

Transformation and Crisis in the Chinese Cultural Space

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Since the 1980s, transnational capital has been expanding, like the electronic media, all over the world, and thus the third-world countries, including China, fall into a dilemma: while opposing the expansion of transnational capital, they have to use foreign capital to develop their local economy and follow the route of transnational capitalism. However, they defend nationalism as well, recognizing that it has strategic significance in the struggle against the Western domination of economy and culture; they take nationalism as an effective form of resistance to the process of globalization and the ideology that goes with transnational capital, providing a critical understanding of the new forms of multinational geopolitical organizations. Therefore, in the process of globalization, we should give priority to the exploration of the political, economical, and cultural structure of a society on the basis of a new global system. In other words, we should pay attention to the positive features of national culture and national psychology, and focus on the changing relations among those features or between different citizens. In what follows I will explore what is happening in the Chinese cultural space, which reveals polarities of the celebratory and the apocalyptic towards globalization and indicates that we cannot imagine any sort of local identity outside or protected against the global flow of capital.

Globalization as a term was not popular in China until the late twentieth century when the Communist Party of China finally took an affirmative attitude towards the world market system after almost ten years' hesitation and frustration at the false dichotomy between a market economy and the socialist system. With the Party's gradual acceptance of the market system, and with the increasing indistinguishability of the economic from the political, globalization became a buzzword at the turn of the century with unprecedented force, bringing about a nation-wide

expectation for a new China that will be economically wealthier and politically more powerful than ever before. Phrases such as “economic development,” “a new historical era,” and “construction of a better life” began to appear in the media with higher frequency, especially after the sixteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Despite all anxieties and debates over Chinese modernity, China is becoming one of the largest potential markets and manufacturing centers of the world, starting to merge into the global market system after shaking off its self-assured ethnocentrism. This can be evidenced in the increasing number of transnational corporations in big cities throughout the country since the beginning of the 1980s. In the city of Beijing alone, more than 400 international corporations have set up subsidiary offices, bringing about a rapid emergence of enterprise capitalism. In Shanghai, when the international forum called “China in the Next Fifty Years” was held in 1999, 45 private planes of multinational corporations landed at the Shanghai-Pudong Airport. When the General Secretary of the Party was invited to address the opening ceremony of the conference on September 27, he emphasized that differences in social systems and political doctrines should be no obstacle to friendly exchanges and co-corporations between China and the rest of the world, stressing the point that economic development should be one of the primary tasks on the national agenda.

Indeed, globalization is understood in China in close association with the question of whether the country can bridge its gap with an international economic standard as soon as possible. However, this excessive emphasis on the economic aspect of globalization has caused a lot of debates among intellectuals. Social critics, in particular, have been weighed down over the years by questions such as “Will economic globalization lead to cultural homogenization, which in turn obscures the national identity?” Equating globalization with Americanization and standardization, some scholars believe that the powerful tendency towards a capitalist market system in China will inevitably lead to a complete loss of its cultural identity. On the other side of the spectrum, globalization is celebrated as a multifunctional mechanism that helps push China into a global structure of production and reproduction.

No doubt China has experienced momentous changes on different levels since the Communist Party of China adopted an open policy in the late 70s. Through promoting a household-based agriculture, the nation became stabilized because of the rapid increase of agricultural products. As everybody knows, 80% of the population in China were peasants, and so long as they had food to eat, the nation would escape serious trouble. Then the nation started its first phase of the modernization project and its economy began to build up steadily. And with the rapid growth of urbanization and increasing availability and use of modern communication technologies in the 90s, particularly after consumerism was officially declared as an important “motivating [force] for the development of production,”¹ the average citizen has been encouraged to believe that China is being “connected” with the developed sectors of the world. Grasping globalization mainly as an economic phenomenon, the Party maintains that socialism is a guiding principle in the country’s development in spite of an increasing awareness of various conflicts between a bureaucratic political system and the market system. Immediately after the great economic success in the 90s, the government went all out to call for a common endeavor to catch up with the West. Foreign trade was expanded from 20 billion US dollars in the 1960s to 360 billion in the late 90s, jumping to sixth place in the world trade market. “Made in China” evokes national pride and signifies a cessation of the country’s exclusion from the world economic system. Though not comparable to well-informed westerners, the Chinese are obviously better informed than they used to be. Besides increasingly wide television ownership by households all over the country, more and more people in the developed areas are using modems to connect with the Internet; retrieving and sending e-mails and surfing cyberspace has almost become part of their routine activity, as an alternative to watching television. In company with the idea of a global information superhighway, people are excited by the prospect of a global village. A survey conducted by CCTV shows that 10% of citizens are using the Internet for communication and commercial interactions; 72% know the World Cup; 44% know the Chicago Bulls; 39% know Michael Jordan; 51% long for a chance to visit foreign countries; global brands such as Coca-

