



## Intercultural Interpretative Difficulties of Modern Chinese

### Intellectual Development: A Hermeneutical View

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#### Abstract

This study is constituted by three components. The first will examine how Chinese scholars and Western sinologists have characterized modern Chinese intellectual history and what directions they have proposed for future intellectual development in China. The second section will construct a hermeneutic model of intercultural understanding and discuss its implications for the evaluation of modern Chinese intellectual development. I will show that an understanding of modern Chinese intellectual development in hermeneutical terms can circumventing many of the entrenched and misleading dichotomies in the field. In the third section, I will investigate three intercultural difficulties that modern and contemporary Chinese intellectuals face in the study of their own society and tradition. The recognition of these intercultural difficulties — which is made possible by re-conceptualizing local intellectual development in hermeneutical terms — put into relief the plight and possibilities of local intellectual development in non-Western localities.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics, Translation, Intercultural understanding, Chinese intellectual history, Postcolonial, Cultural asymmetry

#### 1. Introduction

This study is constituted by three components. The first will examine how Chinese scholars and Western sinologists have characterized modern Chinese intellectual history and what directions they have proposed for future intellectual development in China. The second section will construct a hermeneutic model of intercultural understanding and discuss its implications for the evaluation of modern Chinese intellectual development. I will show that an understanding of modern Chinese intellectual development in hermeneutical terms can circumventing many of the entrenched and misleading dichotomies in the field (Note 1). In the third section, I will investigate three intercultural difficulties that modern and contemporary Chinese intellectuals face in the study of their own society and tradition. The recognition of these intercultural difficulties — which is made possible by re-conceptualizing local intellectual development in hermeneutical terms — put into relief the plight and possibilities of local intellectual development in non-Western localities.

I have chosen to investigate Chinese intellectual development because this case shows lucidly how the intellectual development can be greatly influenced by intercultural interaction. The intellectual enterprise in modern and contemporary China resembles many non-Western ones in their marginal positions within the global intellectual world. But unlike many smaller non-Western cultures, China had a powerful and sophisticated indigenous intellectual tradition in the pre-modern era. A small number of non-Western culture aside from China, including India, Japan, and the Middle East, share this property. While these cultures demonstrate significant differences — such as modern Japan's ability to isolate itself to a certain degree from global intellectual influences and India's employment of English instead of an indigenous language in its academia — the modern intellectual enterprises of these cultures share a lot of common problems. The weaknesses of their intellectual development cannot be explained simply by a lack of indigenous talent, a lack of financial resources, the constraint of political pressure, or the stranglehold of an obsolete indigenous tradition. I will explicate their modern intellectual enterprises' underdevelopment in terms of structural problems in intercultural understanding.

## 2. Problems in modern Chinese intellectual development

The course of modern Chinese intellectual development is puzzling. The Chinese literati had remained a well-established and powerful group throughout pre-modern periods. China has resourceful traditions of art, literature, philosophy, and history. Moreover, Chinese intellectuals had a relatively early start to import modern Western ideas. In short, Chinese intellectuals enjoy significant advantages over many other non-Western cultures in developing a modern indigenous academy. However, Chinese scholars are still marginal in the global academic world, and both modern and traditional Chinese thought seldom enters into dialogue with Western traditions (except among Western sinologists). Modern Chinese intellectual development was filled with intellectual capriciousness and vagaries, phenomena that have become an investigative focus of modern Chinese intellectual historians. For example, there have been three main waves of confrontation in modern Chinese thought between 'traditionalist' and 'Westernizer' intellectuals. In every case, the most prominent cultural conservatives and the leading thinkers of the 'traditional' camp have been found to advocate radically progressive and modern ideas, whereas the most vigorous proponents of Westernization and anti-traditionalism have renounced Westernization and turn around to praise the Chinese tradition in later points of their career. In this section, I will map out previous studies of these 'traditionalists' and 'anti-traditionalist' paradoxes in modern Chinese intellectual thought and more recent proposals of Chinese intellectual development.

### 2.1 Attempts to make sense of intellectual history

The most influential early study of the anti-traditionalistic elements of Chinese traditionalists is Joseph Levenson's *Confucianism and its Modern Fate*. He explains that while Confucians of the late Qing and early Republican years wanted to be faithful to tradition, they were not willing to ignore the practical concerns of nation-rebuilding and cultural reinvigoration, which in turn brought in Western values and ideas to these Confucians' thoughts. Levenson portrays Chinese intellectuals as being only 'emotionally' faithful to tradition. They 'intellectually' betrayed tradition by introducing modern Western visions to promote the national well-being of China. He characterizes them as 'traditionalistic' figures in order to distinguish them from real 'traditionalists' and 'progressives'. However, he qualifies that he "does not suggest that some [emotional] Chinese minds were attached purely to history, as against some [intellectual] minds attached purely to value: traditionalists with the first attachment, iconoclasts with the second" (Levenson 1965: xii). Hence, although Levenson could be rightly accused of implying that Chinese and Western traditions are largely incompatible, he does not fail to sensitize us to the fact that Chinese and Western elements of thoughts were combined in early modern Chinese intellectuals.

