

Full Length Research Paper

China: The quest for identity

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The rhetoric material vs spiritual; West vs East in our historical present is more than ever a false problem, in a way that in a post-modern era where technology offers new definition of time and space, forcing human being to reconsider the role played in society, culture is a definition that shapes itself every day. As to say that the contraposition between civilization was a useful tool to describe a society until the past century, defining an identity by juxtaposition to the other, but today because of the process of homologation that reduces us all to an anonymous mass of consumer, defining the other is a quite more complex attempt and therefore the definition of self becomes a game to lose. The transition from Socialist China to Post-Socialist China is also the transition from the stability guaranteed by Chinese philosophy to the individualism offered by the logic of marketization. Over the sociological attempt to define the never resolved dynamic modernization-westernization, China places her quest for a new identity.

Key words: Confucianism, taoism, modernism, westernization, modernization, scar literature.

INTRODUCTION

To understand China and some behaviors that at Western eyes might seem sometimes quite naïve we should first have some understanding of Chinese history. Reviewing briefly only the past century we recognize that chaos is what defines better this bracket of time. First was the warlord period and the Nationalist effort to keep together a country where Chinese, Mongols, Manchus, Tibetan and Muslim had to live together. Then was the long war with Japan and the soon after civil war between CCP and GMD, the violent excess of the Maoist era with the tragedy of the Great Leap Forward and the utopia of the Cultural Revolution. It is on the ashes of this history that is based the Chinese quest for happiness, religion, justice, stability. A common theme linking the whole modern China (Chow, 1967; Cheng, 1990; Hsu, 1995;

Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 2006; Ting, 2010) is the search for meaning; at stake is not the degree of Westernization China has undergone since European powers invaded Chinese soil, but a problem of identity. Man is a tragic being because he possesses consciousness, at least this is the message left in heritage by the existentialism. If we wanted to apply the definition to the Chinese contest, consciousness is not to be seen as the ideological contraposition East and West but the awareness that China, despite the evident economic grow, has not yet found a new identity since the transition to Post-Socialism. What this article wants to emphasize is the socio-anthropological phenomenon of a society floating above controversial ideologies. When at the end of the seventies Deng Xiaoping gave start to the

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Table 1. Socio-anthropological differences between Chinese and Western civilization.

China	West
Tendency towards equilibrium	Tendency towards extremes
Nature	Machine
Stability as ultimate goal	Immortality as ultimate goal
Emphasis on collectivism (family, clan, dynasty)	Emphasis on individual
Unity as pervasive principle of the history	Differentiation as historical principle
Emphasis on the old	Emphasis on the new
Tendency to acceptance leads to despotism	Tendency to questioning leads to democracy

economic process of openness (开放) towards the world global market, the influence of western popular culture and consumerism that invaded China without being filtered by any ideological remark. On one hand, it brought inevitably the rise of an infant individualism, to be read as an attempt of cultural independence from the official line; on the other hand, it produced the loss of influence of traditional culture, to be read as the weathering of Chinese identity. Here lies the real issue: the replacement of the Chinese collectivist identity with a more individualist approach shaped a hybrid that seems to be not anymore Chinese, and yet quite far from being westernized. China became a simulacrum of her history. In order to better explain such a statement, let us first introduce the matrix of Chinese identity in contraposition with the western spirit, a contraposition which is sociological before than ontological. We will consider then the moral vacuum produced by the encounter with the age of capitalism which might help to understand better the political unawareness of modern Chinese literature, and finally we will consider the true challenges China has to face today to hold on to her residual self.

Chinese uniqueness

Due to clichés, juxtaposition and ideal type we could easily draw a map of socio-anthropological differences between Chinese and Western civilization (Table 1).

