

Feature Article 【專題論文】

East Asia in the Globe:
Beyond Universalism and Relativism
在全球視野中審視東亞：
超越普遍主義和相對主義

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Keywords: universalism, relativism, historicism, incommensurability, Giambattista Vico, Peter Winch, Richard Nisbett, cross-cultural understanding

關鍵詞：普遍主義、相對主義、歷史主義、不可通約性、維柯、溫奇、
尼斯貝特、跨文化理解

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Abstract

In cross-cultural understanding, universalism and relativism are two opposite paradigms, of which relativism predominates in contemporary scholarship. In comparison with Vico's historicism, contemporary relativism does not just acknowledge cultural diversity, but it insists on cultural incommensurability, thereby questioning the possibility of cross-cultural understanding and communication. By examining the arguments of Peter Winch, Richard Nisbett and others, this essay exposes the limitations and internal difficulties of the relativist paradigm and argues for a broader perspective on East Asia in the globe well beyond the dichotomy between universalism and relativism.

摘要

在跨文化理解中，普遍主義和相對主義是互相對立的兩種範式，而在當代學術研究中，相對主義佔有主導地位。與維柯之歷史主義相比，當代相對主義不僅承認文化的多元，而且堅持文化之間不可相通，於是懷疑跨文化理解及交往之可能。本文通過考察彼得·溫奇、理查·尼斯貝特等人之議論，揭示相對主義理論範式之局限和內在矛盾，主張超越普遍主義與相對主義之對立，以更開闊的眼光看待全球與東亞之關係。

In understanding different cultures, universalism and relativism are two approaches that set up very different and almost opposite paradigms. Universalism maintains that basic human values are everywhere the same despite superficial differences, while relativism holds that cultures and traditions are fundamentally different and incommensurable, with no criteria available across linguistic and cultural gaps for comparison and evaluation. In the latter half of the 20th century, with the rejection of positivism, scientism, and the questioning of objective truth and the universal claim of truth, the limitations of universalism are readily recognized. What is wrong with universalism is often the realization that the so-called "universal" is not universal at all, but only European and North American, and, as such, it is related to the hegemonic and oppressive power of Western imperialism and colonialism. This is clearly put by David Buck in his introduction to a "Forum on Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies" in the February 1991 issue of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, of which he was the editor at the time. According to Buck, the universalist position is an ethnocentric position related to Western colonialism and imperialism, a position adopted by those Europeans and North Americans who "chauvinistically held that their civilization was superior to others."¹ With such ominous implications in moral and political terms, universalism is totally discredited and has lost its appeal to most scholars in Asian studies. As a result, says Buck, relativist views are "advanced with much more frequency" than universalist ones among American scholars in Asian studies.² The relativist position thus appears to be a morally commendable one, because Western scholars have condemned Eurocentric and colonialist prejudices that looked down upon non-Western cultures by measuring them with Western standards and found them lacking. Against the imposition of Western concepts and values upon non-Western cultures, the relativists argue that each culture must be judged by its own standard and measured by its own value system. When we discuss East Asia in the global context, it is very likely that we may emphasize

1 David D. Buck, "Editor's Introduction: Forum on Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 50 (Feb., 1991), p. 30.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

the distinct nature of East Asia vis-à-vis the West and argue for the necessity to look at Asia without imposing Western views and values.

That argument is of course reasonable, but insofar as it advocates the legitimization of an internal value system, it is not so different from the kind of historicism we find in the eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, i.e., the "conviction that every civilization and every period has its own possibilities of aesthetic perfection; that the works of art of the different peoples and periods, as well as their general forms of life, must be understood as products of variable individual conditions, and have to be judged each by its own development, not by absolute rules of beauty and ugliness."³ Vico, however, does not deny the possibility of understanding despite cultural differences, for he is convinced of the intelligibility of all the diverse forms of cultural expressions, past and present, of foreign origin or of one's own tradition. "There must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations," says Vico, "which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects."⁴ That is very well said indeed, because here the acknowledgement of the diversity of forms of human life and human expressions goes hand in hand with a vision of the shared humanity represented by a common mental language underneath all the different forms and expressions, a universal language that makes it possible for people to understand and communicate with one another. Vico's idea of the common mental language, as Isaiah Berlin puts it, provides a "unifying factor, which makes history the story of the development of a single species—mankind."⁵ That is a significant point Vico made that proves to be particularly relevant to our own world today, namely,

3 Erich Auerbach, "Vico and Aesthetic Historicism," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), pp. 183-184.

4 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch (trans.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), section 161, p. 67.

