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The Clash of Civilizations?

The Myth of Cultural Clash between U.S and China

Cheung Lee-ying

The cultural conflicts are particularly highlighted after Samuel P. Huntington published his work titled “The Clash of Civilizations” since 1993. Huntington claimed that the fundamental source of conflict in the new world will not be primarily ideological or economic. Instead, the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. (36) Huntington’s hypothesis on fundamental conflicts of culture to the affection of global politics seems realistic especially after 911 terrorist attacks; ethnic and religious clashes are frequently found in the contemporary history. A dichotomy of U.S and China are often presented by the mass media, while the political and economic statuses of China in the global stage are rising rapidly, causing tension and competition. Apart from the economic reason, the cultural powers of the two nations are always put into comparison. So, can Huntington’s hypothesis adequately explain the relationship between the two nations that the conflict is caused by civilization differences?

According to Huntington, differences among civilizations are not only real but basic. (37) This implies that two cultures are essentially different so that they are unable to communicate with each other. He even suggests the rise of China would threaten the stability of Asia, since Confucianism and the Western civilization are essentially different. As a result, the U.S should stop the rise of China even by military forces. Huntington addresses, the cultural differences are far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies, and the processes of economic modernization
and social changes are weakening the power of national state. (37) These two points will be argued in this essay.

If Huntington is true, there is no way for people to compromise for world peace as it would never come true. On the contrary, Edward Said offers an opposite idea. Said highlights at least one of the most obvious weaknesses of Huntington in his articles called “The Clash and Definitions” and “The Clash of Ignorance”, saying that the hypothesis of Huntington neglects the changeability and complexity of culture, as culture is never as static as Huntington said. Besides Said, Edward T. Hall also discusses the cross-cultural matters, such as pointing out that the clash of styles in communication often leads to misunderstandings and misrepresentation. Also, scholars such as Arif Dirlik specifically concern the situation of China in the globalization discourse. Dirlik advocates, one has to be more situational in understanding Chinese behavior in order to avoid a problematic representation of Chinese as a monolithic entity. (Ooi 121)

The Clash between U.S and China?

Although difficult to trace the origin, the phenomenon of U.S- China comparison becomes obvious. Under the influence of the Cold War, two famous articles about the containment of China are published. The first one is written by Leslie H. Gelb, titled “Breaking China Apart” posted on New York Times in 1991. Another one is by Charles Krauthammer, titled “Why we must contain China” posted on Times (Vol. 146, Iss.5) in 1995. Obviously, China is presented as a threat generally for her economic domination among the world in the coming future. Although the argument starts from the economic prospective, Huntington is one of the scholars who draw the attention
from economic to cultural aspect. Meanwhile, some scholars including Chinese one promote the enhancement of soft power of China. This kind of ambition seems indirectly coherent to Huntington’s assumption that the Chinese will become a threat, while the rising power of China is affirmed through all those representations.

To a large extent, however, the dichotomy of U.S and China is ideologically constructed. The tension between U.S and China usually becomes obvious in the economic aspect but not the cultural aspect. According to the U.S Foreign Trade Statistics, the U.S trade deficit with China was US$227 billion. Despite a slight drop, it is still the largest in the world between any two countries. The civilization differences as Huntington suggested is probably not the fundamental problem. The assumption on civilization differences among political ideologies and regimes probably cannot stand in case of U.S-China relationship.

On one hand, the notion of China threatening the West has a political implication behind; on the other hand, some Chinese scholars suggest that China should enhance the soft power as well as the cultural power in order to dominate the world in every aspect. For instance, a Chinese critic comments that the country should export popular culture as U.S does. (Ding and Saunders 25) The ambition of Chinese scholars are reflected in their essays, one example is found, “China used to be called “Central Empire”, that is, at the world’s “center”, why will it not “recentralize” itself, or at least enable itself to be among pluralistic centers of the world culture in an age of globalization?....Shall we Chinese intellectuals construct a theoretical discourse on globalization of our own?” (Wang 56) The rise of economic and political power
seems to bring ahead the improvement of China’s cultural power, but actually the former does not directly guarantee an increase of the latter. Those people who want China to be the greatest in cultural power seem fall into the same trap as Huntington. This kind of expectation on cultural domination is somehow a dangerous sign for cultural imperialism. In other words, so-called “cultural power” is just a tool for enhancing national power, a kind of national affirmation, while the possibility of complexity, hybridity and diversity between cultures are ignored.