Cola, Panasonic, Marlboro, Hitachi, and Philips are so familiar to most of the Chinese in big cities that they have become mass-cultural icons. Although restricted to a small elite class, imported fruits and vegetables are always available in supermarkets regardless of season. In fact, in most big cities, people can find a wider range of foreign foods on the shelves of supermarkets. And pastas, pizzas, burgers, and fries have long ceased to be regarded as unusual and have become everyday family foods. Thus food is becoming a global culture that exemplifies the compression of international space. In short, the expansion of capitalism and the process towards globalization in China makes itself most obvious as an economically better way of life, a path championed by developed capitalist countries. The country has never experienced such an abrupt break with its own history and tradition.

Anthony Giddens defines globalization as a consequence of modernity, characterized by “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by



A European-style café in Beijing. Photo: Wang Liya.

events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (64). Such an emphasis on the idea of global connectivity, including the intimacy between globalization and modernity is exactly what might be summarized as an important theme in China’s modernization project. Somewhat different, but related to this concept of connectivity, the familiar phrases “to connect with the world,” “to bridge the gap with world market,” and “think globally” best describe the mentality of the Chinese at the turn of the century. With the government’s persuasive rhetoric of, and promise for, “a better life” for its average citizens, globalization is mainly grasped as a lineal economic process that leads China towards a very developed stage. In living with all the ambiguities of American capitalism, the government sees economic globalization and cultural identity as opposed, and can only be unified within the structure of Chinese modernization. Although the Sixteenth National Congress reiterates the Party as the sole engineer of the country’s modernization project, the Party Constitution makes some significant adaptations to the new historical situations, shifting its grand utopian vision of liberation to that of “a better life” for the average citizens under the Party’s leadership. Although the government tried to communicate the concept of “a better life” with specific items that define the standard of “a comfortably-off family,” the average citizens have only secured a vague idea of what it really means except 800 US dollars per capita national income. Often, such a normalized (and idealized) image is expressed through activities of routine consumption and an increasing desire for commodities.

One of the most exciting and frustrating topics among citizens in recent years is the loans and mortgage system in the housing market. People are encouraged by the government to “own” houses/flats via different forms of loans and mortgages. While feeling tempted, most families in cities are becoming more and more commercially pressured. Capitalism, which was associated with private ownership and exploitation, is interpreted in this new historical situation as a better way of life. Despite a carefully controlled voice in the press, the power of capital is functioning as a force of enlightenment in China. This active adaptive outlook goes together with the Party’s renewed attitude towards its own identity and composition. The newly revised version of

the Party Constitution makes it clear that while “the Communist Party of China is the vanguard of the working class, it is also the vanguard of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation.” Throughout its history, the Communist Party of China has been recognized as a legislative body based on a union of the workers and peasants. The revised Constitution signifies some recognition of the significant transformation in the Party’s composition. As many Marxist ideologies would remind us, the subject of labor and revolt has changed greatly since the 60s, transforming with it the composition of the proletariat—the proletariat as a broad category should include all those whose labor is directly or indirectly exploited by capitalist norms of production and reproduction. In China this transformative consciousness appeared as early as 1978 when the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party Congress launched the campaign of “thought emancipation.” Distantly related to this ideological movement, there appeared some obvious changes in the Party’s components. More importantly, the Party began to accept self-employed entrepreneurs who applied for membership, which meant that the Party would



