

# Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

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Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 6

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November 2001

## Cultural Heat in Yunnan

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### Recommended Citation

Dellios, Rosita (2001) "Cultural Heat in Yunnan," *Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cm/vol4/iss2/6>

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# Cultural Heat in Yunnan

## **Abstract**

Extract:

'Economic Globalisation and Pluralistic Development of National Cultures' was the theme of an international academic conference held in China in August 2001. Convened by the China Confucius Society and the Yunnan Institute for Nationalities, the conference was held in Kunming, the capital of China's ethnically diverse Yunnan Province in the southwest.

## **Keywords**

globalisation, ethnic minorities, international relations

*The Culture Mandala, 4 no. 2, November 2001. Copyright © Rosita Dellios 2001*

## **Conference Report: Cultural Heat in Yunnan**

*A Centre Report*

'Economic Globalisation and Pluralistic Development of National Cultures' was the theme of an international academic conference held in China in August 2001. Convened by the China Confucius Society and the Yunnan Institute for Nationalities, the conference was held in Kunming, the capital of China's ethnically diverse Yunnan Province in the southwest. In this region reside 34 of China's 55 officially recognised non-Han minorities. Minority nationalities form seven per cent of China's total population. Yet their fate at the onset of globalisation was seen as a problem for the whole of China and its development policies. This was because globalisation was still somewhat foreign and a challenge to Chinese from all ethnicities and walks of life. For example, Chinese business people counselled not to act like sheep with the wolf of foreign business at the door. This was self-defeating; they needed to prepare themselves for facing foreign competition.

'Cultural heat' is a term used to describe the increased debate on culture in China; not only the cultures of the many ethnic minorities but also the cultures of socialism and capitalism; of 'human values' and 'money values' in shaping globalisation. With regard to the latter, some thought 'economic globalisation' was not a proper term, preferring 'economic internationalisation' or 'economic uniformity'. Also 'economic globalisation' could not be considered realistically in isolation of cultural and human dimensions. Indeed, 'human globalisation' was seen as a more fitting term.

The nature of 'economic globalisation' also gave rise to divergent perspectives. One view equated 'economic globalisation' with capitalism, market consumerism, Westernisation and hegemony. This was the 'trap theory': that China was falling into a trap of elitist economic globalisation with no regard for the poor and culturally divergent. An opposing view held globalisation to be a double-edged sword, with advantages and disadvantages, challenges and opportunities. From these premises emerged strategies for deal with 'economic globalisation'. The 'trap' theorists were simply opposed to and would seek to minimise its effects. 'Double-edged' sword theorists suggested that the potential victims of 'economic globalisation' should change from behaving like 'sheep' and become more creative and proactive.

Other strategies and scenarios in consideration of the pluralistic model (in reference to ethnic and economic cultures) spoke of coexistence; mutual dependence; pluralistic harmony; but also the more predictable systems of pluralistic realism in which there exists a degree of managed conflict, or in which one dominant element emerges. As opposed to speculations on directions within pluralism, there were those who feared that a final monoculture will come into being. Such a monocultural globalisation would occur with either Western or Eastern culture becoming dominant. They, in turn, were challenged by others who thought that ultimate globalisation might not be possible. Instead, diverse cultures might be integrated to varying degrees in the process.

*From left: Dr Martin Lu, Director, Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies, Bond University, Australia; Dr Karen Gloy,*

*Philosophy Department, Lucerne University, Switzerland; Ms Jing Sun, Department of English, Yunnan Institute of Nationalities; Professor Robert Scalapino, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California; Dr Heidi Dumreicher, Director, Oikodrom Institute for Urban Sustainability, Vienna, Austria; and Dr Rosita Dellios, Associate Professor of International Relations, Bond University.*



Would tradition Chinese culture be integrated into globalisation? If so, how? One method proposed was through its service to the present age. While it was acknowledged that the traditional Chinese cultural philosophies of Daoism and Confucianism could not cure all the problems posed by globalisation, yet they could provide ethical guidelines for its conduct and construction. This, in itself, is an integration of the old, enduring philosophies into the new. For example, the Confucian emphasis on *ren* (humaneness) would promote globalisation with a human face. *Zhongyong* is the traditional concept of *centrality*, in the sense of not going to extremes, and *normality* as a notion of not acting in an unnatural way. Like Daoism with its emphasis on nature and aesthetic principles, as well as pragmatism, *zhongyong* is well suited to environmental protection issues and human development, rather than pursuit of the environmental or industrial extremities.

