

CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM AND WESTERN CHINA DEVELOPMENT

YU Yongyue¹

Abstract: The development of Western China should take a new path, different from that which people before us have taken in Western China, from that which industrialists have taken on the East Coast and also from that which developed countries have taken in Europe and the United States. The path I propose here is built upon constructive postmodernism. The path isn't the one and only option but can serve as an alternative worth exploring.

Key words: constructive postmodernism, Western China, development

PART ONE: CURRENT PREDICAMENTS OF WESTERN CHINA

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1999, the Chinese Central Government announced the strategy of Western China Development. According to an official statement, Western China consists of 12 provinces/regions: Shanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Xizang(Tibet), Guizhou, Sichuan, Chongqing, Yunnan, Nei Mongol, and Guangxi. This area represents 6,380,000 km², which is 71% of China's total territory. The population of this part of the country is 320,000,000, which represents 28.4% of the total population. Minorities among this population represent 86% of all of the minorities in China combined. Eight provinces in which minorities are actually majorities are all in Western China.

China consists of multiple ethnic groups. The development of Western China is not an economic

¹ School of Political Science and Public Management, Wuhan university, China.

(1967-), female, doctor degree of Political Economics, Associate professor of School of Political Science and Public Management in Wuhan University, mainly researching Western China Development.

Address: School of Political Science and Public Management, Wuhan University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430072, P.R.China.

* Received 4 February 2008; accepted 19 April 2008

issue per se. It is also a socio-political one. Only through better development of Western China in every aspect can we bring a stable social and political milieu in which China can enhance itself.

2. POVERTY

Both rural and urban areas of Western China share the problem of poverty. To be more exact, there is a big gap between the rich and the poor. Historically, Western China has had a big population which has been below poverty line and this group of people almost all live in the country /villages. After we espoused the market economic system, we have seen a group of people with less ability to compete, such as women especially pregnant women, less educated or aged people, being laid-off. It results in poverty in cities as well in Western China.

3. ECO-SYSTEM

Western China is where the sources and heads of Yellow River and Yangzi River are. The environmental situation of the area, affects not only this area but also other parts of China as well, not only the current generation but also many generations to come.

In order for better returns in crops, people before us chopped down trees for farms. This led to disastrous alterations of and damage to our environment such as major flooding. In the hope of seeing a higher GDP and/or a constant GDP increase, people looted Mother Earth. Generations of Chinese seemed to have witnessed a big leap in industry, but they failed to notice the damage they have done to the environment.

4. SOCIETY

In Western China, 2000-2005 saw about 25% of country folks flocking into the city with the hope of better opportunities. Most of them were young people; those still remaining in the country were either children or elders.

Twenty percent of those who still remained in the country couldn't afford medical care. And since those adults in the country were advanced in years, they found supporting children's education a financial burden. Eighteen percent of the country folks abandoned their lands, 60% thought of doing so and 57% of them said they would if they could find any jobs in the city. These migrants from the country brought challenges to the city — more people than ever competing for limited job slots, and difficulty in managing and maintaining social order in the unfamiliar city.

5. CULTURE

There has been a global craze for ancient Chinese philosophy. Indeed, although those different schools of thoughts were developed thousands of years ago, they still work like elixir to our times' confused and tortured minds. This heritage, together with that developed by numerous non-Han ethnic groups, put together the magnificent Chinese culture we know today.

The cradle of this inclusive Chinese culture is in jeopardy · however. Western China is now almost a

desert. This makes travel hard for people in the desert and the people outside the desert don't bother to meet their brothers and sisters in the desert. The communication between the East Coast and Western China is thus blocked. The East keeps modernizing itself, abandoning the glorious past/tradition, and Western China fails to enjoy the conveniences that their East Coast counterparts have.

PART TWO: THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The development of Western China, I suggest, should take a new path, different from that which people before us have taken in Western China, from that which industrialists have taken on the East Coast and also from that which developed countries have taken in Europe and the United States. The path I propose here is built upon constructive postmodernism. The path, I would like to stress, isn't the one and only option but can serve as an alternative worth exploring.

Some people believe that China, as a nation yet to be modernized, cannot leap straight to the postmodern era, given the conventional notion that human development is linear, including the step through modernization.

Postmodernism isn't anti-modern, but still aware of the domination of modernism, it cherishes the positive side of modernism but at the same time pays attention to its limitations. Postmodernism appreciates the material and spiritual advancement of human life that modernism has brought us, but meanwhile criticizes negative effects that modernism entails. The love-hate relationship with modernism is the crucible for new thoughts.

The ultimate goal of constructive postmodernism is to pursue the common good of all species. What scholars ponder over day and night is how to at the same time keep the positive side of modernism but also avoid negative effects that it may bring to the environment and society. They work and hope to figure out an alternative option that may be a win-win situation, beneficial to all entities.

