

ARTICLES

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE INTERCULTURAL EAST-WEST PROCESS: SOME THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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This essay tries to define the cultural identity within the framework of East-West process in the age of contemporary globalization and presents the plausible methodology of this kind of research.

Cultural identity in the intercultural East-West Process may be understood as a set of customs, institutions, ideas, ideals and values created and developed throughout history, forming a continual entity within a general and unequivocal cultural continuum usually associated with one nation (and nationalities or minorities belonging to it), living in a particular State or within a larger cultural community. Homeostatic adaptability and the total balance was and still is a precondition of the harmonious cultural identity without great problems. It was, and still is, a prerequisite of the successful development of cultures, in our case of Asia and Africa. The study of cultural identity of these countries, as you know, is the goal of this project.

1

During the past years, the majority of our staff concentrated firstly, on the issue of tradition and innovation in intercultural communication between East and West, and secondly, on the questions of globalization as well as on the requirement to return to the cultural traditions of Asia and Africa.

Our work on the previous project in the years 1997-1999 showed us that the "return to identity" (in the cultural East-West process) as the goal of our research activities would not be without problems. It was clear during the work on

it that in the process of world-wide globalization it is not easy to find and define the really viable elements of this identity in the development of the multicultural world which should form the basis (or foundations) for mutual communication and intercultural understanding.

What is identity in general?

Identity is a term or concept with several semantic levels in various parts of social consciousness. Identity is *de facto* the same entity (*idem*) as, for example, the perception or awareness of one's continual existence that can be differentiated from all other people, which is a characteristic of the psychological identity of the individual. The simplest is mathematical or logical identity. Much more complicated is the identity of the ethnic or national collective, or cultural identity as a complex mechanism including all typical products of the spirit of the ethnic groups, national minorities, nation or nations living in one State, for instance, in China, India, Turkey, or South Africa.

The cultural identity of such a nation, or, we may say multicultural community, has a common history and development of habits, institutions, ideas, ideals, values passed down from generation to generation, which was occasionally and partially modified and created a continual entity within a general and safely unambiguous cultural continuum. Cultural identity has many forms, the most important of which are its linguistic, literary, artistic, philosophical and religious forms covering a smaller or greater extent of time and space. Cultural identity undergoes intracultural and intercultural development. It is therefore the result of process phenomena. Cultural continuum, especially nowadays, is a broad space where different continuities meet, compete and survive. In our age of globalization, the Western world, – West European and North American culture – is the most aggressive and trying to influence all other cultures of the world. It is the duty of all indigenous and less differentiated cultures to defend their own values and to live through this era using the methods of homeostatic adaptability. I suppose that the last strategy is the best one.

2

Every scholarly project, if it is to be successful, has to state more or less clearly, its goal(s), methodology of research, to have enough accessible materials (books, articles in journals, or the results of field research, etc.), and possibility(ies) of publication. Feedback, that is intermittent control and correction of errors, or improvement of the methodological instruction is also very good. A "minimum agreement" on methodology and "maximum knowledge" of the subject under study is very important here. Under "minimum agreement" are understood the basic procedures following the theoretical framework of the whole project. Under "maximum of knowledge" is to be comprehended the sum total of available facts and their adequate scholarly processing.

The methodology of the research is probably the most difficult to define. As far as I know, the study of cultural identity is a new subject of research and it was compelled by the situation in the multicultural societies and the necessity for interhuman and intercultural communication.

Since the study of cultural identity is a new one in international studies, no one quite plausible methodology was found to be applicable in successful research. On the other hand there are many studies (books and articles) of this kind, since this research is much in vogue in the last years. By about the beginning of 1999, the *International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America*, included at least 850 items concerned with literature only.¹ The personal bibliography made by Dr. Lin Jenn-shann of Shih Hsin University, Taipei, counts 87 books.² This one is much better and is concerned with broader subjects. I personally appreciate the methodology elaborated by Professor Rien T. Seghers, Rijkuniversiteit Groningen, used in his study "Cultural Identity: New Perspectives for Literary Studies".³ Here we read that fields, such as philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, international relations have dealt with cultural identity, but mainly in the combination with topics, such as European unification, the problems of nationalism vs. fundamentalism and lifestyles of different countries. A very typical example of the last may be the one about an American and Japanese who met on a safari trip. They walk together outside the safe path and suddenly "they are confronted with a hungry-looking lion. The American immediately starts running. But the Japanese doesn't move and thoughtfully opens his black leather briefcase in order to take out a pair of gym shoes. Looking back at the Japanese the American shouts: 'Come on, run for your life, leave those gym shoes behind – you don't have a chance anyhow to run faster than a lion does.' The Japanese thinks, waits a bit and says politely, "The one I have to outrun, is not the lion, but you."⁴ This is a joke and therefore a bit superficial, but true.