In refutation of the incompatibility thesis (ie. that between Chinese and Western cultures), Chang Hao (1989) describes the situation that modern Chinese intellectuals faced as "a crisis of meaning" brought about by modernization as well as by competing belief and philosophical systems. In this crisis, 'traditionalists' and 'anti-traditionalists' alike drew ideas from both Western and Chinese traditions. Chang specifically demonstrates how Liang Qichao, who seems to fit into Levenson's portrait of 'traditionalistic' figures, had indeed placed certain traditional Confucian elements at the center of his thought. Wang Fansen investigates the roots of anti-traditionalism in allegedly 'traditional' movements and 'traditionalist' figures. He illustrates how the Ancient History Movement belied the original aims of its leaders and "quickly joined forces with the Anti-Tradition Movement" (Wang, 1987: 49). He discovers that the leader of the National Essence School, Zhang Taiyan, and many others in the 1890s proposed to "completely destroy the traditional Chinese social structure" long before the iconoclastic May Fourth generation did (Wang, 1987: 54). Even Thomas Metzger, who goes the furthest in claiming that modern conservative Chinese thoughts were a continuation of indigenous tradition rather than a reaction to the West, is no exception in analyzing them as a result of a mixing of Chinese and Western intellectual elements. Metzger and Ramon Myers (1980: 19) think that to both 'traditional' and 'anti-traditional' Chinese intellectuals, "Western thoughts are the essential new means" that "promise a breakthrough in the [...] struggle to reach traditional goals."

The paradoxical nature of Chinese Westernizers and their intellectual thought are no less attended to. Benjamin Schwartz (1964) establishes through the case of Yen Fu that the way Chinese Westernizers received Western thoughts is very much shaped by their exigent Chinese concerns. Lin Yusheng argues that it was "relatively easy" for "totalistic iconoclasts to change many elements in the content of their thought on the basis of the adoption of Western ideas and values" and they were still "dominated by their conception of the continuity of political and cultural orders and by a traditionally derived, intellectualistic-holistic mode of thinking" (Lin, 1979: 156). And as I mentioned earlier, Li Zehou (1987) explains that Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao and many other anti-traditionalists have turned gradually from the idealistic concern of "enlightening the Chinese masses" to the more mundane one of "national survival." Pang Pu, another contemporary Chinese philosopher, complements Levenson's discussion of 'traditionalistic' figures and thinks that the early Westernizers were fueled on one hand by "the spirit of their particular time — the pursuit of rationalism" and on the other hand by "the spirit of their culture — emotional longing for tradition" (Pang, 1988: 134). It was such a combination of tradition and modernity which led them to their peculiar strand of extremist thought. Yu Yingshi argues that the thought and practices of Mao Zetung were to a significant extent shaped by traditional Legalist thinking and

Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of Ming dynasty (Yu, 1981). A host of scholars including Guy Alitto (1979) study the similarity between Maoist thoughts and Neo-Confucianism, traditional Militarist and Moist thinking.

There is wide consensus among Chinese intellectual historians that elements of both Chinese tradition and modern Western thought are present in modern Chinese intellectuals of all stripes. The surprising part is that there is not much effort to extend analysis beyond on this recognition. Scholars keep on deconstructing old dichotomies, such as those of traditionalism versus Westernization or progressive versus reactionary, without reconstructing a more adequate perspective to characterize modern Chinese intellectuals and thought.

## 2.2 Proposals for future intellectual development

The majority of proposals for future Chinese intellectual developments concur that China's intellectual future ought to be composed of both Chinese and Western elements. However, different proposals prefer different principles and means through which Chinese, Western, traditional, and modern elements combine. While many emphasize the themes of democracy and science, the more cautious among them — such as Wei Zhengtong and Lin Yusheng— exhort Chinese intellectuals to attain a more sophisticated level of understanding of these Western values before incorporating them into intellectual thought. Neo-Confucians such as Mu Zhongsan and Cai Renhou advocated approaching Chinese and Western elements via “opening up from within Confucianism.” The more empirically minded, such as Yu Yingshi and Li Zehou, demand accumulation of detailed intellectual and historical knowledge as the prerequisite for reconstructing a new Chinese thought. Theoretically oriented figures such as Chang Hao and Tang Yijie identify specific elements of Western cultures which are worth adopting and parts of Chinese tradition to be downplayed. Among all these proposals, Lin Yusheng's notion of ‘creative transformation’ is the most systematically argued for and one of the most influential (Pang, 1988: 132; Tang, 1988: 54).

