Entombed Terracotta Warriors and the Janus Face of Modernity

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This paper opens the question of modernity and its dynamic relationship with its counterpart, tradition. Drawing ideas and inspiration from The First Emperor, China's Entombed Warriors exhibition from the Art Gallery of NSW as well as 'modern' Western society, the paper aims to critically examine the impact of modernity in a cultural, political and economical landscape. The installation acts as an analogy between the modernisation process in the Qin dynasty and that similar contemporary drive in our Western capitalist society. For the most part, the installation serves to recount and revisit artifacts from the past but at the same time it structurally represents a construction of the present.
The question of modernity manifests in two distinct ways: as an uplifting development and progression or as a tool for weakening tradition. The article delves into the ways modernity is a form of emancipation inducing the idea of a "new beginning." Yet, it also acknowledges the view that modernity is an apparatus used to 'disintegrate' tradition. The paper proposes a third limb, that is, the ideas of tradition and modernity are inextricably linked. Whilst tradition may be continually losing recognition and practice in the public sphere, it still continues in the private sphere. Moreover, the space of the "everyday" shows the ways tradition is consistently reshaped and appropriated according to our changing values. By exploring an array of modernist critics and conservative philosophers' understanding of this dynamic relationship between modernity and tradition, it will allow us to better comprehend the present moment we live in.

Keywords: moral decay; emancipation; hybridization; continuity

> We shall not cease from exploration And the end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started And know the place for the first time. -(T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*)

I. Introduction

The modern installation, The First Emperor, China's Entombed Warriors exhibited in the Art Gallery of NSW, reinvents the cultural transformation of the Qin Dynasty, from its infancy to the First Emperor's vision of an 'immortal' afterlife. The construction of a world valuing protection of the natural world, national pride and security would eventually become the locus of a 'pure' Chinese identity. Chinese tradition relies heavily on such balance and circularity of ideologies. Overtime, this 'pure' identity has evolved and been appropriated under the growing influence of occidentalism.

Thus, this installation serves as a platform to explore the question of modernity: whether modernity is a beneficial development (particularly within the Qin Dynasty 221 BCE to 206 BCE) or perhaps a growing 'crisis' in our age, diminishing tradition to a mere idea? This paper shall explore the relationship between modernity and tradition, particularly focusing on the ideas of truth, spiritual and moral decay, emancipation and continuity.

The discourses of tradition and modernity have been under considerable debate over the centuries. Populist belief holds modernity as a process based on logic and rationalism which conflicts with the tradition of preserving culture and ideologies. Yet, tradition and modernity are not mutually exclusive or contradictory. Such terms do not exist in themselves; rather they function dialogically where these ideas ' communicate' between each other, always working

in a positive correlation (Siegle 2009). To understand this thoroughly it is best to define the terms, "tradition" and "modernity."

II. Tradition

Tradition refers to a set of practices, a constellation of beliefs or a way of thinking that exists in the present, but was inherited from the past (Gross 1992). Its Latin heritage, *tradere*, means to transmit or give over, suggesting the process of handing down. Without its existence there would be neither social integration nor any connecting fabric holding communities. By indicating what is culturally normative, tradition "establishes a framework for meaning and purpose"(Gross 1992, p.62).

Tradition shapes the concept of authority. Gross (1992) asserts that the authoritative was always handed down from past generations, through the medium of tradition. This idea is exemplified from the very beginning of the installation through a bronze plaque which emulated the Imperial inscription on Mt Langya:

> The universe entire Is our Emperor's realm, Extending west to the flowing sands, South to where the houses face north, East to enfold the eastern sea, North to beyond Tahsia Wherever human life is found, All acknowledge his sovereignty (Art Gallery NSW 2011)

The traditional practice of valuing the Emperor's realm as a symbol of power and the keystone to holding Chinese society during the Qin dynasty was absolute. The emperor was determined to conquer the warring states that the previous Chou dynasty had essentially created. The emperor succeeded in claiming what was later known as the Middle Kingdom, a single unified nation. Such practice of "acknowledging [his divine] sovereignty" led to a distinctive hierarchy, binding each person to their station. Villagers living under the authority of the family and harvesting food amongst their ancestors' burials, were in essence perpetuators of a system in which the daily cultural rhythms of life became authoritative.

