CHAPTER 5

Traditional Culture and Modernization of Higher Education in China

Modernization has become an increasingly popular subject of interdisciplinary studies. Scholars across different disciplines have been studying modernization from their respective disciplinary areas. Higher education is no exception. The relationship between traditional culture and modernization lies in the core of modernization research. It bears special significance to study from the perspective of higher education. On the one hand, the cultural functions of higher education lie in its inheritance, evaluation, selection, and innovation in culture. Additionally, higher education is the driver of modernization. Carrying out research from the perspective of higher education can enable people to have a profound and comprehensive understanding of the relationship between traditional culture and modernization. On the other hand, effective management of the relationship between traditional culture and modernization bears important practical significance as it can provide theoretical guidance for the reform and development of higher education in China.

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A thorough understanding of the essence of modernization is the prerequisite for understanding the relationship between traditional culture and modernization. Therefore, in order to study this relationship, one must develop a sound understanding of the fundamental characteristics of modernization. Scholars from different disciplines tend to have different understandings of modernization and thus emphasize that understanding of modernization in their respective field of research. This is not only nothing surprising but also conducive to enriching people’s understanding of the polysemy of modernization. However, one popular view is still open to question.

This view, which equates modernization with industrialization or Westernization, holds that modernization refers to the widespread application of modern science and technology in the production process and the process

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of the resulting fundamental economic and social change. There is something to the fact that this view has been formed and gained popularity. A marked sign of modernization is the rapid development of science and technology, which results in increased material productivity, accelerates economic growth, and brings about changes in social life, leading to the division between modern culture and traditional culture. Modernization is also a process that proceeds alongside industrialization. It first began in the West and rapidly developed. Because of this, people associate modernization with industrialization and Westernization. Nevertheless, this view is biased due to its incomprehensive and inaccurate understanding of the essence of modernization.

1. In terms of value standpoint, this view, which regards the modernization model in Western society as the universal modernization model, is strongly West-centric. Thus, it cannot be adopted to understand modernization movements worldwide, especially the modernization movements that have sprung up like mushrooms in developing countries. In the worldwide view, modernization did start in Western countries and later spread to other parts of the world in an either rapid or slow manner; moreover, Western countries have indeed successfully explored a relatively mature modernization path. Despite this, we should by no means neglect the remarkable progress that has been made in the modernization practice carried out by developing countries in light of their own characteristics. The paths of modernization chosen by these countries differ from the Western one in many important aspects. What’s more, the view that modernization is Westernization is based on the presupposition that Western countries have already achieved modernization. Nowadays, indeed many Chinese and foreign scholars hold that this is the case and that Western countries have already entered the “postmodern society.” This view evaluates the degree of modernization using the standpoint of Western values as the criterion and further requires developing countries to pursue the same modernization goal while turning a blind eye to the serious social problems in the Western society. This is a typical representation of Western centralism.

2. This view is one-sided in its understanding of the “key variables” of modernization. Although there is some truth in the idea of taking material production and material life, such as industrialization, as well as science and technology as the fundamental factors of modernization, it does leave something out—the modernization of people’s thoughts and spiritual realm has failed to be taken into consideration. Just as what the American scholar Guy Salvatore Alitto said, these views only focus on the positive changes brought about by modernization in science and technology as well as people’s material life, but neglects the negative reactions it has generated in people’s thoughts. Therefore, it is impossible to fully grasp the essence of modernization by