One of the reasons of this notion's success is its skilful articulation of a principle which virtually all other Chinese cultural transformation proposals implicitly rely on: intellectual openness. Lin states that in order “to understand pluralistically the Chinese tradition and the West, to treat them with an open attitude, [one should] concretely and carefully comprehend individual elements and developments in both the Chinese and Western traditions” (Lin, 1988: 369-70). Note that openness to all traditions is also a tenet of hermeneutical understanding. Lin's definition of creative transformation and the way in which he pictures the transformation of current cultural as a remaking of tradition is in line with Gadamerian hermeneutics. However, the problem is that he treats the pooling of resources across two cultures in a rather simplistic way.

Creative transformation is the use of a pluralistic mode of thought to reformulate and/or modify some (but not all) symbols, thoughts, values and models of practice, [...] so that they can become a valuable resource of transformation and at the same time, they can preserve our cultural identity (Lin, 1988: 388).

He admits that cultural “reformulation and/or modification could be influenced by — but not rigidly transplanted from — the West” (Lin, 1988: 388). His whole project rests on an ambiguous definition of ‘rigidity’ and the dubious principle of being ‘valuable.’ How rigid is rigid? To whom and in what ways should culture be valuable? He also seems to sense the vacuity in such a formulation and re-define it on the practical level:

The pluralistic mode of creative transformation involves two steps. 1) The application of Max Weber's ideal typical analysis to elements of tradition in order to ‘define’ them. 2) The elements thus defined are then ‘located’ within the modern life. If we discover that some cannot locate themselves in modern life — in other words, they ought not and cannot occupy a position in modern life — then we should abandon them. Whereas, if the central meaning of a particular traditional element is still meaningful to modern life, [...] then should we abandon it (Lin, 1988: 389)?

Such an extension provides a more practically identifiable principle of transformation, but at the price of contradicting many of Lin's insights. If he still holds that “the West embodies [...] contents that harmonize with one another as well as contents that contradict one another to various degrees” (Lin, 1988: 369), it is meaningless to relegate the final verdict of cultural transformation to the monolithic entity ‘modern life.’ Lin may be taking a pragmatist attitude and tentatively designating modernity as the relatively coherent picture of the West. Even though the difficult project of cultural transformation may afford such a pragmatic manoeuvre, another problem immediately surfaces. Yu Yingshi has warned us against using the term ‘modern life’ in an out-of-context way because

‘modern life’ in general is an ideal type. The description of concrete modern societies [in terms of such concepts] results in empty forms devoid of historical experience” (Yu, 1984: 15).

In other words, even if we grant that the Western cultures can be taken as a coherent whole, we cannot rely entirely on the historically specific standards of the West as the guide for China's own historically specific cultural transformation. Hence we have come full circle: to find out how to transform Chinese culture in an appropriate way, we need to know what is appropriate and practicable in China. The goal of cultural transformation is generally agreed upon, but the criteria and guidelines for achieving it have still not been clarified. The interpretation and evaluation of modern Chinese

intellectual development is in need of a new paradigm. In the next section, I propose to construct one that emphasizes hermeneutical intercultural understanding.

### 3. Towards a hermeneutical interpretation of modern Chinese intellectual development (8452)

Charles Taylor (1985) provides a useful characterization of intercultural understanding. He perceives it as a process of hermeneutical enrichment of language, the product of which he calls the language of perspicuous contrast.

It will almost always be the case that the adequate language in which we can understand another society is not our language of understanding, or theirs, but rather what one would call a language of perspicuous contrast (Taylor, 1985: 125).

More specifically the language of perspicuous contrast is defined as

a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constant at work in both. It would be a language in which the possible human variations would be so formulated that both our form of life and theirs could be perspicuously described as alternatives of such variations (Taylor, 1985: 125).