We need new wisdom in face of today's issues and to deal with them, says Dr. John Cobb, who has in the past more than 30 years been keeping the development of China and the world close to his heart.

Professor David Griffin defines constructive postmodernism as a process of overcoming the negative effects of modernization while preserving its positive achievements. For Griffin, China can avoid the destructive effect of modernization by learning from the mistakes made by the Western world.

Constructive postmodernism is new wisdom that I would like to propose. It can help us re-think the Western China's yesterday, today and tomorrow and generate harmonious development in all aspects.

1. CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM EMPHASIZES THE ECO-SYSTEM

In sharp contrast to modernism's human-centered attitudes towards nature, postmodernism contends that human beings take all species into account when consuming natural resources.

The notion that human beings are the king of all species is nothing but human beings' ego-centrism and their rationalization of their looting behaviors. Human beings aren't but one species among millions of others, not superior to other fellow species. Human beings' value as a member of the big family is enhanced when they contribute to the harmony of the eco-system.

Constructive postmodernism re-constructs the hierarchy of the whole eco-system and stresses the reciprocity of human-environment relationship.

2. CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM CARES ABOUT INTEGRITY

Modernism sees only the trees but never the whole forest. In other words, it has been criticized for being reductionism. Constructive Postmodernism promotes integrity. The unique nature of postmodern methodology stems from the examination of the inter-connection between the organic and inorganic.

Constructive Postmodernism maintains that the whole eco-system is a big entity constituted by numerous interdependent organic and inorganic subsystems constantly in development. The thoughts proposed here show a long-term, comprehensive and multi-perspective concern for regional, national and international development, and the natural eco-system as well.

3. CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM PROMOTES DIVERSIFICATION

Diversification is one key element of Constructive Postmodernism. According to Prof. John Cobb, Postmodernism is pluralism. Abstractly speaking, Constructive Postmodernism suggests a multi-perspective approach towards problems. In practice, it is manifested in diversity of values, developmental models, lifestyles, preferences and bio-diversity. As an extension of the point I made earlier, the Constructive Postmodernism proposed here is based on a combination of post-modern organic and holistic theories. This novel combination of two schools of thought stresses the worth as subject of all things and the inter-connection between them. All species are entities in and of themselves, though inter-related to one another, human beings included, none of them separate from the human species, who, for thousands of years, have claimed domination of the Earth which should have belonged to all living beings.

4. CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM CALLS FOR OPENNESS

There will always be conflict between numerous forces. Traditionally, conflicts are handled with power struggles or even fights. This ego-centric behavior leads to further ideological closure and absolutism.

In contrast, Constructive Postmodernism calls for openness. This openness consists of empathic listening, tolerance, and respect. In turn, one is advised to adjust and adapt, ready to accept viewpoints different from his or her own. So Constructive Postmodernism contends that in reaction to conflict, one shouldn't oppress those on the margin and should create a possible win-win situation. Ultimately, he or she can generate egalitarian dialogues, coming to consensus but at the same time respecting differences.

5. CONSTRUCTIVE POSTMODERNISM ENCOURAGES CREATIVITY

Postmodernism encourages people to live up to their potential, challenge themselves and explore new things. A famous philosopher says, because a creator creates not only a new world but also possibilities, he or she should create possibilities for a better world.

Creativity is a crucial value for Constructive Postmodernism. In the eye of a Constructive Postmodernism theorist, creativity is an integral part of a human being. "We are essentially creative beings: all individuals embody creative energy, and we humans evidently embody it to the highest degree

(at least on this planet).”

Given the uniqueness of Western China and the multi-ethnic nature of its population, absolutism can never function adequately in this region. Constructive Postmodernism cares about complication and process, which serve as the basis of creativity. Western China is a complex region compared to other regions dominated by Han people. And it also has a complicated history. This unique nature of the region provides nutrients to creativity.

PART THREE: THE ADVANCEMENT OF WESTERN CHINA

What would I like to see enhanced in Western China?

Some people interpret the advancement I propose as breaking through stalemate, some as instigating economic development, and some as challenging conventional cultural codes. All these interpretations do resonate with me but I call for more. I would like to see Western China pushing its geographical, historical and cultural limits, adopting a developmental model different from that of the East Coast and taking a path not the same as that of developed countries. In short, I would like to see a path beyond the unsustainable modernism, a way of harmonious political, economical, social, cultural and environmental development.

1. DEMYSTIFY THE MARKET ECONOMY

The developed status of western nations indeed appears quite appealing. China’s East Coast has adopted a similar model, focusing first on productivity and then shifting to proficiency. This profit-oriented model has brought a revenue boost, but I should say it is a short-sighted, narrow, ego-centric path. The model I propose here concerns not only the economic aspects but also social and environmental ones.