We need to open brief philosophical brackets to understand such a dichotomy. Confucianism, Taoism, Moism are the pillars on which is based ancient and, though confusing, modern China. Confucianism surely gave Chinese society a system of education and strict conventions of social etiquette but it is much more than this. It is the philosophy of social organization, of order, public education and practical knowledge; it is about rectifying people's conduct and behavior because a man who rectifies himself can rule his family; he will bring order to the State and peace to the world. The main purpose was to form an ethical stratum of intellectual who could lead the road for a right and durable government. Taoism was more concerned with the observation of nature and the discovery of its Way, or Tao, in order to

maintain peace. Human happiness, which is to be found in harmony, is achieved when men follow the social order which is hierarchy linked to the natural order of things. Mohism again, besides a message of universal love to be perpetuated between the citizens, would emphasize the oligarchical order of the State as only remedy against the proliferation of ideas which is synonymous of disorder. In this sense, while Western society relates itself to God and therefore the philosophical speculation is either a denial or a reaffirmation of metaphysical elements, Chinese society relates itself to the society itself, the philosophical speculation therefore never engages itself with metaphysic but social ethic, more realistic or practical in a way and yet much less systematic. Here lies one of the main differences between the two cultures. Christian theology divided time into past, present and future (historicity): such a conception of time forced western civilization to study nature in order to unveil the secret held by the mysterious future, and so they opened up the sky and they dug up the earth in order to compete with nature and enrich themselves with a promise of Heaven. On the other hand Asian civilization did not compete with nature for they never had a future to decode; the same divination is a practice used to adjust the present rather than the attempt to change coming events. Asians and China specifically, therefore did not challenge nature but rather accepted it. Buddhism, by introducing the idea of after-life, tried to introduce as well the concept of responsibility; hence the ability of planning the future and for men a chance to foresee themselves in it. But China did not accept it, because by not having a god to refer to, China has felt vulnerable in front of nature; thus China based the core of a civilization of the historical present (A temporal philosophy). Chinese language itself is luckily the best evidence to the theory: Chinese tense knows only the present; it has neither past nor future, unlike Latin languages. But it describes past and future by adding external preposition as to say that the flowing of time it exists and it is accepted only as a deviation from normality. Because China does not have the idea of future or responsibility, and because of fear, it did not try to fill the gap between man and nature; first, man and divine after. Capitalism did not happen; collectivism, socialism, communism were the obvious

Table 2. New philosophical approach between Chinese and Western civilization.

China	West
Inner	Outer
Simplicity	Structured
A-temporality	Historicity
Morality	Divine
Ideal-Utopia	Reality

outcomes. All this is to say that a philosophy gives a society what that society needs the most: Confucianism, Mencius, the Legalist, Buddhism, broadly speaking Chinese philosophy gave China stability, the idea of an equilibrium ruling men's destiny, a dialectic of opposition without synthesis (Taoism) and yet guaranteeing the balance of the universe while contemplating a resemblance of change. Collectivism and oligarchy are the intellectual justification that China established over the centuries to replace the lack of unity, warring states, civil wars that more often than not have violated and devastated Chinese land. Unlike Western culture who after having satisfied primary needs, having reached a satisfactory level of welfare quite early, had to cope with the awareness of being mortal, the liability of life where every second is not just one second but the last one. Western philosophy therefore did not offer stability; it offered immortality. Western society did believe in the promise made by Christianity, believed in the after-life, a glorious stage of peace and prosperity to be reached either by divine election or personal achievements. Being responsible of the historical present therefore helped the West not to fear nature and planning the future in accordance with it, more often rebelling to it. As Weber suggested the outcome might have been capitalism; more evident is a society tending very much towards its expectation for the uniqueness of a time that does not repeat shaped a civilization that lives only once, but it lives today and tomorrow. And yet China is changing. The transition from socialist China to post-socialist China, the impact of Western culture on the Chinese people has unleashed forces that involve a mastery of nature, a new understanding of man, society and man's role in it. Facing modernity has been until now a cultural breakdown; the coming in age of a new economy (capitalism) brought an absolute new philosophical approach (Table 2).

It might be clear by now the point being sustained; China has historically been a conservative nation; believing to be vulnerable before an unpredictable nature, China tried to stabilize it as much as possible. The 5000 years old cult for the ancestors, the family clans system, the dynasties, the bureaucratic apparatus, all in all the history of China is an attempt to create an organism which might be able to endure, repeating itself, rather than developing. The transition from a dynasty to another

