

From Nothingness to Technology, What Do We Read Ourselves in New Mediaⁱ

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Introduction

From the early beginning of western art history, art and technology are inseparable. The original meaning of the word “techne” in ancient Greek means “art” and “craft”. The term “technology”, was therefore a discourse on arts as both fine and applied. In a modern world, technology implies a practical application of science to commerce or industry. Therefore, it is not contingent that science and technology has shared a dominating part in the modernization and commercialization of western art forms. However, the concepts of science and technology in pre-modern China were not very much the same as the West. This has been extensively discussed by Joseph Needham, the late English biochemist, embryologist, the writer of *Science and Civilisation in China*, by his questioning of why technological development had not developed as rapidly in China as it had in Europe from the sixteenth century onward. It is not incorrect to say that art in pre-modern China was essentially different from western art as technology was not necessarily a part of the development of art in Chinese history.

However, a comparison between the concept of science and technology of pre-modern China and modern western world is somewhat infeasible, if not irrelevant. Yet, China's modernization is never a symmetrical one. There is a big technological lag between urban China and rural China. In a recent trip to the Tibetan region of China, I experienced a time in civilization when a culture is at a crossroad of modernization. We might have gone through this stage in our history when urbanization and development was about to explode, new technologies and progressive knowledge flooded in with ambivalence and amazement. But this part of our history must be too long ago; this past is a myth now. The Tibetan region allows me to have a glimpse at this transition from pre-modern to modern society. Here, we can find advance wireless GPRS media in major cities, but there are towns and villages still do not have basic infrastructure like telephone connection or even powered electricity supply. At the same time, mass communication technologies like satellite TVs, Internet cafe, cell phones, computer games are popular media in most towns and cities as long as they have solar power and communication networks. Under a centralized and state controlled environment, all these global media are very much consumer oriented. You can find a wide range of online RPG

games copied locally to meet a large market of young consumers but none of them have free access to a “ global” network. The rapidly increasing consumption of advance communication technology in China allows us to look at media technology as a global culture from a different perspective.

From nothingness to technology

Like any part of rural China, Ganzi (or Kham, in Tibetan language) is going through many social and economical changes with the modernization of China. We can see pollutions in river as a result of increasing consumption of material goods, which Tibetan cannot identify as a problem yet. I have seen Internet cafe in every town filled with teenagers smoking and playing RPG game late in the night. Almost every Tibetan family has a TV at home, a satellite TV which might be something unnecessary in Hong Kong but it is a must in rural China because of her scattered population and geography. However, this satellite TV does not connect you to every corner of the world including Hong Kong and Taiwan; China government has configured all standard satellite dishes to allow a number of national channels to be connected. Tibetan has never seen any Hong Kong TV news but it is amazing to find they all know popular movie stars of Taiwan and Hong Kong from their selling CDs and VCDs. Besides satellite TV, mobile phone is perhaps the other highly developed wireless technology in China. China has been counted as the biggest mobile phone population in the world, but this is not always true in every part of China. Many small and remote villages are not included in phone service area, neither wireless nor land-based network. At a glance of these contradictions and intricacy, what do we interpret this asymmetry of modernization and technological imbalance in China?

A Multidimensional Space

Similar to many visitors coming from a developed region, the first time I observed the uneven development in rural China, my immediate response is how our own modernization experience can be applied to “ remedy” this technological imbalance and at the same time not to destroy this particular culture’ s traditions which will be in a danger of disappearance. My mind was all of a sudden occupied by theories like globalization, human liberation, technological determinism, mass media, secularization and so forth. Certainly the political and social formation of China must be a cause, but this asymmetry is in fact a common condition of most developing countries. I do not intend to investigate the political and social condition of China’ s modernization which is too complicated to be simplified in this paper. What have caught my attention are multiple dimensions of this moment of change which

mixed with traditions and novelty, old and new, primitive and technology, religion and virtuality standing side by side in a same space before everything is going to be fully modernized. In one street, we can find printing shops equipped with Microsoft XP desktop, and in the next the Sutra Printing Monastery still runs a living antique engraving workshop. In an Internet cafe I found a lama ironically immersed in a virtual world of RPG games and outside at a corner of a path, there are Tibetan walking around a beautifully carved mani stone mound. I was not surprised to see a woman in a hospital turning an electric dharma wheel beside her bed. The past is not so much a myth in this multidimensional space. The old world is still very real and tangible. You can find signs of changes everywhere, but many customs are still alive and spiritually practiced. Whether this moment of changes and diversities will be overwhelmed by global trends is still unpredictable but our affirmation may reinforce the expectations that modernization must lead to identical outcomes. While injecting various discourses of modernity into what I was seeing, I was aware that my preconception of these signs had already affirmed some expected outcomes. I began to ask myself is there a universal theory to explain all problems and process of modernization for all cultures in different time and places? What kind of value do we base to justify these problems? Where does our preconception come from? Our interpretation and assessment of this technological imbalance and asymmetrical development is viewed from a perspective of progressive societies and we tend to think all modernization process will reach the same destination. We believe that traditions must give way to development and therefore they need to be preserved before it is going to surrender to a new set of value and social system. We have the assumption that traditions must be contradictory to development. The worst of all readings is that when a modernizing society chooses to follow their advance neighbors' model of modernization by a radical revolution of her tradition. Indeed, this is exactly a complex in China's modernization which we can trace back to late nineteenth century. The Cultural Revolution was only a desperate moment of this complex. When do we start to call something a tradition? It seems that there is a clear boundary between tradition and progress. When we regard tradition as obstacles to modernization, what we assume the process of modernization must be irretrievably binary. This is typically a western way of looking at new and evolution. The idea of preservation does not free modernization from its problem too. Under such a tradition/modern perspective, while we are strengthening the preservation of a culture's heritage we are also disrupting it. It is our binary explanation of change actually makes modernization problematic. Changes need not to be ruptures or a break to conventionality nor is it a recycle of old and new.

