

Introduction

The humanities and social sciences have been permanently challenged by the changes in their contexts. They have to answer to new challenges since the questions they are confronted with by their research are always influenced by the topical problems in practical human life. One of these ongoing challenges is the growing density of intercultural communication in the academic life of today.

For a long time the work of the humanities and social sciences were based on academic traditions which have emerged in the cultural context of the West. But in the meantime this Western dominance has found strong criticism - in the West itself and, of course, in the intellectual life of non-Western countries as well. This criticism stems from the needs to reshape academic work in understanding the human world according to the growing self-confidence of non-Western cultures and their attempts to shake off the burden of Western dominance so that they may find a stance on their own terms.

This strong tendency leads to a complex situation: On the one hand there is a strong desire to separate oneself from one tradition of doing the humanities and to create a special way according to one's own culture and tradition. But on the other hand this new way takes place, and ought to take place, in a worldwide discourse which relates different traditions to each other; thus it principally transgresses the limits of cultural peculiarity and has to conform to generally accepted normative rules in order to be recognized. The Western tradition has stressed the universalistic scope of academic thinking. Should the critique of Western domination give up this universalisation in favour of cultural relativism? Some post-modern tendencies in the academic world follow this way of pluralism, but the cognitive costs of this approach are rather high, much too high. Why? The academic procedures of acquiring solid knowledge rest on concepts of method which provide knowledge with claims for validity transgressing the

context of research and representation. Therefore, they allow an argumentative interrelationship between different contexts with high validity.

If the standards of universal criteria for cognitive validity are maintained, the problem of a reference to different traditions arises: How can a confrontation of different universalisms be avoided which logically oppose each other? On the level of epistemology this question reflects the complex situation of pluralization. In essential dimensions, like economy, the media etc., the opposites - the power of uniformity and the need for diversity and difference - have to be mediated. In this context the slogan of "glocalization" has become intellectually attractive, although its concrete meaning for human life is a matter of controversy. The humanities and social sciences are confronted with these controversies, and it is this inbuilt bundle of problems which forms a constant challenge to their task to deliver solid knowledge, by which the public at large are enabled to understand what is going on in their lives.

All this is true for historical thinking in its different forms in academic life. But history is asked to give a special emphasis on input in respect to its role in culture. Here we have one of the most important fields of forming and discussing the issue of identity. Identity is the answer to the question of who somebody - a person or a social unit - is. This answer can't be given without a reference to history. In order to know who somebody is one has to know his or her history by which he or she has become what he or she is and will be. Therefore form of doing history always carries along elements of identity formation. This is the reason why identity politics cannot be ignored when doing history, including its modern academic forms. The critique of Western dominance in historical studies therefore has to be accepted as a legitimate demand for obtaining the recognition of non-Western cultural identities.

Identity cannot be conceptualized without making differences, the most fundamental of which is that of belonging and not belonging, of selfness and otherness. This is the reason why in the intercultural discussion on historical

thinking delimitations play such an enormous role. The growing need for recognizing cultural references (and thereby differences) have a powerful impact on history as a cultural medium of forming identity. And it is this issue of identity which gives the intercultural discussion about history its profile (and political relevance).

One of the most powerful factors of this profile is the attribution of values to the juxtaposition of selfness and otherness. It belongs to the basic factors of cultural life, that a functional identity needs a positive evaluation of the self. Therefore the image of one's own culture is normally painted in positive and bright colours and empowered with positive values. The image of the others, in turn, is composed of darker colours, and less positive or even negative values are attributed to them. A widespread, if not anthropologically universal example is the distinction between civilization and barbarism when identifying one's own place of belonging to and of being different from other people. It can be universally observed as a human strategy. This is the burden of ethnocentrism in the cultural processes of identity formation by doing history, and it can easily be detected in the topical intercultural discussion about history. Here most, if not all criticisms of Western dominance in historical studies go along with the argument of ethnocentric devaluation of others. The counter-argument in turn claims that this critique itself revives that discredited ethnocentrism by merely inverting the evaluation.

With these remarks I have identified the field of interculturally reflecting history as a cultural means of understanding the human world: How does cultural difference (and with it: cultural identity) work as a moving force in historical thinking? And at the same time, how do different traditions refer to each other within a common field of academic study?

In this issue of the *Taiwan Journal for East Asian Studies* the distinctive nature of Chinese historical thinking will be discussed. The essays of Huang Chun-Chieh and Wong Young-tsu are chosen from the presentations in a

conference on humanism and history, which took place at the Institute of Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences of the National Taiwan University from October 11th to 12th, 2012.

The theme of 'Humanism' introduces a new idea into the intercultural discussion about Chinese historical thinking: It is the inquiry into the efforts of how to reconcile cultural differences by transgressing ethnocentric elements within historical culture. The importance of cultural difference is not at all ignored but addressed in detail. Humanism could be an answer to the question chances are of transgressing cultural limits and finding a common ground for intercultural discussion.

Wong's essay makes clear that the Chinese historiographical tradition can contribute to such an answer. For him the work of Sima Qian represents not only the origin of Chinese historiography but its essence as well. This essence can be summarized in three points: (1) History is the work of men and therefore an issue of this-worldliness; against the power of mythical and religious thinking he puts man into the centre of historical understanding of the past. (2) In giving the events of the past a historical meaning for the present and its future he uses the framework of a super-temporal morality and political normativity. His historiography is shaped by the logic of exemplary meaning. By its morality it is essentially humanistic. (3) Man as the fundamental mover of history is presented in individuals who are responsible for their activities, thus illustrating political morality by their success or failure.

Huang argues in a rather similar way, mainly, stressing the exemplary mode of giving the events of the past a historical meaning for the present. For him this mode and its moralistic and humanistic essence present a still valid tradition of Chinese historical culture today. Huang's essay discloses an important logical feature of this way of historical thinking. It accepts an internal unit of empirical facts and theoretical frames. It is the (humanistic) normativity which makes an event of the past 'historical'. Thus the philosophy of history is not a issue of

cognition separate from concrete historiography, but an inbuilt element of historiography itself.

Hu describes the structural changes by which Chinese historians, philosophers and public intellectuals have met the challenge of modernization. He makes clear that modernization cannot be understood as only a Chinese reaction to modern forms of historical thinking brought about in the West since the end of the 18th century. It has its internal dynamics in Chinese tradition as well. This unity of external challenge and internal development is represented by the work of Qian Mu in a paradigmatic form

The three papers highlight some important factors of forming historical thinking in general, and they look to their manifestation in China with special respect to its first (classical) paradigmatic representation. They do not intend to explicate the details of the history of Chinese historiography, but rather concentrates on logical issues. They try to address fundamental criteria of making sense of the past by its historical presentation, and look for the specific manifestation and constellation of these 'logical' elements in bringing about the specific features of Chinese historiography.

In doing so, the humanistic impact within Chinese historiography is elaborated. Although the impressive continuity of historical thinking throughout the course of Chinese history is stressed, the changes it underwent is not neglected, through which is answered the challenge of modernization and its domination by the West since the 19th century.

It is with this intention that the essays in this issue may be read as a plea for an intercultural discussion which refers to principles in the light of which concrete findings acquire an understanding of their place in the historically varied act of doing history as an essential part of human culture.

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