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# Can China Import Western Ideas?

by Fang Deng



I was in China last summer for six weeks. Most people there seemed impressed by the Bush administration's enthusiasm for the mission to "bring world peace, spread democracy, and redirect history." At the same time, in Chinese academia, there has been a debate over the idea of a "universal civilization." Is Western civilization this "universal civilization?" Do Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, human rights, equality, liberty and democracy fit China? The debate has been hot and has attracted a great deal of attention. There is a practical reason for people in China to be interested in the debate, since there are significant differences between Western culture and Chinese culture. The values that are most important in the West are least important in China. How do Western ideas fit China?

In 1990, just three months after I came to the United States from China, I woke up at 7:00 AM one snowy December morning. Four or five inches of snow had already fallen. I lived in a house owned by the University of Chicago, sharing it with seven American students. It was more than fifty yards from our house to the parking lot. I got up immediately, didn't take a shower or brush my teeth, but took a shovel and went out to clean snow. In China, whenever it is snowing, every family sends one person out early in the morning, and all the neighbors shovel a path through the snow together. I had brought that norm with me from China and believed that all my roommates in Chicago would do the same thing. While I was shoveling alone I told myself: "Don't worry. They'll come out soon." Five minutes passed, then ten, but no one came out. Finally, the front door opened and a student came out. But she didn't have a

shovel. Instead, she walked to her car through the path that I had just cleaned. "Good morning, Fang," she said, and drove away. I was confused. Why didn't she join me? Why didn't she even pay attention to what I was doing? I spent forty-five minutes shoveling by myself that morning, watching as each of the other residents of the building walked the cleared path to their cars. Not one offered to help clear the snow.



There were three assumptions in my mind when I went out to shovel. The first one was that everyone would go out to shovel snow because that is our obligation to the group. The second assumption was that my roommates would judge me based on my fulfillment of this obligation. So, I didn't shower or brush my teeth because I wanted to show my roommates that I took this obligation very seriously. The third assumption was that my relationship with my roommates would depend on performing my obligation. In other words, in the future, my roommates would do everything to serve my interests as long as I did my duty. There was no room in my mind for individual rights and personal preference. In the Chinese culture, social obligation is the most important value and individual rights are the least important value. In Western culture, especially in American cul-

ture, people are born with rights. In Chinese culture, people are given rights by society. Shuming Liang, one of the greatest Chinese philosophers, explains the Chinese idea of rights in this way: "I bear an obligation to take care of others, who have a relationship with me, while the others bear the obligations of taking care of me; I enjoy my rights when the others perform the obligations. ... The individual performs obligations first, and then they are endowed with rights by the others, but they never ask for rights." In large degree, while Western culture is based on individual rights, the Chinese culture is based on social obligations.

One of my friends, an American who truly believes that Western culture is the "universal civilization," challenges me as follows: "What you are talking about here is the traditional Chinese culture. China is moving towards the free market and capitalism. The Chinese culture is changing and people in China have committed themselves to the Western values." It is true that people's economic interests in China have never been bound up with those in American and other Western societies. Recently, of every one hundred GM cars sold, twenty of them would be sold in China. Every year McDonald's opens one hundred branches in China. When people in China drive a GM car, work for Motorola, eat at McDonald's and watch Hollywood movies, they become familiar with Western culture. Does this mean that they have committed themselves to the Western values? History shows us that there has been a reverse trend in China. In 1920, Baihua Zong, a famous Chinese scholar, studied at Frankfurt University in Germany. He wrote his friend in China that "Many Chinese scholars have committed themselves more to the traditional Chinese culture after they were educated at European and American Universities. I am afraid that I have become one of them." Recently, this trend exists among the populace in China. After being attracted by Western values, most people in China have committed themselves again to the traditional Chinese culture. While China is moving towards the free market, indigenous, historically-rooted values, beliefs, and institutions reassert themselves. Why? Let us look at some examples.



One of the best examples is the amendment of China's Marriage Law. China's Marriage Law, initially enacted in 1950, has been amended twice since 1980. The first alteration was in 1980 and moved towards Westernization, while the second

time in 2001, it moved back towards indigenous values. Both times, the statutory conditions for divorce were a main focus. In its original 1950 form, the Marriage Law was based on the Chinese idea of social obligation. Divorce couldn't be granted without proper causes. Law officers, government agents, family members, and friends would be expected to work to convince individuals who wanted a divorce to accept that divorce was wrong, and that the individual was obliged to take care of his or her family.

In 1980, there was a divorce case in Beijing that sparked a nationwide debate that brought Chinese and Western values into sharp relief. A woman asked for a divorce due to "lack of spiritual life" in her marriage. The woman told the court that one day when she and her husband were sitting at the top of a mountain enjoying a fine view, her husband suddenly began talking about croakers that were on sale (croakers are a type of fish eaten in China) and how he wanted to be sure to buy some. "I cannot stand him anymore," the woman said, "He is a nice guy but I cannot discuss music and literature with him." The court granted the divorce, and the husband appealed to a higher court. What was wrong with talking about croakers on sale? Did the court do the right thing? Could lack of common interest in music and literature be a proper cause for divorce? A spontaneous public debate started in Beijing in the mass media. People were divided on the case. Since 1978, the Chinese Communist Party has protected political institutions from change but has loosened control on people's social lives. The debate became national in scope. While some people criticized the court and the woman based on Chinese values, a new perspective on marriage and divorce based on individual rights was spread for the first time since the Communist Party took power in

