

Postmodernization and the Second Enlightenment

Zhihe Wang, Ph.D

(Director, The Institute for Postmodern Development of China
Director, China Project, Center for Process Studies)

It is clear to all that China is facing the predicament of modernization. While the achievements of China's modernization are remarkable, such as the fast GDP growth, the price is extremely high. The price includes environmental problems, an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and the loss of faith among its people.

What is wrong with China's modernization? Who is responsible for the predicament? Is there any way for China to get out of the predicament? Is there any alternative to the current form of modernization?

This paper offers a tentative answer to these questions. Undoubtedly the questions are tough and there is no easy solution. Therefore my paper can be regarded as an invitation to everyone present to contribute wisdom aimed at finding practical, comprehensive, and profound solutions.

My own thesis is that constructive postmodern thought, based on Whiteheadian or Process thought, provides an alternative to China's current form of modernization. However, in order for a constructively postmodern culture to emerge in China or in other parts of the world, we need what can be called a Second Enlightenment. A Second Enlightenment can overcome the limitations of the first Enlightenment, aspects of which are responsible for some of China's problems in modernization. A Second Enlightenment can assist China in a process that moves beyond modernity toward postmodernity: a process called *postmodernization*.

What is postmodernization?

Although different people have different understandings of postmodernization based on their stances, almost all agree that postmodernization is "radically different from" modernization.¹ Here I prefer David Griffin's understanding that postmodernization is a process of overcoming the negative effects of modernization while preserving its positive achievements. For Griffin, China can avoid the destructive effect of modernization by learning from the mistakes the Western world made. In this sense, China becomes postmodernized.²

1 Steohen Crook, Jan Pakulski, Malcom Waters, *Postmodernization*. London: SAGE Publication, 1992, 1.

2 Griffin, Preface for Chinese Version of *Reenchantment of Science*, Central Translation & Compilation Press, 1998,16.

Postmodernization means a transformation, social, economic and political from modernization toward community center, earth centered, and sustainable development centered .

Postmodernization requires “redirecting the economy for the sake of human beings and the whole biosphere.”³ China’s postmodernization will be centered on the common good rather than on an unfettered devotion to economic growth. It will recognize that economic growth can be healthy or unhealthy, and that healthy growth is growth that serves the interests of human community in an ecologically responsible context.

Of course this will not be easy. A big challenge for China to shift toward postmodernization is that so many in the mainstream are still obsessed with modernization. The majority still believes in the myth of modernization, which treats economic growth not only as good thing, but virtually as “the ultimate good.” Economic growth and scientific discoveries are regarded as constituting progress, they are unquestionable. “They were good almost by definition.”⁴ This consensus prevails in modern societies, both eastern and western, and in both developed and developing countries.

One way to help people critique the prevailing view, which emphasizes economic growth at all costs, is to reflect on the First Enlightenment.

What is the First enlightenment?

By the First Enlightenment, I refer to two things. I refer to (1) the historical intellectual movement in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that advocated Reason and individual freedom. And I refer to (2) the May 4th movement in 1919 in China, which advocated Democracy and Science. In China we called them Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. At that time people in China believed that Science could solve every problem and that it could even provide answers to the meaning of life. Although there is a gap in time between the Chinese version of the first Enlightenment and the European version, there is also an intrinsic connection between the two Enlightenments not only historically, but also spiritually. Both involve an unfettered devotion – indeed a worship – of science and reason. For this reason I speak of both as a First Enlightenment.

There is little doubt that the First Enlightenment in both Europe and China played a revolutionary role in liberating people from Federalist tyranny and ignorance. Some fruits of the Enlightenment included the notions of liberty, democratic participation, and the dignity of the individual. These fruits should still be highly valued and preserved. Given China’s circumstance, in which a feudalist ideology is still very influential, it is especially important to promote these values.