one, from Confucius to Maoism, from Nationalism to Communism; it is always about one emerging conservatism taking over a dying conservatism, establishing a system able to give stability by its stagnancy. The very Chinese attitude towards money for instance, debt, saving, spending is a confirmation of this ideological understanding. A Chinese would buy gold not as jewelry but for its value against inflation (China is today the world's largest importers of gold). There is a story in China comparing the spending behavior of an American lady and a Chinese one. The American took a mortgage to buy a big house. When she dies she has no saving but a big house. The Chinese lady saved all her money to buy the house; when she is dying she has enough saving to buy the house. This thrifty behavior reveals the Chinese attitude towards the unpredictable, broadly speaking towards nature. Chinese oil paintings, more often than not, offer a description of a peaceful nature where men's presence is either absent or very small compared to the economy of the landscape, revealing Chinese fear, distrust of nature and its unpredictable plans. Thus the lack of religion and philosophical needs (search for stability) led China first towards conservatism and in a second stage to despotism. As already mentioned, in order to reach a steady existential dimension China gave up the very same idea of future, implanting a civilization on the historical present, delaying the coming in age of modern conceptualization of self-responsibility and progress. What happened in the past thirty years is that the economic growth and the magnet of materialism, having in order to be, has changed the Chinese consumption behavior, the thrifty attitude towards debt and spending. The tendency towards individualism, in this case, is described very well by the nowadays Chinese purchase of luxury goods, a hedonistic consumption stretching to gratification and pleasure which pretends to shape a more fashionable lifestyle. Western tendency is again entangled with the Chinese psychology where advertising wealth is the equivalent of advertising a social status, prestige, reputation, power. From a more sociological, and maybe personal, point of view, it is the whole society under attack, the Chinese cultural system whose emphasis is based on a consensual orientation, a mutual interaction, 关系(guanxi), 面子(mianzi), 人情(renqing), is today confronted by more individualistic approach, a perception of self which involves an inner search for meaning rather than the all community. A minority of Chinese society seems to advert that the process of modernization should not go along with the more dangerous one of westernization. Back in 2006 a group of Ph.D. students publicized a petition calling on citizen to control their expenses for Christmas as an attempt to resist Western culture. In 2007 a Starbucks coffee in the Forbidden City was shut down after an online campaign led to preserve Chinese identity. There is a Chinese intelligentsia that is well aware of the risk of contamination, but the truth is that the rhetoric

material vs spiritual, West vs East, in our historical present is more than ever a false problem in a way that in a post-modern era where technology offers new definition of time and space, forcing human being to reconsider the role played in society, culture is a definition that shapes itself every day. What is China?

Identity is not a static factor that stands on its own; it shapes itself against the awareness of surrounding countries, it moves with technological and economic changes and it sticks to history even though we do not quite understand if history heads towards a goal or it moves in circle. However identity is not a metaphysical issue; it is very much related to the self-interpretation, the matrix of a society in spite of foreign influences and the borders of a state. Giving for good the assumption that Chinese matrix is slowly fading away, we might want to consider why in other western Eastern countries, sharing with China the same post socialist experience, the process of Westernization did not imply a recognition of Western order as much as it did in China? In a China that is becoming increasingly international, the process of acculturation is more about imitation of foreign models than expression of Chinese uniqueness. Why is that?

The first reason is to be found in Chinese soil. Taking 1911 as the starting point of China's modern national identity we easily distinguish two Chinas, one before the 1949, defined by the attempt to build a capitalist democratic republic (GMD) and another China, after 1949, characterized by the goal to establish a socialist country (CCP). The ideological gap between two different understanding of the world produced and historical rupture in terms of expectation of course and in terms of a common framework on which built up a state. The Western counter parts based unity on the solid idea of democracy but China had nothing to hold on to, therefore Chinese identity already weak was again under attack. The second reason is to be found in the overwhelming power of the Western invasion more in cultural terms than military. The West not only mined Chinese cultural stability but it pushed forward new intellectual directions which gave China a more structured thought which led to science and science, since May Fourth was seen as the spell to achieve progress. On this very fragile historical stage, whose ultimate goal until now is the market economy, China tried to unify again a land wounded for centuries by domestic and foreign invasion. Difficult is the process of unification when facing the overlapping of different cultural paradigm: economic (capitalism), philosophical (Confucianism), political (socialism). In fact the impression is that contemporary China before being able to find a new identity is fated to go through a process of fragmentation, Socialism with Chinese characteristic is a moment when values, consolidate understanding, literature, art, language, music, the amalgam of a whole civilization comes loose. What is next? Let us step back into history for a while. The predominant artistic style in China from the early 1930 was Socialist Realism, styled borrowed from Communist