Taylor illustrates the actual generation of a language of perspicuous contrast with an example. He first criticizes the inadequate understanding Western anthropologists had of magic practices of primitive societies. He objects to the Frazerian theory that magic is a type of proto-technology, but he also refutes the argument against Frazer held by Peter Winch and others, that magic should be understood as fulfilling a 'symbolic' or 'expressive' function. He argues that both "share an ethnocentric assumption that the tribe's practice must be either proto-science/technology or the integration of meaning through symbolism" (Taylor, 1985: 128). The segregation of the two is a modern Western characteristic. "Identifying the two possibilities — fusion and segregation [...] amounts to finding a language of perspicuous contrast" (Taylor, 1985: 129). It is clear from the example that what Taylor means by language includes concepts, theories and methods. Note also the way he moves hermeneutically from theory to cultural text, then to an alternative theory and again to text, and finally reaches his own theory. A more systematic theoretical account of such hermeneutic enrichment can be found in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Taylor acknowledges that his "notion of a language of perspicuous contrast owes a great deal to Gadamer's conception of the fusion of horizons" (Taylor, 1985: 126). In his major work, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer deals with the difficulties of the modern interpreter of historical texts. The gap of understanding in question is that between history and the present, or tradition and modern culture. In Gadamer's context, a horizon is simply defined as a set of "criteria and prejudices" and "a range of vision from a particular vantage point" (Gadamer, 1982: 302) (Note 2). Methodological discussions following the phenomenological sociological tradition of Alfred Schutz have demarcated the horizon of the scientist from that of the layman and that of certain designated groups from others. We may cautiously presume the existence of a Chinese horizon and a Western horizon, and some demarcation or non-overlapping area between the two for our theoretical purpose of problematizing intercultural understanding. As Gadamer warns us, the overlapping between horizons and the incoherency within individual horizons always render it difficult to demarcate between different horizons in practice.

For a person equipped with a certain horizon to achieve a better understanding of the Other who has a different horizon, there has to be a fusion of horizons. The person must "transpose himself into the other's situation" and "onto it must he bring himself" with his criteria and prejudices (Gadamer, 1982: 305). The process of transposing oneself

consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other (Gadamer, 1982: 305).

In hermeneutics, there is certainly no absolute universal which rises above all particularities. We can imagine a continual advancement of understanding through the works of consecutive generations of scholars, each producing a new language of contrast perspicuous to varying degrees. In this light, what Gadamer's scheme means for understanding the cultural Other is that one starts with a minimal level of commonality between cultures. Then one identifies one's particularities, brackets them, allows the Other's particularities into one's horizon, and interprets the Other with the broadened and fused horizon. If the understanding is not profound or adequate enough for one's purpose, then one may proceed again through starting a new hermeneutic circle. One has to more forcefully bracketing one's own particular horizon in this new circle than in the last attempt. In this sense, the language(s) of perspicuous contrast is in the plural rather than singular.

It is possible to evaluate a diverse range of schools of thought in modern Chinese intellectual history in terms of the advancement of languages of perspicuous contrast. Even the most culturally conservative Confucians had in early modern times contributed to a new language perspicuous contrast; they were involved with similar projects that anti-traditionalists are working on. Even the sinocentric formulation of the 'Chinese essence, Western utilities' principle

(in which it is asserted that Chinese culture grasps the universe's moral essence and Western cultures are merely good at instrumental skills) is at least attempting to make comparisons between cultures. We can certainly criticize them on the basis that they have neither bracketed their horizon well nor transposed into the Other's horizon sufficiently, and hence have not produced a sufficiently perspicuous language of contrast. At the same time, one must not forget that such criticisms are made possible only with reference to the relatively more perspicuous languages, ones that are partly built upon the languages generated by previous hermeneutic efforts. To evaluate contemporary Chinese thought, we can similarly consider how systems of intellectual thought, as languages of perspicuous contrast, surpass the particularities of modern discourses. Utility to an enlightened cultural transformation, faithfulness to Chinese classics, and deep understanding of the original meanings of Western values are integral and necessary parts of — though not the sufficient conditions — of advancing better intercultural understanding.

#### 4. The intercultural difficulties of intellectual development in the modern Chinese context

In spite of its merits as an embracing scheme of evaluation, the concepts 'fusion of horizon' and 'language of perspicuous contrast' provide an overly idealized picture of the reality of modern Chinese intellectual development. Jürgen Habermas justly criticizes that Gadamerian hermeneutics

gives the interpretive model of *Verstehen* a peculiarly one-sided twist. [He] only admits the possibility that the interpretandum may be exemplary for us, that we may learn something from it; [but not] the possibility that the author could learn from us. In opposition to this stands the anthropologist's experience that the interpreter by no means always assumes the position of a subordinate in relation to a tradition (Habermas, 1984: 134-5).

This weakness is inherited by Taylor. Taylor's scheme cannot accommodate the indigenous observer-translator who learns from the West and use that knowledge in a hermeneutic project of understanding indigenous tradition. Indigenous tradition is a cultural Other to Western observer-translators but not to indigenous observer-translators. In order to understand these 'indigenous observer-translators,' I will analyze three fundamental difficulties of intercultural understanding that they have to face in addition to those typically faced by Western observer-translators. They are the asymmetry of translation, the conflicting objectives of understanding indigenous and Western traditions, and the lack of 'real confrontations.'