However, it would be irresponsible if we did not point out the limitations of the First Enlightenment after postmodern thinkers in the West already have pointed out the social and ecological costs. The Enlightenment played “a central role” in the justification for modernization. A worship of economic growth in modernization can be conceived as a manifestation of Enlightenment’ emphasis on modern Man who only seeks his own good and is “indifferent the success or failure of other individuals.”⁵ Let us consider these limitations more closely.

³ Herman Daly & John B Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 361.

⁴ Ronald Inglehart. *Mmm and postmodernism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, 77.

⁵ Herman Daly & John Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 159.

What are the limitations of the First Enlightenment?

We can find five shortcomings in the First Enlightenment, all of which are closely related.

1) *An imperialistic attitude toward nature*

The First Enlightenment carried with it a disrespectful attitude toward nature. Starting from an anthropocentric stance, this attitude treated nature as an object to be conquered, manipulated, dominated, and exploited by humankind. For Francis Bacon, one of the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment, “Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.”⁶ In the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men.”⁷ Nature was treated as a slave under the imperialistic attitude. The attitude is closely related to the disrespect for women because both nature and women are seen by the Enlightenment culture as “irrational, uncertain, hard to control, fuzzy.”⁸ Therefore, many people now realize that, in order to liberate women from oppression, people must also liberate nature, at least insofar as the two have been symbolically linked in the Western imagination.

2) *A nihilistic attitude toward tradition and the past*

The First Enlightenment also carried with it a nihilistic attitude toward tradition and the past, believing that in order to be fulfilled humans must sever their relations with tradition. In Europe, the past was treated as the “dark ages.” In China tradition was treated as trash which should be totally and completely abandoned. “Down with Confucianism” was the most famous slogan that time. Such a radical rupture with tradition made us Chinese cut off the intrinsic link to our own tradition, leading us to abandon excellent spiritual resources in our tradition such as “respect for the heaven and awe of the Dao”, “harmony with difference.” We are now struggling to reclaim these traditions.

Moreover, it is the nihilistic attitude that causes the loss of faith and values in China today. Lacking any faith or sense of the divine, people come easily to treat something secular, such as science or money, as the object of worship. That explains why scientism and worship of money are so popular today in China and in the West as well.

3) *The Worship of science*

Science was worshipped by almost all the First Enlightenment thinkers. It seemed to them to be the only correct and valid way to know the universe. Based on this assertion, all other ways of knowing the universe -- such as religious, artistic, intuitional, emotional knowing -- were viewed as unscientific. Therefore they were to be suppressed and demolished. In effect, advocates of the “science only” approach to life were scientific

6 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952, book 1, Sec.10.

7 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, 4.

8 Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, London & New York: Routledge, 1995, 192.

chauvinists. According to Li Yusheng, during the May 4th, Chinese Enlightenment, scientists in China deeply believed that truth was on their side and that the progress of China would totally rely on them. “I believe in science, therefore, I am superior to you both mentally and morally.”⁹ Most scientists held such an arrogant attitude toward their adversaries when they debated with them. Chen Duxiu, one of the leading Enlightenment thinkers in China claimed that only science and democracy could save China from “all dark sides including political, moral, academic, thought Levels.”¹⁰

There is little doubt that science has made a great contribution to promote human civilization. However, it is very dangerous to treat science as an object of worship. It is the worship that makes people, both in China and in the West, neglect the limits of science. In fact, the Western science the enlightenment thinkers worshiped was based on Newtonian physics characterized by mechanism and reductionism, which went wrong in many crucial respects, while succeeding in others.¹¹ From such an outlook of mechanistic science, the world was viewed as a machine, nature, “a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless.”¹² In Max Weber’s phrase, the world is disenchanted by modern science. According to Ulrich Beck, a well known German Sociologist, it is science that constituted “a potential cause of civilization-induced mass immiseration.”¹³

4) *The Worship of Reason*

Closely related to the worship of science was the worship of Reason. The first Enlightenment has been regarded as an “Age of Reason,” because, in it, “Reason becomes the unifying and central point of the century, expressing all that it longs and strives for, and all that it achieves.”¹⁴ Enlightenment thinkers believed that reason, especially “pure reason,” which is “untainted by emotion, sensate knowledge, social constructions, and noncognitive awareness,”¹⁵ was the drive of progress and could build a brand new civilization.