Some scholars may agree that America and China can stand side by side; they comment that Chinese cultural power need not compete directly with Americanization or Westernization as globalization is not a zero-sum game. (Ding and Saunders 25) No matter it is a zero-sum game or it isn’t, another problem is, whether it is a cultural domination, or dominations. A third name other than U.S and China has still been ignored. Is it possible to interpret the case in a way that, becoming the biggest cultural export country already means that the globalization is a zero-sum game because the cultural domination will negatively eliminate other possibilities? For example, Hollywood Movies have taken away the chances for other non-Hollywood movies to share the film market. This example shows the consequences of putting U.S and China into competitors, as well as expecting one to be the biggest share in the global market, while other countries are deprived and cut off.

In fact, the interaction between cultures may have a third way out for less concerned countries. Using Stephen Chow’s movie, “Kung Fu” (2004) as an example, regardless of arguing the representation of Hong Kong or Chinese Culture, the investment
project, the filming technique, the target audiences, made “Kung Fu” not a pure Hong Kong movie. (Chu) The success of “Kung Fu” shows blending of the nationality and hybrid collaboration can be easily found in the era of globalization. This also shows the multi-dimension of how different parts of culture co-operate on one subject matter, which forms the possible interaction between cultures. So, can a nation be an adequate scale to measure one’s cultural power or cultural movement? The answer is definitely not.

The tension between U.S and China is a two-way pulling as discussed. Although Huntington’s hypothesis has its weaknesses, the clash of civilizations is probably standing firmer under these double framing of ideologies, although the reason does not actually lay on the fundamental cultural differences. Regardless of the U.S side, but then, what is the claimed “Chinese Culture”? How does it formed and constructed?

Culture and “Chinese Culture”

Before arguing what “Chinese Culture” is, the definition of culture can help to gain insights towards constrains of using the scale of nationality as a framework to understand cultures. “Culture is constituted by what members of a social group- e.g. country, ethnicity, community, company and organization- believe, how they behave and how they manage their environment. For a nation-state, language, religion, food, family structures, friendship practices, political behavior and all other social phenomena are considered to be in the confine of national culture. Culture is jointly
created and yet influences how a group of people interact among themselves. As a concept that attempts to draw out the commonalities within a community, culture is remarkably difficult to capture and write about because a community is inevitably heterogeneous.” (Ooi 113) This definition not only points out the problem of Huntington on generalizing civilizations in the scale of region and nation, it also reminds readers about the heterogeneity of a culture which echoes with Edward Said’s statement that a culture will evolve and change, all stereotypes and labeling cannot adequately conclude the complexity of the reality. (Chu)

According to the definition, the term “Chinese Culture” can be read in many different aspects, but the term “Chineseness” somehow limits the possibility to national, regional or ethnical scale by the dominated discourse. The obvious argument is about Han Culture dominating the discourse of “Chinese”, without acknowledging to the authorized 56 minority ethnical groups in China. The diversity of Chinese Culture as well as encountering with other “non-Chinese” groups can reflected at least by the history of the Silk Road. The historical diversity is not going to be discussed, but as argued above, an ideology of culture uniqueness is herein established in order to firm one’ national identity.

Coming back to the modern situation, the uniqueness of “Chinese” is stereotyped and promoted as Confucianism in foreign countries especially in printed culture. First, the Chinese-language learning institution is named as Confucius Institutes although most of the schools do not actually teach Confucianism. They teach Mandarin accompanying with some life style in China such as food culture. Second, people
including Huntington used Confucianism to represent Chinese tradition. The authority of Confucianism as a representative of Chinese Culture however is always questionable. What does it imply when Confucianism is used to represent Chinese Culture?