##### 4.1 *The asymmetry of languages*

When earlier generations of Chinese intellectuals began to study the West, employ Western concepts for China, and compare the two different cultures, they were equipped with fewer Western theories, concepts, models, and methods than contemporary Chinese intellectuals. Previous generations of Chinese intellectuals had to translate Western academic languages from scratch with new formulations. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that we have to be concerned with the asymmetry of this representation relation. From the fact that we in modern English or some other modern language, with our academic resources, can accurately represent the belief system or part of the belief system of another culture, it does not follow that the corresponding part of our belief system can be represented in the language-in-use of that other culture (MacIntyre, 1989: 194-5).

Generations of modern Chinese intellectuals and especially anti-traditionalist ones have experienced this asymmetry. They were dazzled by the great diversity of Western scholarship and were at pain to translate them. Some commentators including Arthur Wright argue that there are inherent difficulties using the Chinese language to do translations. But the argument that Chinese language is inherently less capable of translation is controversial. Perhaps traditional Chinese intellectual vocabulary is too much dominated by Confucianism, but the long history of debates among Confucians have also generated a rich and varied vocabulary. Perhaps China was more geo-politically unified for most of the time than Europe, but regional intellectual differences among different parts of China was also substantial. So the question of asymmetry has to be explained with something other than the characteristics of (non-Western) languages.

##### 4.1.1 The relative desirability of cultures

Talad Asad's discussion of the inequality of languages between the West and the third world gives some clues to answering the question.

Western languages produce and deploy desired knowledge more readily than third world languages do. (The knowledge that third world languages deploy more easily is not sought by Western societies in quite the same way, or for the same reasons) (Asad, 1985: 159).

Asad thinks that while non-Western intellectuals cannot afford to ignore Western culture even if it is difficult to access, Western intellectuals has much more discretion to neglect to translate non-Western culture when they find it difficult to do so. He argues that there are a host of Western models, theories, and vocabulary that non-Western intellectuals want to imitate and reproduce (Asad, 1985: 159). They are essential to non-Western intellectuals because the "knowledge of these models is the pre-condition for the production of more knowledge" and translation of Western culture is itself "a mimetic gesture of power, an expression of desire for transformation" (Asad, 1985: 159).

The Western observer-translator is not particularly motivated to translate non-Western cultures in non-Western cultural terms. The social science and humanities in Western academia does not accord much significance to Chinese and other non-Western traditions. In the modern Chinese scholarly community, however, there are numerous intellectual who fit Asad's description of third world intellectuals. That is, non-Western academics care much more about Western culture and knowledge than the Western academy care about any non-Western tradition of knowledge. As a result, Chinese language-in-use is has to carry a much heavier translation load than the Western languages. This in turn results in a much larger amount of mistranslation in Chinese translation efforts. Interpreted in this light, the asymmetry of translation is ultimately caused by an asymmetry in global intellectual and cultural power.

#### 4.1.2 Contextuality of the translation principles of 'charity' and 'humanity'

A critical analysis of translation theories in the philosophy of language can also shed light on the problem of translating Western culture into the Chinese language. One of the tenets of translation theory —advocated initially by Williard Quine and then by Donald Davidson — is the principle of charity:

Until we have successfully established a systematic correlation of sentences held true (in the other language) with sentences held true (in our language), there are no mistakes to be made. Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters (Davidson, 1982: 78).

Davidson's main concern is the very possibility of translation. A translator who merely emphasizes the incommensurability of foreign terms eventually defies the goal of translation. The translator has no way of knowing that the foreign term is inaccessible in the first place, because "the more absurd or exotic the beliefs imputed to a people, the more suspicious is entitled to be of the translations" (Quine, 1960: 69). Furthermore, a translation which contains extreme oddity as interpretation is, strictly speaking, not a translation at all, and will be of little value to anyone save obscurantists. If such a translation of a certain foreign practice is accepted, then subsequent efforts to re-interpret the practice will be discouraged.

Another tenet of translation, the principle of humanity, similarly concerns the possibility of translation. Richard Grandy proposes to translate in a way that "the imputed pattern of relationships among beliefs, desires and the world be as similar to our own as possible" (Grandy, 1973: 107). The justification for humanity is that portraying the Other as an absolutely incommensurable entity endangers the legitimate status of the Other as a group of human beings. There is in addition a pragmatic concern: if the rationality structure of the Other cannot be assumed to be roughly identical to that of Us, then the pioneer translator would not have found a basis for translation (Note 3).