Looking at models of new condominiums. Photo: Wang Liya.

accept owners of private factories or companies, who hire workers and exploit their surplus value and thus could be regarded as new capitalists. Such a brave maneuver signals an honest recognition of social stratification in China. Indeed, the structure of social class has undergone drastic change since the country started its first stage of reform at the beginning of the 80s. Technicians of industries run by local people, administrative workers employed by foreign enterprises, self-employed workers and entrepreneurs, professionals of various kinds are increasing so rapidly that they form new social groups. With distinctive characteristics of their own, these groups and classes cut across the traditional category of “the industrial working class,” complicating the emergent phenomenon of social stratification in contemporary China.

If we take modernization as a process indicated by a migration of labor from agriculture to industry and postmodernization as one moving from manufacturing industry to service industry (entertainment, health care, education, finance, transportation, advertisement, etc), what is taking place in the economic zones of China is perhaps a postmodern socialism. With the gradual shift of focus from agriculture towards industry and service jobs, more and more peasants are becoming wage workers in big cities, causing floods of internal migration which increases competition among employees but decreases labor cost. In the year of 1995, huge numbers of factory workers were dismissed and relegated to the category of “going off sentry duty.”² This linguistic term is carefully chosen to avoid the unpleasant word “unemployment” —a phenomenon traditionally ascribed by the Party to capitalist societies. Parallel to an increasing demand for higher wages, there is an ever widening gap between the rich and the poor. People have to confront the inequality of wages and incomes in socialist China. A report from the Bureau of Labor and Social Security (an official organizer that registers the gradual change and increase of various professions) shows that there are mainly 264 kinds of occupations, among which chairmen of the board of directors have the highest income, with an average annual income of 211,678 RMB. At the other pole are those average factory workers, whose best annual income is no more than 20,000 RMB. These people include workers in grinding mills, butchers, textile workers, printing workers,

tailors, sewing workers, poultry raisers, and dustmen (Ling 444). One of the sensational news items that became a topic of discussion at the beginning of 2002 is a “story” that describes over-production in the milk industry in the cities of Chengdu and Nanjing. A news reporter gave the following description: “sweet milk flows all about in the milk factory with abundance of foam. To our dismay, it flows down the drain.” In spite of its superficial impression of an unprecedented economic boom, the Chinese see no poetic ambiguity in this fictional narrative. As an official report shows, the annual consumption of milk of an average Chinese is only 7.2 kilograms, a figure only one twelfth of the average consumption level in the world, and only one thirty-sixth of that in the developed countries. Such a ratio, together with the fabricated story of milk abundance, easily recalls the citizens’ memories of Marx’s description of the simultaneous occurrence of overproduction on the one hand and extreme poverty on the other. If this dramatic picture of milk production is a random occurrence that fails to represent the real picture of social stratification in current China, the following figures registered by the government might be more sufficient to capture what lies underneath the social transformation. The Minister of the Bureau of Labor and Social Security reported at the beginning of 2001 that people who received unemployment insurance payments numbered 1,900,000 in the year 2000; astonishingly, the figure increased to 3,500,000 in 2001; the minister predicted that it would escalate to 5,000,000 in the year 2002. More significantly, people became aware of a brutal fact: those official statistics have intentionally or unintentionally excluded those who are not only jobless but also deprived of insurance of any sort. When the government issued a regulation entitled “life security on the minimum level,” the hard fact of social poverty and unemployment was officially recognized. While big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou present an almost internationalized standard of life, a trip around neighborhoods reveal that such a picture of normalization and development only represents part of the reality. Nevertheless, we should not regard these inequalities as illusions of development. As is already recognized, “the geographical differences in the global economy are not signs of the co-presence of different stages of development but lines of the new

global hierarchy of production” (Hardt and Negri 288); similarly, the uneven economic development and its relatively backward lifestyle in China are largely determined by the internal political and social structure. In short, the Chinese are forced to confront the increasing expansion of capitalism in China. Instead of falling too easily into two bad alternatives—either a socialist China or capitalist China—the Chinese began to accept Chinese modernization as part of the uneven development of global capitalism.

