

## IDEOLOGICAL VACUUM IN THE PAST AND TWO ACTUAL CHALLENGES OF SOCIETY IN CHINA

*Candidate of Philosophy Sciences Balshikeev S. B.,  
Candidate of History Sciences Amirkhanova Zh. B.,  
Zhiyenbayev M. B.*

*Kazakhstan, Karaganda State Technical University*

**Abstract.** *The transition from Socialist China to Post-Socialist China is also the transition from the stability guaranteed by Chinese philosophy to the individualism offered by the logic of marketization. Over the sociological attempt to define the never resolved dynamic modernization-westernization, China places her quest for a new identity.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese society, modernism, westernization, modernization*

The concerns with economic and politics are quite familiar to the West. There is a saying which goes: *In 1949, only socialism can save China; in 1979 only capitalism can save China; in 1989 only China can save socialism; in 2009 only China can save capitalism*, as to underline the role that China plays in world's market economy. However the analysis must be complemented by the reflection on social life and individuals. How did China respond to the institutional shift of the past decades and how did the redefinition of the moral landscape reshape the Chinese character? We shall start our discussion by saying that the development of the private sector in Chinese economy, by large the coming in age of capitalism, produced a divided self. Why is this? China did not come to terms yet with her most recent past, but at the moment rather than the past we shall focus on the future. Emotions and desire are not new to Chinese people, but in Maoist China they were controlled or at least stigmatized as improper for they would not adhere to the revolutionary cause. Scar Literature beautifully describes the dissolution of any privacy, be it an intimate behavior or a personal thought, into a public space which is always the political arena of those who criticize and those who are criticized.<sup>3</sup> The party-state shaped people's space and expression; everyday life was an endless cycle of work and study session, primary means of indoctrination. When in 1978 silenced emotions were finally unleashed (for academic purpose we take Deng Xiaoping reform as the starting off point), the greater openness increased artistic production as well as the rate of depression and other health issues such as alcoholism, drug addiction, sexually transmitted diseases, domestic violence, gambling (Shu-mei, 2007). The retreat of the State from active involvement in shaping the economic life of the country opens up space for civil society; better said, the rise of a public sphere challenging the authority, which is as well the first step on the way to democracy. However the economic process of the past thirty years besides democratic and sociological issues is accompanied by a more subtle moral crisis which is the conflict between individualistic needs and values (the fact that everyone wants now to possess and consume more) and the Confucian tradition based on preordered social relations. More in general is the transition from a collective system of work to de-collectivization that untied a new society. The marketization of housing, education, medical care, forced everyone to be responsible for their own choice. The sociological implication for the loss of 饭票 (*meal ticket*) millions or urban workers eating together food supplied by the party state, recalls the idea of a mother country (China) that tends to control every single aspect of people life. When this came less China was called to invent a new identity. We assist millions of villagers moving from the countryside to the cities competing for the opportunities given by the private sector while enlarging the gap between rich and poor; youths looking for higher education, life aspiration pondering about happiness and freedom replaced the previous emphasis on self-sacrifice. China became the world's largest middle class society. What exactly happened is that by the late 1980 the monetary success became a new fetish; it is reflected on the fact that many had second jobs in order to provide for their new needs, material comfort and freedom. But the shift from a collective system of responsibility to an individualistic system of self-development brought as well new social phenomenon: sexual revolution, increase of depression, isolation, divorce, suicide (Shu-mei, 2007). The ethical change in China was not backed up by an outside authority. The Western world before any cultural change or secular movement was parachuted by the power of religion which somehow always pointed the way; Chinese contest had first in the family orientated system and then in Mao a background of morality to fall on. But in the new Chinese society the authority the individual can rely on is individual itself, which, we have seen, is a definition

