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Modernity vs Pre-modernity in a Global Literary Context

«Modernity vs Pre-modernity in a Global Literary Context»

by Ersu Ding

In its non-specialist usage, the word “modern” simply means <of or having to do with the latest styles, methods, or ideas> and in that sense people of all historical periods can justifiably describe themselves with the same adjective. In socio-historical studies, however, the concept of modernity has been specifically linked with the emergence of industrial societies which first came into being in northwestern Europe some two centuries ago. There are many things that have been said to characterize a modern society. Put in the most general sociological terms, such a society possesses a multiplicity of institutions which have been developed for distinctive missions and special tasks; in particular, a modern society is guided in its actions by the findings which have been obtained through science.

Modernity, of course, does not happen in a vacuum; it is temporally preceded by thousands of years of civilization that centered around the tilling of land. As early as 10,000 BC our hunting and gathering ancestors took to domesticating animals and cultivating land, thereby establishing the first settled human communities the world had ever known, but their technology (the plow) and social structure (the village) remained almost unchanged until the advent of industrialism in the 18th century. Not surprisingly, the subsequent industrialization of society with its contingent institutions and values was to encounter strong resistance from the agrarian precedent which had its own deep-rooted ways of life. Whatever social area we look into, there is always a tension between the “old” and the “new”, the “backward” and the “progressive”, the “traditional” and the “modern”
which characterizes the entire historical process called “modernization”.

The incipient strain between tradition and modernity is nowhere more forcefully dramatized than in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* written by the British novelist Thomas Hardy. Set in Casterbridge (a fictional town of the early 19th century, England) and structured through a series of events surrounding Michael Henchard, the novel “explores the forces of historical change and their impact on a rural community”. (Harvey 2003: 32) At first, the provincial town functions in isolation from the rest of the world and Henchard, its mayor, runs the place according to the outdated rural customs: he mixes business with personal matters and relies on weather prophets to make work plans. When Donald Farfrae arrives, he brings with him new and efficient methods for increasing agricultural production and manipulating the local markets: he uses modern accounting skills as well as a scientific process by which damaged grains can be restored to their original condition.

The contrast and conflict between these two characters can be illustrated with their very different attitudes toward their relationship with others and between themselves. When Farfrae first joins Henchard’s business as his manager, they enjoy each other’s company, but their friendship soon cools off as a result of their disagreements over management. Henchard’s way of doing things can be described as patriarchal and inefficient. One such example involves Abel Whittle, a workman in his hay-yard who is often late for work. On a morning when he is late again, Henchard goes to his house, drags him out of his bed, and sends him to work half naked for the purpose of teaching him a lesson and reforming his work habit. Away from the public eye, Henchard has supplied Whittle’s mother with coals and potatoes the previous winter. (Chapter XV) Farfrae, on the other hand, thinks that a tardy worker should simply be fired rather than humiliated in public. The rationale behind his approach is that the public world of employment should be separated from the private realm of family, hence guaranteeing a kind of inviolability of the former. As time goes on, Farfrae’s impersonal style proves to be more popular with the residents of Casterbridge. When Henchard realizes that he is surpassed by Farfrae in the affections of townsfolk, he fires his highly talented manager in a fit of jealousy even though his decision negatively affects his financial situation. But Farfrae
does not take Henchard’s hostility towards him personally because his primary motive in competing with his former boss is to usher an advanced economic system into Casterbridge and make the place more prosperous. Such a measured way of doing things exemplifies a model of science that is associated with modernity.

Thus the struggle between Henchard and Farfrae can be interpreted not merely as a competition between a grain merchant and his former protégé but rather as a tension between the old and the new. It is true that Hardy endows his protagonist with a great deal of sympathy, as is evidenced by the subtitle of the book – “A Story of a Man of Character”, yet he also seems to have portrayed Henchard’s fall from eminence as being inevitable. Indeed, we as readers are invited to appreciate all the accomplishments the new comer has made: his determination to introduce modern technologies to Casterbridge and his efficient method for organizing the granary’s business.1

_Things Fall Apart_ by Chinua Achebe is another novel which explores as its central theme the tension between tradition and modernity, but the battle of time presented therein is far greater both in intensity and magnitude. Raymond Williams, late professor of English literature at Oxford, is one of the earlier scholars who recognized the distinctiveness and significance of works of this kind. In his study of English literary representations of “the country” and “the city”, a pair of cognate notions to tradition and modernity, he points out that the tug of war between the traditional and the modern have taken place in more than one country and literature. There is an abundance of materials in French, Russian, German, Italian, and American literatures that feature the dichotomy between the rural and urban ways of life, all pointing to “an obvious need for more comparative studies” (Williams 1973: 292). More importantly, he continues,