Useful as they are to Western observer-translators, 'charity' and 'humanity' assume a different form and generate different implications for non-Western observer-translators. When a Western observer-translator accepts certain exotic practices as 'right,' she is less immediately obliged to count herself as wrong. Smooth bracketing and un-bracketing of values in one's horizon is easier when the Other's horizon poses less universalistic beliefs than one's own. An example will illustrate this point. When a Western social scientist interprets the Indian taboo against eating ox meat as 'right', she practices 'charity' by regarding the act as a particular incident that is suspended from further investigation. Such charity might represent a Eurocentric and condescending attitude. But it could also yield anti-Eurocentric arguments such as explanation of the taboo in terms of rational economic and ecological factors (Harris, 1979). The indigenous Indian observer does not usually go through a parallel process. Instead, she will find it much more convenient and sensible to first make a universal claim and then verify the particular incident as the Western observer-translator does. In doing this, she brackets her own beliefs and accepts the Western horizon for the sake of proceeding to challenge her own (bracketed) one. As long as the modern Western scientific enterprise produces more universal claims than the belief systems of less developed societies, the asymmetry of language is sustained. Charity practiced by a powerful culture does not generate identical intellectual consequences than that practiced by a marginalized culture.

A similar situation problem can be found with the principle of humanity. The indigenous observer-translator demonstrates, in line with Grandy's formulation, an identification of the rationality structure of the translator and the translated. However, because Western rationality structure has stronger claims to universality, both indigenous and Western observer-translators are likely to take modern Western rationality as the basis of common rationality.

#### 4.1.3 Implications of intellectual multiplicity for translation

The asymmetry of translation is also reinforced by the multiplicity of intellectual positions in Western culture. By pluralism, I am referring specifically to the clearly demarcated, systematically organized, and differentiated positions in any field of Western knowledge. Multiplicity and pluralism are definitely not detrimental to Chinese intellectual development. The problem to be identified here is not that the Chinese language is insufficiently rich to translate these multiple positions, but that a Chinese observer-translator has to choose among many interpretations of the same term made by different Western schools. For example, the ubiquitous concept 'social structure' carries different connotations

for orthodox Marxist, structural-functionalists, and critical theorists, just to name a few. Western intellectuals sometimes look

“scornfully at other academic professions [for] the multiplicity of mutually irreconcilable standpoints. But from within one’s own profession, one characteristically views and describes the situation only from the specific point of view of one’s own commitments” (MacIntyre, 1989: 197).

The Chinese observer-translator is less ready to adopt such an ‘insider’ point of view that eliminates the confusion of multiple interpretations. Scrupulous Chinese observer-translators confront Western thought as a whole rather than being gradually socialized into a specific school. When Western observer-translators approach Chinese tradition, they can proceed through hermeneutic enrichment more smoothly. It is because she can try to come up with a set of differentiated and precise vocabulary at the end of that process instead of dealing with them in the beginning. Even though clear demarcated standpoints can be a bonus in some ways, their short run effect on translation is disorienting.

What adds to this disorientation is the multiplicity of Chinese translations on any Western intellectual subject. Chinese intellectuals through the past century have translated many foreign concepts, and not all such translations are used consistently. Additionally, many of these Chinese translations are systematically different from Western ones. By ‘systematic,’ I am referring to differences that show an identifiable indigenous pattern of divergence. For instance, Thomas Metzger (1988: 78-95) demonstrates that contemporary Chinese intellectuals’ conceptions of liberalism are heavily colored by an optimism not found in modern and classical Western discussions of liberalism. Andrew Nathan points to an “identification that had dominated the Chinese vision of democracy since Liang Qichao[:] [...] the facile identification of peoples’ interest with the state’s” (Nathan, 1981: 225-6). These systematic divergences may stem from various sources such as local political and economic contexts. Whether such divergences are taken as mis-translations or praised as innovative cultural contributions, subsequent generations of indigenous observer-translators carry a more onerous burden in their translation efforts.

#### *4.2 The conflictual goals of translating the West and understanding China*

The previous section reveals some of the difficulties a Chinese observer-translator faces in interpreting the West. One may question the relevance of these difficulties, since the majority of Chinese intellectuals in social sciences and the humanities take China and not the West as their object of inquiry. This section focuses on the issue of Chinese intellectuals studying China instead of the West and its implications for intellectual development.

The crucial point to bear in mind is that Chinese intellectuals are scrambling to utilize Western concepts, theories, problematics, and methods to understand China. The use of Western methodology in turn requires prior understanding of Western societies, history, culture, and thought. Comprehensive background knowledge of the West is often the prerequisite for clear understanding of the Western theories and methods one wants to apply to studying China. For instance, the use of a single concept such as feudalism already involves an interpretation of Western history. Despite the lack of explicit discussion among Chinese intellectuals’ on intercultural understanding, any application of Western methodologies by them inevitably involves a fusion of horizons. The balancing of efforts invested in understanding China versus those in the West hence becomes a problem for Chinese intellectuals.