in progress. From here the ideological moral vacuum different tradition of scholars refer to, an evident disengagement from the historical present, whose victims feel the need to buy a new phone model every six months to satisfy their desire to belong somewhere. On a sociological base disillusionment, mistrust, detachments are the more evident traits of those characters in search of identity. We have talked about the transition from Socialist China to Post-Socialist China. Economic changes have always a social impact; the more relevant are the innovation the more dramatic are the effects, and more often than not is followed by an ideological break-down. This is a quite obvious statement that does not help much to understand nowadays China. Sixth Generation authors and their movies represent probably the best attempt to describe the controversial changeover between two China, to some extent between two ideologies<sup>4</sup>. The euphoria of that part of Chinese society that more than others took advantages from the open door policy is sided by those who otherwise feel all the shame of an historical betrayal. Mao's mistake were blamed by Deng Xiaoping, one above all *to have produced an entire generation of mental cripples*<sup>5</sup>; therefore the old generation, the very same that actively participate in the socialist construction, is now called to repudiate Mao's Cultural Revolution and what they worked for, the planned economy. But while doing so, the new economic agenda did not bring any good giving way to social issues such as unemployment, floating population, and criminality. The State discovers itself weak; it is not any longer able to protect its workers, declaring the bankrupt of state factory, forcing women to prostitution, rural workers into illicit business. The new policy not only enlarged the gap never really fulfilled between the intellectual class and the working class but the very same working class is reduced to a sub strata, a subaltern class that, if on one hand did not see the promise of egalitarianism fulfilled, on the other hand has to survive in the new shining city just built. The message launched by those underground movies is that on a sociological base of disillusionment and mistrust, the abandoned workers tried to make it in a way or another, detachment and criminality are the most evident result of a ruthless policy. But the silence of the old generation is the very same silence of the new one. Twenty-thirty years old youngster looking for a social definition have assisted the government's crackdown at Tiananmen. In addition to this, they grew up on a quite confusing cultural background; in fact we might as well define it as an overlapping of cultural paradigm. They are brought up with the Confucian ideal of filial piety, which means first and foremost respect for the others, and suddenly they found themselves living in a world that tolerate and advise individualism, competitiveness, auto-referential egoism. They are ask to fulfill duties that modernity denies, to have an identity in a world that changes every day, to be modern and traditional, conservative and liberal, to memorize Mao's speeches and embrace the opportunity offered by capitalism. All in all, once the socialist model has been sided by that of capitalist practices (accumulation, commodity exchange, impersonal relation) the cultural symbols previously shared were, in the turn of a few years, emptied of their significance before new significance could be found. It comes alone that the social consequence of such dramatic cultural overdose it couldn't be but isolation and disintegration. An immense ideological vacuum is the prize to be paid to step into modernity even more acute if we think that the theoretical framework on which the western world based the condition for an individualistic society, a state with a strong democracy belief and welfare support, are still missing in China.

**Two actual challenges.** Reading backwards the recent history of China it is evident that at certain moment of the historical continuum China found herself in a death end street: step into the world outside embracing a modernity far to be understood and simultaneously giving away to a process of cultural erosion, a conflict between the self and the other, tradition and modernity, which shaped the hybrid of today. It is with the first Opium war that China had to re-think her centralism, when then Encyclopedias of Geography were introduced, China saw herself transformed from being the world to be a part of it. The encounter with the West, a science and a technology far superior, shattered the previous demarcation between center and periphery, which means the demarcation between the self and the other, forcing China to reorganize itself into a new image. To better understand the process of cultural erosion and transformation China went through for the past centuries, it might be useful to refer to the Hegelian dialectic Master-Slave where the dynamic between the two ideal types is the essence of the process of recognition: the master emerges as master and the slave as slave only through the recognition of the other. Soon the interaction between thesis and antithesis, subject and object, will lead to a new syntheses. The slave works with devotion and effort; he begins to shape products for the master through imitation applied to his own creativity and originality. He creates a world auto-sufficient and he realizes that the world around him was created by his own hands; thus the slave is no longer alienated from his own labor and achieves a new self-consciousness, while the master on the other hand has become entirely dependent on the products created by his slave. The master is enslaved by the labor of his slave. China has been, since the dramatic encounter with the west, hanging on a relation of dependency on her own territory, military oppressed, politically benched and culturally overshadowed. This is precisely why once the