III. Modernity

Modernity, on the other hand is the sense that the present is a discontinuity. Life in the present is fundamentally different from life in the past through a process of social and cultural change; either through progress, or through decline (Hooker 1996). Modernity became a movement away from the traditional social order and the set of traditional beliefs to embrace new forms of social structures and world views that were becoming distinctively modern (Hall 1996). Such new ideals are dependent on reason, experiment and experience.

Modernity focuses on order: rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos. It is assumed that a more ordered society will function more efficiently. Through progress, modernity functions as an economic and social tool to achieve greater wealth, flexibility and innovation for groups and individuals. Marshall Berman (1982) states that it is "a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal" that aims to utterly transform life. The ideas of 'modernity' and 'enlightenment' as understood in the West was meant to inaugurate a new age of human freedom and self-determination as opposed to the turmoil of previous eras highlighted by political, religious and intellectual guardianship (Berman 1982). In turn, the reflection of Kant's (1782) memorable phrase on modernity and the enlightenment era was meant to awaken humankind from the "slumber of self-induced immaturity" and ignorance, thereby paving the way for the undiluted reign of scientific knowledge and moral self-legislation (Dallmayr 2004).

However, underlying modernity is a humanist value that knowledge and truth ought to be discovered and is to remain eternal. The rational pursuit for truth is the essence of civilisation. Discovering the truth is part of the framework of order, the way by which man attempts to locate himself in the universe and pursue happiness. Yet, modernity is experienced today as a proliferation of alternatives regarding to changes in lifestyle, social mores or technology whereby there is an emphasis on future gains (Hooker 1996). The accelerating expansion of different alternatives that becomes available to those living in the twenty-first century notwithstanding, creates a growing sense of tension. Hence, there is an ultimate need to slow down progress.

IV. Spiritual & Moral Decay

Yet, through modernity there has been an alleged deterioration of tradition as enforced by the poet, T.S Eliot and his poem '*The Wasteland'*. It is believed that the decline of tradition is an unmitigated disaster. This decline in tradition leads us to be thrown into spiritual and moral decay. The process of modernity produces a fragmented lifeworld that is empty and vacuous where it is unable to discern what is valuable and valueless. Without tradition, it is said that people are denied a meaningful context in which to function. For the most part, tradition does not translate to values it simply harbours them. Neither does modernity yield values, it simply assigns objectivity before values. Subsequently, this 'lack' or 'lost' sense of continuity and place is more evident with attachments to well-established collective memories and meanings (Gross 1992).

The dominant discourse in our 'modern' Western culture is the 'global society' portraying the world as being compressed in time and space by new technologies of communications. Over the past two centuries, Immanuel Kant (1782) wrote that we are "unavoidably side by side" (Held 2005, p.44). Since Kant (1782), our society is becoming ever more intertwined, no longer inhabiting if there ever was, a world of discrete circumscribed communities (Held 2005). Instead, we live in a world of 'overlapping communities of fate' where the trajectories of all countries are deeply enmeshed with each other (Held 2005). Through globalisation there is the undermining of continuity and authenticity of indigenous cultures. In place of that, are western cultural icons such as McDonald's and other patents that form part of a global popular culture. Indeed, there is a growing stress on a homogenous way of living and 'universal sameness' (Wells 2005). An example of the Americanisation of Chinese culture is exemplified in the film *Mulan*. By contrast, 'Sagwa' the protagonist, seeks to localise Chinese culture in America, aiming at letting others recognise and embrace it by achieving a reciprocal understanding between the two different cultures. Similarly, at the end of the Terracotta Warrior installation, the merchandise store selling Western representations of Chinese Terracotta Warrior figurines, bookmarks and child board games furthers this sense of universality. "The constant motion and incorporation of different elements brings with it new characteristics, new distinctions and new similarities" (Kwok-Bun, Walls & Hayward 2007, p. 50).

