles in that way. Sometimes, too, economic pressures convinced officials in the party-state that with their managerial and other skills they could do better in the market. In Shanxi, the daily newspaper *Life of the City* is produced by a former division-level cadre in the General Office of the Taiyuan CCP Committee, and *Good Friends* comes from a publishing company started by journalists and officials from the *Shanxi Daily*.

Many, too, are the relations, often the children, of officials of the party-state who build on their and their relatives' influence to develop their enterprises. A Buddhist advisory service was developed by the son of the mayor of a district-level city, who moreover was able to establish his enterprise in a building owned by the provincial committee of the CCP. A pop music producer's father had been party secretary of a rural district. So strong and transferable are these family connections that the children themselves can forswear membership in the CCP or positions in the party-state. Having a father who had been a long-term village leader, or senior cadre, in a provincial department makes party membership unnecessary and, indeed, for cultural activists runs the possibility of being counterproductive.

However, the relationship between new cultural activities and the party-state is not just associational in those fairly obvious ways. (After all, where else would one expect well-educated, administratively competent new agents of cultural change to come from?) New cultural activities tend to have even closer structural relationships with the party-state. The party-state has not disappeared from economic interaction with society; it has simply adjusted the level at which those interactions take place. Local government now plays a central role in China's socioeconomic development. For cultural activities, as for economic enterprises, local government provides access to capital (funds, equipment, and buildings), labor, and political protection. Partly for a share of equity (and in order to generate income) and partly because it feels happier with corporatism at the local level (where it can claim a monitoring influence, particularly in the face of questions or difficulties from superior officials), local government in its turn is pressured to cooperate. The booming collective sector of the economy is largely at the level of local government

and ensures financing and a network of influence to support activities that want to grow beyond the small scale of private enterprise.

These observations about the continued influence of the party-state would seem to confirm the arguments that suggest that the popular “from below” aspects of the drive for popular culture have been subverted “from above” in the 1990s. Certainly, as Jing Wang argues in her article, the party-state has developed a new ruling technology that seems designed not to let popular culture just be. However, as always in studying the contemporary PRC as it evolves, there is a need to stand back a bit. The party-state’s aims may be clear, but they, too, can be thwarted by the very social processes it seeks to manage. Social and even political groups may be complicit in their own management through an evolving corporatism, but the net result is likely to be a synthesis of their interactions with the party-state. There may be few challenges to the existence of the party-state, but there are no guarantees that its agenda will be implemented at any given time, or at least not necessarily in the way that was originally intended.

The party-state’s deliberate creation of provincial and regional cultures at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, and their subsequent development, has been instructive in this regard.¹² To encourage economic reform and local initiative, many provincial leaders purposefully encouraged the development of provincial and local cultures. Local histories and collections of local culture were published; local traditions were rediscovered and often commercialized themselves; and considerable emphasis in public rhetoric was placed on local identity and sense of place, particularly that of the province. Given the administrative origins of provinces, there was always likely to be an element of risk in this strategy. Few provinces had that kind of cultural identity beforehand. On the contrary, most provinces were administrative units intended as agents of central control. Their boundaries more usually cut across social and cultural patterns of interaction.¹³

Across the provinces, the results of this strategy were very mixed. In a few provinces, the strategy would have to be regarded as successful. In Shanxi, talking about a provincial culture united a number of disparate local cultures and provided a confidence previously lacking, so that its annual economic growth has regularly outpaced the national rate.¹⁴ In part the success of the cultural strategy can be attributed to the work of the republican era warlord

Yan Xishan, who had provided a provincial consciousness absent in many other provinces.¹⁵ In part, success can also be attributed to a strategy explicitly based on recognizing the province's more local cultures and emphasizing their commonalities.

However, in more provinces the emphasis on provincial identity and local culture was less successful in achieving the aims of the party-state. In some it backfired on those provincial leaderships who had introduced such strategies, and in others it exacerbated social and political problems. In Hubei, for example, an already unpopular provincial leader managed to alienate significant social and political interests and was forced to resign.¹⁶ In Jiangxi the attempt to develop a provincial identity was always fighting a hard battle against the distinct local cultures, each of which looks more fondly to one of its four neighboring provinces than toward the collective entity. The result by the mid-1990s was an increase in the strength of these local identifications, with provincial affairs dominated by their interactions.¹⁷ In Hainan, new emphases on the province merely sought to highlight tensions among the various communities—divided by language, economic activity, and often ethnicity as well as a generation of migration—each of which claimed to be the authentic provincial voice.¹⁸

Notes

- 1 See, for example, He Baogang, *The Democratization of China* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- 2 For example, Raymond Aron, *Eighteen Lectures on Industrial Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961).
- 3 There is a vast literature on this topic, starting with G. O'Donnell, P. Schmitter, and L. Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). Three subsequent and significant contributions are Ellen Meiskins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Yun-han Chu, and Hung-mao Tien, eds., *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
- 4 David S. G. Goodman, "To Write the Word for 'Man' across the Sky: Literature and Its Political Context in the People's Republic of China, 1978–82," *Journal of Communist Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 1985): 8.