> it is not, was not, ever a question of study alone. The very fact that the historical process, in some of its

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1 Hardy is said to have had second thoughts about the characterization of Farfrae after the completion of the novel which prompted him to make some minor changes to its later editions so that the character would be judged in an unsympathetic light. For details, please refer to pp. 164–65 of _Thomas Hardy_ by Timothy Hands.
main features, is now effectively international, means that we have more than material for interesting comparisons. We are touching, and know that we are touching, forms of a general crisis. Looking back, for example, on the English history, and especially on its culmination in imperialism, I can see in this process of the altering relations of country and city the driving force of a mode of production which has indeed transformed the world. (Ib.)

Williams, we know, was neo-Marxist in his theoretical orientation which explains the use of such classic terms as “imperialism” and “mode of production” in his exposition, but he is right on target in characterizing the historical process of industrialization as “now effectively international”. This is also to say that moral strains and social conflicts caused by industrialization are not confined to the internal development of individual states; rather, they are being spread around the globe as the process extends outward from its original Western base to take in the rest of the world.

The international or intercultural dimension of the dichotomy of tradition vs. modernity is exactly what gets thematized in Things Fall Apart. In terms of narrative structure, Achebe’s book consists of three parts: the first part is set in Umuofia before the arrival of the white man; the second part depicts Okonkwo’s life in exile and reports the arrival of the white man in his home village; the third part shows the tragic fall of Okonkwo and the decay of the old ways of life in Igbo society. The conjunctive “and” in the last part of the previous sentence is worthy of our notice because what it connects are two entirely different responses to the uniquely African process of modernization.

At the personal level, Okonkwo resists the new political and religious orders because they threaten his established status in the Igbo community. His sense of self-worth is dependent upon the traditional notion of valor and toughness which has made him a hero in waging wars against the neighboring tribes and tilling the harsh land of Nigeria, but he fails to adapt to the new times when Europeans come to live among the Umuofians. As tolerance rather than violence now constitutes the wisest principle for survival in his changing society, Okonkwo becomes a man of the past, that is, a cultural relic only to be noted in the future book of the colonial
As was indicated earlier, Achebe’s book presents much more than the tragedy of one particular individual. In the first two parts of *Things Fall Apart* readers are given a comprehensive look into the Igbo society as a living structure which is held together by a network of intricate relationships. Through such joyful events as the planting season, the “New Yam Festival”, a marriage feast, we are led to appreciate the depth and sophistication of the native culture. But this is not just an Eden of pre-modern life which is later destroyed by the white man. As a matter of fact, to put it in the words of Chidi Okonkwo, 

Achebe presents the rural cosmos as maintained through ritual observances whose internal contradictions make the order vulnerable to chaotic forces. Umuofia, for instance, alienated some citizens by branding them as ritually unclean; it also oppressed women who either had no male children or had given birth only to twin. Naturally, these disaffected people proved receptive to missionaries’ appeals. (Parker et al. 1995: 85)

Westerners’ appeals are not merely psychological which were brought home through the institution of the Christian church. They also include trading posts which pumped goods and money into the village as well as hospitals and schools to which the villagers send their children. But whatever motivations behind their acceptance of a new way of life, the imaginary Igbo society of the 1890s experienced a wave of changes ignited by the arrival of a very different culture, and “[t]he greatness of *Things Fall Apart* lies in Achebe’s ability to reveal both what was truly at stake in that tragic conflict and why it was that the confrontation was decided in favor of modernization.” (Moses 1995: 108)

There is little doubt that works like *Things Fall Apart* need to be examined from a cross-cultural perspective because they substantially and visibly involve characters from different traditions interacting with one another, yet there are also texts where the presence of foreign cultures is not so apparent but whose interpretation still depends heavily on our knowledge of the global context in which
they function. Two good examples from the latter category are *The True Story of Ah Q* by Lu Xun and *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck.