Because of language proficiency, familiarity with local cultural tradition, and proximity to local data, it is logical to expect Western intellectuals to understand Western methodology more readily and Chinese ones to handle primary Chinese materials with more ease. A contrast between the two major groups of intellectuals in China Studies substantiates such an expectation. On the one hand, Metzger and Myers urged Western sinologists to place “a new emphasis on linguistic competence and on that careful emphatic analysis of Chinese thought patterns for which linguistic competence is indispensable” (Metzger and Myers, 1980: 50). On the other hand, Perry Link and Su Wei notice that in cultural discourses in China in the 1980s, there “was the hasty snatching of ideas from the West”, and the “whole scene was as stimulating as it was superficial” (Link and Su, 1990: 17). And if translation across the two cultures are indeed asymmetric (as I argued in section 4.1), then problems identified by Link are inherently more insurmountable than those problematized by Metzger.

There is another factor that makes the balancing act more stressful for Chinese intellectuals. Since the vocation of Western sinologists is the understanding of China, linguistic competence in the Chinese language and knowledge of Chinese tradition are a logical extension of their central intellectual efforts. But for Chinese intellectuals, the understanding of Western intellectual history and tradition is only one of the prerequisites to a better translation of Western theories. And this translation is in turn only one of the prerequisites for a more adequate and profound understanding of China. Despite their zeal of adopting Western theories and methods, many Chinese intellectuals do not consider the thorough understanding of Western societies one as of their central intellectual concerns. Ye Qizheng describes the reluctance of investing serious effort in understanding the West in the case of Taiwan sociologists:

They stay at the level of collecting and describing primary data [of Taiwan's social phenomena], and the better ones borrow established Western theories to re-examine old propositions. Those few studies on [Western] methodology and analytical strategies are crude (Ye, 1982: 136).

Ye is referring to sociology, which is a modern Western invention. Dependency on Western methodology in the discipline is expected to be heavy. The humanities, which have had a long tradition in China, could be somewhat different. Humanities fields such as philology enjoy an indigenous heritage of methodologies. In this sense, the humanities require less Western methodology and hence less understanding of the West. But in practice, even scholars in the humanities are under heavy pressure to learn Western paradigms.

#### 4.3 *The dominance of 'real confrontations'*

Circumstances of knowledge consumption shape intellectual development. Intellectuals depend on the state and business for financial and institutional support; intellectuals also depend on the opinions of the educated public and media for rewards such as prestige. I identify the peculiar characteristics of the Chinese intellectual consumption context in terms of Bernard Williams' distinction between 'notational confrontations' and 'real confrontations.' Williams argues that

a real confrontation between two divergent outlooks occurs at a given time if there is a group of people for whom each of the outlooks is a real option. A notational confrontation [...] occurs when [...] at least one of those outlooks does not present a real option (Williams, 1985: 160).

William is referring to the terms 'outlook' and 'confrontation' in the context of different ethical values between two cultures, but we can generalize and apply this distinction of real and notational confrontation to any kind of intercultural understanding. Both Chinese intellectuals and Western sinologists are involved in certain forms of cultural confrontation triggered by their knowledge of the differences between China and the West. However, they experience the reality of the confrontation differently. While Western sinologists find China to be an intriguing subject of study, they seldom find China a model on which the West should urgently reform itself. In contrast, many Chinese intellectuals perceive the ethical, technical, and economic outlooks of the West as real options, or even the best and only option, for future China. They think they could readily "go over to them, live inside them in their actual historical circumstances and retain their hold on reality, not engaged in extensive self-deception, and so on" (Williams, 1985: 160-1). Certain options Chinese intellectuals desire to accept may be misconceptions or utilitarian considerations motivated by the political and economic power of the West. These may eventually be recognized by Chinese intellectuals as notational options. But in general, Chinese intellectuals and society at large may be said to engage in real confrontations much more than their Western counterparts. To the extent that real confrontations proliferate, intellectuals, their audience, and their sponsors are less able to afford a 'relativism of distance' — the ability to appreciate foreign values but at the same time not accept them as an alternative to one's own values. They are more eager to demand an absolute and clear, albeit over-simplifying, choice between the two cultural outlooks.

The mechanism through which the reality of confrontation affects knowledge consumption takes the form of two demands. The first is reflected in the continuous and unbridled fashion in which intellectual development is milked for immediate social, political and economic utility. The pragmatic nature of the intellectual community of modern China is widely recognized. Zhao Fusan argues that the pioneer introducers of Western social sciences, including Yen Fu and Liang Qichao, directed social sciences "at the aim of the salvation of the country" (Zhao, 1985: 223). Yu Yingshi describes one of the two main schools of Chinese historiography as 'interpretationists', whose projects "are dictated exclusively by the demands of political reality" because what they did was to "seek historical justification for political activities" (Yu, 1984: 12). Ye Qizheng examines the historical development of sociology in China from the 1920s to the 1980s and concludes that

either from the point of view of the entire intellectual enterprise or from sociology alone, China's social order is the impetus [of the development of the discipline]. [...] Because of this practical concern for survival, Chinese sociologists developed in a low profile way with heavy emphasis on the pragmatic (Ye, 1982: 122).