Our modern eyes are so much confined by a philosophical

tradition with a view that all changes must come after a separation from tradition; sometimes it needs even a total cut off of a culture's roots. Change is not necessarily a binary pair of old and new, past and now, tradition and progress in Asian philosophy. Change is by itself change. It can't be resisted too. It is our clinging to invent a break with something that hinders us to see change is just everything as constantly in flux. The more we distinguish something in a culture as local or traditional to resist the idea of globalization, the fewer the dialogue between the two will ultimately happen because the logic lies behind this distinction is very much itself a binary. A culture's heritage will be ultimately reduced to a myth, similar to two akin words "traditions" and "the past"; they are now the taboos of many modern societies as well as in the discourses of humanity. Why is the past so frightening? If the past is inaccessible, it is not because we are impossible to return to a pre-industrial or pre-urbanized status, but because we do not have, or more correctly, we have lost our vocabulary to articulate our cultural heritage if it is not translated in a system of modern (or western) values. The accumulation and succession of a culture's heritage is not about preserving its tangible form but how much its rooted values give way to another system which is fundamentally dualistic and aggressive.

As an outsider, I am not in an appropriate position to justify this moment of changes and its influence to Tibetan culture. *The Cup* directed by Bhutanese filmmaker, Khyentse Norbu (in his Tibetan community he is called H.E. Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche) in 1999 captured a similar moment of change in the exile Tibetan community. Without the exotic tones that are common in western world's projection of Asian culture, the film calmly depicted Tibetan's peaceful response to her transition into a modern society. Portraying the contradictions and intricacies that come along with the temptations of technology and lures of civilization, the director did not undermine the meaning of change with either his insistence or resistance to modernization. The film neither shows disagreement between the philosophy of Tibetan life and a secular World Cup event, nor does it conflict with the director's spiritual status in real life and his absorption in mass media. The success of this convergence of two dissimilar realities was not gained from selections of refined cultural forms and traditional tools of expression but with the director's exact translation of his culture's inherited wisdoms in a modern language through a modern medium. Like Norbu has told in an interview that it is because he did not get stuck with inhibitions and hang-ups and gave constraints beautiful names, such as tradition and culture, he has faithfully showed his culture's openness to change without implying a rivalry break to his tradition or an unconditional compromise. Selecting a film medium to express Tibetan's concerns with modernization does not decrease an outsider's

realization of their tradition. Change is not viewed as a pair of tradition and new in many cultures.

What Do We Read Ourselves

What do these multiple dimensions of change mean to us? My conception is rather about a reading of ourselves through another culture which is almost at the dawn of modernization. Yet, in a culture that has been long after the dawn of modernization like mine, we can either identify ourselves with modern values or undermine it by an ambiguous theory of postmodernism. We find ourselves ironically stuck in a dichotomy of tradition and modern. If modernism or postmodernism is a particular historical movement in western history, our pastiche of these movements in local society is nothing more than an imitation. Therefore, we have reproduced a “post-ism” in our culture prior to that “ism” we supposed to go through first. Before modernism has ever come into being, we have an advance postmodernism and the later has continuously put us back to the problem of modernity which the theory wants to fix. The “new” in modernism has been replaced by postmodernism, but the idea of having a break with tradition still carries on. Without the historical and cultural context of a borrowing discourse, we are only reproducing them as a fascination. Did avant-garde movement matter the same in Chinese history as it was in European culture? We can ask the same question to media art too. We were completely out of the historical moments in movements like cyberpunk, Fluxus or the dematerialization of art. Media art in Hong Kong is not culturally rooted. If postmodern art in the 60s was not yet a global influence, new media has made this possible in the last two decades with the advance in communication technology. Accompanied with this new art form are packages of new technologies, expressive forms and also the same amount of art theories and aesthetics knowledge prior to our mastering of it. Like any other circulated art forms, avant-garde, modern or postmodern, without the particular historical and cultural context, we have indeed only one definition of art, that is, either old or new.

Would there be a theory of media art that can truly describe individual cultures' explanation of art not as one “ism” after another? Or else, media art must be in principle a western art in global scale because all its aspects are undoubtedly discoursed from the perspective of western art history and aesthetics theories. Can we articulate our cultural heritage not by a split of tradition/modern and at the same time it would not be translated as a mere icon of a global postmodern collage? What can a history of media art learn from history of science and technology if this history is only a history of modern western science? Before we

have answers to these questions, terms like local art, cross-cultural art or global art are not very much different. In addition to a global theory of complexity, different cultures' philosophy, mathematics, logics and heritable values should be dialogued in a world history of science and technology. Difference cultures have their meanings to changes. Turning away from a preconception of all modernization process must be same, we may have some wise understanding of art and science.

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