communist, read it as Mao, took power they isolated China from the rest of the world: it was the attempt to preserve a civilization by avoiding confrontation. Only when they realized that such a confrontation came to be unavoidable, only then China took consciousness of herself and through a process of imitation and creativity, the master-slave dynamic, began the shaping of her new identity. But the Chinese acculturation is of difficult understanding because it stands between definitions, tradition-modern, east-west, old-new, socialism-capitalism. Culture is much more than material modality of expressions; it is about moral and art, values and ethic, nothing that can be established overnight, nothing that can be abandoned in a day. The first challenge that China is facing today is to perform self-criticism in order to come to terms with her most recent past. Ting Ling<sup>6</sup> saw her husband being executed by the GMT. She herself was then arrested and imprisoned few times but underground she would continue writing and organizing mass movements of peasants, workers, students. After the People Republic of China was proclaimed she became one of the leading figures of the Communist literature movement. In *The Trial*, one of her most acclaimed pieces, she would have one of the peasants saying during the trial against the ex-landlord Chen, that *there would be no New China without the Communist party*. The short story, which is objectively artistically poor, was labeled as *author's mastery of artistic technique*, and yet it was not enough for her to avoid being labelled as rightist. After twenty seven meetings with more than a thousand of participants where she never admitted guilt, she was expelled from the party, sent to a farm first and then to jail for another twenty years. When in 1979 for the first time at 75 she appeared in public again; she was asked about the past. She indulgently laughed and said that people should look ahead. But, the future should never ignore the past. The categories known as China and Chinese are historically sedimented constructs; 5000 years of traditions is a daily heard slogan for those who live in China, but they are as well built on historical amnesia. Let us not bother; the past is a wide spread understanding of the present. And it takes us to the second challenge China has to face, which is the more intellectually delicate attempt to avoid an acritical westernization, because every time that western habits, costumes, ideas are taken for own consume, indirectly an assumption is made: the implicit acceptance that habit, costume or idea are better. Chinese modernization cannot afford to be confused with an uncontrolled westernization for it would fling China back again to the Master-Slave dynamic. However it must be said that the same vacuum, the same struggle for self-definition, self-determination was visible in East Europe just after the collapse of Soviet Union, it is the empty space between the state power retreat and people leap towards freedom. In this sense China is not an *unicum*, 思想危机 (ideological crisis) and 精神危机 (spiritual crisis) is a phase Europe has suffered at every turn of century, and every time it came out with a new subjectivity. Nowadays Chinese urban film makers' picture characters with humanist concern but politically unaware, being politically unaware in post-socialist China does not have the same negative connotation as it had in socialist China. In fact to some extent the political unawareness of a big slice of Chinese population, might as well be one of the first traits of the new Chinese identity. According to Habermas and Marx the idea of civil society and therefore the public sphere is connected to the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the fact that China has today the biggest bourgeois class in the world would authorize us to say that China has at last found a new identity.

It is tempting but misleading. Western society based the concept of identity on the solid platform of truth. Truth has been simultaneously a religious understanding of human expectation, science able to explain man position in the universe and art expressed through beauty because the perfection of beauty reconnect man to the divine element he once had. But Chinese identity had none of it. Chinese virtues, identity, society could not possibly stand on a religious base for while in the western counterpart first came religion and then society and therefore Christianity shaped the whole civilization, religion belief in China came after society and therefore it never had the strength, the imprimatur to unify a country otherwise so vast and different. Science is a recent invention in China. It appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, together with the Western powers and the idea of a materialist progress. Obviously it was opposed by the conservative wings, as contrary to nature and Chinese spiritual philosophy. Neither art nor beauty could represent an amalgam for the scattered Chinese identity for beauty in China is an imperfect concept that does not last, too liable, too weak. Art, by definition, pretends to be immortal; art is what remains once we are no more, but China had no time to look for perfection. China was engaged with the tragedy which fragmented, dispersed men's awareness, and men's critical thinking. Beauty, by large art, in China does not last because China burnt it down to produce in order to catch up with the European production; beauty in China was smashed and tore apart, silenced, treated as an impostor, a rightist, enemy of the masses. And because beauty could not console China, for it to survive it needed a more solid background, a frame to hold on to while dynasties, invaders, regimes would rapidly alternate. It is ideology. The cultural stage on

which was based Chinese identity has always been ideology: first was Confucius to define the shape of what was moral and what was not, then was Maoism, read it as Communism to point out what is right and what is wrong. At last arrived capitalism to indicate the difference between success and failure, with a blend new of values and ethics. When it was only Confucianism or even Confucianism and Communism together, due to their common attitude towards order, the identity was somehow preserved; but with the appearance on the stage of the logic of marketization Chinese identity rapidly entered a phase of cultural schizophrenia. The process of modernization quite successfully hid the contradiction of a society where nowadays individualism and competition have to go along with respect and collectivism. Cultural chaos took finally the resemblance of peace. Clearly the ideological vacuum following the death of Mao plays a big part in the definition of a new identity because ideology is the imaginary representation of the world but now that ideology has slipped out of daily life there is a space yet to be filled. By what? Family? Association? Religion? But it seems unlikely that a faith of foreign origins might be able to help the construction of Chinese uniqueness, besides the repertoire of quantitative and qualitative images available today make difficult the development of predominant characters as the logic of capitalism goes along with concept of fragmentation, de-personalization, de-subjectivization. In spite of this, the exploration of subjectivity constitutes the bulk of contemporary art, literature, aesthetics, all aware of the humanist quest for Chinese's soul after for few decades it dissolved into the impersonality of the masses. External symbols, embrace-ment of western symbols, commercial culture is the tool used to avoid the chaos opened by the ideological breakdown; they might as well represent the cultural bridge to a new cultural paradigm. Today, digging the soul of contemporary China is a transition bordering alienation and nihilism, an entanglement of values none of them valid enough to be followed as leading star, controversial messages where men and women are both victims of the commodity exchange policy, both looking for a new guide to the social totality.

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