- 5 Hans J. Hendrichske, *Populäre Lesestoffe: Propaganda und Agitation Im Buchwesen der Volksrepublik China* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1988), 328.
- 6 D. L. Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
- 7 On the new culture movement see Wei Hongyun, "Social Reform and Value Change in the Jin Cha Ji Border Region," in *North China at War: The Social Ecology of Revolution, 1937–1945*, ed. C. Feng and David S. G. Goodman (Boulder, Colo.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
- 8 The book was serialized in the journal *Guowai zuopin xuanbian* [Selections of writings from the rest of the world], published by the Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, starting with April 1979.
- 9 This development is described in James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 10 *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1989* [China statistical yearbook] (Beijing: China Statistical Bureau, 1989), 450.
- 11 Information in the following paragraphs is drawn from a study of Zhejiang and a study of Shanxi currently under way. Preliminary findings on Shanxi may be found in David S. G. Goodman, "State-Society Relations in Shanxi: Elite Interdependence and Accommodation," in *Twenty Years of Reform in China*, ed. Bruce Dickson (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2000). Research on Zhejiang is reported in Goodman, "The People's Republic of China: The Party-State, Capitalist Revolution, and New Entrepreneurs," in *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, McDonald's, and Middle Class Revolution*, ed. R. Robison and D. S. G. Goodman (London: Routledge, 1996), 225.
- 12 See, for example, Hans Hendrichske, "Provinces in Competition: Region, Identity, and Cultural Construction," in *The Political Economy of China's Provinces: Comparative and Competitive Advantage*, ed. Hans Hendrichske and Feng Chongyi (London: Routledge, 1999), 1. This volume also contains specific studies of Shanxi, Jiangxi, Guizhou, and Hubei that focus on this issue.
- 13 J. B. R. Whitney, *China: Area, Administration, and Nation Building* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Department of Geography Research Paper No.123, 1970).
- 14 David S. G. Goodman, "King Coal and Secretary Hu: Shanxi's Third Modernisation," in Hendrichske and Feng, eds., *Political Economy of China's Provinces*, 211.
- 15 Donald G. Gillin, *Warlord Yen Hsi-shan in Shansi Province, 1911–1949* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967).
- 16 Zhao Lingyun, "Hubei: Rising Abruptly over Central China?" in Hendrichske and Feng, eds., *Political Economy of China's Provinces*, 155.
- 17 Feng Chongyi, "Jinagxi in Reform: The Fear of Exclusion and the Search for a New Identity," in Hendrichske and Feng, eds., *Political Economy of China's Provinces*, 249.
- 18 Feng Chongyi and David S. G. Goodman, "Hainan: Communal Politics and the Struggle for Identity," in *China's Provinces in Reform: Class, Community, and Political Culture*, ed. David S. G. Goodman (London: Routledge, 1997), 53.

Commentary

**Government from Below:
The State, the Popular, and the Illusion of Autonomy**

Ralph A. Litzinger

To write a history of the culture of the popular classes exclusively from inside those classes, without understanding the ways in which they are constantly held in relation with the institutions of dominant cultural production, is not to live in the twentieth century.—Stuart Hall

In his seminal essay “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” Stuart Hall argued that the study of popular culture should always begin with what he termed “the double movement of containment and resistance.”¹ Hall reminds us that throughout the long transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism, there was a continuous struggle over the languages, traditions,

Editorial Collective

Ann Anagnost
Charles Armstrong
Tani Barlow
Sandra Buckley
Chungmoo Choi
Kyeong-Hee Choi
Prasenjit Duara
Henry H. Em
Judith Farquhar
Norma Field
James Fujii
Yukiko Hanawa
James Hevia
Ted Hutters
Marilyn Ivy
Marshall Johnson
Lydia Liu
Donald Lowe
David Palumbo-Liu
Lisa Rofel
Naoki Sakai
Gi-Wook Shin
Miriam Silverberg
Mariko Tamanoi
John Treat
Jing Wang
Ken Wells
Mayfair Yang
Angela Zito