Russia, based on Communist Utopia and class struggle. Soon after the establishment of the CCP the artistic radicalism called for a revolutionary realism-romanticism, a blend of realistic and romantic features where heroic images of the Great Leap forward were intended to inspire Chinese people with spirit of sacrifice. But what really happened was in fact an intellectual paralysis due to the restrictions the artists had to face in terms of content, style and themes. They were asked to create exemplary models to be emulated; they were told to write about socialist realism focusing on a progressive stage of a futuristic China (post-revolutionary) rather than a detailed analysis of present conditions (pre-revolutionary), life as it might be not as it is. When briefly given a moment of free speech¹, they clearly confessed that the total reality they were called to describe was actually empty, that the human element they were called to describe was only theory and that literature was reduced to human science. There were even authors who confessed not to have produced anything in the past years because reading their creation was a boring experience². Back to the most recent China, it is true that we assist in the past one-two century to different waves of western influences into Chinese soil, starting with the Opium war, passing through the May Fourth movement; however it is only after 1978, when China embarked the four modernizations plan (Agriculture, Industry, National defense, science and technology) that Chinese past is seriously challenged proving ineffective the 1898 slogan 中学为体西学为用 (Chinese learning as fundamental structure, Western learning for practical use); for despite the effort to protect tradition and cultural heritage, western influences and values overshadowed Chinese resistance. The encounters with western literature, visual arts, cinema not only reduced the capacity of the state to control society but represented an un-precedent breakthrough, the liberation of thought in fact hints that artist besides serving the people and the party can wide their artistic creation to new ideas, concept and style. 1980 China, especially Beijing, is a country of cultural interaction, the movies of the sixth generation authors, ideology-free, by displaying a face of Chinese society, the floating population as contradiction of an irresponsible process of modernization, are a powerful example in such a sense. The eighties is a decade of significant cultural movement, art gallery, exhibition, critical thinking, Avant Guard, more in general it is the spirit of experimentation what flooded into China giving vent to contemporary art, literary experimentation borrowed from the west whose aim is the discovery of self. This is what we call the process of acculturation. However in China a similar process if on one hand is expression of individualism, on the other hand is erosion of tradition,

¹ See the 'Let Hundred flowers bloom, let hundred schools content' campaign.

² Mu Fu-sheng, *The Wilting of the Hundred Flowers*, Frederick A. Praeger Publisher, New York, 1963

and here lies the real issue. The application of non-Chinese elements on Chinese contest produced an awkward hybrid: China celebrates Christmas without knowing what Christmas is, Chinese youths and to some extent Chinese society seem to know little about China; China seems not to have history, and yet global identities, brands, languages are soon embraced. Globalization is the cultural scapegoat used to explain intellectual negligence but we would not render justice to the history if we reduced the ideological confusion of today's China as the result of a dissolute progress of globalization. As soon as traditional China and the modern technological West met, it came clearly into view the idealist-conservative warning that by inventing machines able to alter the order between man and nature chaos was at hand. Chinese lack of identity today is therefore not the beginning of a process of fragmentation but the end, and with this consoling thought we shall move now back to the question raised before. What is China?

Ideological vacuum

The concerns with economic and politics are quite familiar to the West. There is a saying which goes: *In 1949, only socialism can save China; in 1979 only capitalism can save China; in 1989 only China can save socialism; in 2009 only China can save capitalism*, as to underline the role that China plays in world's market economy. However the analysis must be complemented by the reflection on social life and individuals. How did China respond to the institutional shift of the past decades and how did the redefinition of the moral landscape reshape the Chinese character? We shall start our discussion by saying that the development of the private sector in Chinese economy, by large the coming in age of capitalism, produced a divided self. Why is this? China did not come to terms yet with her most recent past, but at the moment rather than the past we shall focus on the future. Emotions and desire are not new to Chinese people, but in Maoist China they were controlled or at least stigmatized as improper for they would not adhere to the revolutionary cause. Scar Literature beautifully describes the dissolution of any privacy, be it an intimate behavior or a personal thought, into a public space which is always the political arena of those who criticize and those who are criticized.³ The party-state shaped people's space and expression; everyday life was an endless cycle of work and study session, primary means of indoctrination. When in 1978 silenced emotions were finally unleashed (for academic purpose we take Deng Xiaoping reform as the starting off point), the greater openness increased artistic production as well as the rate of depression and other health issues such as alcoholism, drug addiction, sexually transmitted diseases,

