The Dilemma and Redemption of Culture: A Way to Interpret the Role of Intellectuals during the May 4th and Yan’an Period*

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The status and meaning of culture is closely related to the modern China’s revolution. Terry Eagleton’s cultural derivation provides a basis for redefining culture in the process of Chinese revolution. According to this, the new cultural movement in May 4th and the Chinese Marxism aesthetics in Yan’an have taken on the common issues like national and ideological transformation, whereas they have their own historical phase and thus the historical relativity characteristics. As the main body of culture transfer, the intellectuals implement the effective transformation of identity in the process from elite culture to the popularization of culture, and vigorously promote the idea of culture in the context of the Chinese revolution from dilemma to redemption.

Keywords: National revolution, Culture; Elite, Popularization

Introduction

Culture played an important role during the May 4th and Yan’an Period. Culture, to be more correctly, had a close bond with Chinese revolution in the development process of modern China. Aesthetics is the most concise form of culture while intellectuals are the subject of cultural transmission. What would be the influence by the combination of these two? As to Terry Eagleton, culture has three derived meanings: the criticism of capitalism, the life style as a whole, and the art in particular. The culture in the Chinese revolutionary process thus could be generalized according to his theory: as a distinctive lifestyle, the intellectuals offered help to the idealization of realistic social order by their creative and imaginative mental activities. Although there are something in common between the New Culture Movement in the May 4th and the Chinese Marxist Aesthetics founded by Mao Zedong in Yan’an period, such as they both aimed at issues of Nation and thought reform, they did have their separated historical phases and historical relativity. To inspect the roles of the intellectuals in these two historical periods can help us clarify the road the culture goes from being abstract to concrete, from the elites to the mass, from dilemma to redemption.

The Role of Culture in the National Revolution

To the intellectuals in the May 4th period, there was a logic thinking about the twofold mission of enlightenment and salvation: China would never be rescued from the imperialism unless the moral of people,
wisdom of people and power of people were to be improved. People should be put ahead of nation, enlightenment via anti-feudalism should be the prerequisite of anti-imperialism to save the nation. Thus the basic route leads to social revolution was the cultural improvement. Back then “writers and activists strove for the creation of a unified intellectual field that would draw on common assumptions and values” (Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 21). Among those the most outstanding was the attention towards “nationalism”. By looking at the reality in China back then, “our people have shown loyalty to family and clan but not the nation—there has been no nationalism…But for the nation there has never been an instance of the supreme spirit of sacrifice. The unity of Chinese people has stopped short at the clan and has not extended to the nation” (Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 85). Nationalism would be the only way to resist the imperialism from western countries. Chen Duxiu suggested the idea of “citizenism” as the connotation of modern Nationalism. He further concluded that the key factor of rational patriotism lied in the improvement of national behavior instead of sacrifice for the nation. “New human” (Xinmin, 新民) became the basis of nationalism, civil rights and patriotism could be realized only by self-awakening. The national revolution and the cultural enlightenment interacted, both of which aimed for altering thoughts. “The nation includes consciousness among its defining attributes; it must yet turn from ensoi into pour soi by its own effort—but first and foremost through the strenuous effort of cultivation make daily by the guardians of national culture” (Bauman, 1999, p. xxxvi), As the pioneer of thought awareness and the occupant of cultural priority, the intellectuals purposefully undertook the task of national enlightenment and nationality transformation.

The Marxist aesthetics formed in Yan’an period is closely related to Mao Zedong’s belief that the movement of revolution comes after the theory of it. He firstly introduced the “civil-military” (Wenwu, 文武) policy in the talks at the Yan’an forum on literature and art. Mao had a very precise analysis about the new-democracy culture. “the new political power, the new economic power, the new cultural power, they are all revolutionary powers in China…the new-old struggle in Chinese society is the new power of all revolutionary classes against the old one of imperialism and feudal classes. In other words, it’s a struggle between revolution and anti-revolution” (Mao, 1991, p. 696). New culture is not only a theory, it is itself the revolutionary action for Mao Zedong.