More important for us is to find a means of successful study. This is necessary to apply for different cultural fields, especially those we mentioned above. Seghers is interested in Comparative Literature and therefore he recommends a systemic approach as presented in Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek "Systemic Approaches to Literature – An Introduction with Selected Bibliographies",⁵ I regard this approach as good, but too complicated for the literatures and cultures that are not so much studied from comparative point of view as Western European or American literature. And this is the case of all, or almost all, Asian and African literatures. More than ten years ago I have elaborated a simple approach

¹ New York, Modern Language Association of America 1968-. Hard-Copy, CD-Rom, and World Wide Web: <http://w.w.w.mla.org>

² This bibliography has been presented to the participants of the international conference organized by Professor Chen Peng-hsiang and entitled: Subjectivity/Cultural Identity in an Age of Globalization, Shih-hsin University, Taipei, May 26-27, 2001.

³ Lee, M. and Meng Hua (ed.): *Cultural Dialogue & Misreading*. Sydney 1997, pp. 313-329.

⁴ Ibid., p. 319.

⁵ *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/ Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, XIX, 1992, 1-2, pp. 21-93.

⁶ Harrak, A. (ed.): *Contacts Between Cultures. West Asia and North Africa*. Vol. 1. Lewiston, New York, The Edwin Mellen Press 1992, pp. 481-484.

in the study: "Intercultural Process in East-West Interplay",⁶ read at the 33rd International Congress of Asian and North African Studies, Toronto 1990. Later I tried to apply it in other essays. Here intercultural processes are understood as "the communicating vessels" without being governed by the mechanical laws of their manifestation. The "cultural facts" are never isolated in their ethnic or national contexts. These are always in the state of an incessant flow, variability, and this applies both to the individual cultures and to the intercultural reality. In the present age of globalization, the different cultures of the world, even much more than in the past, are the outcome of the mutual continual processes within the continua of the cultures themselves. Therefore we have to study the different cultural facts from the realms of language, literature, culture, philosophy and religion as the manifestations of the particular ethnic and national cultures and try to find the peculiar and common features in order to make possible intercultural understanding and communication.

We ought to have in mind that there are two plausible approaches to the study of the question of cultural entity: the in-group and the out-group. For us only the second is possible, since we are the Others in this respect. In some countries much is done in the in-group circles, for example this applies to the Japanese, who are usually very uncritical of themselves. The Chinese started with their self-reflection at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Later they did not devote much attention to it. More has been done by the Chinese living in diasporas. It would be misleading to think that the cultural identity of one nation is the same in all its segments or geographical parts. If we have the Chinese in mind, there are differences in Chinese mainland in relation to the geographical areas, and the Chinese in diasporas who have lost much of their Chineseness and are more similar to the citizens of their host country.⁷

When writing about cultural identity in our times, it is necessary to have in mind that together with the global which is spreading elsewhere, the local should be emphasized, since only when using both components, that new values can emerge. This local is a matter of subjective invention and creativity. Sufficient knowledge of the traditional values is a precondition of the values that are or should be the characteristic for this identity.

3

Among the elements of the inventory forming the systemo-structural entity of the cultural identity, according to me, values are the most important, as the property of individual facts or their sets. What values as the elements of cultural identity are, is hard to define, but usually they are the ideas or ideals, ethical norms, aesthetic judgments, beauty and usefulness of language, delight in the works of art and literature, or from philosophy or religion. In the last decades

⁷ See the materials published in *Daedalus. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 120, Spring 1991, 2, and 122, Spring 1993, 2.

there is a tendency to return to the indigenous values. Asian and African intellectuals, try to search for the roots of their civilizations and cultural foundations. It is our duty, and one of the goals of our project, to help them in these endeavours. There is a hope that it will be fruitful. We have seen some good results in the case of African literatures, and in Asia, Japanese literature is leading in this respect. If this search is not purely nationalistic, or if is not used as a drug, it may bring positive results.