domestic violence, gambling (Shu-mei, 2007). The retreat of the State from active involvement in shaping the economic life of the country opens up space for civil society; better said, the rise of a public sphere challenging the authority, which is as well the first step on the way to democracy. However the economic process of the past thirty years besides democratic and sociological issues is accompanied by a more subtle moral crisis which is the conflict between individualistic needs and values (the fact that everyone wants now to possess and consume more) and the Confucian tradition based on preordered social relations. More in general is the transition from a collective system of work to de-collectivization that untied a new society. The marketization of housing, education, medical care, forced everyone to be responsible for their own choice. The sociological implication for the loss of 饭票 (*meal ticket*) millions of urban workers eating together food supplied by the party state, recalls the idea of a mother country (China) that tends to control every single aspect of people life. When this came less China was called to invent a new identity. We assist millions of villagers moving from the countryside to the cities competing for the opportunities given by the private sector while enlarging the gap between rich and poor; youths looking for higher education, life aspiration pondering about happiness and freedom replaced the previous emphasis on self-sacrifice. China became the world's largest middle class society. What exactly happened is that by the late 1980 the monetary success became a new fetish; it is reflected on the fact that many had second jobs in order to provide for their new needs, material comfort and freedom. But the shift from a collective system of responsibility to an individualistic system of self-development brought as well new social phenomenon: sexual revolution, increase of depression, isolation, divorce, suicide (Shu-mei, 2007). The ethical change in China was not backed up by an outside authority. The Western world before any cultural change or secular movement was parachuted by the power of religion which somehow always pointed the way; Chinese contest had first in the family orientated system and then in Mao a background of morality to fall on. But in the new Chinese society the authority the individual can rely on is individual itself, which, we have seen, is a definition in progress. From here the ideological moral vacuum different tradition of scholars refer to, an evident disengagement from the historical present, whose victims feel the need to buy a new phone model every six months to satisfy their desire to belong somewhere. On a sociological base disillusionment, mistrust, detachments are the more evident traits of those characters in search of identity. We have talked about the transition from Socialist China to Post-Socialist China. Economic changes have always a social impact; the more relevant are the innovation the more dramatic are the effects, and more often than not is followed by an ideological breakdown. This is a quite obvious statement that does not

³ See Lu Xinhua short story *The Scar*

help much to understand nowadays China. Sixth Generation authors and their movies represent probably the best attempt to describe the controversial changeover between two China, to some extent between two ideologies⁴. The euphoria of that part of Chinese society that more than others took advantages from the open door policy is sided by those who otherwise feel all the shame of an historical betrayal. Mao's mistake were blamed by Deng Xiaoping, one above all *to have produced an entire generation of mental cripples*⁵; therefore the old generation, the very same that actively participate in the socialist construction, is now called to repudiate Mao's Cultural Revolution and what they worked for, the planned economy. But while doing so, the new economic agenda did not bring any good giving way to social issues such as unemployment, floating population, and criminality. The State discovers itself weak; it is not any longer able to protect its workers, declaring the bankrupt of state factory, forcing women to prostitution, rural workers into illicit business. The new policy not only enlarged the gap never really fulfilled between the intellectual class and the working class but the very same working class is reduced to a sub strata, a subaltern class that, if on one hand did not see the promise of egalitarianism fulfilled, on the other hand has to survive in the new shining city just built. The message launched by those underground movies is that on a sociological base of disillusionment and mistrust, the abandoned workers tried to make it in a way or another, detachment and criminality are the most evident result of a ruthless policy. But the silence of the old generation is the very same silence of the new one. Twenty-thirty years old youngster looking for a social definition have assisted the government's crackdown at Tiananmen. In addition to this, they grew up on a quite confusing cultural background; in fact we might as well define it as an overlapping of cultural paradigm. They are brought up with the Confucian ideal of filial piety, which means first and foremost respect for the others, and suddenly they found themselves living in a world that tolerate and advise individualism, competitiveness, auto-referential egoism. They are ask to fulfill duties that modernity denies, to have an identity in a world that changes every day, to be modern and traditional, conservative and liberal, to memorize Mao's speeches and embrace the opportunity offered by capitalism. All in all, once the socialist model has been sided by that of capitalist practices (accumulation, commodity exchange, impersonal relation) the cultural symbols previously shared were, in the turn of a few years, emptied of their significance before new significance could be found. It comes alone

that the social consequence of such dramatic cultural overdose it couldn't be but isolation and disintegration. An immense ideological vacuum is the prize to be paid to step into modernity even more acute if we think that the theoretical framework on which the western world based the condition for an individualistic society, a state with a strong democracy belief and welfare support, are still missing in China.