However, much historical evidence has now shown that the Reason with pure pedigree not only failed to improve the human condition, but also failed to solve the problems of oppression of women and ethnic groups. Reason did not keep its promise to bring us a beautiful new world. One of the weaknesses of reason, in my opinion, when it operates in abstraction from the cultural and spiritual norms, is its lack of a moral dimension. It separates itself from value, and is then conceived of a kind of instrumental reason which oppresses anything irrational. It is both player and judge. In this sense, it is a dictator.

Still another shortcoming of a “reason-only” approach to life is its tendency toward compartmentalization. Reason has various forms such as social reason, political reason, economic reason, technical reason, functional reason; each of them dominates one part of human life. The dominance of these types of reason can be viewed as “the

9 Lin Yusheng, “The Rise of Scientism in China since May 4th.” *Science Times* June 7, 2006.

10 Duxiu Chen, “Defense of *New Youth*.” *New Youth*, 1919, Vol. No.1.

11 Charlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real*, New York: Routledge, 1999, 21.

12 Whitehead, *Science and Modern World*, 54.

13 Ulrich Beck, *Ecological Enlightenment*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995, 50.

14 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951, 5.

15 Charlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of Real*, 220.

defining feature of modern industrial society.”¹⁶ Of course this is not all that reason is. In Greek thought, for example, reason included emotion and value, and was understood as a more comprehensive way of understanding things. But in the first Enlightenment reason was reduced to instrumental reason and lost its capacity for far-reaching vision. Closely related to the above, the third shortcoming of modern reason is its individualism, which assumes that “rational self-interest” is the fundamental motive for human activities. According to this view, which has had an inordinate influence in Western neo-classical economic thinking, rational people only care about maximization of their interest and have no reason to take the consequence of their actions for others into account.

5) *A one-dimensional understanding of freedom*

“Freedom” was a ubiquitous slogan of the Enlightenment, which played a very positive role in encouraging people to fight against the oppression of feudal tyranny. However, the concept of freedom that Enlightenment thinkers promoted had its limits. Briefly, freedom was understood abstractly by Enlightenment thinkers primarily as a possession of the isolated individual, and not as a way of being connected to community, and it was limited to freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and (in John Locke’s thought) freedom to own property.

What is the Second Enlightenment?

It is these limits of the First Enlightenment discussed above that have led to the destructive consequences of modernization. Therefore, it is necessary to call for a second Enlightenment based on reflection of the First Enlightenment in order to move beyond modernization. We must shift towards postmodernization, which calls for, in Rick Smyre’s words, “new ways for learning/education, new approaches for economic development, new methods of leadership, new concepts of governance, and even more complex ways of thinking.”¹⁷ It is worthy to point out that if the First Enlightenment can be viewed as a modern Enlightenment, then the Second Enlightenment can be called a postmodern Enlightenment that is not a complete rejection of the modern Enlightenment, but an integration of “many of its greatest achievements.”¹⁸

What are the main implications of the Second Enlightenment? Although it is not an easy task to summarize the defining features of the second Enlightenment in this short paper, I will attempt to do so under five aspects. The Second Enlightenment goes 1) beyond anthropocentrism to promote ecological awareness; 2) beyond Eurocentrism or Western-centeredness, toward a promotion of complementary awareness; 3) beyond homogenization, to an appreciation of diversity and plurality; 4) beyond a “one dimensioned view of freedom” and toward a deeper freedom with responsibility; and 5) beyond instrumental reason toward an inclusion of aesthetic wisdom.

| 16 Water F. Baber & Robert V. Bartlett, *Deliberative Environmental Politics: Democracy and Ecological Rationality*. London: The MIT Press, 2005, 19.

| 17 Rick Smyre, “Creative Connections”,
<http://www.communitiesofthefuture.org/articles/Creative%20Connections.htm>

| 18 Thomas Altizer, “A holistic, on-alienated Theologian.” In *John Cobb’s Theology in Process*. Ed. David Griffin & Thomas Altizer. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977, 3.