With regards to the Terracotta installation, there is a dominant theme of seeking the truth and longevity. The first emperor's very need to build a Terracotta Warrior army and mausoleum was to establish an eternal afterlife and pursue immortality. This sense of creating a grand eternal city built by over 700 000 conscripts to achieve a sense of symbolic immortality was omnipresent. During the Qin Dynasty, the concept of immortality became a distinctive part of Chinese culture. Immortality referred to both the eternal frame of the individual and the family (Dong & Golstein 2006). Later in the Han Dynasty (206 BC to 220AD), it was popular to follow Daoist principles; that if we can properly transform our bodies, we will obtain longevity. Immortality within Chinese culture was about creating a legacy to establish an

afterlife. However, the distinctiveness of this Chinese value is giving way to the homogenous process of globalisation. That is, this idea is permeating through western popular culture, whereby immortality is reflected through the strive in medical breakthroughs such as in Botox to appear younger, among other things. Modernity holds immortality as some objective life work, centred around maximising one's utility (Held 2005).

From this perspective, perhaps hybridization and globalisation leads to a growing loss of distinctiveness in culture. Objects are broadly categorised, such that our lives are fragmented as people are increasingly identified by their functions relative to others, such as the lawyer, the doctor or the builder. As such, society is increasingly disregarding addressing people in terms of their family, politics or religion. People are objectified. Like media images, they have no personality or authenticity requiring interaction or social connection beyond the perfunctory one (Wells 2005). Indeed, this sense of hybridization anchors itself in Latour's (1993) argument that "we have never been modern".The root of modernity emerged around the time of Hobbes and Boyle, when the domain of knowledge was split between knowledge of people and the knowledge of things. Latour's (1993) purpose is to pull apart this western construction of viewing the world in binary oppositions such as black and white or subjective and objective, asserting that "natural objects" and "social subjects" are "hybrids circulating in networks of translation and mediation" (Latour 1993, p.31).

Thus, remains the question of whether we need the existence of tradition? Freud hypothesised that human beings harbour an urge to return to earlier states of existence calling this the "repetition compulsion" (Nicholson-Smith 1973). This concept refers to the drive to restore an earlier pleasurable point in time and recapturing a previous embedded feeling. This yearning to repeat may not necessarily be a longing for tradition yet bolsters the argument that human beings have certain deep-seated needs for security, continuity and rootedness. Over the centuries there exists a bona fide need for tradition such as a reliance on religion and culture. However, it goes hand in hand with the need to search for other things to satisfy humanity's own innate curiosity. There are those who forego that sense of security to seek more. Tradition and culture tend to be abstract notions. Modernity on the other hand, tends to encourage widely accepted rational ideas which then become universally accepted. Due to this process, 'modern' society tends to desire a sense of the objective.

V. Emancipation

Therefore, modernity may function as a form of emancipation, whereby it allows for creative flow and free expression. Modernists believe that at its fundamentals, tradition is only a constraint stifling originality and hindering human possibilities (Gross 1992). Heidegger propounds that everything essential and of great magnitude has arisen only out of the fact that man was rooted in a tradition (Sheehan 1981). True creativity is released only after tradition is discarded. Therefore, the diminished sense of tradition not only opens new pathways for artistic and cultural expression but it makes possible new modes of individualism.

