Re-imagining the East–West Divide: Culture and Personality

The Kantian inquiry into the key concept of the discourse had a far-reaching impact on Chinese thought. The replacement of ideology with the concept of culture provided an alternative approach in social analysis, which meant that the dilemma the superstructure-basis model created in explaining the continuing ‘slow’ pace of the modernization of China could be overcome. The implications of this new concept were fully displayed in the late 1980s when a whole range of new topics such as ‘the spirit of culture’, ‘national character’ and ‘cultural tradition’ entered into the discourse for modernity.

Modernization theory attempts to dissociate ‘modernity from its modern European origins and stylize it into a spatio-temporally neutral model for processes of social development in general’. Yet there is an undeniably internal connection between the historical context of Western rationalism and modernity. The Chinese search for modernity had been generated from the outset by an awareness of the Western superiority, intellectually and materially, over China. Imperial Confucianism imagined China as the center of the civilized world. This Sino-centrist notion collapsed in the middle of the nineteenth century. The modernization projects launched since the 1860s and the cultural criticism of the early twentieth century were all based on the realization of this inferiority.

The crisis of world capitalism and the triumph of socialism in the first half of the twentieth century complicated this perception of the East–West divide. From the 1960s to the Cultural Revolution, a notion similar to Sino-centrism was fully developed. China was considered as the fortress of a new world revolution. The renunciation of the Cultural Revolution and the birth of further modernization projects in the late 1970s subsequently marked a re-thinking of the divide.

As early as 1980, a leading Chinese historian had attributed China’s recent turmoil and setbacks in acquiring modernity to a misinterpretation of the East–West divide, and called for the reassessment of the characters of Chinese and Western cultures. In the mid-1980s this became a central idea of cultural discourse. ‘The study of the Eastern and Western cultural divide from a
comparative culturological perspective’ and ‘the reflection on traditional Chinese culture so to identify those influential ancient (Chinese) modes of thought, views, mentality and esthetic feelings was the most important task’.

‘By studying the characteristics of Chinese traditional culture, we can deepen our understanding of the character of China’s historical development’.

In the period 1986–89 alone, nearly 700 monographs on the comparative study of Sino-Western cultures were published in China. Throughout the 1980s, more than ten institutions were established to facilitate cultural studies in universities and central and provincial academies of social sciences. National and local symposia were frequently organized. Considering that no conferences or institutions for the study of culture existed between 1949 and 1979, such a development reflected the vitality of the discourse.

The reinterpretation of Chinese cultural ideas

The individuality of Chinese culture in comparison with the West was a century’s old topic in Chinese intellectual inquiry. It emerged, as indicated earlier, when the Chinese began to think seriously about adapting their culture to modernity. From Yan Fu’s discussion of the Chinese cultural characteristics in the late Qing, to the so-called ‘Comparative Study of East–West Cultures’ of the May Fourth period, and the studies carried out by, for example, Liang Shuming and Tang Junyi in the 1930s and 1940s, this intellectual ‘puzzle’ had haunted generations of Chinese intellectuals.

If culture is a meaning-laden system that structures people’s interpretation of the world and their choice of social behavior, then what are those major ideational structures that shape Chinese thinking and behavior? Here, Chinese scholars have followed an interpretative approach. J. Thompson has distinguished two usages of the concept of culture: ‘the descriptive conception’ exemplified by the definition given by E. Tylor, and ‘the symbolic conception’. Clifford Geertz is believed to be chiefly responsible for creating the latter usage. Culture in this vision is a ‘stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures’. The analysis of culture is not for the purpose of formulating laws or constructing evolutionary schemes, rather ‘it is more like interpreting a literary text than observing some empirical regularity’. The predominant practice in Chinese discourse was to identify the so-called ‘basic spirit’ and ‘core idea’ of traditional Chinese culture: those norms, ideas, beliefs and values that were behind China’s institutions and behavioral patterns. These normative ideas and values were considered as the ‘third layer’ – the deep layer and the ‘core’ of Chinese culture.

Stewart saw the cultural core as ‘the constellation of features which are most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements. The core includes such social, political, and religious patterns as are empirically determined to be closely connected with these arrangements’. Hallpike, however, disagreed with this idealist view, arguing that the cultural