

# Introduction

This issue of the *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* is dedicated to one of the most important themes of the humanities and social sciences. The relationship between Self and the Others belongs to the essentials of human identity, and identity is one of the most important cultural factors of human life.

Every human being has to make a difference between him or herself and the others. By this difference he or she constitutes his or her identity. This is true for persons, communities and whole cultures. Exploring and comparing such cultural identities in the frameworks of different "Civilizations" is one of the major themes of intercultural communication today. With the growing density of communication in the globalization process new challenges of cultural interactions call for an answer. It is not only necessary to discuss the specific relationship of the non-Western cultures to the West under the auspices of post-colonial criticism of a deeply rooted imbalance of different world views and concepts of identity as it has usually been done. But a decisive step has to be taken forward, namely the logic of cultural identity formation has to be discussed in general. It has to be analyzed under the aspect to what degree this logic is a logic of ethnocentric exclusion, or whether there are experiences and potentials of overcoming the ethnocentric tensional relationships in the identity forming constitution of one's own self and the otherness of the others.

Ethnocentrism is a concept of cultural identity, in which positive values are concentrated in the image of oneself, and the negative ones in the image of the others. By doing so the interrelationship of the two social units inevitably proves to be full of tensions and "clashes."

Such an ethnocentric logic has dominated the identity-forming processes in most, if not all, human life forms. It started with archaic world views, where only one's own people were looked at as being human, and it continued in the ideas of humankind brought about in the so-called world civilizations up to our day. Here all members of the human race were called human and shared some ontological qualities distinguishing them from animals and divine beings. But, nevertheless, one's own people were qualified as "really" human (or civilized), whereas the others did not reach this standard of humanity. With the growing density of intercultural interrelationship and communication in recent centuries and even more in the globalization process of today this logic has become more and more dangerous and less and less convincing. Therefore one has to look for possibilities of taming or "civilizing" the ethnocentric form of interrelating self and the others. For this purpose it is necessary to look for universalistic elements in the concept of cultural identity and check their potential to include the otherness in one's own value system without ignoring or even giving up the difference between oneself and the others. On the contrary: Cultural difference has to be addressed as a subject matter of mutual recognition.

The humanities and social sciences have a specific responsibility for bringing about this way of identity-formation. It can only be realized by an interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary approach. Since cultural identity is a historical phenomenon, history is one of the main disciplines to be consulted. On the other hand the logic of identity building is an issue of psychology, sociology, political science and philosophy. Additionally, the manifestation of cultural identity and of the relationships between different cultures covers the whole realm of culture: religion, literature, art, everyday life-orientation etc.

The contributions to this issue stem from a conference on "Human Identity and Cultural Difference in a Crosscultural Perspective – The Interaction between the Self and the Others." It was organized by the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen (now affiliated to the three universities of Bochum,

Dortmund and Duisburg/Essen) in co-operation with the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences of the National Taiwan University. It took place at the Evangelische Akademie Haus Villigst in Schwerte, September 3<sup>rd</sup> till 6<sup>th</sup> 2007. Some of the papers have already been published earlier and elsewhere, mostly in the *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Issue 8), December 2007.

It was the intention of this conference to address problems listed up above. It was impossible, of course, to cover all dimensions and impacts of the interrelationship of self and the others. It could only be treated in a highly selective way. The constellation of articles in this issue represents this selectivity. It opens up an intercultural perspective as well as an interdisciplinary one, and it refers to very different manifestations of identity like history, philosophy, literature.

The discussion of the conference had a meta-theoretical impact: It looked for general and universal features of identity, and at the same time it analyzed peculiarity and difference. This character of argumentation is preserved in this issue, since it combines case studies as well as philosophical reflections and intercultural comparisons.

With these articles the issue of the journal will contribute to a new discourse on understanding the relation of self and the others by increasing the complexity of its role in the cultural orientation of human life and by strengthening its intercultural dimension.

Our section starts with a non-Western tradition of conceptualizing self and the others: The Indian one. It is difficult to characterize this tradition in a clear feature underlining its peculiarity vis-a-vis the enormous variety of ideas in philosophy, the religious life and the other fields of culture in Indian history, but Chakkarath presents basic and structural elements of understanding the human self and its relationship to others by emphasizing mainly the Hindu and Buddhist versions. He puts them into the context of related worldviews within which their

effect in mentally organizing social life becomes understandable. The paper puts the issue of identity formation into a really intercultural perspective by daring to present one of the so-called "world civilizations" as a cultural unit with clear distinctions from other cases of such a far-reaching dimension of togetherness and difference from others.

Lin Hong-Hsin's paper opens up a similar broad perspective, but it is not so much related to different countries but to different logics, which characterize Western and Eastern thinking on human identity. The author analyzes a central idea of Christian theology concerning the human self as a person and its relationship to the community defined by the relationship between God and man. This analysis is a case study interested in two different way of conceptualizing the human self and its social embeddedness. Lin presents this difference by comparison. It is fascinating to realize how the same idea can appear in different forms according to different traditions of thinking about the human self in general. Lin seems to confirm a widespread dichotomy between East and West in conceptualizing the human self and its uniqueness: on the one hand the self is defined by separation from the community, within which it lives, and on the other hand it is the community which enables the self to be unique. Usually this difference serves as a means for distinguishing East and West, ascribing he "selfish self" to the Western tradition and the "social self" to the Eastern one. Lin follows this ideal-typological dichotomy, but he gives it a surprising turn: both alternatives can be applied to both traditions. By doing so he overcomes the very abstract opposition of East and West and opens up a new way of understanding the difference between both civilizations: Usually the dichotomy is understood as exclusive, dividing and separating both life forms from each other, but Lin's presentation puts it into a discursive dynamics, which opens up a new space for a more inclusive mode of thinking about the human self.