Mao’s analysis about the new-democracy culture comes from his correct understanding of the reality. On the one hand, historism, as an inspiration source of his thoughts, explained why a communist should first strive for bourgeois democracy, and the socialism system after. As Mao said, “it’s the historical necessary route” (1991, p. 559). On the other hand, the concept of “multi-determination” could be seen in Mao’s thoughts which were clearly reflected by his view of contradiction. Firstly, Mao also set a question of “weak link” (Boruohuanjie, 薄弱环节) which he described as follows: “victories always get started, get developed, and get won from where the anti-revolution power is weak” (1991, p. 153). The imbalance of the war determined its durability which offered space for cultural revolution and thought construction, and explained the adoption of the united front strategy. Secondly, Mao clarified the objective and the subjective conditions of the new democratic revolution. Thirdly, as Althusser said, a unity which was formed by the accumulation of a series of environment and trend could spur the breakout of the revolution. People in different classes such as proletariat, peasants and petty bourgeoisie applied themselves in the anti-imperialism and anti-feudal trend, it’s not only the demand of the united front, but also their own nature, their current situation and their special way of activity. This was clearly analyzed in Mao’s article “Chinese revolution and the CCP” (ZhongguoGemingyuZhongguoGongchandang, 中国革命与中国共产党).
Mao Zedong presented several topics about the construction of cultural revolution in the new democratic period, such as “the new democracy theory”, “the united front in the cultural work”, “recruit large numbers of intellectuals” and so on. He, on the one hand, confirmed the intellectuals’ function as “pioneer” (Xianfeng, 先锋) and “bridge” (Qiaoliang, 桥梁) during the Chinese revolution. On the other hand, he emphasized the importance to educate and to transform the intellectuals, demanded that the cultural workers should have the awareness of “people’s culture” (Renmin de Wenhua, 人民的文化).

**Elite Culture in May 4th Period**

Anti-tradition is the classical feature of the bourgeois aesthetic discourse in May 4th, enlightenment by virtue of anti-feudalism is the main power of Chinese nationalism. As a new national language, the vernacular movement aroused huge response and got big support in the level of intellectuals because of its opposition to the feudal rules. To view the history as the will of the emperor and the principle of feudal moral was replaced by the effort of the youth, to whom science and aesthetic education were tools to realize people’s values. But one of the consequences of anti-tradition in the background of low moral, low wisdom and low power of people was the weakness of the mass base. Chen Duxiu indicated that people who was illiterate was not able to get any benefits from fictions, newspapers, and even schools. What he suggested was to reform dramas. This traditional form in the name of “reform” could be seen as “putting new wine into the old bottle” (Jiupingzhuangxinjiu, 旧瓶装新酒). In fact, some conservatives who were criticized by radicalism provided a rational thought toward the historical development. For example, Du Yaquan believed that “continuity” (Jiexuzhuyi, 接续主义) was a dialectical unity of “conservation” (Baoshou, 保守) and “radicalization” (Kaijin, 开进), complete conservation meant reversionary, while too radical resulted in shaking the nation’s base. It was more suitable for people’s mental feature and thinking habit to combine old with new, it was this kind of combination which “placed poetic and artistic representation above philosophy and history” (Bullock, 1985, p. 40). It was a pity that the activists didn’t make further thinking about it because of the rapid change in Chinese history.

Another consequence of anti-tradition was that the western theories were largely introduced by attempting to solve all the problems in China. The method the intellectuals in May 4th period used to save their country was from the nation’s inherent weakness, that was very precious but the consequence was obvious too. Firstly, it was not easy to make these theories which were only propagated among the intellectuals understandable to people. Secondly, based on the situation back then, and the elements like “novelty”, “origin” that the concept of revolution itself has, it’s difficult for the intellectuals to get down to research work. When novelty reached the realm of politics, “it not only assumed a more radical expression, but became endowed with a reality peculiar to the political realm alone” (Arendt, 1963, pp. 39-40). Therefore when it came to explain the western cultural phenomena such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the intellectuals of the May 4th, their comprehension was hasty, sometimes even self-contradictory. As Hannah Arendt mentioned, “it was precisely the revolutions, their crisis and their emergency, which drove the very ‘enlightened’ men of the eighteenth century to plead for some religious sanction at the very moment when they were about to emancipate the secular realm fully from the influences of the churches and to separate politics and religion once and for all” (1963, p. 186). This self-contradiction which the western Enlightenment could not even avoid now got more serious in China because of the demand to localize the western theories. How to find the most suitable theory for Chinese reality was not
the same as to simplify it into a “new” issue. In this point, Fu Sinian’s analysis about “the Chinese intellectuals always think a new theory as a universal one without considering time and situation” (1918) sounds reasonable.

