CHAPTER 2

Philosophical Reflections on the Course of Chinese Cultural Modernization

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It has been over a century and a half since the Opium War forced China onto the road of modernization. At present, with the coming of the new millennium, Chinese cultural development is faced yet again with new problems and opportunities. In this work, it is necessary for us to sort through the ideological themes and developmental logic of China’s modern cultural transition, analyze their results and issues, and better understand trends in contemporary Chinese culture.¹

Modernity: The Main Ideological Themes of Modern Chinese Cultural Transition

Chinese cultural modernization historically began by “learning from foreign masters,” even though at its root it cannot be considered “Westernization”; however, due to the objective differences in power between Chinese and Western culture, it was determined that Chinese cultural modernization must accompany study of the West. The quest for modernity became the major ideological theme of China’s cultural transition from tradition to modernity.

As to the meaning of “modernity,” there are a variety of opinions in this debate. This essay favors a meaning of modernity that highlights the rational spirit, the rise of individualism, and a teleological view of history.² Among these three, the “rational spirit”³ is the foundation of modernity. This is not only

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¹ It should be made clear here that the period since the Opium War is often considered the modern period of world history, and, in fact, Chinese culture since 1840 really began a course of modernization; hence, the period referred to as modern will be considered in this way.


³ “Rationality” has a wide range of meanings. Broadly, it refers to robust human sensibilities, ideas, and knowledge that are opposed to superstition and ignorance. In this case, “rationality” is based on robust knowledge, is mature in the cultural traditions of subjective and objective dichotomy of the West, and makes the scientific method the core of the human spirit.
because the rational spirit formed a consistent theoretical basis of Western cultural tradition but is based more on the important role of the rational spirit in the process of modernization. In the Middle Ages, humans were not only consciously made subservient to gods, but also were powerless in the face of nature. After the Renaissance and particularly the Enlightenment, people found that as a creation of God mankind could understand and shape the rational forces of the world and that mankind could and should become the masters of the earth. Hence, humanity set a course of progress and conquest of the world under the direction of rationality. It was the rational spirit that allowed mankind to supplant, in a certain sense, the omnipotent position of the gods: “In face of the unity of such reason the distinction between God and man is reduced to an irrelevance.... In their mastery of nature, the creative God and the ordering mind are alike. Man's likeness to God consists in sovereignty over existence, in the lordly gaze, in the command.”4 Hence, the rational spirit has become the marker distinguishing modern society from premodern society. The emergence of a teleological view of history and the rise of individualism are also built on a foundation confirming the power of rationality. Only with the power of rationality can humanity effectively understand and transform nature and society and, from this, allow human society’s continual development to be possible. Similarly, the rise of modern democratic politics is premised on citizens’ possessing a rational consciousness to form independent political bodies. If members of society have not awakened to understand that they have their own basic rights, responsibilities, and freedom, then clearly there would be no individualism. In this sense, science and democracy could be said to be the products of the rational spirit. Therefore, it follows that the rational spirit forms the core of modernity and that there is no part of the successes and difficulties of modernity that are not in some way related to rationality, and thus any judgment of modernity cannot escape commenting on rationality.

Since imitating the West became the main train of thought for Chinese cultural modernization and modernity formed the core of Western modern culture, one of the most important and valued goals of the modern Chinese cultural transition manifested itself as a quest for modernity. Closely associated with this, one of the most clearly unique points of modern Chinese culture, as opposed to traditional culture, is that in traditional Chinese culture there is no emphasis on the rational spirit, but in modern Chinese culture, it has gradually emerged. With the continual advancements made

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