The Construction of East Asian Culture and Cultural Awareness

He Fangchuan

Professor, Peking University

Part 1

In the present world, the tide of economic globalization is sweeping every corner of the planet that we are living on. It's impossible for this tide to be confined within one economic river-way for a long time. Just like overflowing spring tides, it will flow into all areas of human life, such as politics and culture. As pointed out by Giddens: “Globalization is not only, even mostly not, about the economic reliance on one another, but about the world-shaking change of space and time in our life.”

Therefore, all the nations and peoples in the world are going about their life under the influence of and even restriction from the progress of globalization. The East Asian area is none of the exception. The East Asian area here in the main refers to the Pacific Asia, namely, from the north East Asian area through China to the south East Asian area.

In this way, there is a common platform for the discussion of the East Asian countries and their cultural constructions. In the ancient time, we all had splendid ancient civilization—whether it be Confucianism, Buddhism or late-appeared Islamic civilization. In the modern time, we all have been invaded, enslaved and exploited by the Western colonists except Japan and our national civilization has suffered the humiliation for a rather long time. Now with the globalization as the background, the Western civilization, especially the American culture, holding the strong position, is exerting its impact on every part of the world, including the East Asia.

It is on the above-mentioned cultural platform where Chinese and peoples in the other East Asian countries are constructing and developing their countries respectively. Obviously, cultural development on such a platform is an essential and gigantic task. This gigantic task requires that all East Asian peoples have high cultural sagacity, or so-called cultural awareness. Being a Chinese scholar, my speech is, in a sense, the cultural reflection of a Chinese. Gadamer says: “In fact history does not belong to us; but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live.” Therefore, my own reflection naturally has its limitations. Here I am sincerely expecting all of you to contribute your valuable cultural wisdom to this issue.

Part II

When undertaking the construction of the nation, especially the construction of the culture, what kind of cultural awareness should we have in copying with the Western culture?

We Chinese and the peoples of other East Asian countries have been interacting with the Western culture for a fairly long time. There is no need to mention the far-off time. Five hundred years have elapsed since the beginning of the seafaring age in the West. With 500 years of its influence, at least for the Chinese, when coping with the Western culture, we should pay special attention to its two negative cultural legacies. From the viewpoint of cultural
awareness, these two negative cultural legacies are two kinds of unawareness or two kinds of blindness in culture exchange.

One kind of blindness arises from the history.

Having suffered from national humiliation for long, including political, military and economic invasions of those Western powers, China has also sustained the cultural humiliation and cultural invasion; One thing to mention here, when the modern Western colonists invaded China, they consciously brought here more negative things in the Western culture—the vice and nasty things of the Western culture, which have easily resulted in the Chinese people’s repulsion and resistance to the Western culture; Therefore, going along with our righteous national struggle, a blind repulsion and resistance to the Western culture has been gradually imbedded in the national gene of the Chinese.

This kind of national gene of blind repulsion to the Western culture generally often manifests itself in two ways.

One is that we are unable to analyze and take in the good things in the Western culture in an objective and self-possessed way. This is a kind of “Pride and Prejudice”. As we know that the Western culture has a history as long as that of China and East Asian culture, and it has also survived different historical eras and become what it is today. It must be acknowledged that there are as many treasures in Western culture which have been created, developed and accumulated through hundreds and thousands of years by all Western peoples, as there are in Chinese and Eastern culture. In Western culture, there is rich and colorful content, inexhaustible as water in oceans. The splendid ancient Greek and Roman culture, the glorious culture at the time of the rising capitalism in modern Western world, and the present-day Western culture which is continually and creatively modifying itself, all of which are worth our taking and digesting earnestly. The great revival of the Chinese nation in the 21st Century will be the great revival of Chinese culture. Without construction of the culture or without all-round and proper absorption of the essence of the Western culture, it’s hardly imaginable to carry out this revival.