Lu Xun’s story is about a Chinese peasant by the name Ah Q whose personality is depicted as rather thoughtless and self-deluding. When he is humiliated by his fellow villagers, Ah Q always manages to obtain a sense of victory by consoling himself in one way or another. For instance, one time when he is winning in a gamble, a skirmish erupts during which he not only loses his money but is also physically beaten up, but he is able to gain his peace of mind by slapping his own face, imagining that he is hitting his enemies. Even when he realizes that he is on his way to the execution ground at the end of the story, he remains calm most of the time, because “[i]t seemed to him that in this world probably it was the fate of everybody at some time to have his head cut off.” (Lu 2000: 333)

On the literal level, *The True Story of Ah Q* does not seem to have anything to do with the tension between tradition and modernity that is thematized by Achebe, but if we dig into its socio-historical context, the affinity between that story and *Things Fall Apart* becomes much clearer. Long before the publication of Lu Xun’s book, Western culture had started to penetrate the “Middle Kingdom”, giving rise to numerous rounds of debates about the strengths and weaknesses of the native culture. The debates went on for decades following the Opium War (1839–42) and culminated in what is now known as the New Culture Movement of the 1920s which is characterized by a fierce ideological confrontation between the advocates of Confucianism and those of Western science and democracy. The issues that were most frequently debated during that period of time include: How can the Chinese cultural heritage be preserved and renewed? What is the proper relationship between spiritual culture and material culture? Where should one stand in terms of adopting or rejecting foreign cultures? Many Chinese politicians, philosophers, and literary writers participated in the debate and among them was Lu Xun, who gave up his medical career in order to save the souls of his countrymen with his pen. Thus, says Dr. Huang Sung-kang, “[a] more detailed study of the clash between Western thought and Chinese indigenous culture arising from the subsequent development of that movement is necessary to understand Lu Xun’s position in the conflict between the Old and the New.” (Huang 1992: 71)
As a writer, Lu Xun was greatly influenced by Western ideas and customs he was indirectly exposed to when he was an overseas student in Japan. Like many progressive intellectuals of his generation, he saw an urgent need for China to transform herself from an agricultural society into a modern industrialized nation so that the humiliations she suffered at the hands of contemporary foreign powers would not be repeated. To alert his countrymen to this need, he resorted to literary writing by which he hoped to expose the “national character” of the Chinese. Ah Q, we learn from Lu Xun’s story, has a very high opinion of himself: he looks down on all the people around him, considering the two young scholars in the village not worth a smile, thinking to himself that “my sons would be much greater!” When involved in a quarrel, he would glare at his opponent and say “We used to be much better off than you! Who do you think you are? These descriptions of a country fellow, although quite funny, may appear somehow idiosyncratic at first reading, but for those who are familiar with the psychological state of a large number of Chinese of the time, the behavior of Ah Q is highly symbolic or emblematic. In fact, with regard to the Chinese reaction towards the Western impact, it was not uncommon for Lu Xun’s contemporaries to read and hear everywhere such sayings as follows:

- China has an immense territory and its civilization is the oldest in the world.
- Whatever foreign nations have, China has already possessed before. A certain science is only this-and-that spoken of by ancient Chinese philosophers.
- Although the material civilization of the Western nations ranks high, China’s spiritual civilization is much better.

Given these prevalent Chinese attitudes towards the Western culture in that historical period, it was not difficult at all for Lu Xun’s intended readers to draw an interpretive parallel between the personal traits of Ah Q and the “national character” which many thought has hampered the course of China’s modernization. In other words, through the “spiritual victories” of Ah Q who does not even have a personal name nor an authentic hometown, Lu Xun’s readers are shown a much deeper, and more serious weakness of the Chinese people as a whole who refused to face up to the realities of being the loser in the Sino-West confrontation. It is also in this sense that The
True Story of Ah Q has been cited by Fredric Jameson as a typical example of what he calls “national allegory”:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (Jameson 2000: 320)

We certainly need not go as far as Jameson in thinking that third-world literary texts are “always” or “necessarily” allegorical in nature, but this particular story by Lu Xun happens to fall into that category: it was “intended to convey a uniquely satirical conception of the Chinese national character” (Lee 1985: 10) and therefore should be interpreted as such.

Similar to The True Story of Ah Q, The Good Earth contains no non-Chinese characters except one who appears very briefly in a city scene distributing pictures of Christ on the cross to uncomprehending pedestrians (Chapter 14), yet if we want to achieve a full understanding of its import, the book has to be placed in its original intercultural context. The Good Earth, we know, depicts life in the Chinese countryside which is not an unusual subject matter. What makes the book distinctive, among other things, is the fact that its author is an American who crossed the Pacific Ocean to spend nearly half of her life in China as a member of a missionary family. For the sake of convenience in carrying out their missionary activities, her parents did not always live in one of those protected areas set up specifically for foreigners. Rather, they often chose to mix with ordinary local people as their neighbors and friends. This experience of living among the Chinese for an extended period of time earned the future writer a significant role as an “authentic” voice on Chinese people and their culture.