The process of modernity brings about the notion of a new beginning. The concept of this new beginning is the exploration of new possibilities; introducing something that never existed before as opposed to tradition, which is a repetition or continuation of the way of things. Within the framework of tradition it seems as if there was only one choice of "superinducing and engrafting new things upon old" now there was the possibility of letting go of the past and starting over (Whitney 1986, p.85). The English philosopher, Francis Bacon stressed on the "new and innovative" questioning the true value of tradition. He believed that through modernity the 'new' was arriving. For Bacon, traditional concepts and

images were still valuable, but only insofar as they helped individuals adjust to the alleged advances of modernity (Whitney 1986).

In the seventeenth century "the new" came to be thought in both a temporal and spatial sense. In a spatial mode of beginning again, one could leave a physical setting to occupy a completely different empty space; or for others to enter a space that is already occupied, clear it out and then establish a new presence there (Gross 1992). It was believed that the old traditions were no more than "magnificent structures without any foundation," and the goal should be not to restore them but to "try the whole thing anew upon a better plan" (Whitney 1986, p.94). The unified reign of the Qin Emperor and the building of the Great Wall of China exemplified this type of beginning again, for the emperor saw the unification of the Warring States as the starting of a new imperial China. The old ways of Confucian scholarship and literature were destroyed, substituted with centralisation. This was achieved by ruthless methods, focused on standardising legal codes and bureaucratic procedures, the forms of writing and coinage as well as the pattern of thought and scholarship (Dirlik 2002). Overtime, this system and way of life has become the norm and hence a 'standard' tradition.

Through modernity there is also a development of empiricism and rationalism. The former defines that knowledge is entirely derived from observation and sense experience. The goal of an individual is to approach life as it is given to the senses, without any reliance of received ideas. The latter concerns the things which we know as certain are not discoverable through sense experience but reason. Descartes defended this line of thinking, arguing that traditions seem to perpetuate the 'errors' of the past, making "us less capable of correct reasoning" (Lafleur 1960). If the elements of tradition could be incorporated into a rational framework, he would not object to its continued existence. According to him, the nature of tradition amounted to nothing but a chaos of customs and unverified opinions mostly failing the test of reason (Lafleur 1960). Certainly this was the case for China where its perpetuating tradition of Confucius ideals and philosophy (on which to order virtually every aspect of life) and the error of bureaucracy led to a stagnated economic state for nearly a millennia.

VI. Continuity

In consideration though, what has been extinguished is tradition as a social element. The demise of tradition through the process of modernity, though apparent and real, is overstated. Tradition still continues through the cracks of modern life. They exist privately even where they have eroded publicly. Some survive by going underground, others by reconstituting themselves in such a way as to live on in new forms and guises (Gross 1992, p.64).

Similarly, the installation is a fusion of both modernism and a sense of the archaic. For the most part, the floor-plan of the exhibition in Figure 1 (Art Gallery NSW 2011) attempts to imitate the shape of the original burial site. Within the installation, each chamber room uses a substantial amount of open space alluding to traditional Chinese architecture, which is renowned for their open courtyard or sky wells. This traditional architecture is furthered by the use of rectangular units of space constructed in all the rooms, joining to form an organic whole. However, the rooms' high ceilings and the emphasis on height and depth juxtaposed against the "visual impact of the width of the buildings" is an aspect of contemporary Western architecture (Hooker 1996, p.20). For instance, the halls and palaces in China's Forbidden City have low ceilings in comparison to equivalent majestic buildings in the West. Thus, the installation incorporates a fusion of both contemporary Western and traditional Chinese architecture. Moreover, there is a blend of both primary and secondary source material. The dim-lit media visuals, posters and projected collages of the original burial site on