4

Our aim in the project under study is to reconstruct the different identities within our realm. In the age of global and local transformation, we should search for the old and study the new in its multicultural context. We should try to find and analyse the weighty issues, not just the trifles. Everyone of us should be aware of his/her responsibility.

The knowledge of different cultural identities (together with a good will to act according to human rights and responsibilities) is a prerequisite for mutual understanding and communication. "Maximum of knowledge" in this respect is not only our scholarly duty. It is also our ethical imperative. I do not want to bother you with the "minimum of agreement". You do not need to have the same opinion. It is a matter of your personal decision. As a person responsible for the project, I shall be very happy, if the final products of all of us will become small contributions to the different values connected with the cultural identity of the countries of Asia and Africa.

Now I shall try to be more concrete. And as a Sinologist I shall devote myself to the questions concerned mostly with China and the Chinese world.

Firstly, I shall devote myself to the questions of the difference between the segments in relation to the cultural identity in the countries or territories under study. I am quite sure that in India there should be similarities and dissimilarities between the adherents of two greatest religions – Hinduism and Islam, and between the different states forming the Republic of India, for instance Punjab and Bombay, or Kashmir. The same could be said about the national minorities in Mainland China (but this should be studied rather in the context of multiculturalism), but also among the different Chinese geographical areas, even provinces, and the Chinese abroad, in South East Asia, North America, Australia, and in the years to come even in Europe. Because of the slowed development in the last two hundred years (probably with the exception of the last two decades), we see clearly that the Chinese in the so-called peripheries, have at their disposal much higher intellectual abilities and economic potential than their countrymen living in the territories of *Hua* and *Xia*. The poor merchants of the Chinese Empire and coolies of the last two centuries became millionaires and their sons and grandsons teachers at the prominent universities and laureates of Nobel Prize. The traditional identities changed much in the new countries of "exile", and according to Tu Weiming (* 1940), Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy at Harvard University, the periphery became the centre of cultural China. The same could be said

also about the Chinese economy, at least up to this moment. Who is a Chinese now is very difficult to say. Is he a *Zhongguoren* (human being of Chinese origin, living once in the Chinese Empire, later in the Republic of China up to 1949, then in the People's Republic of China)? Yes, the majority of Chinese are, but some tens of millions are not. Nationalist Taiwanese do not regard themselves as the Chinese of this kind and many think that they are *Taiwanren* (Taiwanese), and they even prefer their own dialect as a new kind of literary language in the vernacular. Is he a *huaren* (human being of Chinese origin, but living outside of the original Chinese areas), or a *huaqiao* (the Chinese sojourner) or *huayi* (the Chinese descendant)? The histories of these "exiles" are very different and their attitudes to the Chinese heritage, and their "Chinese" identity likewise.

The identities of the Chinese sojourners and the Chinese descendants are very much, or at least to a great extent influenced by the local cultures. The identities in the peripheries, even if their representatives are much more progressive, of higher intellectual level, economically stronger, they need not to be axiologically higher, if the peculiar values in the spiritual realms are concerned: philosophical, religious, ethical, legal, literary, artistic, and even others. The greatest space for the Chinese identity, for "Chineseness" is China proper, those territories where the imperial and post-imperial China was situated. Its spiritual culture, at least from the times of the Shang-Yin Dynasty (ca. 1570-1045 B.C.), is a legitimate source of this identity. Much of this extremely rich source is still unknown to the great majority of the Chinese population, and even for those who with their creative work are (or should be) the makers of this identity in the intercultural process in the last years or decades. In their post-Cultural Revolution times, the Chinese have behind them widespread archeological, historical, religious and literary research. But much of the values which could be useful for their cultural development and for the constitution of their cultural identity in this time of worldwide globalization are up to now, unknown, or only little known outside the narrow group of specialists.⁸

The Chinese never had the patience of the Latin Americans or Africans in studying their own hidden, by the Confucian or Neo-Confucian scholars not acknowledged cultural legacy. They either wholly approved it (before the New Culture Movement in 1919), or to a great part negated it later. The rather enthusiastic acceptance of the Western values, or pseudovalues, starting with Social Darwinism, American Pragmatism, European Marxism and Euro-Asian Leninism, was not a good solution of the question. The advocates of the indigenous values were not numerous. The New Confucians of the twentieth century (following the Neo-Confucians of the imperial era), in their first (1921-1949), second (1950-1979) and third generations (after 1980) made great contributions either in defending mostly Confucian (but partly also Taoist and Buddhist) val-