Advisory Board

Arjun Appadurai
Dipesh Chakrabarty
Kuan-Hsing Chen
Choe Jang Jip
Gail Hershatter
Robert Hymes
Elaine H. Kim
Kojin Karatani
Dorinne Kondo
Mary Layoun
Lee Hyo-chaeh
Leo Lee
Li Tuo
Lisa Lowe
Hy van Luong
Yoshiko Miyake
Tessa Morris-Suzuki
Aihwa Ong
Paik Nak-chung
Vince Rafael
Mark Selden
Wada Haruki
Sylvia Yanagisako
Marilyn Young

Editorial Staff

Tani Barlow, senior editor
Chungmoo Choi, associate editor
James Hevia, associate editor
Donald Lowe, associate editor
Tamiko Nimura, managing editorial assistant

Corresponding Editors

Paik Nak-chung, *Ch'angjakkwwa bip'yŏng* (Korea)
Russell C. Leong, *Amerasia Journal* (USA)
Huang Ping, Wang Hui, *Dushu* (People's Republic of China)
Li Tuo, Chen Yangu, *Horizons* (People's Republic of China)
Akio Igarashi, *Journal of PacificAsia* (Japan)
Editorial collective, *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies* (Taiwan)

Statement of Purpose

positions: east asia cultures critique offers a new forum of debate for all concerned with the social, intellectual, and political events unfolding in East Asia and within the Asian diaspora. Profound political changes and intensifying global flows of labor and capital in the late twentieth century are rapidly redrawing national and regional borders. These transformations compel us to rethink our priorities in scholarship, teaching, and criticism.

Mindful of the dissolution of the discursive binary East and West, *positions* advocates placing cultural critique at the center of historical and theoretical practice. The global forces that are reconfiguring our world continue to sustain formulations of nation, gender, class, and ethnicity. We propose to call into question those still-pressing, yet unstable, categories by crossing academic boundaries and rethinking the terms of our analysis. These efforts, we hope, will contribute toward informed discussion both in and outside the academy.

positions' central premise is that criticism must always be self-critical. Critique of another social order must be as self-aware as commentary on our own. Likewise, we seek critical practices that reflect on the politics of knowing and that connect our scholarship to the struggles of those whom we study. All these endeavors require that we account for positions as places, contexts, power relations, and links between knowledge and knowers as actors in existing social institutions. In seeking to explore how theoretical practices are linked across national and ethnic divides, we hope to construct other positions from which to imagine political affinities across the many dimensions of our differences. *positions* is an independent refereed journal. Its direction is taken at the initiative of its editorial collective as well as through encouragement from its readers and writers.

positions east asia cultures critique

volume 9 number 1 spring 2001

chinese popular culture and the state

Contributors

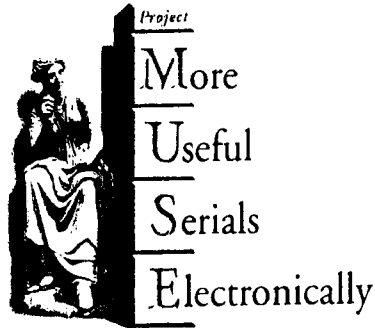
Tani E. Barlow, senior editor of *positions*, is the author of *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (forthcoming).

Dai Jinhua is a professor of Chinese literature at Peking University. She is the codirector of the Luce Project of Contemporary Chinese Popular Culture and the author of *Cinema and Desire* (forthcoming).

Judith Farquhar, a member of the *positions* editorial collective, is professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her new book, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*, is forthcoming.

David S. G. Goodman is director of the Institute for International Studies at the Institute of Technology, Sydney, Australia. His most recent work is *Social and Political Change in Revolutionary China* (2000).

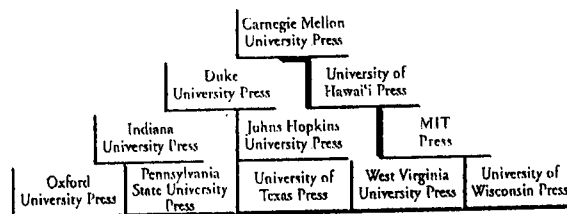
James L. Hevia, a member of the *positions* editorial collective, is chair of the Curriculum in International Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His book, *Making China "Perfectly Equal": The Qing Empire and the Powers, 1860–1901*, is forthcoming.