1) *Beyond Anthropocentrism to Ecological Awareness*

Given the fact that anthropocentrism is responsible for the ecological crises faced today, the Second Enlightenment tends to reject the anthropocentrism and its manifestation: an imperialistic attitude to nature. Unlike the First Enlightenment, which treated nature as an object of exploitation, the ecological awareness promoted in the Second Enlightenment regards nature as a “subject.”¹⁹ It challenges people to realize that we are a part of the unfolding process, inherently linked with the stars, the winds, the rocks, the soil, the plants, and the animal. They are not a valueless ‘resource’ that we are to exploit as detached managers for the sake of a GNP.²⁰ Unlike popular environmental attitudes that still treat nature as an object to be merely protected by humankind, ecological awareness emphasizes that it is nature who protects us. Nature is not only the provider of our food and cloth, nurturing our body, but also “nurtures our mind.”²¹ Therefore, we should not only protect her (by referring to nature as “her” are you continuing the linkage of women and nature, and is that ok in the Second Enlightenment?, but also love her, be in awe of her, and pay our respect for her.

2) *Beyond Western-centeredness to Complementary Awareness*

Since the First Enlightenment emerged in the West and modernization also appeared in the West, people often identify modernization with Westernized modernization. It seems that Westernized modernization is the only development model of modernization. Some Chinese Enlightenment thinkers like Hu Shi and Chen Xujing, declare that only Western culture, especially Western science and democracy, can save China. Accordingly, they propose the well-known theory of a “totally westernized China,” which says that China should totally and completely adopt Western ways, including its political, economical, and cultural systems.

It is worth noting that although there are few people in China today who insist the same theory literally, the theory is still very influential. For example, *Crying for Yellow River*, a very popular TV program in China showed in 1989, was full of praise for Blue civilization (Western civilization) and denigrating the Yellow civilization (Eastern Civilization). This indicates the necessity and hardship to promote the Second Enlightenment.

It must be stressed that the Second Enlightenment has no intention to replace blue civilization with yellow civilization, replace Western-centeredness with Eastern-centeredness. In contrast, what the Second Enlightenment tends to do is to promote a complementary awareness between Western and Eastern civilizations. At the heart of complementary awareness, as Jay McDaniel beautifully points out, is the assumption that there is more wisdom in all the traditions taken together than in any of them considered

| 19 Charlene Spretnak, *The resurgence of the real : body, nature, and place in a hypermodern world*, New York: Routledge, 1999,73.

| 20 Charlene Spretnak, “Postmodern Directions.” In David Griffin, *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*. Albany: State University of New York, 1988, 37.

| 21 Meijun Fan, *Contemporary Interpretation of Traditional Chinese Aesthetics*, Peking University Press, 2006, p.18.

alone, and that people of different traditions have much to learn from each other, because insights from one tradition “help complete from each other and correct insights from the others.”²² Just like no one can have monopoly of truth, no civilization can have monopoly of truth. Therefore, it is necessary for the two civilizations to be complementary to the other. Considering the destructive consequences of modernization, such as ecological crisis and moral crisis facing the world today, it is extremely important for the two civilizations to work together in order to cope with the pressing issues. Valuable concepts in Chinese tradition such as harmony with difference, benevolence, ecological consciousness, etc, can be revalued and revived to help address the illness of modernization.²³

At the same time, a revised science, democracy, and liberty will benefit humankind in a new form, in a new context, after being rescued from its hegemony. For example, in the Second Enlightenment science is no longer the King but can be the servant of human beings. Democracy is no longer the one that is “inherently unfriendly to environment,”²⁴ but a sustainable or green democracy that takes into account “the common good,”²⁵ which not only includes ourselves and our future generations, but also “the rights of non-citizens and the powerless, including sentient beings.”²⁶

3) *From homogenization to diversity*

By homogenization thinking I refer to modernity’s preference for sameness rather than difference, unity over plurality. The destruction of indigenous cultures by globalization reflects homogenization thinking, which is an act of violence against the “other.” At essence, this way of thinking holds a strongly negative attitude toward diversity.