Anti-tradition and learning from the West manifested elitism as another limitation of bourgeois aesthetics in May 4th. Firstly, this thought enlightenment was mainly carried out among intellectuals and young students, its main spreading route was through the newspaper and magazine publishment and the reform of education system. The extent to which the masses were affected by it and accepted it remained to be proved. Secondly, many intellectuals at that time came from traditional literati or bureaucratic family, although they strived for getting out the feudal cage, the effect the class boundary between the ruling and the ruled imposed on them was out of their imagination. “In our lives and in our psyches we keep lugging along a three-thousand-year-old history…. We can only say that we are people who value new thought, but we have not yet displaced old ways of thinking with new ones” (Schwarcz, 1989, p. 159). They easily went back to their families once the movement was failed or encountered difficulties, their aesthetic idea would accordingly become a kind of utopia. Thirdly, the elitism would easily lead to a psychological superiority over the people. As Luo Jialun wrote in a memorial article, “the students became a special class after June 3rd, they concerned about everything and were in a position to supervise and to instruct people who had to treat them differently” (Zhang, 1979, p. 109). How to spread the idea of enlightenment effectively, how to realize the transformation of intellectuals, it’s a huge difficulty for the cultural and thought revolution in May 4th, it’s a big challenge for the bourgeois aesthetics as well. Because “the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10).

**Popularization of Literature and Art—The Mission of Intellectuals**

Luo Jialun, one of the founders of *Xinchao* (Renaissance, 新潮), mentioned three factors of the masses in an article: the masses’ inertia, the simplicity of the topic of the mass movement, the emotional stimulus. He saw both the significance of the mass movement and the failure to start the movement without knowing the mass’ mind (1920). It conveyed a cultural characteristics which was similar to Eagleton’s description, “it represented in the main a radical brand of aristocratism, with a heartfelt sympathy the volk and a supercilious distaste for the burgher” (2000, p. 12). Lu Xun, in one of his articles, argued that intellectuals took on the role of cultural guide, while the masses were unguided because of their taste, temperament and other reasons (1918). This kind of cultural attitude with demanding sympathy for people had been transformed by Mao Zedong in his political writings, he generalized the new literature and art policy as “standing in the position of the proletariat and the masses”, “to make the thoughts and feelings of our writers and artists in harmony with the masses” (1991, p. 851).

Mao Zedong’s attitude toward intellectuals was both positive and critical, in his opinion, intellectuals should be united and be educated at the same time. On the one hand, intellectuals had no difference with the classes of workers and peasants in the oppression of imperialism, feudalism and capitalism, so they were one of the necessary social power with “great revolutionary character”. With rich political feelings and cultural knowledge, intellectuals often played the role of “pioneer” and “bridge” in the process of spreading and accepting Marxism-Leninism and Chinese revolution. More information could be seen from Mao’s analysis of “the
masses”, “the largest number of people, over ninety percent of the total population is workers, peasants, soldiers and urban petty bourgeoisie” (1991, p. 855). The intellectuals, who were urban petty bourgeoisie, were “ally of the revolution” and strong force of the “cultural front”. On the other hand, Mao Zedong clearly defined Chinese revolution as new democratic revolution which was “part of the world’s proletarian socialist revolution” and was anti-imperialist and anti-feudal by the masses under the leadership of proletariat (1991, p. 647). Similar idea could be seen in Engels, he believed that the struggle should band small farmers and small bourgeois because they were in the transitional phase to proletariat, but it should end up with the victory of the proletariat. Both Engels and Mao Zedong conveyed the necessity of banding intellectuals and the intention to uphold the proletariat leadership. Right on this point, Mao Zedong thought that we could better mobilize and organize the masses only by recognizing the objects of the revolution and learning from the past. “A large class, like a great nation, never learns better or quicker than by undergoing the consequences of its own mistakes” (Engels, 1943, p. xix). Since elitism was the major problem of intellectuals’ thoughts, it required them to work hard, to deliberately change their role from “enlightener” to the ones who were to be transformed ideologically.

