CHAPTER 1

The Logic of Chinese Cultural Development in a Variable World of Modernization and Globalization

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Globalization is at a watershed in world history. What characterizes it is a kind of inherently and globally produced interconnectedness based on the foundation of economic integration that is unbreakable and progressively stronger over time. Globalization is first evident in the integration of the economy, but the globalization of economic life inevitably comes to intensely affect the entirety of a society’s productive life, including its politics and culture. Economic globalization greatly changes not only the way in which humanity produces, consumes, and exchanges but also the way in which humanity thinks and behaves, and with this a major blow is dealt to national cultures. The onslaught of globalization on Chinese culture began prominently in the early nineteenth century until the New Culture movement of the early twentieth century, and internal conflicts in Chinese culture have intensified yet again since the 1980s and 1990s. These conflicts occur in a variety of dimensions, such as the conflict between tradition and modernity, conservative and progressive ideologies, nationalism and globalization, and even conflicts between Sinicization and Westernization. These fierce cultural clashes have triggered impassioned and intense debates on culture—the reemergence of a “cultural craze.” This chapter offers a commentary on the most controversial cultural discourses commonly in progress among Chinese intellectuals and thereby to discern the logic of Chinese cultural development in a variable world of modernization and globalization and what its future holds.

Cultural Modernization

The political and market reforms—“opening up and reform”—China undertook after 1978, in terms of the longue durée of historical development, were part of modernization. It was from this moment that China really began to steadily and completely commit itself to the path of modernization. Modernization is an overall process of social transformation. Economically, modernity seeks an industrialized market economy; politically, it seeks to realize a democratic
political system; culturally, it pioneers the core values of freedom, equality, and the individual agency. Overall, these political, economic, and cultural elements of modernity are incompatible with Chinese traditional culture. Hence, transforming Chinese traditional culture and creating a modern culture was the first response of Chinese intellectuals to opening and reform.

This so-called cultural modernization implements radical transformation to traditional civilizations to conform to the demands of industrial civilization, management systems, and democratic politics. This was a practical development in order to realize a change in Chinese traditional culture, building an advanced modern culture, and make it conform with political and economic modernization. As many scholars have pointed out, cultural modernization at its root is a prerequisite to social modernization and is an organic component of social modernization:

The modernization of social life and the individual is invariably accompanied by cultural modernization. Cultural modernization primarily refers to a new culture built on incorporating the best elements of past cultures that can fit with the demands of a modern society. The modernization of economic and social life, the modernization of humanity, and the modernization of culture are three inseparable aspects of modernization. They are interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and irreplaceable.1

The modernization of Chinese culture consists of essentially two discourses: the first is a critical transformation of Chinese culture aimed at removing the depraved and backward dross of tradition and propagating the more rational and useful parts of tradition; the second is learning from other advanced cultures by studying and absorbing the superior fruits of other civilizations in order to assimilate them into Chinese culture. This became an important part of China’s New Culture movement.2 For many Chinese scholars, these two discourses have been indispensable. On the one hand, the continual absorption of all the rational elements of modern Western culture as well as their integration into the reality of Chinese society to make it more digestible in China has been crucial to the modernization of tradition. On the other hand, we cannot avoid a process of continual reviewing and filtering of our tradition in order to burnish the essence of tradition while negating that which is backward until it is gradually extinguished:

2 Also known as the May Fourth movement.—Trans.