5 Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, edited by Henry Hardy (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 69.

that despite and above all differences, people of different nations and cultures can find a way to communicate in a genuine dialogue of civilizations, that they have a common mental language that binds all of us together as human beings.

In contemporary relativist thinking, however, that is precisely a point of contention, for relativists today, as David Buck observes, go much further in questioning "whether any conceptual tools exist to understand and interpret human behavior and meaning in ways that are intersubjectively valid."⁶ That is to say, relativists today do not just acknowledge cultural diversity, but they insist on cultural incommensurability; and they maintain a skeptical attitude towards the possibility of cross-cultural understanding and communication. The rise of relativism in our time thus involves much more than the mere denunciation of colonialism, for it is based on the radical change of many fundamental concepts and values. In the whole range of humanities and social sciences, as Richard Bernstein observes, there is a "movement from confidence to skepticism about foundations, methods, and rational criteria of evaluation," and consequently the relativist paradigm reigns supreme. "There seems to be almost a rush to embrace various forms of relativism. Whether we reflect on the nature of science, or alien societies, or different historical epochs, or sacred and literary texts, we hear voices telling us that there are no hard 'facts of the matter' and that almost 'anything goes.'"⁷ Christopher Norris also remarks that the collapse of old orthodoxies tend to give rise to a new orthodoxy equally, if not more, dogmatic. In the postmodern critique of the concepts of truth, reality, and so forth, "the proclaimed liberation from old disciplinary constraints goes along with a whole new set of orthodox bans on any talk of 'reality' or 'truth', or any questions concerning the conceptual adequacy of these various textualist paradigms."⁸ Although Norris dissociates Derrida from the widely held view that

6 Buck, "Editor's Introduction," p. 30.

7 Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 3.

8 Christopher Norris, *Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (Malden: Blackwell, 1997), p. 6.

deconstruction forms part of this post-structuralist and postmodern trend, he does acknowledge that the influence of Foucault seems to lead to just such a relativist "rhetoric of multiple decentred 'subject positions', of reality as a wholly discursive—narrative or textual—construct, and of truth as a species of operative fiction sustained by the current (juridico-linguistic) status quo."⁹ From this we may understand that cultural relativism maintains at least these two related points: first, cultures are fundamentally different and incommensurable, and second, cultures, like everything else, are conceptual constructs that are internally coherent but mutually incompatible, and there are no such things as reality or truth outside or beyond conceptual constructs to form the basis of any objective criterion for understanding, comparison, or evaluation. But if such a relativist outlook is not just a moral position in reaction against colonialism and imperialism, what would be its theoretical and practical consequences?

Let us look at the controversy around Peter Winch's works as a particularly revealing example. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of language games and arguing against the positivistic notion of objective truth, Winch maintains that knowledge or truth does not coincide with any reality outside the language in which that knowledge or truth is expressed, and that different cultures may have distinct rules for playing their language games and may thus understand reality differently. "Reality is not what gives language sense," says Winch in one of his most controversial essays. "What is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has."¹⁰ If different cultures are all different forms of life engaged in different language games, and if there is nothing outside the various languages to provide an independent basis for description and evaluation, this type of thinking would lead inevitably to a sweeping cultural relativism that sees various cultures as totally incommensurable, intelligible only to those already living within limits of a

⁹ Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁰ Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 12.

specific cultural system. Winch's argument indeed leads to such a relativism even though he himself declares that "men's ideas and beliefs must be checkable by reference to something independent—some reality," and explicitly rejects "an extreme Protagorean relativism."¹¹ He may have realized the danger of a nihilistic, "anything-goes" relativism, but his theoretical framework does not allow him to avoid such a danger. Bernstein tries to disentangle Winch's argument from the very relativism Winch disclaims, but eventually he also finds Winch's work leading to "a new, sophisticated form of relativism."¹² In facing an alien society, says Winch, the social scientist must become a participant in a language game different from his own, and his "reflective understanding must necessarily presuppose, if it is to count as genuine understanding at all, the participant's unreflective understanding."¹³ That is to say, the Western sociologist or anthropologist must suspend his or her own views and must think, feel, and act like a native of the alien society in order to understand it "unreflectively," from the native's point of view.