⁸ See *ibid.* and in *Daedalus*, 122, Spring 1993, 2. See also Liu, Tao Tao and Faure, D. (eds.): *Unity and Diversity. Local Cultures and Identities in China*. Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press 1996.

ues of the traditional Chinese philosophy, but also in promoting these values against the background of Western philosophy. The third generation prolongs their work with the fourth, although the third is leading with Liu Shuxian (*1934), Cheng Zhongying (*1935) and Du Weiming. Most of all they are pondering over the role of Confucianism in the globalized world of today and in the future. According to Umberto Bresciani, the leading historian of this movement, "what they mean is a less radical aspiration to regaining a dominant role in a society", but a "more humble strive for active presence and contribution to a world culture shaping up in recent years together with the globalization process".⁹ Global pluralism in philosophy, religious faith and in *Weltanschauung* is their common credo. In three meetings with me (Boston, Montreal and Taipei) Du Weiming expressed an idea that the dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity is possible and plausible. The same may be endorsed by the attitude of Liu Shuxian to the American philosophy, he knows so well, or of Cheng Zhongying to the European understanding of hermeneutics and of Existentialist philosophy. This we may deduce from the *onto-hermeneutics* he proposes as his own teaching. I am afraid that his belief in the possibility of a "new global world philosophy", if not understood pluralistically, is a myth of the end of the last century.¹⁰

For China proper, if we have in mind its cultural identity, even more important are the researches into the values mostly outside of the New Confucians' efforts. In the middle of the 1980s many Chinese men of letters were enthusiastic about the *xun ken* (search for roots), which to some extent followed the search of Latin American and African writers for their own tribal or national myths, customs, and folk forms of literature. If in the case of the Latin American scholars and writers, it took many years, or even some decades,¹¹ in China it did not transcend a few weeks, and the whole movement did not last more than four years (1984-1987).¹² The Chinese writers usually visited their own native villages, towns, or provinces, and later described their impressions and wrote some works of fiction. Even if some of these are the best works written in China in the post-Cultural Revolution period, no one could compete with Gabriel García Márquez's or Jorge Luis Borges' works, although some of the Chinese writers tried to do so. The best specimen of this literature (at least I am regarding it as such), Gao Xingjian's (*1940) novel *Lingshan* (*Soul Mountain*), in spite of the pronouncement of the Swedish Academy which highlighted it as "an oeuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which

⁹ Bresciani, U.: *Reinventing Confucianism. The New Confucian Movement*. Taipei, Taipei Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies 2001, pp. 31-32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 396-409, esp. 404.

¹¹ Monegal, R.E.: "Die lateinamerikanische Literatur". In: Wilpret, G. von und Ivask, I. (eds.): *Moderne Literatur. Die Gegenwartsliteraturen Europas und Amerikas*. Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag 1978, pp. 159-161.

¹² Gálik, M.: "Searching for Roots and Lost Identity in Contemporary Chinese Literature". *Asian and African Studies*, n.s., 9, 2000, 2, pp. 154-167.

has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama",¹³ cannot be evaluated so highly as the best works of the two mentioned.

Gao Xingjian, probably in relation to other Chinese writers, enumerated the individual elements of the inventories within the different sets forming the systemo-structural reality of Chinese structure before the age of globalization. He has done it in one of his essays entitled "Wenxue yu xuanxue: guanyu *Lingshan*" ("Literature and Dark Learning: on *Spiritual Mountain*"), where he put aside the Confucian component of culture, and left it only for the experts as a realm for their research, and singled out primeval shamanism, later Taoism and Buddhism, popular culture, and lastly what he called "a kind of pure Eastern spirit". Popular culture, according to him, includes myths, legends, customs, ritual, folk songs, operas (*xiqu*) and novellas (*huaben*). Under the specimens, of the "pure Eastern spirit", Gao Xingjian understands Zhuangzi's philosophy of nature, Neo-Taoist *xuanxue* (the dark or mystic learning) of the Wei and Jin Dynasties (225-419) and unreligious Chan (Zen) teaching and practices.¹⁴