whitewashed walls contrast the intact burial items in the glass exhibits. The secondary material attempts to inform us and set the context of the primary sources.
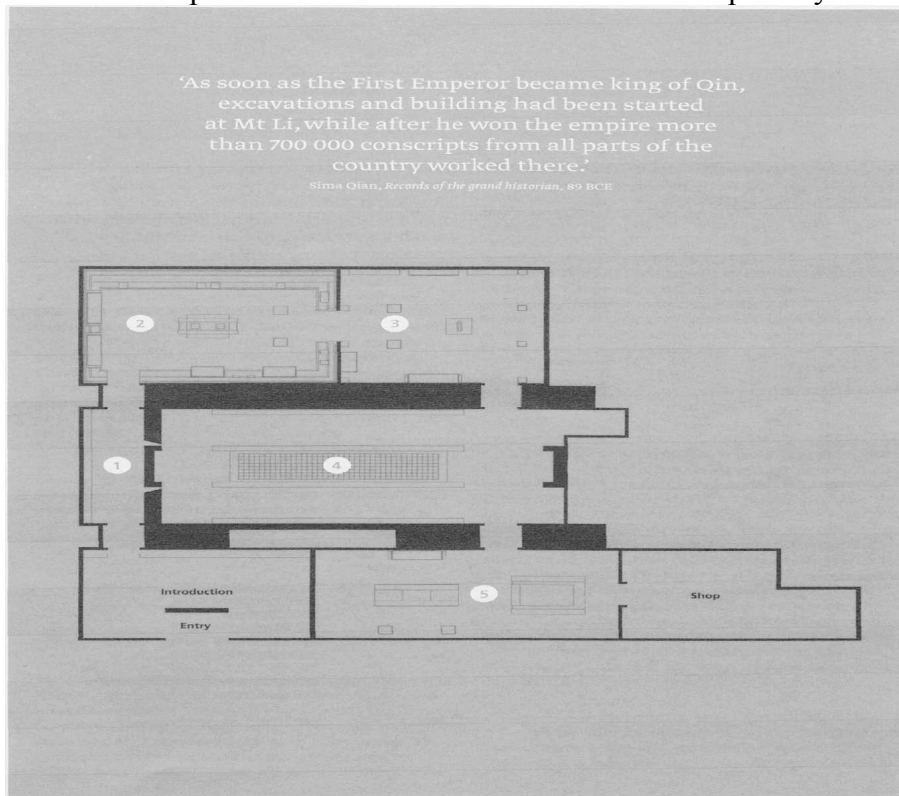

Figure 1.

It must also be addressed that the terms modernity and tradition are not mutually exclusive concepts. Traditions, whilst being inherited from the past, are in fact constantly evolving to adapt to changing circumstances. Tradition is not necessarily something that opposes or precedes modernity, but is rather inextricably linked with modernity (Bendix 1967).

Indeed, Dong & Goldstein (2006) assert that modernity in the space of the 'everyday' in its myriad contexts, reproduces and reshapes the way the everyday is lived. For the most part, the everyday is described as the space of incompleteness, where "the contradictory rhythms of daily life collide and repeat" (Dong & Goldstein 2006, p.50). The everyday is that which is most familiar and most recognisable. This is the landscape closest us, the world most immediately met. Yet, if the everyday is disturbed and disrupted by the unfamiliar and the new, essentially, in modernity, the everyday becomes the setting for a dynamic process: for making the *unfamiliar* familiar (Highmore 2002). This includes the tensions involved with adjusting to new ways of living and the disruption of custom. The everyday marks the success and failure of this process. "The new becomes traditional and the residues of the past become outmoded and available for voguish renewal" (Highmore 2002, p.15).

Although modernity bolsters the idea of objectivity, the problem is that the acceleration of new ideas, changes and thoughts has become too great, insofar as destabilising the rubric of fundamental understanding and tradition. Society needs time to adjust to certain 'new' ideas. Under the chaos of the birth of more modern ideas, leads to a foregoing of traditional ones. In the space of the 'everyday' tradition is constantly appropriating itself and adapting to modern ideals. Through this process, not all traditions have been diminished, rather only tradition as a social element. It has induced a growing sense of a hybridisation of uniform cultures. Yet, the practice and the value of tradition still survives in the private sphere such as in galleries and museums and oral communication. Thus, the complex process between modernity and tradition is dynamic and reciprocal.

Notes on Contributor

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