Such a change was both important and significant. To truly become one with the masses, to change the idea that the masses were servile, ignorant and lazy must be on the premise of justifying the role of peasants. Collecting years of revolutionary struggle experience and critically inheriting the classical Marxism, Mao Zedong put forward that peasants, as the fundamental force of revolution, had the power like “abnormally fierce storm”. “All the revolutionary parties and revolutionary comrades must be put in front of them and be inspected” (1991, p. 13). In other words, it was peasants who in turn to judge the revolutionary position and attitude of the intellectuals, not the opposite. By comparison, Marx thought it was a historical inevitability for the countryside’s attachment to the city and for the peasants giving way to the bourgeoisie. “the bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns…so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West” (1972, p. 477). When speaking of the socialists’ concerning about the farmer issue in The Farmers in France and German, Engels still regarded peasants as a group to be rescued and thus lack of consideration compared to Mao’s idea of peasants’ revolutionary subjectivity.

Mao Zedong also acknowledged that it was not easy for the intellectuals to build rapport with the masses, which needed “long-term and even painful training”. As for the intellectuals especially the writers and artists, what made their work meaningful? The answer was “to absorb nutrient from the masses” (1991, p. 864). Our peasants were not uncultured, they were using their own blood and sweat to create a culture for the landlords; Our peasants were not unwilling to learn knowledge, it was the dogmatism and the subjective attitude towards the peasants that made them opposed to “the schools” and “the students”. The level of literacy would be increased rapidly as soon as the peasants started their own night schools. Although Marx and Engels felt sorry about the peasants’ idyllic life being destroyed, they considered it, on the one hand, as historically inevitable, on the other hand, as “the peasant has so far largely manifested himself as a factor of political power only by his apathy, which has its roots in the isolation of rustic life” (2010, p. 483). Marx and Engels had neglected to some extent the creativity and initiative of human beings because of their emphasis on the infrastructural evolution. Whereas Mao Zedong thought that history was created by people and accordingly put forward the national and people’s aesthetic form at the cultural revolution level.
Mao Zedong also questioned the elite culture in May 4th on the attitude toward national heritage. “The foreign stereotypes, the empty and abstract discipline and the dogmatism should all be replaced by Chinese style which are very lively and are welcomed by Chinese people. People who don’t know internationalism at all always separate the content from the national form, but we should combine the two” (1991, p. 534). This was a clear expression of culture’s national form, it’s also a profound rethinking of intellectuals’ anti-traditionalism in May 4th. Deep into the workers and peasants’ life, feel freely to the masses, learn the democratic and revolutionary part from people’s culture by the viewpoint of historical dialectics, this was the right way the intellectuals should take in the revolutionary practices. Painting workers in Yan’an, for example, usually used paper made of Malan straw, black paint from pot bottom, sickles and hoes as objects, this was certainly for economic reasons, but from another point of view, these art tools and objects were used and praised as symbols of the masses.

Although Mao Zedong made an emphasis to peasants’ revolutionary strength, he didn’t think that the peasant’s themselves were proletarian. He depicted the interior fierce polarization among peasants, analyzed the possibility they might participate in the revolution based on their different economic status, so as to adopt corresponding strategies. But the separation between economy and politics was the most prominent obstacle for the class consciousness. “And if the proletariat finds the economic inhumanity to which it is subjected easier to understand than the political, and the political easier than the cultural, then all these separations point to the extent of the still unconquered power of capitalist forms of life in the proletariat itself” (Lukacs, 1968, p. 77). The inherent feudal remaining thoughts made it easy for the peasants to see only the immediate local interests. To achieve the ultimate goal, it would be a process from the “actual mental consciousness” to “proletariat class consciousness”, which could only be realized through the ideological reform and the unity of cultural theory and practice. As commanders of all levels in cultural front, intellectuals were responsible for offering the masses “the cultural knowledge and artistic works that they desperately needed, enhancing their enthusiasm and confidence, strengthening their bond, making them fight with one mind against enemies” (Mao, 1991, p. 862).

Conclusion

As it mentioned before, the cultural dilemma in 4th May lies in the effective spread of enlightenment ideas and the effective transformation of intellectual identities. Some scholars considered this kind of dilemma could be settled by “the populism” in Mao Zedong’s thought. Maurice Meisner pointed that the inner contradiction of the populist worldview was, “A voluntaristic belief in the decisive revolutionary role of the consciousness of the intelligentsia was accompanied by a basic faith that the truly creative forces of revolution reside in the people themselves” (1982, p. 84). From the viewpoint of dialectical materialism, Mao Zedong analyzed that the intellectuals were not just onlookers and enlightenments, they involved in the process of cultural revolution with practical theory and action. To assist the Gongnongbing (Workers, Peasants and Soldiers, 工农兵) in pushing the history forward, the intellectuals, at the same time, accomplished their own transformation of thoughts.

References


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