For some reason, Gao does not underline the necessity of study of the legacy of the territories and state of Chu (?11th cent.-221 B.C.), especially of *Chuci* (*The Elegies of Chu*), Chu culture, art, religion, as a Southern pendant of the Northern Confucian culture. "Great Chu will rise again",¹⁵ cried once a rebel Wu Guang against the oppressive Qin Dynasty in the last years before the beginning of the Christian era. Maybe, the yearnings of Qin peasants will find their fulfilment at the beginning of the third millennium, at least in some aspects of modern Chinese cultural identity. Up to now the study of Chu culture flourishes only among the experts in archaeology, history, literature, art, religion, law, warfare and some aspects of the social and political life. *Chuxue wenku* (Treasury of Chu) comprises eighteen different books and publications related to the problems of Chu.¹⁶ The books and studies connected directly or indirectly with Chu problems are too many up to our days.¹⁷

It will take much time, probably some decades, even more, for the old values discovered now, to become the property of the Chinese, a part of their cultural identity. In the global cultural continuum, the individual psychological equipment of the Chinese must be changed in the new environment. Some properties of the Confucian mental outfit that were suffocating human individuality must be put aside, some should be accommodated for modern times, for instance, the

¹³ "The Nobel Prize for Literature 2000 – Press Release," p. 1.

¹⁴ *Jintian* (Today), 3, 1992, pp. 212-213.

¹⁵ Si Maqian: *Shiji* (Records of Historian)... Taken from the translation byang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang: *Selection from Records of the Historian*. Peking, Foreign Languages Press 1979, p. 198.

¹⁶ Treasury of Chu is published by Hankou Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe.

¹⁷ See the bibliography appended to the volume of essays *Defining Chu. Image and Reality in Ancient China*, ed. by C.A. Cook and J.S. Major. Honolulu, University of Hawaii's Press 1999, pp. 213-238.

Confucian concept of *xiao* (filial piety), family cohesion, solidarity, entrepreneurial spirit.¹⁸ *Guanxi* (relations) between people who are near to each other could not be practiced to such a great extent as now, and *houmen* (walking through the back door) should be at least to a great extent abolished, otherwise in the new market economy China will change into the most corrupt country of the world.¹⁹

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In these musings, we stressed the values as the most important, and the indigenous values as the primary for preserving or "improving" the cultural identity of Asian and African nations or ethnic communities. Another aspect, but always present in our strains, was not underlined here: intercultural communication. Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter slightly distort the message of Confucius who said on one occasion: *Xing xiang jin ye, xi xiang yuan ye* (By nature men are alike. Through practice they have become far apart." (*Lunyu, Analects*, 17, 2).²⁰ In the translation used by Samovar and Porter it sounds as follows: "Human beings draw close to one another by their common nature, but habits and customs keep them apart."²¹ This citation stands at the real beginning of the book entitled *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, edited by these two well-known experts, which appeared in 2000 in its ninth edition in 15 different cities on five continents. According to my understanding of the words by one of the most famous teachers and philosophers of the world, there is no clear message that would point to the communication between human beings. On the other hand this slight reorientation of Confucius' statement is very important for the world of today. In reality Confucius spoke about the common identity of all human beings, their human nature, which under different conditions, in different environments, expresses itself in many variegated ways.

Different identities are secondary, but extremely important within the cultural framework of different ethnic communities and nations of our globalized world. They are the outcome of the intercultural process. Their East-West part forms one of the most weighty problems of our age. Intercultural communication should be the eleventh commandment for our global world.

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¹⁸ Tu Wei-ming: "Selfhood and Otherness in Confucian Thought". In: A.J. Marsella, G. De Vos, and Hsu, F.L.K. (eds.): *Culture and Self. Asian and Western Perspectives*. New York: Tavistock Publications 1985, pp. 234-240 and 248, and Godwin C. Chu: "The Changing Concept of Self in Contemporary China", *ibid.*, esp. 272-276.

¹⁹ King, A. Yeo-chi: "Kuan-hsi and Network Building: A Sociological Interpretation". *Daedalus*, 120, 2, pp. 63-84.

²⁰ *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*. Trans. and Comp. by Wing-Tsit Chan. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1963, p. 45.

²¹ *Intercultural Communication. A Reader*. Belmont CA. and London: Wadsworth Publishing Company: a division of an International Thomson Publishing Company 2000, p. 5.