Two challenges

Reading backwards the recent history of China it is evident that at certain moment of the historical continuum China found herself in a death end street: step into the world outside embracing a modernity far to be understood and simultaneously giving away to a process of cultural erosion, a conflict between the self and the other, tradition and modernity, which shaped the hybrid of today. It is with the first Opium war that China had to re-think her centralism, when then Encyclopedias of Geography were introduced, China saw herself transformed from being the world to be a part of it. The encounter with the West, a science and a technology far superior, shattered the previous demarcation between center and periphery, which means the demarcation between the self and the other, forcing China to reorganize itself into a new image. To better understand the process of cultural erosion and transformation China went through for the past centuries, it might be useful to refer to the Hegelian dialectic Master-Slave where the dynamic between the two ideal types is the essence of the process of recognition: the master emerges as master and the slave as slave only through the recognition of the other. Soon the interaction between thesis ad antithesis, subject and object, will lead to a new syntheses. The slave works with devotion and effort; he begins to shape products for the master through imitation applied to his own creativity and originality. He creates a world auto-sufficient and he realizes that the world around him was created by his own hands; thus the slave is no longer alienated from his own labor and achieves a new self-consciousness, while the master on the other hand has become entirely dependent on the products created by his slave. The master is enslaved by the labor of his slave. China has been, since the dramatic encounter with the west, hanging on a relation of dependency on her own territory, military oppressed, politically benched and culturally overshadowed. This is precisely why once the communist, read it as Mao, took power they isolated China from the rest of the world: it was the attempt to preserve a civilization by avoiding confrontation. Only when they realized that such a confrontation came to be unavoidable, only then China took consciousness of herself and through a process of imitation and creativity, the master-slave dynamic, began the shaping of her new identity. But the Chinese acculturation is of difficult understanding because it stands between definitions,

⁴ In the aftermath of Tiananmen 1989 an increasing number of underground directors labelled as Sixth Generation Authors, received a global attention for their production based on Italian neorealism and cinema vérité, bringing on the screen marginalized individual and the all spectrum of social experience.

⁵ <http://edition.cnn.com/fyi/school.tools/profiles/deng.xiaoping/index.story.html>

tradition-modern, east-west, old-new, socialism-capitalism. Culture is much more than material modality of expressions; it is about moral and art, values and ethic, nothing that can be established overnight, nothing that can be abandoned in a day. The first challenge that China is facing today is to perform self-criticism in order to come to terms with her most recent past. Ting Ling⁶ saw her husband being executed by the GMT. She herself was then arrested and imprisoned few times but underground she would continue writing and organizing mass movements of peasants, workers, students. After the People Republic of China was proclaimed she became one of the leading figures of the Communist literature movement. In *The Trial*, one of her most acclaimed pieces, she would have one of the peasants saying during the trial against the ex-landlord Chen, that *there would be no New China without the Communist party*. The short story, which is objectively artistically poor, was labeled as *author's mastery of artistic technique*, and yet it was not enough for her to avoid being labelled as rightist. After twenty seven meetings with more than a thousand of participants where she never admitted guilt, she was expelled from the party, sent to a farm first and then to jail for another twenty years. When in 1979 for the first time at 75 she appeared in public again; she was asked about the past. She indulgently laughed and said that people should look ahead. But, the future should never ignore the past. The categories known as China and Chinese are historically sedimented constructs; 5000 years of traditions is a daily heard slogan for those who live in China, but they are as well built on historical amnesia. Let us not bother; the past is a wide spread understanding of the present. And it takes us to the second challenge China has to face, which is the more intellectually delicate attempt to avoid an acritical westernization, because every time that western habits, costumes, ideas are taken for own consume, indirectly an assumption is made: the implicit acceptance that habit, costume or idea are better. Chinese modernization cannot afford to be confused with an uncontrolled westernization for it would fling China back again to the Master-Slave dynamic. However it must be said that the same vacuum, the same struggle for self-definition, self-determination was visible in East Europe just after the collapse of Soviet Union, it is the empty space between the state power retreat and people leap towards freedom. In this sense China is not an *unicum*, 思想危机 (ideological crisis) and 精神危机 (spiritual crisis) is a phase Europe has suffered at every turn of century, and every time it came out with a new subjectivity. Nowadays Chinese urban film makers' picture characters with humanist concern but politically unaware, being politically unaware in post-socialist China does not have the same negative connotation as it had in socialist China. In fact to some extent the political unawareness of