Despite the increasing unevenness in the country’s economic development, people’s lifestyle, or, better said, their desire for a better life, shows a tendency towards normalization. One of many social facts that manifest this characteristic, the convergence of consumer tastes and preferences in everyday life is happening all over the country, changing people’s traditional attitudes towards boundaries of nation-states. As typical in capitalist societies, consumerism is often symbolically expressed through various forms of entertainment. Body building, golf, tennis, traveling abroad are beginning to be regarded as affordable desires of the middle class in China and are being structured into the contemporary leisure activity of the privileged few. For most average citizens these desires, often mediated through televised advertisements, are voluntarily or involuntarily treated as symbols that inform their relation with their social environment and social structure. In an attempt to analyze various results of capitalist expansion, John Tomlinson says that it is not “just that capitalism defines and structures the global political economy, but that in the process it determines global culture: in the distribution of commercialized media products containing the ethos and values of corporate capitalism and consumerism” (82). In China, to be sure, one of the inevitable results of market economy is an emergence of convergence in cultural production and consumption. The power of capital has always spilt over into other realms beyond the economic. In the city of Beijing, it is roughly estimated that for every 100 families there are 55 air conditioners, 90 telephones, 85 refrigerators, 90 washing machines, and 120 color television sets. Entertainment can be pursued at home with more ease and comfort. Instead of going to the cinema, people can sit in their well-furnished homes, effortlessly enjoying VCD with Hi-Fi

or cable TV. Indeed life is improving dramatically. The older generation will never forget that 20 years ago the best that the rich and the privileged could desire on the domestic market was to choose among three brands of bicycles and between two brands of expensive watches. Now, in the city of Beijing, one out of eight families owns a private car. With all these changes, the power of commodification has in fact started to turn almost everything into objects of desire. Among various ads that intensify the desire to buy, those that promise beauty and health always catch the attention of those who desire images that are sexually appealing. The first sex product shop named "Adam and Eve Health Care Center" appeared in the city of Beijing in 1992, causing a great shock among the people holding to older traditions. As Raymond Williams points out, politics is always embedded in "ways of life" and "structures of feeling" peculiar to places and communities (242). Indeed, advertisements are changing people's consciousness. As many critics have noted, a shocking advertisement might create greater economic benefit. For instance, hung in the front of a restaurant in Xi Ba He district of Beijing in the year 2002, was a big ad: "Rabbits Boiled alive, the first superb restaurant in Beijing." This not only brings more customers to the restaurant and thus more economic profit, but also instigates their strong desire for entertainment. In other words, whatever attracts the public attention is immediately transformed into a commodity, which brings about more economic profit.

As mentioned above, if capitalism is generally perceived and pursued as a materially better way of life by the majority of the Chinese, such a lifestyle is still restricted to the small, more affluent sector of the country. It is generally agreed that although the majority are affected by the expansion of capitalism, only those of the educated and informed middle class receive benefits. This social fact runs counter to the blueprint of a modern socialist China untouched by the known evils of Western capitalism. In order to check the rampant spread of consumerism and commodification within the country, social critics and intellectuals of a conservative inclination level their criticism at capitalist expansion. Ascribing almost all the social problems to the capitalist mode of production, they believe that if capitalist domination and