But how does one achieve such "unreflective understanding" in thinking about an alien culture? If "unreflective" means completely assimilated and internalized to the point of being unaware of the very rules of the language game, one may wonder how anyone can enter and participate in a different game in the first place. Such a relativist move actually turns out to be predicated on an old notion of objectivity that completely negates one's own subjective position. The desire to escape from one's own prejudice and to assume an alien point of view, as Bernstein notes, simply reenacts "a parallel move in nineteenth-century hermeneutics and historiography, where it was thought that we can somehow jump out of our skins, concepts, and judgments and grasp or know the phenomenon as it is in itself."¹⁴ Georgia Warnke also sees a connection between

11 Ibid., p. 11.

12 Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 27.

13 Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 89.

14 Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 104.

Winch and romantic hermeneutics. "Does Winch suppose, as Dilthey does," she asks, "that social scientists can simply leave their native languages behind them in learning a new one? Or, as in Gadamer's hermeneutics, are the two languages or sets of prejudices brought into relationship with one another and, if so, how?"¹⁵ These are of course crucial hermeneutic questions that Winch's argument prompts us to consider, questions that are particularly relevant to the understanding of East Asia in a global context. Winch constantly calls our attention to the differences between cultures and languages, but the important hermeneutic question is: How does one achieve understanding beyond and in spite of those differences? Unfortunately, his advice to assume a participant's "unreflective understanding" does not offer a very helpful answer.

The debate still goes on. In a more recent book, Richard Nisbett, for example, claims that Asians and Westerners think differently. "Human cognition is not everywhere the same," he declares. Not only do "members of different cultures differ in their 'metaphysics,' or fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world," but "the characteristic thought processes of different groups differ greatly."¹⁶ The dichotomy he sets up is a familiar one: Asians are "collective or interdependent," whereas Westerners are "individualistic or independent." The result of such an absolute dichotomy is also made clear, for Nisbett warns us that because of the fundamental differences between Asians and Westerners in thinking and behavior, "efforts to improve international understanding may be less likely to pay off than one might hope."¹⁷ These words may give us pause in believing that the relativist position is necessarily morally or politically commendable. We may wonder whether the relativist emphasis on difference may always lead to respect and acceptance of other people's ways; or whether it may just as easily lead to quarrel, conflict, and violence. We may be reminded of

15 Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 110.

16 Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently, and Why* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), p. xvii.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. xvii-xviii.

the words of Rudyard Kipling—"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,"—which are often quoted to articulate the cultural difference between East and West and their incommensurability, even though these words are quoted out of context to give voice to the colonialist ideology of a bygone past, the age of the British Empire in the height of its global power.

In highlighting the intercultural differences, the relativist argument also minimizes or even totally ignores differences within regions and cultures. East Asia as a notion is not one homogeneous entity, but a large region that contains different cultures, histories, political systems, and many other important characteristics. It is true that China, Japan, Korea, and to some extent Vietnam, share many cultural values and characteristics, and the Chinese written language was used widely in this region and is still used in some parts, which constitutes a shared cultural background based on the written language and, with it, some of the typically East Asian concepts and values. The shared philosophical traditions of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist teachings in the history of East Asia need to be studied more extensively than has yet been done, and the ways East Asian countries have developed economically and politically can be fruitfully explored as significantly different from that of Europe and North America. At the same time, each of the East Asian countries has undergone a different path of transformation in modern times, with internal differences among them significant enough to be differentiated from one another. When we speak of East Asia, therefore, we must understand the internal complexity and differences among the East Asian countries as well as the differences between East Asia and the West.

