CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LIANG SHUMING AND MAX WEBER ON CHINESE CULTURE

In the summer of 1920 Max Weber unexpectedly died. In autumn of the same year the Peking University Bulletin (Beijing Daxue Rikan) began a serial publication of the lecture notes of Liang Shuming’s Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies. These two things are quite unconnected and the thought of the two men had no obvious mutual influence. And yet seen in the context of the development of modern society, the way in which these two scholars looked at China’s historical culture are both representative of the scholarship of China and the West in the twentieth century. The issues they addressed are intimately connected.

Although Weber’s The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism, was published in 1916 and Liang Shuming’s The Essentials of Chinese Culture in 1949, yet for a long time intellectuals within China remained cut off from the outside world, until in the mid 1980s discussion among academics abroad aroused their interest in these works. In twentieth century academic circles in the West, Weber’s view of Chinese culture held an important place in sinological research, especially among more recent sinologists, very few of whom did not take Weber as their point of departure. Meanwhile in twentieth century China, Liang Shuming’s view of Chinese culture also held a special position. Although his position is not representative of the majority of scholars, yet the depth of his influence is certainly not inferior to that of Weber. Ever since the publication of Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies, Liang Shuming was popularly known as a cultural philosopher. His works were rarely seen as works of sociology. However, Liang Shuming’s most representative work The Essentials of Chinese Culture is a specialist study of the structure of ancient Chinese society and its value system.

1 Wang Zongyu, Liang Shuming Nianbiao, 308.
2 Guy Allito also maintains that in the late 1940s, “Liang Shuming’s whole approach and points of analytical emphasis had shifted from philosophy to sociology and history”; “The second version of his cultural theory can be called ‘Chinese and Western Cultures and their Societies’.” See Guy Allito, The Last Confucian, 177.
By focusing on sociological and anthropological factors, the issues discussed and observed are in many respects similar to those noted by Weber. It is especially worth pointing out that in many places Liang Shuming’s view and understanding of Chinese culture is much deeper and more accurate than Weber’s. Hence in studying Liang Shuming, it will surely be very meaningful to compare *The Essentials of Chinese Culture* taken as a work of sociology and *Chinese Religions: Confucianism and Taoism* so as to take a fresh look at the significance of, and contribution made by, Liang Shuming’s view of Chinese culture.

1. **The Characteristics of Chinese Culture**

In *The Essentials of Chinese Culture* (henceforth called *The Essentials*), Liang Shuming begins by listing seven features of Chinese culture, which are (1) independent creation and development, (2) a self-contained system, (3) existing in isolation for a long time, (4) a very strong tendency towards uniformity, (5) the prioritisation of national harmony and assimilation, (6) no subsequent progress since the culture matured 2,000 years ago, (7) a wide and great influence on surrounding countries.\(^3\) He then goes on to set out the distinctive characteristics of Chinese culture as compared to other cultures. In all he lists 14 items:

1. Large landmass and population;
2. The uniformity and blending of such a vast nation;
3. A long history unlike that of any other nation in history;
4. No-one knows what makes Chinese culture so great and strong.
5. Society does not change in the course of history; culture stagnates and does not progress.
6. No religious view of human life;
7. In the whole culture the clan system has an important place.
8. Scholarship does not progress in the direction of science.
9. China lacks the demand for and system of democracy, liberty and equality.
10. Moral atmosphere particularly strong;

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