expansion are becoming more global, then resistance to the accelerating capitalist flows is necessary and important. This localist position is best evidenced in the rediscovery of Maoism and a renewed form of nationalism in the 90s. At the very beginning of the year 1990, the familiar image of Mao Zedong began to appear in various forms (miniature sculpture, photos, pictures, etc.) in shops, buses, and taxi-cars. Interestingly, old eulogizing songs dedicated to Mao were reproduced with modern technology and sold so well that they became new pop music. Such a revived interest found a quick response in the film industry. Film directors worked hard and produced a series of documentaries in the following two years, such as “The Great Kun Lun Mountain,” “Mao Zedong and His Son,” “Mao Zedong and His Countrymen,” and “The Creation of Heaven and Earth.” Diagnosed as a nostalgic wave of Mao’s anti-imperialist modernization project, such a rediscovery in fact reflects some dissatisfaction with the emergent capitalist values, including the government’s inability to regulate the dichotomy between the economic and the political. Deeply embedded within this discrepancy is the idea that China should re-establish local identities outside, and protected against, the global flow of capitalist economy. The anxieties about naming the Chinese modern—a capitalist China or a socialist China—resurfaced as an issue, relegating economic development to a secondary position in the modernization project. In fact, the socialist/capitalist or Western/Chinese dichotomy has always been present throughout the process of modernization. Although critical of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign launched in 1984, the Party seems unwilling to recognize that capitalism is an economic-political order that accepts no territorial boundaries or limits. Nationalism is still maintained as a strategic weapon against capitalism. One striking instance of an extreme and narrow nationalism occurred when NATO bombed the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia on May 7th, 1999. Immediately after the event people in big cities, especially university students, shouted the slogan “Down with USA!” recalling familiar scenes in China thirty years ago. While political demonstrations were going on in the streets on that very day, the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared a series of postponements, ranging from diplomatic interactions between Sino-

US high officials to negotiations on issues such as weapon proliferation, arms control, international security, and human rights. It is not surprising at all that the government slipped back into a negative attitude towards the WTO. A survey conducted by the China Social Investigation Office on June 10th, 1999 shows that 48% of Chinese citizens believed that there should be no compromise concerning issues such as aviation, electronics, communication, and agriculture on the part of the government in the interest of the nation. Underneath such a renewed conception of nationalist sentiments is the belief that globalization means capitalist Americanization—an international standardization that threatens Chinese cultural identity and national sovereignty. The old binary construction of Chinese socialism and Western capitalism falls too easily into a choice between two alternatives: either submission to Western capitalist domination or a socialist China with the Party functioning as a sole agent of management.

This does not mean that the power and mechanism of capital is deliberately neglected. In fact, it is well understood that capital constantly operates through a reconfiguration of the boundaries of the inside and the outside. What is fearfully recognized throughout its modern history is the fact that capitalism brings into the country not only economic transformation but also cultural and ideological forms that eventually replicate themselves in the non-capitalist society. Historically speaking, nationalism has always been narrowly understood as a synonym of national sovereignty throughout the modern history of China. Dr. Sun Yat-Sen is the foremost representative of nationalism as a weapon against Western capitalist and colonialist oppression. At that historical moment nationalism was in close association with the movement towards national liberation. Indeed, national sovereignty has played an important role in the country's struggle against external domination, sustaining the traditional idea that China is a self-sufficient civilization. When science and democracy were introduced during the May Fourth Movement as two fundamental vehicles that would move the country towards modernization, science was neglected by most of the Chinese intellectuals at the time. Despite their urgent call for liberation, the Chinese were slow to recognize that the clear-cut dichotomy between the Western and the

Chinese, the economic and the political, limited the country's emancipatory possibilities. More importantly, perhaps, social critics failed to recognize that the progressive function in the idea of national sovereignty is always accompanied by power structures of internal domination. Such a narrow perspective continued in post-revolutionary or post-1949 China when the whole country was immersed in Mao Zedong's anti-imperialist modernization project. To some extent, the antagonism between Mao's anti-imperialist discourse and his utopian desire for liberation explains why the whole country responded so quickly to the fanaticism of the Great Leap Forward Movement. Although critics after the Cultural Revolution often ascribed the country's economic backwardness to Mao's voluntarism and the fetishism of politics, it should be pointed out that Mao's blueprint for a new China represented a self-assured ethnocentrism due to its relative isolation from, and considerable ignorance of, the technological power of the capitalist countries. Whether we should interpret Mao's socialist discourse as an antagonism between anti-imperialism and modernization or a double discourse that combines the political with the economic remains an issue that invites further debate. But what has been generally agreed upon over the nation is that just as we should not accept a globalization as a function of economics, it is equally undesirable to accept nationalism in its extreme geopolitical term. This does not mean that nationalism is dying out as an old category. As a form of resistance against global capitalist hegemony, nationalism should be reexamined in the broad configuration of globalization in indigenous culture and economic politics. The term "socialist market with Chinese characteristics" is built up to capture the idea of hybridity under capitalist globalization. Despite all the contradictions, the idea of a socialist market is constructed with the purpose of making a new China while avoiding various social problems confronting developed capitalist countries. What happened in the wake of the embassy bombing perhaps illustrates the wide acceptance of such an idea. About two months after the incident, quite a number of students majoring in computer science put forward a slogan "Resist American products except computer software!" However, after their furious demonstrations in front of the US embassy, they returned to their prepara-