Unlike the First Enlightenment which favors homogenization and uniformity, the Second Enlightenment holds a very positive attitude toward diversity in human life including ethnic, racial, sexual, cultural and religious difference. It not only pays respect to diversity, but also appreciates and “honor” diversity.²⁷

For Alfred North Whitehead, one of the founders of constructive postmodern philosophy, it is diversity and plurality that provide us the condition for higher development. He further stresses that the diversity in human societies “is essential for the provision and the incentive and material for the Odyssey of the human spirit.”²⁸

According to Whitehead,

Other nations of different habits are not enemies: they are godsend. Men require of their neighbors something sufficiently akin to be understood, something sufficiently different to provoke attention, and something great enough to

22 Jay McDaniel, *Gandhi’s Hope*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2005, 9

23 Meijun Fan, *Contemporary Interpretation of Traditional Chinese Aesthetics*, 1.

24 Water F. Baber & Robert V. Bartlett, *Deliberative Environmental Politics: Democracy and Ecological Rationality*. 3..

25 See Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*.

26 Janet McIntyre-Mills, ed. *Rescuing the Enlightenment from itself*, 16, 351.

27 Charlene Spretnak, “Postmodern Directions.” In David Griffin, *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*, 39

28 Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 207.

*command admiration. We must not expect, however, all the virtues. We should even be satisfied if there is something odd enough to be interesting.*²⁹

Here Whitehead challenges us to appreciate difference.

4) *From a one-dimensional understanding of freedom to a multi-dimensional understanding.*

Unlike the First Enlightenment that treated freedom abstractly, the Second Enlightenment reveals the complexity and richness in freedom, especially its social dimension. First, the Second Enlightenment emphasizes that freedom is always within constraints. There is no absolute freedom. Foucault's theory of power undermines the notion of absolute freedom. For Foucault, power relations are everywhere. It is power that "constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies."³⁰ Even freedom itself is an effect of power. It is power that produces the possibilities of action, and the conditions for the exercise of freedom.

Second, unlike the First Enlightenment that only emphasizes "freedom of thought, freedom of the press or freedom for religious opinion,"³¹ The Second Enlightenment calls people's attention to freedom of action or freedom of practice which is more important than freedom of speech or thought. In contrast to freedom of thought and speech, freedom of action is a primordial human need. To Whitehead, "The essence of freedom is the practicability of purpose."³² Starting from such a point of view, Whitehead says: "Prometheus did not bring to humankind freedom of the press. He procured fire, which obediently to human purpose cooks and gives warmth."³³

Third, the Second Enlightenment emphasizes the social dimension of freedom. It introduces responsibility into freedom and reveals the intrinsic relation between freedom and responsibility. For Emmanuel Levinas, responsibility to others pre-exists freedom and there is no freedom that pre-exists the responsibility to others. Freedom is always intrinsically related to responsibility. It does not mean that responsibility limits freedom. In contrast, in Levinas, my responsibility for others "*founds my freedom.*"³⁴ That is, freedom is not freeing from others but to be dedicated to serve others. In the words of Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., "Freedom is not freedom from one another but freedom for one another."³⁵

If the First Enlightenment emphasized the primacy of freedom over responsibility, then the Second Enlightenment emphasizes primacy of responsibility over freedom. Unlike the First Enlightenment, which only stresses my rights, my freedom, the Second Enlightenment values the rights of others, the freedom of others. That does not mean the Second Enlightenment does not care about "my right", my freedom. Instead, it tries to

²⁹ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 207.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power." in: *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. University of Chicago, 1982, 208.

³¹ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 66.

³² Ibid..

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. trans. A. Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, 124.

