

The Emerging Constellation: Reconstruction of Value in China

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The conflict over spiritual values in today's reforming and opening China is, by no means, less intense than the conflict over the four modernizations. The loss of faith in Communism and its values constitutes a context not only for a rapid introduction of Western democratic values but also for a strong resurgence of traditional Chinese values. Thus, "freedom", "liberation", "realization of the value of the self," "self-standing," "self-discipline," "self-empowering," "social role," "true, good, beautiful, "ideal," "spirit of man," etc. constitute a set of new signifiers reverberating today throughout China's value and spiritual arenas. Therefore, in addition to the existing battle line between communist values and all non-communist values, a new battle line is forming: the battle line between traditional Chinese values such as propriety, obedience, righteousness, collective solidarity, discipline, loyalty, etc., and democratic values such as individual freedom, rights, autonomy, choice, etc. The struggle on this battle front is not only one of China's most significant current moral conflicts, but also one of the determining factors in shaping the system of moral values and spirituality in a reforming and opening China in the coming decade and century.

The term "resurgence" is used deliberately to dramatize the strong presence of traditional values in China today. Certainly, traditional Chinese values, even after the communist revolution in 1949, have continued to influence Mainland China's public life and politics. These values are a set of rules that govern traditional inter-personal relationships not only in the traditional structures such as the family and the community, but also in institutions such as China's Communist Party and the Chinese army. They are a set of *Chinese* ethical principles,

creating a Chinese "ethical space" (a term used by Charles Taylor). Being Chinese is identified with being imbedded into these values, acquiring ethical principles embodied in these values. The term "resurgence" is deliberately used also to denote some new significance and vitality that these traditional values acquire in the present context of China's struggle for spiritual regeneration. For example, self-discipline is a traditional value; however, it also has new significance and vitality in the present practical context of China's struggle toward the four modernizations and within the context of the influence of the Western values of freedom and autonomy. Thus it implies abiding by an institution and rules of propriety, but not abiding blindly or with an exaggerated loyalty to custom or institution. Furthermore, the term "resurgence" is deliberately used to point to the emergence of a new set of values which are inspired by Chinese tradition. For example, the ideas of "self-standing", "self-empowering", and "ideal" are all inspired by the traditional concept of true *selfhood*, meaning autonomy, self-reliance and self-mastery, etc. At any rate, the term "resurgence" is meant to indicate that China is changing; China is as it is. It is as it is in that its traditional heritages continue to be a source of inspiration for life.

The resurgence of traditional values poses a serious challenge to the development of democracy in China, but it also creates a potential source of inspiration for it. These traditional and newly emerging values inspired by tradition do, however, designate a spirit and an aspiration which differ in many significant aspects from the democratic spirit-- at least in its present Western expression. In this case, it is no mere rhetoric to say that those promoting democracy in China should strive to do justice to the cultural tradition and reality; this is a fundamental truth and valid plea.

To see the nature and scope of the moral conflict between democracy and its values of individual freedom, rights, choice, etc., and traditional Chinese values, it is crucial to understand that traditionally, those Chinese values described above were oriented to developing a harmonious, and hegemonic society, not one which is diverse and conflictive. Neither were they meant to de-emphasize and discourage individual freedom, rights, autonomy, choice, etc., nor to encourage blind loyalty and submission. For example, propriety means not only to

recognize an individual's social role and responsibility to observe a set of social codes (e.g., between superior and subordinate, father and son, husband and wife, the older and the younger, friends, etc.) and to fulfill one's duty by carrying out one's responsibility, but also to do so obediently even if this means giving up one's freedom and rights. Self-discipline compels an individual to achieve self-mastery and return to proper action and thinking through ritual practice. Righteousness is the opposite of interest, desire and practical benefit; it is meant to constrain the latter three. Taken as one set, these traditional values are meant to cultivate a sensitivity to collective solidarity, community and societal harmony, and to develop a distaste for the advancement of individual interests and advantages. Therefore, as democracy makes its inroad into China, conflict with traditional Chinese values is inevitable. For democracy entails individual freedom, rights, autonomy, diversity, advancement of different interests, etc. Thus, in responding to the recent controversy over human rights, Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese senior leader, asked harshly: "What are the human rights? The rights of how many people? The rights of the majority, of a handful, or of the people as a people? On this point, our concept of human rights differs from that of the West." (Deng Xiaoping, *Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, Beijing; The People's Publishing House, 2987:111). One must not think Deng's statement here is just a kind of bland remark; it indicates a deep gap between a Chinese concept of individual rights supported by a set of traditional values and the Western concept of rights supported by Western democratic values.