We should pay attention to the role of China's history but not exaggerate it, many of the conference delegates argued. The functions and beliefs of traditional China cannot be used in today's China, but new and old can be combined for development. On a more particularistic note, how might this affect ethnic minority groups? Wang Ya Nan, who is an academic who comes from an ethnic minority background, advised as follows (in translation from the Chinese):

We should keep our cultural origins, but at the same time we can face the reality of life around us and participate in globalisation. We are trying to help Yunnan find a way to benefit people. We are holding meetings this year about how to develop the economy while developing culture.

Asked during question time whether the Yunnan Nationalities Villages constructed for visitors in Kunming was a 'human zoo', he conceded that in many respects it was. Yet there was hope that Yunnan had not succumbed to monocultural trends in development. This was because Yunnan's national minority culture was in the mainstream rather than the substream. Moreover, within individual ethnicities there is diversity. For example the Yi nationality is a large group but comprised of approximately 20 branches.

Another local academic, Professor Fang Tie from Yunnan University, pointed out that ancient China could be found in the minority nationalities, as there had not been much change in this essentially agricultural region. Nowadays, however, satellite television has reached some remote areas and this is expected to have an impact, along with other aspects of modern life. Currently, he says, there is a debate in planning circles over how to approach this situation. There are those who predict that globalisation will reach into the remotest corner and some of the smaller and more vulnerable cultures will disappear. These officials argue that it is not healthy to keep certain groups isolated in order to save their cultures. Given the inevitability of globalisation, the opposite will occur. Hence there is an attempt at present by Yunnan planners to do both: encourage cultures to develop on their own terms, but also to be able to have outside contact.

Hence the famous 'one country, two systems' approach (used for the political reunification of Hong Kong and Macao with China) may well be employed for cultural development purposes. Certainly, the situation is being studied closely. Five universities in Yunnan are leaders in research on China's

minority nationalities. Research is now underway, after extensive surveys and field data collection, for economic development of the southwest to occur in culturally sustainable ways. A key consideration, according to Professor Fang, is how the new and the old traditions of the minorities can be merged.

The conference was attended by 69 delegates, 25 of them from abroad - including Europe, the USA, Japan, as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan. This foreign presence was well served by interpreters, as were the Chinese delegates when papers and speeches were presented in English. Most of the interpreters, who displayed a high proficiency in English and in intercultural conceptual translation, were themselves from ethnic minorities.



*Dragon Statue at Black Dragon Temple, on the outskirts of Kunming*

The largest foreign delegation was Australian, from Bond University, representing the disciplines of international relations and philosophy. A prominent US International Relations expert, Robert A. Scalapino, Robson Research Professor of Government Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, was an invited dignitary at the conference. In light of the outbreak of massive terrorism in his own country in the following month, his remarks at the conference were prescient when he said we are entering a difficult and complex era; indeed, a revolutionary one. When asked his views on the writings of fellow American scholars, Samuel Huntington who speculated on a 'clash of civilisations' characterising the new era, and Francis Fukuyama with his thesis of the 'end of history' now that the battle of ideologies was over with the Cold War, Professor Scalapino thought they oversimplified a complex future. Civilisations and cultures are having more and more diversity within them. "We are going to have diversity and we need to have stability in this for future harmony." Needless to say, the quest for stability is now uppermost in the global mind. Cultural insights are precious resources.

Below is a random selection of the hundred flowers that bloomed in Yunnan's cultural heat of August last:

- "Globalisation might be a *datong*" (*Datong* is a one-world community for which Confucius sighed in longing. In it, all people care for each other like family.)
- "In the West, people ask: How? What? When? Why? In Daoism we do not ask." (Daoist teacher.)

- "*Individualism* translates as *selfishness* in a Chinese dictionary. This translation needs to be improved." (Chinese interpreter.)
- "No person or society should impose values on others."
- "Some values will block development. They concentrate on self-interest, not on how to relate to the world."
- "First be a good Chinese. Second, be a Chinese who can accept the world. Then we will be accepted too." (Taiwanese)
- "The Heaven-Earth-Human relationship implies that everyone can be god. In China we have a lot of gods."
- "I waste your time." (Polite conclusion to a presentation.)

The conference papers and interviews with delegates may be found at the China Confucius website: [www.chinakongzi.com](http://www.chinakongzi.com)

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