**Chinese Culture as Confucianism?**

Confucianism is probably established as propaganda to present the “uniqueness” of China, in which the promotion is also a national image building process, as highlighted by scholars, the cultural attractiveness, as one of the important components of a country’s soft power, not only influences various aspects of people’s lives and plays a vital part in social development, but also has a direct impact on helping a country to achieve important foreign policy goals. (Ding and Saunders 9) The revival of Confucianism represents an increasing nationalism thus. (Wang 57) The presented context to the foreigners is not picked up arbitrarily, but intentionally to empower China. For example, *The Confucian Analects (Lun Yu)* is always quoted during political conferences. U.S President Obama used it during his visit in China to show his friendliness. (Wenweipo; CRI Online) *The Confucian Analects* is also quoted during the opening ceremony of Beijing Olympic 2008. In addition, “Ru Jia” itself has its complexity but is now limited to Confucius (Kong Zi) only. Meng Zi is always omitted in the discourse of Confucianism even though his contribution to “Ru Jia” should not be denied. Also, the virtues and everyday life practices in different parts of China, the Chinese geomancy (feng Shui), the cultural differences between overseas and mainland Chinese are seldom discussed and concerned in a front of foreigners. Referring to the previous definition of culture, the variations in
environmental and social factors in different communities are important to the analysis of one’s culture. Packaged cultures, however, are always selectively constructed neglecting its complexity; and are presented in preferred ways which can be received by target audiences. (Ooi 116) The constructed Confucianism is one of those.

As a result, articulation of cultural differences, as well as establishing cultural uniqueness is for the political sake.(125) Clashing, merging, blending or even eliminating actually always happens when one culture meets another, but what to show or what not to show is obviously political. Then, can learning Chinese Language help foreigners to get better involved in a cultural exchange, so that they can explore China themselves, other than just receiving a one-way knowledge?

The possible role and power of learning Mandarin

According to the statistic in 2006, the NOTCFL (National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language) has established 66 Confucius Institutes in the world. By 2010, the NOTCFL targeted to establish 100 Confucius Institutes worldwide.\(^1\) Besides the NOTCFL, there are more than 100 foreign organizations working in conjunction with China to establish further Chinese schools. (Ding and Saunders 20) Promoting Chinese language, again, is a kind of soft power enhancement, but it can also be a sign for people to engage with other nations or cultures. On the other aspect,

\(^1\) From Xinhua website, it reported that the number of Confucius institutes has increased to 123 in 49 countries in 2007. The targeted number increased to 500 Confucius Institutes by 2010. (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-01/01/content_5557138.htm)
referring to the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), the purpose of rapid promotion of Chinese language is for “enhancing the mutual understanding and friendship between the Chinese people and other peoples of the world, promoting economic and trade cooperation as well as scientific, technological and cultural exchanges.” The main concern is, will the foreign Chinese language learners be a powerful force to enhance a more dynamic understanding of China when they can communicate with the Chinese people in the future? The promotion of Chinese Language, (actually is Mandarin only) may be for political purposes, but can this communication power be a double-edged sword, in which the cultural and political environment will be affected? The actual power of foreign Mandarin learners has to be evaluated before we get the answer.

The number of non-Chinese speakers studying Chinese stands 30 millions in 2005. More than 2300 universities, around 100 countries are offering Chinese courses. (Ding and Saunders 21) It is no doubt that the number of Chinese language learners is growing rapidly after the rise of China, but the fastest growing countries are South Korea, Japan, Singapore and France, showing Mandarin is very popular within Pacific Rim. This phenomenon, however, exists before the rise of China. Another statistic shows that, about 24,000 high school students in U.S are learning Chinese, while more than one million students are learning French. (25) In addition, Chinese language often means Mandarin in all Confucius Institutes. A study conducted by Chinese government in 2004 discovered, only 53% of the population in China understands Mandarin. It is assumed that those foreign Chinese learners can

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2 This is quoted from The University of Sydney, “About Us”. The official website of Hanban is: www.hanban.edu.cn
communicate only with those 53%, whereas 47% are not Mandarin speakers. It may take even a longer time for Chinese language learners to read Chinese texts without depending on translation if we expect them to take a vital and an active role in cultural exchange, but there is still a light of hope that language can be a tool for interactive cultural exchange, other than just for the promotion of national and political power.

After all, nationalism is proofed to be one of the powerful elements which form the discourse of cultural clash. The nation power does not weaken as Huntington said. In addition, political and ideological controls are always hidden behind the phenomena which show the reason of constructing unique “Chineseness”. Instead of fundamental differences in civilization as Huntington claimed, the problematic representation, generalization and labeling, the expectation of increasing national power may be reasons causing the tension or clash between two cultures. Although Huntington’s assumptions are debatable, he brings up the discussion about the significance and nature of cultural formation. Last but not least, it is more important to notify the cultural complexity and changeability, as Edward Said said, all stereotypes and labels are not adequate to describe the true faces of reality.
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