2. STOP LOOTING MOTHER NATURE

I suppose you might from time to time be struck by vivid news about natural disasters in China. The most recent one, which occurred just a few weeks ago, was a big flood in Central China, which left thousands of people homeless. This is a price that we have to pay for our over-developed timber industry, in particular the areas where the heads of the Yellow River and the Yangtzi River are located. Trees can grasp and absorb water for us when there’s too much rain, but thanks to people before us or even to ourselves now, there just aren’t forests to be of service to us. But it’s never too late to come up with a strategic plan. Starting in 1999, the government, as part of the Western China Development package, implemented a tree planting campaign. It can’t be denied that those trees can’t solve the problem right away. But in a long run, I’m sure that we will see the positive effects of this approach. This reflects the point I am stressing — a model that we can all benefit from for generations to come.

3. ABANDON ANTAGONISM AGAINST TRADITION

The China East Coast, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, has been recognized as the “great

modernization of China”. This modernization, which is actually westernization, as western culture is the preferred and dominating culture, makes East Coasters every inch the best. This, in turn, results in Western China residents’ collective inferiority complex. Western China has been marginalized and has been seen (both by the China East Coast and Western China itself) as the “other”.

Western China in actuality has a rich history. Agriculture started there. The Chinese Characters used today came from there. Were it not for our obsession with profit-oriented economic development, they would not have had this inferiority complex. I have a story to illustrate my point.

In 1981, while China was intrigued by the agricultural industry in the United States and hope to “modernize” Chinese farms by espousing “the American experience”, an American researcher came to China to study the Chinese organic method! This story illustrates to us that Chinese culture, in this postmodern era, is emerging as an alternative and appreciated way of living and processing.

Western nations have come to realize its value. Chinese people, in particular Western Chinese in this context, should value their long tradition as well.

4. RETAIN THE PRECIOUS VALUES

There have been numerous definitions for the word “liberation” or “liberating”. In modern China, I am sorry to say, it means to “liberate the people from the precious values”. So precious values have been treated as obstacles to development, which, as I’ve mentioned earlier, has been economic- and market-oriented. This leads to people’s negligence and abandonment of social justice and conscience. Money comes first. Yes, we see people satisfied materially but other than that, they are hollow men walking in limbo. The modesty and frankness of Western China’s people, the precious values which I think are the gist of Chinese culture, are gone. I really would like to see them retrieved.

5. PURSUE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Past development models are mostly based on these postulates — that there are limitless resources on earth at our disposal and that the earth can digest and get rid of any pollutants that human beings heap on it. But we have come to the realization that such assumptions are both wrong! As the example I just gave pertaining to floods in Central China has proved to us, Mother Earth has her limit and she has started to fight back. The United Nations’ proposal of “sustainable development” is human beings’ coming to an awakening before it is too late. I suppose I’m not exaggerating when I say that Mother Earth is “fighting back”. And I believe that a call for harmonious interaction with Mother Earth isn’t an outrageous request. I would like to see harmonious symbiosis between human beings and Mother Earth, between human beings and other fellow inhabitants on earth, and among human beings ourselves. This harmonious interaction, which means equalitarian distribution and wise utilization of resources on earth, is, in my opinion, the ultimate way to have sustainable resources for us and for those after us.

PART FOUR: A POSSIBLE BLUEPRINT FOR WESTERN CHINA DEVELOPMENT

1. A SECOND ENLIGHTENMENT

If we see the modernization of Europe in the 18th century and the modernization of China in the early 20th century as the First Enlightenment in the West and the East, then my proposal may be called a Second Enlightenment. This Second Enlightenment, cherishing broader perspectives towards nature, consists of three aspects: ecological benefits, social benefits and economic benefits, and these three aspects, as my previous points might have implied, need to be valued in this fashion: ecological benefits being the priority and economic benefits being the least important.

Ecological benefits are to see the reduction of water, air and soil pollution, in particular a wise utilization (or consumption) of forests, water, soil and animals and plants. If we can't bring betterment to the eco-system, then at least we minimize our harm to it.

Social benefits include social justice, concerns for consumer health and safety, to be more exact, policies that serve the good of all people. These benefits can bring a better social structure and social order, and eventually a harmonious society. Ideally, I'd like to see policies that cause no negative effects. Should there be any negative impacts, they should be kept to the minimum.

This grand plan I'm proposing starts with education. Specifically, I'd like to see concepts of environmental protection and social justice incorporated into all our curriculum. Once these key concepts become values ingrained in people's minds, the policies and implementation of them just come naturally. Then we may see concrete plans which go along with sustainable development in agriculture, tourism and other aspects germinating and coming to fruition.