³⁵ Charles Birch & John B. Cobb, Jr. *The liberation of life : from the cell to the community*, New York : Cambridge University Press, 1981,188.

correct the overemphasis of First Enlightenment on individual freedom. In fact, there is no conflict between the two slogans. They rely on each other. The former is the basis of the latter. The full realization of the former depends on the latter. We need to liberate ourselves first, then we can begin to pay respect for others. In turn, we can truly realize our freedom only when we have respect for others. In Robert Bellah's words, "individual are realized only in and through communities," and that "strong, healthy, morally vigorous communities are the prerequisite for strong, healthy, morally vigorous individuals."³⁶

5) *From Pure Reason to Aesthetic wisdom*

In order to cope with the emerging issues in our time, "we need fresh wisdom."³⁷ Unfortunately, modern reason has shown its impotence to undertake this task due to its intrinsic weakness, especially its hegemony, its separation from value, its compartmentalization, its short sightedness, and its lack of integrative and synthetic perspective. Therefore it is necessary for the Second Enlightenment to call for an aesthetic wisdom.

By aesthetic wisdom, I refer to an integrative thinking based on the conception of organic interrelatedness, which aims at harmonizing truth, good, and beauty. In aesthetic wisdom, not only scientific rationality, cognitive reason, but also artistic intuition and religious experience can find room to develop themselves. Amid aesthetic wisdom, all types of human experiences can complement each other, enrich each other.

Aesthetic wisdom is different from modern reason in important ways. Modern reason is often based on either/or binary thinking that rejects and oppresses anything irrational such as sensitivity, feeling, values, and beauty. On the other hand the aesthetic wisdom the Second Enlightenment promotes values harmony based on both/and thinking. In this sense, it is a wisdom of Dao, whose essence lies in synthesizing and harmonizing the seeming opposites.

Such an aesthetic wisdom is to some extent a combination between Western wisdom and Eastern Wisdom. As a matter of fact, it is important to note that modern pure Reason or instrumental reason is an alien concept to Chinese culture because reason is always intrinsically related to Dao or value. There will be no reason without Dao. Based on such an understanding, the aesthetic wisdom, the second enlightenment calls for a vision of life that is value laden. It values all life, not only ours, but also the lives of all beings.

Unlike modern reason that disenchant the world by treating nature a lifeless matter, aesthetic wisdom aims at reenchanted the world. Nature, in Whitehead's view, has its own integrity. It does not exist simply for us, but has its value in itself. We should pay our respect for it.³⁸ Likewise, another kind of science is possible from such a

| 36 Robert Bellah, "Community Properly Understood: A Defense of 'Democratic Communitarianism'," in *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, 17-18. Cited in John B. Cobb, Jr. *Postmodernism and Public Policy*, 132.

| 37 John B. Cobb, Jr. "A Whiteheadian Appraisal of Modernization." Conference Paper for the International Conference on Constructive Postmodernism and China's modernization, Dec.16-18, Claremont, CA

| 38 John B. Cobb, Jr. "A Whiteheadian Appraisal of Modernization."

perspective of aesthetic wisdom, which is more open and more humane. In this sense, science gets reenchanting also.

From the perspective of postmodern aesthetic wisdom, we see the value of Second enlightenment as a whole. It is organic, respectful of nature, respectful of diversity, free yet responsible, scientific yet spiritual, humane and ecological. It is this kind of vision needed by China and the world today if we are to move beyond the shallowness of consumerism into a more meaningful way of living. The aim of this essay has been to differentiate the First Enlightenment from the Second, showing how the Second can build upon the First while moving beyond its more destructive aspects. Of course, to actualize the Second Enlightenment is “a huge undertaking.” Nevertheless, as Jordan S. Gruber rightly points out, “it may be the most worthwhile undertaking imaginable.”³⁹

³⁹ Jordan S. Gruber, “The Second Enlightenment Project: A Preliminary Analysis.” <http://www.integrativespirituality.org/postnuke/html/modules.php?op=modload&name=Sections&file=index&req=printpage&artid=200>