Pearl Buck was an extremely prolific writer authoring as many as one hundred and seven books in a life span of eighty-one years, but the work that made her instantly famous all over the world was The Good Earth which sold millions of copies when it came out in 1931. Since its content is related to China, the book has also received a great deal of attention in the country of its origin. One year after it
was first published in the United States, the Chinese version of *The Good Earth* also appeared in installments in *Orient*, a well known literary journal of the time. The following years saw eight different translations of the book in Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing, and other places, and Shanghai Commercial Press alone issued twelve prints of its version between 1933 and 1949. (Lipscomb et al. 1994: 58)

It needs to be pointed out that except in the earlier years during which Chinese receptions of Buck were somewhat mixed, the critical responses to Buck in China have largely been harsh and negative. With regard to *The Good Earth*, she has been criticized for a number of things such as eulogizing Western missionaries in characterization, ignorance of cultural subtleties in description, and overuse of coincidences in plot development, but the most scathing accusation falls on her selection of subject-matter or, in today’s critical parlance, on what is left unsaid in relation to what is being said in the text. The temporal setting of *The Good Earth* is around 1927, a time when millions of Chinese peasants in many parts of the country were rising up in their struggles against foreign powers, national warlords, corrupt government officials, and vicious landlords, yet nothing of the sort receives substantial treatment in the novel, and the rural world under Pearl Buck’s pen is forever peaceful with well-to-do landlords smoking opium in their beds and poor peasants working away quietly in the land, interrupted only by drought, flood, or some other natural disasters.

What most Buck critics failed to notice or refused to see is that *The Good Earth* was written for the American readers of the 1930s who demanded a different set of narrative strategies as well as narrative substances. By the time this novel came out, the United States of America had already replaced Thomas Hardy’s England as the most industrialized country in the world. Modernization, of course, brought with it its contingent social problems such as crowding, crime, unbearable intensity of work, and enormous disparity in wealth and all these were compounded by the Great Depression which left many in America yearning for a return to the past when human life was supposedly much simpler and happier. To a certain extent, *The Good Earth*, with its portrait of a Chinese farmer and his family, provided a vicariously enticing world of rural existence.

More importantly, *The Good Earth* was meant to be a book on general Chinese culture about which the majority of Americans at
the time were ignorant. Instead of reporting on the internal national politics of contemporary China which would not engage the book’s targeted audience, Pearl Buck wanted to depict the entire communal life of Chinese peasants who made up almost ninety percent of the country’s population. As Pradyumna S. Chauhan puts it in “Pearl S. Buck’s The Good Earth: The Novel as Epic”,

_The Good Earth_ shows us all: the rituals of the community, the social gestures, the superstitions, the New Year’s feast, the wedding gifts, and the burial ceremonies. The earth gods, we realize, must be remembered at all crucial occasions – upon the marriage and the birth, at mournings and festivals – and they must be remembered even when they curse and afflict the people who adore them. The whole range of behaviors confront us, thus, not only with the social picture of a people, but also with their “unconscious metaphysics,” the ethos which defines them as a memorable entity. (Ib. 123)

This statement, of course, should not be taken as a proof that the inclusion of fictional details in _The Good Earth_ was not selective; on the contrary, one is given there a rather heavy dose of strange and weird behaviors such as arranged marriage, polygamy, infanticide, and foot-binding which were stereotypically associated with Chinese culture at the time. Indeed, to capture her American readers back at home, Pearl Buck had no choice but to package those quaint features of pre-modern life that were not only in the past and but also at a distance (in China), and at that she was very successful.

To summarize, we can say that the tension between tradition and modernity can be and has been thematized in various ways for vastly different purposes. Thomas Hardy did it to remember the old and to celebrate the new within more or less one national tradition; Chinua Achebe did it to reveal the “shock” of Western modernization when it is imposed upon a hitherto harmonious pre-modern African community; Lu Xun did it to highlight the general weaknesses of his countrymen for the purpose of waking them up to Western science and democracy; and Pearl Buck did it to satisfy the American nostalgia for rural life and desire for exotic culture in a time of expanding industrialism and imperialism. To fully understand the
meaning and significance of each of those texts, we need to go back to its original historical context which, due to the process of globalization, has become more and more intercultural. The situation, in other words, calls for a comparative study of cultures. Perhaps one hundred years ago, it was still possible to argue that literatures written in different languages at different times by different peoples could be studied in isolation from one another but today, when the economic and cultural globalization is so widespread, it would be too provincial to confine our study to any single national heritage. As is also shown through the preceding textual analysis, despite their differences in style and content, the collective works of this international set of writers reflect a common concern with the tension between the traditional and the modern. If modernization is not merely a local phenomenon but a universal condition of humanity and therefore an inevitable subject of any literature, then the proper perspective of our study should be one that gives much greater critical attention to texts that come from cultures other than one’s own.

References