tion for the TOEFL test. Those who work in joint ventures suffered a similar dilemma. They simply did not know whether it was ethnocentrically right to work for American companies when nationalism was advanced nation-wide as a powerful strategy against Americanization. In living with all the ambiguities in relation with the idea of globalization, the government seems to make it clear that what China needs is material or technological exchange internationalized, but political exchange localized. Globalization is still ideologically and politically suspicious.

The question of production in relation to power and desire has had a similar impact on universities in China. With a general anxiety over the so-called job crisis the humanities in academia are no longer popular with students. Of several factors responsible for this phenomenon, a primary one comes from some obvious change of policies in the national educational system that marginalize the humanities so that resources can be shifted to the applied sciences. In Beijing Normal University, where I work, it was proposed by the administrative branch that the study of Russian and Soviet literature should give way to more “important” subjects. Although culture is a heated topic of discussion in academia, it is being driven out of universities before it is finally reincorporated into the industry of entertainment and consumer activities. Course enrollment, as well as degree of production, are carefully examined in terms of economic losses and gains. Invariably, PhD placement is regarded as one important signal that determines the academic rank of a university as well as a channel that attracts financial support from the government. As is happening outside China, scholarship and academic achievement are strictly measured by quantified publication and citation records. While scholars are indoctrinated by the dictum “publish or perish,” publishing houses, academic journals, and university presses are downsizing academic publication so that they can be commercially self-supporting. In spite of all sorts of complaints, education is becoming an industry that changes the traditional academic out-look. Indeed, the condition for capital is wage labor. As an important part of the labor force, university teachers have to confront a contractually-limited employment, which is now being carried out in elite universities such as Peking University and Beijing Normal University. In Peking University, teachers without

PhD degrees under the age of 45 cannot apply for professorships; those who fail to publish enough (strictly quantified) will be either dismissed or transferred to work in ancillary service departments of the university, such as cleaning and housing management. It is claimed that such a reform is a better idea than the tenure policy in American universities.

While these transformations in different spheres of the society greatly dissolve the traditional self-assured ethnocentrism and self-sufficient civilization, they have also created various social problems, which are ascribed by the conservatives to the rise of capitalism and invasion of transnational corporations. In a sense, transnational capitalism functions to sustain the myth of nationalism. As is generally agreed upon, globalization “would not have happened in the way it has without the US operating as both a driving force and a supervisory agent of the whole process” (Harvey 68-69). What China experienced (as an important lesson) in its application for a membership within WTO before November 10, 2001, is that the politics of a global market is in fact nothing but what US foreign policy tries to achieve. This convinced its citizens that global capitalism might in one way or another be a hegemonic American capitalism that threatens national identity.³ In opposition to the neo-liberalist party among Chinese intellectuals, the Neo-Leftists believe that globalization has already made the Chinese weaker opponents of capitalist countries. With their traumatic memory of imperialist invasion and oppression, people of conservative inclination argue that the global entails homogenization and undifferentiated national identity, whereas the local preserves heterogeneity and difference. In an attempt to look for factors that are believed to be responsible for social problems, some ascribe them to the conflicts and contradictions within the practice of the “socialist market system.” From what has been experienced in the past two decades, people believe that the incompatibility between China’s political system and market economy not only presents an obstacle to economic development but also breeds corruption on various levels. The National Commission for Inspecting Discipline was surprised to find that corruption cases (bribe-taking) placed on file for investigation in the year 1995 amounted to 122,476 in total. And even average Chinese citizens know that reality goes far