Literature opens up an even better chance to overcome the strength of pre-given prejudices and stereotypes. It allows to criticize them and gives space

for alternative ideas and visions. Erhard Reckwitz demonstrates this freedom of aesthetization by an analysis of a novel written by an author of mixed British-Cantonese descent. Reckwitz uses the novel by Timothy Mo as an example for the power of literature to reshape pre-given world views as an act of liberation. The novel presents a bitter part of colonial history and stages a counter-narrative, where a new understanding of the colonized culture emerges and "deconstructs" the power of ethnocentric devaluation of the other. At the same time the linguistic means of establishing a barrier of understanding are unveiled, and a different form of interpreting the human world is used. Reckwitz' article shows the possibility of using postmodern art and thinking to develop new strategies of a hermeneutical transgression of the limits of one self-awareness to the otherness of the others as an act of recognition. At least on the level of fiction the strong division between self and otherness can be overcome in favour of an "in between" as a starting point for more humane intercultural communication.

Straub and Rebane follow a similar line when using literature as source material to overcome the limits and possibilities of identity formation in the recent past. Whereas identity politics are subjugated under strong demands of self-affirmation and self-distancing from the others, literature can go beyond this powerplay of mental strength and "experimenting and experiencing alternatives. The authors have chosen historical novels in Italy between 1978 and 1981 as examples. These texts bring historical consciousness as the most important dimension of identity formation into the fore. They address the very complex situation of national identity in modern Italy. A synthesis of aesthetic form and political content allows a subtle explication of the most important elements and factors of identity formation with a special respect to fictional or even illusionary and "real" (in the sense of: given by experience) moments. At the same time the analysis of this mixture is reflected in two directions: In respect to the frame of reference, within which collective identity can and has to be interpreted on the one hand, and in respect of the relevance of the results of this interpretation, so that the complexity of modern collective identity can be understood.

Wilfried Loth's contribution follows another line of thematizing collective identity. He presents some basic features of European history without a strong reference to non-European countries and peoples. This demonstrates that Europe aims at a new future-directed identity strongly motivated by a strong self-criticism. Europe's historical self-awareness today refers to a long historical development covering different realms of space and shaping different levels of feelings and convictions of togetherness. Loth speaks of "different layers," which constitute the cultural context of European identity. This context is characterized by a mixture of the tradition of Christianity and the tradition of modern Enlightenment – both in a conflicting interrelationship – and by the experience of two world wars. The ongoing formation of European identity is grounded on a strong collective will to forever prevent such catastrophic interrelationships of the European states and nations and build up a political system, which guarantees the contrary: namely peace, a democratic organization of political power and social welfare. It is an open question whether this new European approach to overcome traditional national boundaries (without negating them, but by changing its exclusive into an inclusive character) can and should contribute to new strategies of intercultural communication.

At the end of our small collection of articles we find Ernst Wolff's interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas' attempt to create a new humanism as a framework for a new conceptualization of self and others. This attempt is based on the widespread and deep-reaching anti-humanism in the Western intellectual discourse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Typical for this anti-humanism is the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Levinas shares the basic argument of this anti-humanism, namely a radical critique of the traditional Western concept of the human self and its independence and autonomy. But giving up this idea of subjectivity might lead into relativism and a fundamental lack of meaning. In order to avoid this consequence, Levinas develops a new humanism based on the priority of ethics over epistemology and ontology. It is a humanism which defines the human self from the challenge of the otherness and even strangeness of the others. In order to make this humanism

historically plausible a different tradition of Western thinking is evoked, which introduces a new awareness of religion into the main Jewish traditional concept of a tradition of the Jews as prosecuted and suffering people.

The collection of texts dealing with the fundamental problem of conceptualizing self and the others is not free of arbitrariness. But, nevertheless, it represents the main issues of the present-day discourse in and on the cultural processes of identity formation. All articles stress difference. This is unavoidable since identity can't even be thought of – not to speak of lived – without making a fundamental distinction between oneself and the others. But difference in itself cannot be thought of and even practically lived without having something in common (basically the simple fact that the people in concern are human beings). This common ground in identity formation should not be overlooked when identity is a matter of dispute, and even more so when the logic of identity formation is addressed.

This quest for commonness in difference could be a stimulus for further work in the humanities and social sciences. It indicates a possible direction and aim of discourse, and it may contribute to the necessary taming of ethnocentrism and its disastrous consequences. The texts in this issue and its constellation indicate an argumentative dynamics in dealing with identity. It should be received as an expression of this dynamics, thus inviting the reader to contribute to new and more humane ideas and concepts of understanding one's own self and its relationship to the otherness of the others.



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