Implicit in the conflict between traditional Chinese and Western values are two different concepts of the individual. The Chinese tradition defines the moral significance of an individual merely in terms of an individual's status in a society; its concept of the individual is totalitarian. An individual is considered to be absorbed within a society. The traditional Chinese values of propriety, obedience, discipline, righteousness, collective solidarity, and loyalty, etc. are all based upon this view of the individual and meant to define a good social individual from a different perspective. The Western concept of the individual is, on the other hand, individualistic, atomistic. It presupposes an inviolability; in John Rawl's word, "an irreducibility of an individual". In other words, the moral meaning of an individual

is irreducible to an individual's *societal* imbeddedness and social forbearance. Individual freedom, rights and autonomy are not only indispensable; they are also inalienable. In short, the traditional Chinese concept of the individual emphasizes the primacy of the society over an individual and the Western concept underlines the opposite.

Despite their significant areas of conflict, Chinese and democratic values are compatible and can indeed mutually enrich one another. Being conflictive is not identical with being incompatible. For example, the value of propriety is not incompatible with the value of freedom. Neither does freedom necessarily deny propriety nor propriety necessarily reject freedom. On the contrary, these two values can complement one another. When all members of a community are sensitive to propriety, the liberty and rights of each individual are safeguarded. As a matter of fact, even in a democratic society like America, as pointed out by Richard H. Brown in his *Society As Text*, propriety is a rule of daily life. Today it is no longer sensible for us to talk about freedom without discipline and constraint, or choice without principle. Extreme individualism is not only harmful to a likely future Chinese democracy, but to all democracies. Therefore, we should see that the conflicts between traditional Chinese and democratic values are rooted in institutions or history and can be adjudicated. Indeed, traditional Chinese and democratic values both can be reconstructed to complement one another so that the former can help the latter to discard extreme individualism, dualism and materialism, while the latter can help the former to eliminate totalitarianism, oppression and repression.

When envisioning democracy in China, it is important to remember that it is neither responsible nor reasonable for us to speak of either a democratic victory over traditional Chinese values or a Chinese victory over democratic values. This does not suggest any incompatibility and incommensurability between these two sets of values; rather it indicates that each has its own inherent merits. In addition, democracy presupposes diversity; its strength lies in diversity. Therefore, it would be more reasonable for us to study the conditions needed for a "new constellation" (a term devised by Richard Bernstein), for a different set of values, in which both traditional Chinese and Western democratic values contribute to one another. Thus, it is more

proper for us to talk about a democratic reconstruction of the traditional Chinese values and a Chinese reconstruction of democratic values. Here, what we need is to abandon what Bernstein calls the big either/or pattern of thinking. That is, we must not operate under the assumption that we must opt either for traditional Chinese values or democratic values. Rather we should think in terms of democratizing traditional Chinese values and sinosizing Western democratic values.

Let me now discuss the democratic reconstruction of traditional Chinese values. The central task of the reconstruction is to create room for individual freedom, rights and choice, rejecting such ideas as blind loyalty and submission and uncritical ritual practices. Thus, propriety should no longer mean operating blindly and ritually within the matrix of institutions, custom and tradition; proper action and thinking should reflect freedom of thought and choice, e.g., proper action or thinking is not just to abide by rules or codes, but rather to choose good rules and codes to abide by. It is evident that the reconstruction of traditional values entails overcoming the rigid understanding of the relationships between righteousness and benefit, freedom and discipline, individuality and collectivity, interest and principle, etc. In particular, it requires us to abandon the assumption that righteousness and benefit necessarily exclude one another, as well as the assumption that the welfare of the society as a whole can override indiscriminately individual rights, freedom and interest. Both assumptions are fundamentally flawed. They make no sense whatsoever to the Chinese struggling for democracy. For the struggle toward democracy is obviously both right for and beneficial to China. Moreover, democracy is not merely for the well-being of China nor merely for the well-being of the Chinese people as a people; rather it for the well-being of each individual in China. It is noteworthy that the rigid assumptions identified above constitute a source of totalitarianism which normally violates individual rights, freedom and autonomy in terms of the welfare of the society as a whole and of the universal truth and the mission of humankind.