The other is we tend to readily accept the criticisms the Western friends have made on their own culture and the partiality the Western friends have for Chinese or Oriental culture. This is another kind of “Pride and Prejudice”. Led by this blindness, we find the theoretical basis for the repulsion against the Western culture—“You see, even the Westerners criticize their own culture in such harsh way!” In contemporary time, it is not unusual that large groups of Westerners criticize the Western culture on occasions. Two most extraordinary occasions are cited here. One is World War . That miserable war has made many Westerners disillusioned with the Western civilization. Another occasion is the post-modernist trend of thought which appeared in Western culture theory circles at the end of 20th Century. From Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism to Edward Said’s criticism on the “Orientalism”, from the Western Marxism to the post-colonialism theory. As a result, criticizing modern Western civilization or culture almost has become a vogue in the Western culture theory circles. At the same time, when criticizing and reflecting on their own culture, they often put their future expectation on the Orient and on China. There are two typical examples. One is the Age of Enlightenment. At that time, many of those enlightenment thinkers were passionately attached to Eastern culture, to Chinese culture, and some, such as Quesnay, were even called “European Confucius”. Great literate Goethe expressed his inner thought of “there’s only Orient in my eyes” in his poems glorifying the Orient. Voltaire held that the Chinese are “the people with the best moral and administrative skills”. Another is the postwar period after World War . From Toynbee to the post-modern literates and culture theorists, they were full of sympathetic and romantic interpretations of the traditional Chinese culture and Oriental culture. Toynbee even believed that “The unification of the world is the way to avoid the suicide of the human beings, and it’s the Chinese people with their unique thinking cultivated in the two thousand of years who have made the best preparation among all the nations in the world.”

It should be mentioned here that the great criticism made by modern Western literates and culture theorists is a kind of reflection and meditation on their own culture on a well-developed platform of civilization and culture in the Western social context. This kind of criticism, like the criticism on the Middle Ages’ absolutism made by the Western thinkers in the Age of Enlightenment, is progressive in itself. At the same time, for lack of profound and adequate understanding of the Oriental and Chinese culture, friends in the Western culture and academic circles at both the Age of enlightenment and the post-modern time were prone to blur the Oriental and Chinese culture, reducing it to a kind of bleary beauty and even romanticizing it as the ideal model in their mind. This is a kind of misunderstanding of the culture or civilization. To idealize and romanticize a different culture is always a powerful weapon for criticizing the negative aspects of one’s own culture. However, if the Chinese or Oriental scholars, when coping with Western culture and Western civilization, favor the above-mentioned things out of their own wishful
thinking, walk towards the other extreme, consciously or unconsciously cite them as evidence for resisting the best things in the Western culture, or take them as something to cover the negative aspects of the Chinese and Eastern culture, the result of so doing is to block the construction of the Oriental and Chinese culture.

The other kind of blindness arises, too, from the history.

What usually comes simultaneously or alternatively with the blind repulsion and resistance to the Western culture is the blind and thoughtless worship to the Western culture. This is called “Worshipping everything foreign” in Chinese.

Worshipping everything foreign is a kind of culture thinking generated in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, and it’s also a kind of attitude and mentality of cringing to the strong Western culture and completely denying and dispraising one’s own culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, this kind of culture thinking was popular among the few Chinese who had studied in Europe, especially in the United States. At that time, the saying that ironically generalizes this kind of thinking was frequently quoted, “The moon in America is rounder than in China”. Obviously, if we are obsessed with the mentality of regarding foreign culture as being superior to ours, we are unable to carry out our culture construction in East Asian countries.

As I see it, these two kinds of blindness result from the fact that East Asian countries used to be colonies and semi-colony nations in the modern times. Both blind resistance and worship to the Western culture stemmed from the weak nations’ status and situation as colonies or semi-colonies. Their status and situation contributed much to the mentality of the weak nations, which has been embedded in the gene of their culture. When the conflicts between Western colonist powers and Chinese and the other East Asian countries become acute, the blind resistance to the Western culture is likely to appear. But when the above-mentioned conflicts are not so intense, the blind worship to the Western culture is prone to appear.

Today’s East Asian countries have already won their national independence and resumed their national dignity in succession after World War. China has made long-stride advancement since the adoption of the Open-door Policy. The present East Asia, with the emergence of the four little tigers and the eight little tigers of Asia, is full of self-esteem and enterprising spirit. Today’s China is a country rising up in its peaceful development, a country responsible for the international affairs and a country hailing the successful launch and return of Shenzhou. It’s not only necessary, but also within our capability to get ride of the above-mentioned culture blindness, because China and the other East Asian countries are no longer colonies, semi-colonies or weak nations. Obviously, we shouldn’t have any of the weak nations’ mentality—blind resistance and worship to the Western culture. This kind of mentality is a small-minded narrow culture view, and how could it befit the aboveboard culture construction being conducted by China and the other East Asian countries? Let us all the East Asian countries abandon this kind of small-minded narrow mentality, daringly take in those that should be taken in and discard those that should be discarded. Demonstrate our virtue of open-mindedness of East Asian peoples.