One of the deleterious results of this practical orientation is the shortage of basic research and methodological development and an oversupply of applicatory exercises.

The governments of Greater China were not particularly good at tolerating intellectual freedom. In the most recent two decades, these governments have relaxed some of their earlier constraints on intellectual thought. Nevertheless, Ye still thinks that their "legitimation of certain values and outlooks" does not genuinely help "the holistic reconstruction of concepts, methods, research agendas and theories" (Ye, 1985: 260). In order to achieve 'holistic reconstruction,' intellectual independence from practical political concern as well as strong financial support is required. However, because of the eagerness for practical impact, much funding is granted to "intellectual development focus[ing] on technological and applicatory aspects," while theoretical intellectual pursuits are marginalized as they "can only benefit society in the long run"(Ye, 1985: 259).

## 5. Conclusion

The previous analyses illustrate that current characterization of modern Chinese development and proposals for future intellectual development in China have not adequately attended to problems of intercultural understanding. Borrowing from the hermeneutics of Taylor and Gadamer, I have shown the utility of applying a hermeneutical model to understanding Chinese intellectual history and future development. Apart from providing an alternative perspective to interpreting Chinese intellectual thought, it most importantly compels us to rethink the difficulties that have been obstructing intellectual development in China or other non-Western localities. By building upon philosophical theories of intercultural translation, I illustrate that there are three major intercultural interpretative obstacles that Chinese and non-Western intellectuals have to face when they utilize Western theories and methods to study their own societies and cultures.

These three obstacles — the asymmetry of translation, the rivalrous goals of translating the West and attending to indigenous tradition, and the dominance of real cultural confrontations — cannot be dealt with by the existing solutions supplied in proposals of Chinese intellectual development. For example, the influential principal of intellectual openness — proposed not just by anti-traditionalists but centrist such as Lin Yusheng — does not help to rectify asymmetries in the translation process, dissolve the dual and conflicting interpretative responsibility falling on the shoulders of indigenous observer-translators, or lower the number of real cultural confrontations. Intellectual openness can encourage charity in translation, but charity could be a dangerous principle to encourage in non-Western intellectual contexts, as I have argued. Another popular solution, one that is gaining more ground in the past decade in China with China's economic success and the emergence of cultural conservative movements, is the preservation of tradition and indigenous culture. This solution is favored by traditionalists and centrists. But neither does it directly deal with the three major problems of intercultural understanding. In principle, it could help by encouraging Chinese intellectual development to circumvent intercultural interpretation altogether and to focus largely on local culture and society. But it is questionable whether such an inward cultural turn is practically enforceable given the present reality of comprehensive cultural, intellectual, and academic globalization.

The nature of the three intercultural difficulties is interpretative, but their origins partly lie in global cultural asymmetry. As long as non-Western intellectual contents remain less 'desirable' than Western ones, the asymmetry of translation is likely to persist. As long as indigenous observer-translators have to bear the burden of understanding foreign culture before they can examine their own, they are disadvantaged in comparison to intellectuals from dominant global cultures. As long as domestic political, economic, and socio-cultural conditions call for utilitarian directions in intellectual development, real confrontations will remain dominant.

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## Notes

Note 1. Dichotomies such as anti-traditionalist versus traditionalist, progressives versus conservatives, fundamentalists versus radicals, are all heavily value-laden terms. But in the highly charged atmosphere of Chinese debates, these dichotomies have remained in use for almost a century.

Note 2. When the term ‘horizon’ was first by Edmund Husserl, within the framework of a philosophy of consciousness, its significance is accorded only to the individual. However after the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy, it becomes more common to speak of horizons of different communities.

Note 3. Robin Horton investigates the way a pioneer translator approaches the Other. He distinguishes between primary and secondary structures. A primary structure “does not differ very much from [...] culture to culture. It provides the intercultural voyager with an intellectual bridgehead. Primary theory gives the world a foreground filled with middle-sized, enduring, solid objects” (Horton, 1982: 228). He goes on to describe in abstract terms what those objects are: “They are related spatially in terms of five dichotomies: ‘left/right’; ‘above/below’, ‘in front of/behind’, ‘inside/outside’, ‘contiguous/separate’” (Horton, 1982: 227). But the bulk of the problem remains — it has only shifted to the question of which objects are primary and which are secondary.