beyond this rather conservative estimation. To a large extent, this is also one important reason that explains an increasingly heated discussion on the possibility of political reform. Although the Party completed, at the beginning of the 80s, the project of promoting household-based agriculture, socialist modernization has been conducted under the imperative that the Party determines the country's political reform. While the Party practices the old orthodox Marxism, which regards private ownership as the root cause of exploitation, it neglects the power structure of internal domination and exploitation in its political structure. Although the economic inflation in 1987-1988 revealed that exclusive state ownership, as means of production, can give rise to exploitation, which generated the idea of "sinification of Marxism" in the Chinese cultural space, political inequality still remains a burning issue. And, more significantly, this cannot be resolved by any paradigm of economic development. As is known, the political structural inequality in China determines a corrupting exchange between power and wealth. One cannot overemphasize the importance of economic globalization, as privatization under the present Chinese situation will inevitably legalize this exchange and protect the politically and economically privileged. Generally speaking, attitudes towards globalization in relation to the Chinese cultural space are polarized between a position which holds to a demand for a completely economically determined market and a position that privileges political equality over capitalist privatization. Underneath such a one-sided view towards the dialectical relations between the economic and the cultural is a dangerous persistence in seeing the US as the ultimate authority that rules over the process of globalization. Instead of seeing capitalism as an economic-political order that accepts no boundaries or limits across time, the government still clings to the idea of economic globalization, as if globalization is a function of economics, as if Chinese socialist market system can be protected against the multidimensional consequentiality of capitalist power.

But should we exaggerate the degree of helplessness in the face of the contemporary crisis between economic development and social conflicts? Does the increasing availability and use of information technology in China mean that its average citizens will not be distanced from

“facts?” While I was brooding over these questions in summer 2003, the press was full of reports and reviews about how China defeated the invisible SARS enemy and won a great victory. Instead of probing deep into the serious deficiency of the country’s bureaucratic political system and the danger of consumerism, the press focuses on a series of publications and celebrations, eulogizing the power of nationalism. This might be symbolically interpreted as a collective response to the WHO’s prejudiced description of China as a SARS nation at the peak of SARS occurrence. However, what was witnessed and experienced by the country during the period has shown its average citizens the inherent “unevenness” of globalization as well as China’s socialist modernization. At least, people will start to learn that the process of globalization operates paradoxically through diversity and unevenness.

In such conditions, what should we do as Chinese intellectuals? If globalization or transnational capitalism is unavoidable, capital will inevitably saturate the space in which culture is organized and produced. Therefore, we must take into consideration both the material and the spiritual. It seems to me that the present Chinese situation must be understood from both internal and external situations of history, for the inherent “unevenness” is determined by various factors diachronically and synchronically. Our task is, I think, to map the effects of globalization in the cultural space of China and analyze China’s differences from, and links with, the world system or global capitalism. Now that the center of world capitalism, the United States, is having its own problems (the war in Iraq is a striking example), we must reconsider the trajectory of Chinese modernization as well as our lived experience that I have described above, which constitute the complex feelings of the Chinese people. The current nostalgia of ordinary Chinese for Mao’s era is not without reasons, particularly if we think there are two villages (Nanjiecun and Liuzhuang) that are still operating successfully in the form of people’s communes even in the market system. I believe that to describe and analyze all of this would make a contribution to the social reformations in China, which would also be a benefit to the people of the world.

Notes

- 1 The idea that “Consumerism is the motivating force for the development of production” became popular after Deng Xiaoping’s talks during his southern excursions in February 1992. See Zhou Guanwu, “Consumerism Serves as the Motivating Force for the Development of Production.”
- 2 Statistics in this aspect are difficult to obtain due to the ideological constraints and attitudinal variations among municipal institutions. The National Commission for Inspecting Discipline presents an unemployment rate as 25% while the National Statistics Bureau proclaims that it is only 20% (Ling 222).
- 3 The debate between Neo-Leftist and Liberalist, as currently named in China, is regarded as one of the most important cultural debates among intellectuals in the 90s. For a detailed description of the issue, see Luo, Chapter 6.

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