Part III

In the course of construction of our nation, especially construction of our culture, what kind of culture awareness should we have of our traditional culture?

As to this, there also exist two kinds of blindness which stand opposite to the culture awareness we advocate.

One is the mentality of nihilism towards the traditional Chinese culture and the culture of other East Asian countries. It is natural that this kind of mentality has a lot in common and stands on the side with the previously-mentioned mentality of blind worship to the Western culture. Take China as an example, not to say the situation in the far-off time, at the beginning of the Open-door Policy this trend of thinking gained great popularity for some time. For example, there used to be a viewpoint among people that the basic difference between China and the West lies in the different natures of the two civilizations—the Chinese yellow civilization is radically inferior to the Western blue civilization. In recent years, this trend of thinking first cuts in the mass culture. With the great development of mass media and the Internet, it easily leads to the penetration of the strong Western culture, which like fire overspreading in prairie. Western mass culture with their quick rhythm and colorful forms, seem to be better in line with the Human Beings on their work, study and life. But the content of the Western culture, which hides right behind the quick rhythm and colorful forms, contains a lot of negative culture impurities. If we just let it be, with the trend of nihilism going, East Asian countries may become the culture dependent and culture colony of the West again.
Another kind of blindness is to advocate excessively the traditional culture of one’s own, and even use this excessive advocacy in defending against the strong invasion of the Western culture.

In China, the above-mentioned excessive advocacy has come into being ever since the start of the debate over the Eastern culture and Western culture around the “May Fourth Movement”. One highly respectable Chinese culture expert once lifted up a cry— “the revival Chinese culture will represent the culture of future world”. What the Westerners require “is the development of the Chinese culture and of Confucianism”. This kind of trend has continued to develop since the Open-door Policy. When great thinkers like Toynbee, Russell and even several post-modernist culture theorists made speeches to praise Chinese culture in an excessive way, the above-mentioned trend went even further.

Is there really any possibility for the traditional Chinese and Oriental culture and Western culture to reign over the world in turn in the sweeping tide of globalization?

The answer is No!

The traditional Chinese culture, namely Confucianism or the mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and other traditional thinking in ancient China, is a gigantic culture system, which has lasted for over two thousand years. And it has been continuously self-renewing, self-consummating and constantly adjusting itself to the development of the times and society. Not to mention the far-off time, this gigantic culture system, as great spiritual power, had worked successfully or adequately in under-propping all the dynasties ranging from Han to Qing.

However, since the Opium War in 1840, the Confucianism-centered traditional Chinese culture, or the mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, as a culture system, has already been surpassed by the modern Western culture over and over again.

Today, to reform and systemize Confucianism is the goal set up by some foreign and Chinese scholars. Naturally, this kind of effort is quite significant. However, the great revival of the Chinese national culture to be constructed in the 21st century is not simply the revival of Confucianism Culture or the systemized reform of Confucianism Culture. The Confucianism culture, which appeared, developed and thrived on the farming civilization in the natural economic era, has undergone time and time again reforms for the sake of its self-consummation, after the death of Confucius, there appeared many schools preaching Confucianism and they differed from one another. This kind of reforms enabled the Confucianism to have firmly held a monopolized position in the mainstream of ancient China for a fairly long time. But this huge culture system seemed powerless to make further reform to adapt itself to confront the sweeping tide of the modern capitalist civilization and industrial economy. Consequently, it finally went to systemic and fabric bankruptcy under the blow of Western civilization. Today, confronted with the knowledge economy or new economy that has grown out of the industrial economy, Confucianism Culture system, as a traditional culture, which has lagged two ages behind.

What it requires for the revival of Chinese national culture in the 21st Century is a whole new culture system different from the simplified revival of Confucianism. This culture system should be characterized as being all-inclusive, open-minded and far-reaching. It is composed roughly of three parts.

