Chapter Four

Americanization, Westernization, Sinification:
Modernization or Globalization in China?

China has long since embraced the concept of the Golden Mean, yet, since the beginning of the twentieth century, extremism has prevailed. The Cultural Revolution is a typical example of extremism turned catastrophe. The reforms promoted by Deng Xiaoping were not only significant on the socio-economic level, but also for politics and ideology. In essence, they constitute an attempt to strike a balance between “left” and “right.” Twenty years of reforms have shown that Deng succeeded in principle, in as much as extremist ideology no longer dominates Chinese politics. Yet, as the old extremisms faded, new forms were taking their place. Currently the two most popular extremes in China’s ideological spectrum are Westernization and its opposite, i.e., anti-Westernization, or—in more concrete terms—Americanization and anti-Americanization. In fact, these new extremes have affected China’s politics, economy, academia, education, literature, arts, media and also to a great extent people’s everyday habits.

I would like to highlight a few examples of this Westernization or Americanization that I personally experienced. In 1999, I was invited to deliver a lecture entitled “Globalization and its Impacts on China” for local executives of the Chuyong regional government, in an ethnic minority region. It was striking in itself to be asked to discuss globalization in an area where the economy is underdeveloped and most people live below the poverty line as defined by the state. What was even more telling was that my lecture on globalization was warmly welcomed by the audience and I was asked to present another. One of the topics this audience focused on in particular was the relationship between China and the USA, and China’s attempts to become a member of the World Trade Organization. Chuyong is located in a subtropical region that is ideally suited for agriculture. Flowers are one of the major sources of income for the local peasants. A wide range of colorful flowers is available on the market at extraordinarily low prices. Confounded by the price level I was told by my hosts that it was equally low all year round except for February, when prices rise because of Valentine’s
Day. This holiday, for the most part, is not known in China, yet it has become a focal market date in this marginal, underdeveloped area. This only hints at how Western marketing, and in particular the American economy, have influenced poor regions such as Chuyong.

Americanization does not stop with flowers. Something I do not like doing in Beijing is taking my young daughter to McDonald’s. This is not primarily because I have not adapted to Western food, since I am used to waiting in line and even to the discomfort of eating on the go. McDonald’s is my daughter’s favorite reward for bringing home excellent marks; so her enjoyment is the exact counterweight to my unhappiness. Over 70 McDonald’s outlets have opened in Beijing alone during the past ten years. McDonald’s is perceived as a symbol of American culinary culture, which the Chinese used to sneer at. Today American fast food is firmly established and represents a challenge to traditional Chinese food because it has captured Chinese children’s taste buds before their parents have been able to inculcate the enjoyment of traditional foods.

The signs of Westernization or Americanization are apparent to anyone living in China, language being a prime example. Learning English is a major preoccupation for students at school and in higher education, sometimes even in primary schools. An English test is required not only for the equivalent of SSATs but also as a prerequisite for job interviews and promotions. English terms and names used to be transcribed with Chinese characters, while today Western advertisements decorate the main streets in China’s metropoles. The operating system used on personal computers is the Chinese version of Windows and for word processing we use Microsoft Word, both marketed by the American Microsoft Corporation. American novels, movies, music, painting, cartoons and other aspects of popular culture are quickly translated into Chinese and become as popular as they are in the USA. Blockbusters such as Titanic were screened in China simultaneously with cinemas in the West, receiving the same enthusiastic welcome. American public figures such as Bill and Hillary Clinton, Alan Greenspan, Monica Lewinsky, Madonna and Michael Jordan are discussed among ordinary Chinese people. Publishers vie for American copyrights of books, since publishing these in Chinese translation is more lucrative than marketing local books. The academic bestseller list includes many American scholars, such as Samuel Huntington, Milton Friedman, Alvin Toffler and Paul Samuelson. Any self-respecting Chinese scholar has them on his or her bookshelves. Most textbooks in management