I shall now turn to my second point: a Chinese reconstruction of Western values. As indicated above, the Western expression of democratic values is too individualistic, dualistic and materialistic. Because the Western expression disregards the insight of the Chinese tradition which stresses the significance of

collectivity and societal harmony, and is insensitive to the cultural receptivity designated by that tradition, an indiscriminate imposition of the Western expression of individual freedom, rights, autonomy, etc., does injustice to the Chinese cultural tradition. In China's process of reform and opening, it also does violence to its present struggle to realize the four modernizations. Besides creativity and basic liberties, this struggle requires sensitivity to duty, responsibility and collective solidarity (in Rawl's sense). Of greater importance is the fact that extreme individualism is wrong. It is no longer reasonable for us to assume that there is necessarily an antagonism between the individual and society; it would be more rational for us to acknowledge that the individual vitalizes society and society, in turn, empowers the individual. At any rate, while we must commit ourselves to the ideal and ideas of democracy, we must also open the Chinese democratic struggle to the influence of the traditional Chinese values of propriety, self-sacrifice, righteousness, collectivity, discipline, loyalty, etc., and reconstruct democratic values in such a way that they are acceptable to the Chinese people intellectually and morally. Of course, by "Chinese reconstruction" I do not mean "stealing the beams and pillars and replacing them with rotten timber," replacing what is true with what is false. I am not speaking here about retaining an appearance of democracy while maintaining a totalitarian content. Rather I am talking about an active reconstruction of democratic values by articulating them in a way that does justice to the Chinese cultural reality as well as *guo ching* (the reality of the country).

My final point is this: reconstruction of values in China should be situated within a broader context of China's struggle to realize the four modernizations. That is, it should not and cannot be isolated from a broader scheme of reconstruction of institutions, ideologies and practices effected by the process of the four modernizations. Reconstruction of values requires the exercise of practical sensitivity and creativity. For the reconstruction is not for its own sake, but for the development of modernization and modernity in China. Therefore, the scenario for the reconstruction should be harmonious with the general scheme of China's struggle toward modernization and modernity. In particular, the reconstruction of values should do justice to the practical context and legitimate concern for modernization

(e.g., political stability, national unity). Thus, the reconstruction and promotion of democratic values in China must be mindful of efficacy and efficiency, as well as methodology and process. In addition, the reconstruction of values is made possible by a reconstruction of institutions. Eliminating the totalitarian elements in the traditional values implies reforming the traditional structures which create and embody these elements. Thus the reconstruction of values presupposes an awareness of the need for a reconstruction of institutions. This, in turn, also requires a sensitivity to see the new conditions and possibilities created by institutional change. Besides practical sensitivity, the reconstruction also demands practical creativity. A fruitful reconstruction presupposes the ability to construct meaning and value out of a practical context, discourse, and practice. Reconstruction of values is not a mere conservative activity; in essence it is creative.

Conclusion

Democracy in China requires and inevitably manifests the need for a radical reconstruction of values. The call for democracy in China has highlighted the intense conflict between divergent systems of values. Of particular importance is the struggle and differences between traditional Chinese values and Western values. The conflict of diverse systems of value in China today will bring out a diversity of values in a democratic China in the future, in which the orientation to individual freedom, rights, autonomy will co-exist with the tendency to discipline, collectivity, and community. The encouragement for diversity goes hand-in-hand with emphasis upon societal harmony and hegemony. On the whole, the value system and *spirituality* in China in the future will be open but also hegemonic. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "War (conflict) is the father of all and king of all" (Heraclitus, Fragment #212). The present Chinese conflict of diverse systems of values could be the father of a China of diverse values. In this sense, the emerging of a new constellation heralds the coming of the dawn.