I might sound like an idealist to a lot of people. But I believe that through this lay-out, we will see a light at the end of the tunnel — a better environment, a more just society but still a profitable economic structure.

2. SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Elton John's song for the 1995 "Lion King" was titled "Circle of Life". This popular piece happens to sum up my idea of sustainable agricultural development. It might have already been a conventional view to grow trees to prevent earth from being washed away, to plan for uses of a given soil based on the characteristics of the soil, to modify the structure of the soil or the crops if need be. But this idea I borrow from Elton John's great hit is the harmonious cycle between/around agriculture, forestry, and fishing. The adoption of chemicals should be kept to the minimum or banned. Such approaches can promise production with stable and sustainable profits.

3. ECO-CONSCIOUS TOURISM

Current tourism is the simple "come and go" approach — tourists come in, see the sights and go. We should count ourselves lucky if they don't leave behind any trash. The plan I have in mind is to turn these sites into classrooms. Tourists can still find themselves well entertained but at the same time, their eco-consciousness is raised. They are not only observers of this environmental protection movement but also participants and contributors. Such tourism brings in money but at the same time prevents possible damage to the environment. The earth becomes a better place to be.

4. ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY CONSUMERS

Moderation has been a virtue highly appreciated by Chinese society. And I've meant to promote this

virtue in almost every aspect. Earlier, I talked about modest consumption of natural resources. That is, we should utilize natural resources wisely so that we'll still have resources at our disposal generations to come. Now I'd like to suggest moderation by consumers, which to me is closely akin to the careful use of natural resources. Earlier in this lecture, I mentioned Chinese Westernization, or rather Americanization. China likes almost anything American, including values and shopping habits. Now Chinese people also try to keep up with the Joneses, living on credit cards as opposed to what they have in their pockets. This over-consumption isn't healthy. As experience tells us, we see head-on competition, bankruptcy, even paranoia, etc. Yes, a lot of factors have contributed to almost pathological shopping sprees. But I would like to point my finger at the media. TV, radio, the press positively represent those owning BMWs or magnificent mansions, in short, those leading luxurious lives, making money and squandering our traditional cherished value. I would like to see the media approaching stories with critical eyes rather than an advertising intent. We need to retrieve moderation, the long-lost virtue. It's healthy for our minds, our bodies, and in a long run, our environment, our earth.

5. CITY-COUNTRY SYMBIOTIC COOPERATION

There has been an oppressor/oppressed relationship between the urban and rural areas where the city plays the feudal lord while the small agricultural village is a poor peasant. I would like to call for re-structuring of the power dynamic. Specifically, I suppose it's a good idea to have the city serve as the nutrients to allow the nearby provincial towns to be better developed. When farmers need funds to start, urban business people chip in money. When the crops grow to fruition, these urban contributors get some discounts if they would like any of the final products. This way, city folks get some benefits such as better-priced wheat, vegetables and fruits and better still, farmers don't need to worry about crops overproduced. Firstly, a portion of the crops have been reserved by the urban business people and secondly, if indeed supply exceeds demands, the urban business people must have channels through which they can help the farmers distribute the crops. This plan echos the postmodern paradigm with which I frame the whole lecture. Postmodernism suggests that the East-West binary opposition, in particular the fact that the West appears to be superior to the East, should be broken. The East should be encouraged, and encourage itself, to preserve its identity in stead of espousing Western values and treating Westernization as the only way out. The current power structure needs to be de-centralized. Seeing the relation between urban and rural areas through the lens of postmodernism, I suggest changing from city-centeredness. Agricultural towns and villages should be given the chance to preserve their identity as small villages and towns. They don't need to be urbanized in order to survive. This utopia needs the rise of the village folks' self-awareness and also urban folks' appreciation for the country. Like Western nations' re-exploration of the East, urban people help country people regain their self-confidence, the two groups live and work on an egalitarian basis and eventually this long sought utopia can be realized.

REFERENCES

- Arran E. Gare. (1995). *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Clifford W. Cobb and John B. Cobb, Jr.. (1994). *The Green National Product: A Proposed Index of Sustainable Economics Welfare*. Lanham. Maryland: University Press of America, Inc..
- David R. Griffin. (1988). *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- David W. Orr. (1944). *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*. New York: State University of New York Press.

- Ervin Laszlo. (1974). *A strategy for the Future*. New York: George Braziller, Inc..
- Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr.. (1994). *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Herman E. Daly. (1996). *Beyond Growth*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Herman E. Daly. (1999). *Ecological Economics and the Ecology of Economics: Essays in Criticism*. Cheltenham, UK. Northampton, MA. USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc..