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Whose crossroads? Asian cultures at the crossroads: an East-West dialogue in the New World Order

Abstract

Extract:

Asian Cultures at the Crossroads: An East-West dialogue in the New World Order, Fourth Annual Conference of the David C. Lam Institute for East-West studies, 16-18 November 1998, Hong Kong Baptist University (co-sponsor Ohio University).

Keywords

David C. Lam Institute for East-West studies, conference, Chinese culture, globalisation

Centre Report

Conference Report: Whose Crossroads?

Asian Cultures at the Crossroads: An East-West Dialogue in the New World Order, Fourth Annual Conference of the David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies, 16-18 November 1998, Hong Kong Baptist University (co-sponsor Ohio University).

Between the 16th and 18th of November, scholars from mainland China, Hong Kong, the U.S.A., Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Europe, Australia and other countries gathered to discuss the issue of *Asian Cultures at the Crossroads*, with special emphasis on the role of East-West interaction as part of the modern transformation of the Asian landscape. The Conference also had the advantage of drawing on a wide range of disciplines, including Sinology, cultural studies, literature and media studies, economics, international relations and women's studies. The cross-disciplinary nature of the conference was one of its main strengths, especially when dealing with issues such as identity, culture change, and cultural influence. This conference was one of the most seminal which has occurred in the last year, and is worthy of serious review.

The opening address of the Conference was delivered by Prof. Tu Wei-Ming, a prominent scholar from Harvard who has made a sustained study of the Chinese cultural world and the significance of Chinese culture in the contemporary period. Tu Wei-Ming gave the first keynote address, entitled *Cultural Globalisation and Multiple Modernities in the Perspective of Cultural China*. The speech addressed the crucial role of the 'Enlightenment Mentality' as driving forward many of the key institutions of the West, ranging from science to democratic polities. Key values, including liberty, equality and human rights, as well as instrumental rationality, also emerge out of this mentality. These trends, Tu Wei-Ming argued, help mobilise self-interested behaviour in the market place and help develop economic capital. However, they do not sufficiently emphasise social and cultural capital, and can therefore deepen the gap between rich and poor, the central and the marginalised. In this context, the French revolutionary ideal of fraternity has not been fully realised, and modern life is often deeply fragmented and divisive. From this point of view, Asian societies may now be too instrumental and competitive. Here a new, more humane civilisation, based on deep spiritual resources, needs to be developed. Rather than focusing on culture conflict, a dialogue of civilisations may be needed in the current period. In particular, Tu Wei-Ming argued that it is not appropriate to speak of

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one modernity, but the coexistence of several patterns of modernity. It may be necessary to tap the rich resources of the past, including Confucianism, to develop a new humanitarian culture. Tu Wei-Ming also argued that it is crucial to consider what values can aid a common ground or basis for global stability.

Such ideas were a suitable starting point for the Conference, and promoted intense dialogue and indeed some controversy in following papers. Dr. Adrian Chan, for example, cautioned that East-West dialogue, China-U.S. dialogue, and Western Sinology as a whole often founder on the problem of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said. Adrian Chan, in his paper *A Stock-Taking on Chinese Culture: Beyond Orientalism*, noted that the English language has often taken up expressions from other languages, e.g. German and French, but has not taken up key expressions or concepts from the Chinese world. Instead Chan examined 'some of the more important and common English expressions in the discourse of Chinese culture to show how those expressions have not only failed to reflect Chinese culture accurately but also distorted the fundamentals of Chinese culture.' The paper used several examples, including what Chan argues is a mistaken interpretation of *di* as God in the influential translations made by James Legge. It could thus be trenchantly noted that 'God may or may not be an Englishman but the Chinese god was a gift of an Englishmen!' (p9). The paper went on to discuss other key issues such as human rights and Chinese cosmogony in the light of the current state-of-play in East-West dialogue. This paper in turn, created intense controversy among the Conference members.

Other delegates took a different approach to these issues. Prof. Leonard Chu of Hong Kong Baptist University, for example, suggested in his keynote address (*Cultures at the Crossroad: What Do You Do At the Crossroads?*) that in fact Asian cultures are not at the crossroads, precisely because Asian cultures often remain largely peripheral in global terms, and most of these cultures focus on communication with the West, not with dialogue among themselves. Leonard Chu discussed in detail the dangers and opportunities of cultural contact, and the way that indigenous governments will sometimes try to forbid or delay foreign influence, to vaccinate their own culture, or to fortify their own cultural infrastructure. This address suggested a new definition of modernisation as the adaptation between past and present, between the indigenous and the foreign, a process which is occurring in both China and the West. In response to a question for clarification on this point, Leonard Chu noted that underdeveloped pockets exist in modern societies, and that one of the problems for the West is that it is often not consciously learning from other cultures, unlike Eastern societies. A partial exception to this has been Australia, with its conscious effort to promote Asian languages, e.g. Japanese language studies.

The Conference also showed how deeply engaged modern Chinese literature and the arts are with the problem of cultural influence and identity definition. This theme was strongly signalled in the keynote address of the second day, when Prof. Dai Jinhua of Beijing University spoke on a theme which addressed the issues of culture and post-modern

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change in China¹. Prof. Dai argued that most of the post-modern phenomena in China today are really post-socialist phenomena which can undermine genuine reflection on the history of contemporary China, and that post-modernism in China of the 1990s can only be attributed to a number of very specific examples of art or film. In this context, post-modernism may not be the appropriate role or project for indigenous intellectuals. This speech, in turn, opened up a serious debate on the meaning of diversity, fragmentation and parallelism in contemporary art, as well as issues of anti-establishment art and the place of deconstructive traditions in allowing a new world-view to emerge.

This theme of the meaning of Chinese literature in the context of rapid political change was taken up in later sessions. Prof. Yi Dan from Sichuan Union University argued in his paper (*Searching the Chinese Experience: Development of Modern Chinese Literature and Art in a Context of Transformation under Foreign Cultural Dominance*) that much modern Chinese literature, art and film positions itself with a direct awareness of the international audience, therefore making any purely Chinese modern art impossible. Prof. Yi argued that this is not so much a matter of personal choice by individual artists, but emerges out of the entire process of modernisation which China has undergone from the 19th century. The paper (p5) argued that it 'is only natural after all these years of transplanting foreign culture into Chinese culture to make a new China, Chinese writers and artists today should face a problem of cultural identification, a dilemma between the foreign and the Chinese, between the international and the national in the "Chinese experience" and "Chinese image" of their works.' Basically, the problem of maintaining a unique Chinese tradition and of resisting foreign influence is largely based on the current geopolitical situation, in which economic, political and military issues come under the problem of cultural confrontation. Referring back to the open, self-confidence of the Tang Dynasty, the paper looked forward to a more balanced situation in the future: -

It is predictable, however, as China should have gained its powerful position in a new world order, that as the nation should have much to offer the world in terms of economic and political resources, and scientific and technological advancements, that as Chinese people should have felt that they are representing the new, they are exerting the great influence on the rest of the world, the psychological unevenness will then evaporate, and the national pride will be regained. Only by that time, the paradox of searching a Chinese experience under foreign cultural dominance will be resolved, and the Chinese image in literature and art will cease to be a bewildering arguing point for writers and artists, critics and common people.' (p15)

Another trajectory into the meaning of post-modernism in contemporary China was posited by Prof. Wang Bin of Zhongshan University. In his paper (*Postmodernity as a Re-Shaping Force in China*), Prof. Wang noted that 'Postmodernity does not enjoy a good reputation among most of the intellectuals on the mainland of China. It has been rejected either as an anachronism or another form of western cultural imperialism.' (p1) But the paper goes on to show that the realities of the Chinese cultural industry, and the wild eclecticism of popular arts and everyday behaviour, undermine this dismissive viewpoint. Most crucially, it now emerges that no single author or authority in China today can

¹ A shortened translation of Prof. Dai's speech, entitled *Present-ness, the Imaginary, and Scenery in the Mirror*, was provided to delegates by the Conference convenors.

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control the interpretation of messages in the public space. Drawing on thinkers as diverse as Derrida and Barthes, Prof. Wang shows that these trends in China are 'cultivating an environment of ideological plurality' (p9). The paper concludes with the telling comment that 'unpredictable as the future might be, we have got to fight for a better one. When the divine "author" dies, even symbolically, the individual will gain his/her existential re-birth' (p11).

Post-modernism also proved to be of direct political and economic significance in the thought of American delegates. Dr. Chuck Kleinhands of Northwestern University studied one of the currently dominant media forms, popular film, in his paper *Terms of Transition: The Action Film in East-West Perspective*. Dr. Kleinhands, developing the lead of Fredric Jameson's thought, argued that there is indeed a connection between expressive forms and the different stages of capitalism. From this perspective, Westernisation and modernisation are in reality aspects of the expansion and development of capitalism. However, Jameson has been too rigid in linking specific stages of culture with specific stages of capitalist production. Postmodernism doesn't end earlier cultural forms, but simply displaces and transforms them. Thus essentiality Romantic narratives can appear in supposedly modern genres. At the same time, capitalism expands into the core of the private, transforming 'every site, be it hospital, school, kitchen, or bedroom' into profit centres and places of class-conflict (p18). From this viewpoint, it seems clear that this process is central to the structure of any East-West dialogue, whether explicit in the case of academic exchange, or implicit, as in the exchanges of cultural products and media.

It is not possible in this short report to do justice to the numerous papers which were presented. Chinese business, legal and political issues were also represented through a wide range of thoughtful papers, including Prof. Shi Benzhi's *Intercultural Management: A New Element of International Economic Cooperation* and Prof. Yu Jinsong's *China's Role in the Establishment of the New International Economic Order: An Observation from the Legal Perspective*. Prof. Wang Fengxin addressed the issue of *The Rising Corporate Culture in China*, while Prof. Fan Jun returned to the theme of *Globalisation: Opportunities and Risks*. Prof. Yan Ming (Suzhou University), in *The Past and Future of Chinese Poetry*, examined the wide influence of classical Chinese poetry on cultural traditions in Japan, Korea and Vietnam. One of the other strengths of the Conference was the wide range of viewpoints from different regions and institutions within the PRC, including Nanjing, Suzhou, Peking, Wuhan, Yunnan, Jilin, Tsinghua, Zhongshan, Fudan, Xiamen, Tunghai, Lanzhou and other areas.

The Conference was also attended by a large delegation of International Relations students from Bond University (Australia), led by Dr. Anne Cullen. James Ferguson, from the International Relations Department and the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*, Bond University, also presented a paper (*The Dynamics of Culture in Contemporary Asia: Politics and Performance During 'Uneven Globalisation'*) and chaired the first panel.

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The great diversity of the Conference can be assessed through the titles of its panels, which included sessions on Cultural Translatability, History and Interpretation, New Media Cultures, Cultural Studies in Asia, Chinese Literature and Other Arts, Chinese Business and Politics, New Brands of Globalisation, Re-Defining Hong Kong, Chinese Culture and Global Cultures, and Issues Related to Women. The sessions included the gala premier of a new Chinese feature film, *The Making of Steel*, directed by Lu Xuechang, concerning modern life in Beijing over the last twenty years. The Conference closed with a banquet on Victoria Peak. Overall, the Conference was a great success, with dialogue on all these issues being taken up both within the formal sessions, and by smaller groups around luncheon tables, or at other venues. The Proceedings of the Conference, which may be published by the Conference convenors, will be a worthwhile addition to East-West studies, Asian studies, media and literature studies and international relations. The next Conferences organised the David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (and associated institutions) is to be looked forward to with real interest.