Building a bigger, better MUSE

Project MUSE® now includes scholarly journals from eleven university presses! Building on the original 47 scholarly titles offered by Johns Hopkins, the MUSE collection now offers 113 full-text journals online. By merging these titles into a single database, MUSE provides scholars with the critical content they need, combined with all of the benefits of electronic subscriptions, including full-text and field searching, easy navigation, and full campus availability 24 hours a day. With our expanded list, faster servers and increased searching options, your users will find research has never been easier. And as a librarian, there's no better value for your dollar—the list price of \$8,000 is much less than the cost of subscribing to these titles in print. Our flexible subscription options include discipline-oriented packages and single-title ordering to best meet your collection development needs. Substantial discounts are also offered for consortium, smaller and special libraries. Contact us now to see why there's more to MUSE than ever before.

Now MUSE includes journals from:



Project MUSE®

Setting the standard for scholarly electronic journals in the humanities and social sciences.

<http://muse.jhu.edu>

Preview the expanded *Project MUSE* now. Contact us for your **free trial subscription** at muse@muse.jhu.edu or 1-800-548-1784.

Submissions

Manuscripts, letters concerning editorial matters, and books for review should be addressed to Tani Barlow, Senior Editor, *positions: east asia cultures critique*, Box 353650, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195; e-mail: position@u.washington.edu; Web site: <http://depts.washington.edu/position/>. All manuscripts must be typed and double-spaced, including quotations and endnotes, and blinded throughout. All manuscripts must be submitted in triplicate. A style guide for authors is available through the Web site or by request.

Subscriptions

All orders should be directed to Duke University Press, Journals Fulfillment, Box 90660, Durham, NC 27708-0660. Yearly subscription rates (3 issues): students, \$19; individuals, \$29; libraries and institutions, \$90. Single-issue price: individuals, \$12; libraries and institutions, \$30. All back volumes, \$90. Add \$12 for postage outside the U.S.; Canadian subscribers add 7% GST. For more information, please contact the Duke Press Journals Division at 1-888-387-5687 (toll-free in the U.S.) or at 919-687-3602. An electronic subscription to the journal may be purchased from Project MUSE at www.muse.jhu.edu.

Abstracts

positions is abstracted in *Sociological Abstracts* and indexed in *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*, *Current Contents*, and *Arts and Humanities Research Alert*.

Photocopying

Photocopies for course or research use that are supplied to the end-user at no cost may be made without need for explicit permission or fee. Photocopies that are to be provided to the end-user for a photocopying fee may not be made without payment of permission fees to Duke University Press, at \$2 for each article copied.

Permissions

Requests for permission to republish copyrighted material from the journal should be addressed to Permissions Editor, Duke University Press, Box 90660, Durham, NC 27708-0660.

Acknowledgment

positions is supported, in part, by the University of Washington and by the Foundation for Asian Cultural Studies.

Volume 9, Number 1, Spring 2001

Copyright © 2001 by Duke University Press

ISSN 1067-9847

positions

east asia cultures critique

statement of purpose

positions: east asia cultures critique offers a new forum of debate for all concerned with the social, intellectual, and political events unfolding in East Asia and within the Asian diaspora. Profound political changes and intensifying global flows of labor and capital in the late twentieth century are rapidly redrawing national and regional borders. These transformations compel us to rethink our priorities in scholarship, teaching, and criticism.

Mindful of the dissolution of the discursive binary East and West, **positions** advocates placing cultural critique at the center of historical and theoretical practice. The global forces that are reconfiguring our world continue to sustain formulations of nation, gender, class, and ethnicity. We propose to call into question those still-pressing, yet unstable categories by crossing academic boundaries and rethinking the terms of our analysis. These efforts, we hope, will contribute toward informed discussion both in and outside the academy.

positions central premise is that criticism must always be self-critical. Critique of another social order must be as self-aware as commentary on our own. Likewise, we seek critical practices that reflect on the politics of knowing and that connect our scholarship to the struggles of those whom we study. All these endeavors require that we account for positions as places, contexts, power relations, and links between knowledge and knowers as actors in existing social institutions. In seeking to explore how theoretical practices are linked across national and ethnic divides, we hope to construct other positions from which to imagine political affinities across the many dimensions of our differences. **positions** is an independent refereed journal. Its direction is taken at the initiative of its editorial collective as well as through encouragement from its readers and writers.

[Return to positions main page](#)

**Copyright © INSTICC – Institute for Systems and Technologies of
Information, Control and Communication
All rights reserved**

Edited by Chi-Sheng Chen, Joaquim Filipe, Isabel Seruca and José Cordeiro

**Printed in Portugal
ISBN: 972-8865-19-8**

**<http://www.iceis.org>
secretariat@iceis.org**