The first part is the traditional Confucianism culture, which, as a kind of culture system, went bankrupt 100 years ago. Our job is not limit to pick it up, give it a new casing or systemize it again. On the contrary, we must discard uncompromisingly now the big amount of negative and vice things, which, as part of the culture content, had long gone rotten with the rotten society in the late stages of ancient China and had been charged and denounced by the “May Fourth Movement” forerunners. We must be on guard against those backward and conservative things that disguise themselves as something else, for these things are as harmful as to kill thirsty by drinking poisonous water. Only when the system is broken can we pick out some parts or ideas, like “Being compatible is the most important thing”, “Try to be compatible but not to echo with the others”, “Compatibility can unify all nations”, etc., reform it to meet the needs of the time and society and blend it with the new culture system China is constructing now.

The second part is the Western culture. The Western culture, as a gigantic culture system, is also not qualified to be our model of learning. It can no longer “hold the leadership for the other civilizations to follow and copy” as expected by Samuel P. Huntington. That is because that the Western culture also has negative and vice stuff, which we must reject. At the same time, when confronted by other cultures of the world, the Western culture system has always posed as a haughty and overbearing power. The power lies in its system, structure and deep into its gene. Especially presently, the culture powers represented by the American government in power are even more self-evident and daring, without any disguise. For example, the US and Western New Conservative theorists are openly advocating the idea that the United States is “the greatest power reining the world”, and that it can effectively
control the international communication. They also stress on the exportation of the American values and democracy. Owing to this theory, Bush Government firmly believes that the American values will definitely reign over the whole world. Now I’d like to raise some questions. Are we Chinese and East Asian peoples ready to construct such an overbearing cultural system? Should China, when she rises again, go like today’s America, flaunt her culture, and take a condescending attitude towards other cultures? Should we export Chinese ideology and Chinese value system forcibly, or even by use of arms? Obviously, we should definitely reject such cultural imperialistic system. We only need to absorb some carefully-picked-out good parts and content in the Western culture, adapt them to the needs of our time and society and merge them into the new culture system we are constructing.

The third part is the other cultures outside the Chinese and Western cultures. We’d better be open-minded when looking at these cultures. Generally, these cultures are similar to the Chinese traditional culture in system. What we should absorb from those cultures is also their good parts and content.

I firmly believe that we Chinese in the 21st Century will review our culture, the Western culture and the other cultures in the world scientifically. We’ll reject those useless and harmful stuff, only take in those fine parts. We will eliminate the false and retain the true. We will construct our own new culture system with Chinese characteristics. Vico has already described such kind of artistic culture conception: “No one would think Gothic churches or temples of Chinese style ugly because of their inconformity to the classic criterion of beauty; on one would think the Song of Roland vulgar and cannot be mentioned in the same breath with the delicate and perfect Candide of Voltaire... We would like take an equal attitude in understanding and appreciating music, poems and fine arts in different times.”

We advocate such kind of culture awareness: under impact of globalization, it never keeps conservatism and conformism in itself and never moans helplessly like the weak; instead, it advances with the times, actively meets challenges and it advocates equal opportunity for all the nations and peoples in the world. Our culture awareness is definitely concerned with retention and elimination through selection or contest. But we only eliminate the negative stuff in each culture, not the cultures of those nations or peoples who seem to be backward just for the time being. What we select is the fine parts of all the cultures. But we will never worship a certain country or a certain culture.

The fine parts of all national cultures should take advantage of the sweeping tide of economic globalization to develop themselves in multi-directions and to mingle with each other in the long run. This is the only way for the future world culture to develop. This is also something we East Asian nations should be aware of culturally in our own culture construction of the 21st century.

References

3 Refer to Ding Jianhong: “there’s only Orient in my eyes—Relationship between China and Germany”, Edited by Zhou Yiliang: Cross-cultural Communication between China and the Foreign Countries, He Nan People’s Press. 1987, p.97.
4 Refer to Zhang Zhilian: Cultural Exchange between China and France, Edited by Zhou Yiliang, p.66.
6 Liang Shuming, Oriental and Western Cultures and the Philosophy, Works of Liang Shuming, Volume 1, Shang Dong People’s Press, 1989, pp.504-525.