a big slice of Chinese population, might as well be one of the first traits of the new Chinese identity. According to Habermas and Marx the idea of civil society and therefore the public sphere is connected to the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the fact that China has today the biggest bourgeois class in the world would authorize us to say that China has at last found a new identity.

It is tempting but misleading. Western society based the concept of identity on the solid platform of truth. Truth has been simultaneously a religious understanding of human expectation, science able to explain man position in the universe and art expressed through beauty because the perfection of beauty reconnect man to the divine element he once had. But Chinese identity had none of it. Chinese virtues, identity, society could not possibly stand on a religious base for while in the western counterpart first came religion and then society and therefore Christianity shaped the whole civilization, religion belief in China came after society and therefore it never had the strength, the imprimatur to unify a country otherwise so vast and different. Science is a recent invention in China. It appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, together with the Western powers and the idea of a materialist progress. Obviously it was opposed by the conservative wings, as contrary to nature and Chinese spiritual philosophy. Neither art nor beauty could represent an amalgam for the scattered Chinese identity for beauty in China is an imperfect concept that does not last, too liable, too weak. Art, by definition, pretends to be immortal; art is what remains once we are no more, but China had no time to look for perfection. China was engaged with the tragedy which fragmented, dispersed men's awareness, and men's critical thinking. Beauty, by large art, in China does not last because China burnt it down to produce in order to catch up with the European production; beauty in China was smashed and tore apart, silenced, treated as an impostor, a rightist, enemy of the masses. And because beauty could not console China, for it to survive it needed a more solid background, a frame to hold on to while dynasties, invaders, regimes would rapidly alternate. It is ideology. The cultural stage on which was based Chinese identity has always been ideology: first was Confucius to define the shape of what was moral and what was not, then was Maoism, read it as Communism to point out what is right and what is wrong. At last arrived capitalism to indicate the difference between success and failure, with a blend new of values and ethics. When it was only Confucianism or even Confucianism and Communism together, due to their common attitude towards order, the identity was somehow preserved; but with the appearance on the stage of the logic of marketization Chinese identity rapidly entered a phase of cultural schizophrenia. The process of modernization quite successfully hid the contradiction of a society where nowadays individualism and competition have to go along with respect and collectivism. Cultural chaos took finally the resemblance of peace. Clearly the

⁶ One of the most celebrated Chinese female authors, first awarded The Stalin Prize for Literature, the persecuted by the regime

ideological vacuum following the death of Mao plays a big part in the definition of a new identity because ideology is the imaginary representation of the world but now that ideology has slipped out of daily life there is a space yet to be filled. By what? Family? Association? Religion? But it seems unlikely that a faith of foreign origins might be able to help the construction of Chinese uniqueness, besides the repertoire of quantitative and qualitative images available today make difficult the development of predominant characters as the logic of capitalism goes along with concept of fragmentation, de-personalization, de-subjectivization. In spite of this, the exploration of subjectivity constitutes the bulk of contemporary art, literature, aesthetics, all aware of the humanist quest for Chinese's soul after for few decades it dissolved into the impersonality of the masses. External symbols, embracement of western symbols, commercial culture is the tool used to avoid the chaos opened by the ideological breakdown; they might as well represent the cultural bridge to a new cultural paradigm. Today, digging the soul of contemporary China is a transition bordering alienation and nihilism, an entanglement of values none of them valid enough to be followed as leading star, controversial messages where men and women are both victims of the commodity exchange policy, both looking for a new guide to the social totality.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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