Given the influence of the relativist paradigm not just in the West, but in the East as well, however, it is quite common to find the dichotomous argument about the fundamental differences between Asia and the West. As early as 1965, Raghavan Iyer already pointed out that not only Europeans but some modern Asian intellectuals "have also been more or less complacent (or defensive) in their own sweeping contrasts between Asia and Europe, between Eastern and

Western thought and culture." He clearly depicted the motivation behind such "facile contrasts," saying that they "are sometimes needed as devices for criticizing the values and institutions found in Asia (or Europe) by idealizing those of Europe (or Asia), and more often are used for compensatory self-praise through a sly debunking of alien peoples."¹⁸ He mentioned as examples "Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's contrast between Eastern wisdom and Western learning, Kitaro Nishida's distinction between the rule of the intellect in European culture and the stress on feeling in Eastern culture, Kitayama's opposition of 'space' and 'time' cultures, and Nagayo's emphasis on the difference between 'soul training' and 'mental culture'. Okakura held that Christian Europe never ascended above a human godhead to the Eastern vision of the universal in its 'eternal search for unity in variety'."¹⁹ Even today, we still hear from time to time such "facile contrasts" that are sometimes thinly disguised expressions of self-praise or sentiment of narrow-minded nationalism rather than careful research and scholarly argument, and that is not at all helpful in our effort at cross-cultural understanding in the 21st century.

The fact is that cultures and peoples of different nations are both different and similar, and it is misleading to overly emphasize either side of the opposites. In a book on human unity and diversity based on discussions of a large amount of recent research in developmental psychology, social anthropology, different branches of biology, and cognitive science, Geoffrey Lloyd finally comes to a conclusion that tries to strike a balance between opposite concepts. He points out the errors of simplistic generalizations made on assumptions rather than careful research, particularly the either / or dichotomy between total identity and total incommensurability. "We are all aware of the amazing diversity of human talents," says Lloyd:

18 Raghavan Iyer, "The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe," in Raghavan Iyer (ed.), *The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 20.

19 Ibid., pp. 20-21.

Without such diversity, there would be far less of the creativity that we naturally prize and celebrate. At the same time our basic membership of the same human species, a matter of our genetic make-up, is undeniable, and we also all importantly share the experience of acculturation in general and of language acquisition in particular, however much the cultures, and languages, in question differ. The relativist must make room for those latter common factors, just as the universalist cannot afford to ignore diversity.²⁰

Unity and diversity, shared humanity and local identity, general ideas and specific characteristics, all these are important in self-understanding and understanding others. It is pointless to ask, without a particular context that situates the question under discussion, whether we should pay more attention to similarities or to differences in our effort at East-West cross-cultural understanding. Overemphasis on either of the two is a mistake, but very often the mistake is to set up the two in an absolute opposition as though they were mutually exclusive, that is, either to see Asia and Europe as completely different or to see them as completely identical. The truth is that there are both important differences and significant similarities between Asia and Europe, and we should try not to dichotomize the two. When we look at Asia and Europe, when we make an argument about their difference or similarity, we will not be arguing in a vacuum, but always answering to a particular question or responding to a particular situation. Given the predominance of a relativist paradigm in our time, it is perhaps more useful now to pay attention to cultural affinities and similarities rather than fundamental differences, but it is also important to understand that cultures are never identical with one another, and that diversity plays a crucial role in the continuation of each of the world's cultural traditions. There is diversity in unity, and unity with diversity: the two are not mutually

20 Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd, *Cognitive Variations: Reflections on the Unity and Diversity of the Human Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 175.

exclusive. There is nothing wrong with emphasis on difference, but the problem with the extreme relativist position is that cultural differences are set up in an absolute opposition. The point is that we need to go beyond simplistic notions of universalism and relativism, and to keep a healthy balance between local distinctions of cultures and traditions on the one hand and the shared values and broad global visions on the other. It is in relation to others that we best achieve our self-understanding, and it is in the context of the shared humanity that we see ourselves as individual human beings with our own personalities and characteristics. Let me end my discussion on the positive note of a sincere hope that our effort to understand East Asia as part of the global culture will eventually help to correct the simplistic views of the East and the West, and to come to a better understanding not only of the diversity of human life and human culture, but also of the shared humanity that bind us all together in peace and prosperity.♦

♦ Responsible editor: Pei-Shi Lin (林沛熙).

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