China in 1949. One supporter of the divorce complained that an important reason that China lags behind the Western countries is "...because we don't value the individual who is always sacrificed to serve others. There is no economic development without individual development. There is no individual development without individual freedom." In 1980, China, a poor country where, on average, one person could only purchase fifteen pounds of meat, three pounds of eggs, and five pounds of cooking oil for an entire year, had just opened its door to the world. People in China envied the economic prosperity and political freedom of Western societies. They couldn't wait to commit themselves to Western values because they believed that the success of Western societies is based on individualism, liberalism, human rights and democracy. Finally, more and more people accepted the new perspective and supported the divorce. At the same time China's legislature amended the Marriage Law. One of the important changes was that "No-Fault Divorce" was imported from the United States. The only statutory condition for divorce was the absence of mutual affection. In some degree, the Marriage Law in 1980 reflected and legitimated Western values by giving individuals rights to pursue their happiness.

What was the impact of the Marriage Law of 1980 on Chinese society, and why did China's legislature amend the law again in 2001? In the twenty years following the 1980 amendment, while people started to enjoy economic prosperity in China, they were stunned by the changes in their marriage and family life. The divorce rate tripled. Many forms of infidelity emerged, including bigamy, taking a concubine and keeping a mistress. At the same time, social norms regarding adultery also changed. Chinese citizens had never heard of ideas like the ones that soon followed. "Choose a husband or a wife who loves you, and find a paramour whom you love." "It is moral to have sex with a person you love." "The red flag (a husband or a wife) stands inside, and the color flags (your

paramours) flutter outside." For some people the involvement of a third party in marriage became fashionable, and they couldn't wait to keep up with the fashion. In a small town in Guang Dong province, for example, more than one hundred businessmen publicly kept their mistresses. Monogamy as a foundation of China's marriage institution was challenged.

How should we interpret these changes in marriage and family life? Were the changes a sign of social progress or moral degeneration? Was it the Marriage Law of 1980 that brought the changes? Another spontaneous national debate started in the 1990s, and it quickly became a focus of the mass media. While some people thought that the changes were normal, many others believed that the changes were, in their words, "a social disaster," "unacceptable," and that "the Marriage Law of 1980 gave individuals too much freedom." Why had marriage and family as institutions started to fall apart in only twenty years in China? Many participants in the discussion argued that the individual freedom represented by No-Fault Divorce is incompatible with Chinese culture. When Confucianism claims that the right thing to do is to put other's interests first, but individualism opposes this claim, how should people make moral judgments? Other people believed that after people lost the moral ground in their marriage and family life, it would be too easy for them to run wild in

China, where more than ninety percent of the population doesn't have religious beliefs and doesn't join any religious organizations. The latter opinion has focused on the difference in social organizations between China and Western societies which certainly explained why in only twenty years China ran so far from Confucianism

even without restrictions in marriage and family life. In April, 2001, a national survey showed that ninety-two percent of Chinese citizens insisted that the Marriage



Law of 1980 must be amended. One of the most important changes in the amendment was to take back individual rights from the parties who didn't fulfill their obligations to take care of their families. Divorce is granted after the victimized partner receives damage compensation. The parties in the wrong are those guilty of transgressions such as cohabitation with a third party, domestic violence, and maltreatment of family members. This alteration shows the trend to commit to indigenous values: people should perform their social obligations and they must pay the price for not doing so.

What can we learn here? First, it's not easy for China to import Western ideas for at least two reasons: cultural incompatibility and a significant difference in social organizations between China and Western societies. Second, China rushed into social disaster in marriage and family life by importing Western ideas without paying any attention to the cultural incompatibility, and the difference in social organizations. Third, people living in non-Western cultures have to work hard to deal with their problems instead of simply importing Western ideas.

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*Dr. Fang Deng's article illustrates some of the ways that cultural differences can make it difficult to adopt practices across national borders. Often, these cultural differences crop up in small, unexpected ways. One of these occurred in the preparation of this article. The editors of Bridgewater Review commonly ask authors to provide us with information about the length of the article they are submitting. It helps us plan for the space that each article can fill in the magazine. Such information has never been easier to supply, since all word processing programs come with a utility that measures the length of a document.*

*In Microsoft Word the utility is located under "Tools" and is labeled "Word count." We had asked Dr. Deng to write an article of about 1,800 words, or about 6 double-spaced typed pages, which is typical for an article that we plan to illustrate with several photographs.*

*During her preparation of the article Dr. Deng seemed frustrated by what she obviously thought was an extremely tight requirement for space. She asked how she was supposed to write about a complicated issue in such a short format. We, in turn, were confused, since this amount of space had served for a large number of faculty articles in the past. The problem was made clear only after Dr. Deng submitted her first draft, explaining that she had not been able to keep the*

*article under 5,000 words, but that she was willing to work with us to shorten it severely if we could only show her how this would work. She had done the word count we expected, and the information revealed that the article was really only 4 pages long, and was a bit short at some 1,100 words. So what was the confusion? It turned out that Dr. Deng was counting the characters in the article rather than the words, because that was what she was used to in her Chinese language articles. You see, in Chinese, each character is the equivalent in meaning to a word in English. For example, the character below left means "fire," and the one below right means "rain."*



*So Dr. Deng, quite reasonably, gave us a character count of her article, and was relieved to hear that she had a good deal more space (two pages more) to explain the issues in her article.*