

# Reflections on Modernisation and Westernisation

*Mark Mancall*

Words, words, words. Words define our understanding of the world. Words structure our relationships with the world and with each other. Words make the past present to us and project us into the future. Words expose us to reality and enable us to hide from it. Words are the battlefield on which we struggle to define others and ourselves.

Philosophers define and refine the meanings of words in the context of ideas both broad and narrow. Social scientists examine reality in order to fill words with content and to facilitate our understanding of our relationships with ourselves, with our fellow human beings, and the structures of society within which we live. Artists, in whatever medium they work, labour to increase our subtle understanding of our existence.

Our leaders, both statesmen and politicians, use words to lead us, to arouse our passions, to persuade us to think as they would have us think, and to mask the realities that call their power into question.

The Ancient Chinese sages were already aware of the importance of the power in words and the importance of their correct use. Confucius (551-479 BCE), China's great political philosopher, argued that disorder in society and in the family derived from the failure to use words ("names") correctly, and he called for the "rectification of names", the correct and precise use of words:

If names not be correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.<sup>1</sup>

The definitional content of the words we use, therefore, requires great care and should arouse no little anxiety both among those who use them and those who hear them.

---

<sup>1</sup>Confucius (James Legge, *translator*), *Analects* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corporation, 1966), Book XIII, Chapter 3:4-7.

We cannot conceptualise our problems and discuss solutions to them if we cannot agree on the meaning of the words we use and if those meanings do not reflect our collective agreement about the reality we experience and conceptualise.

At this moment in our history, we in Bhutan need to take particular care to reflect on the words that are the focus of attention for this issue of the Druk Journal, *modernisation* and *westernisation*. These words are heavily freighted with ideological content, historical experience and example, analytical usefulness, and intentional and policy-making power.

*Modernisation* denotes, in broad terms, the transformation of a past that in the process comes to be considered as “tradition”, into a present that is primarily characterised by the degree to which any particular country’s “present” partakes of characteristics similar to those that attach to whatever any other country stands, symbolically, for the “present” toward which the modernising country wishes to aspire.

In those historical ages, everywhere on the planet, in which technological development had not yet accelerated to the point of rapid and irreversible change of various segments of the human community, observers might perceive borrowings of one or another element from one culture into another, but the attention focused on individual objects or practices.

For example, pre-Columbian America did not have horses. The horse was introduced from Europe, and while it radically changed communications and warfare in large parts of the Western Hemisphere, it did not result immediately and perceivably (at least not by the inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere at the time) in the totalising change implied by our contemporary use of the term.

Similarly, the potato, unknown in Europe before the Spanish conquest of Peru, was introduced to Europe as a consequence of the Conquest and radically changed European agriculture and society but in ways that were not at that time perceived as totalising.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the word *modernisation* first begins to appear in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when European scientific development and invention had reached the level of intrusion into the consciousness of the observers of the time. In other words, *modernisation* as a word begins to denote profound, fundamental change that is both irreversible and totalising.

It is at the same time that the word *progress* becomes attached to the concept of modernisation, meaning that modernisation is a movement toward a goal defined intellectually, administratively, politically, economically, socially...that is better than the present which, in this process of change, comes to be defined as *traditional*.

*Westernisation* is a concept that may have made its first appearance as early as the 1830s but comes into more or less common use in the 1870s; and most specifically it enters into common use at first with reference to the changes that Japan underwent after its decision to radically modernise as a consequence of Admiral Perry's mid-century visit.

In other words, westernisation denotes the primary characteristic of modernisation that is a result of imperialism and the spread of capitalism through Western direct and indirect influence in Asia and Africa, particularly, but also in the Western Hemisphere.

Two historical instances should give us pause to reflect on the experiential significance of modernisation and westernisation for Bhutan.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—after the Western powers defeated the Chinese Empire in the last of the Opium Wars (1860)—the leadership of the Manchu Empire of which China was a part, or, more specifically some of its Sino-Manchu and its Sinicised-Manchu leaders, began to realise that the superiority of the West over China lay not only in the West's military technological advantage but also in some of its ideas.

A “translation bureau” was opened in Shanghai for the purpose of translating important Western texts into Chinese as a means of introducing those ideas into the Chinese governing elite, so that they could discover the “secrets” from which the West's technological developments had grown. An important school of official thought argued that it would be possible to adopt Western technology and at the same time to maintain Chinese traditional values and practices.

This was quickly proven to be an incorrect evaluation, a mistaken concept, of the relationship between technology, on the one hand, and culture on the other. Within a little less than a century, the Chinese Empire had collapsed, and after less than forty years of half-hearted experimentation with the introduction of Western liberal ideas into China, China returned to unity and great power status under the banner of Marxism, which was also a thoroughly Western school of thought.

In other words, before the beginning of the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China had become, in effect, a battleground between “tradition” and “modernity”, on the one hand, and between different Western schools of thought instantiated in political, military, economic, etc., practices and institutions. As China changed, and changed profoundly, its definition of “tradition”, “modernisation”, and “westernisation” also necessarily changed. And this took place at all levels of society.

It should be noted, and not just in passing, that the same extremely broad brush strokes could be used to depict modernisation in India at roughly the same time. During the century from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, India became more and more a colony of Great Britain, while China retained its independence, at least technically. It would not be too far-fetched to suggest, therefore, that independence and sovereignty were not really significant variables in the different paths that China and India took in the modernisation process.

Japan provides a different example. By 1890, the Japanese leadership also sought to discover the “secret” of Western political power and military and economic superiority. The Japanese sent a commission abroad that visited the United States and the greatest powers in Europe to try to discover, through observation and discussion, that secret. When the commission returned, it reported that what differentiated the great Western powers from Japan was that the former possessed “constitutions”—in other words, Western political institutions were the secret the Japanese sought, at least as the commission reported.

The consequence was the rapid development in Japan of a Constitution and “democratic” institutions, at least as the Japanese leadership of the time understood and interpreted them. And it is true that in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japan won a significant victory in the Russo-Japanese War and went on, even in the period between the two world wars, to become a major industrial power. The Japanese also believed that it was possible somehow to maintain both tradition and modernity within one container of national identity.

In the years following World War II and Japan’s defeat at the hands of the Western powers (including in those days the Soviet Union), foreign observers often noted anecdotally a certain kind of “schizophrenia” in Japanese cultural practices. For example, it was often said that Japanese dressed in traditional garb and while sitting on tatami in Japanese-style rooms behaved according to very traditional patterns. But dressed in Western clothes and, for example, riding urban trams, old traditional Japanese decorum and manners disappeared

to be replaced by rough mob behavior thought to be so characteristic of Western crowds.

Obviously this is a very simplistic approach to a discussion of the extraordinarily complex set of questions around which the discourse between tradition and modernity revolves; but it certainly suggests that the concept that it is possible to modernise and at the same time to preserve tradition may be fanciful at best.

As the great historian Jerrold Seigel suggests, modernisation is not something one can cherry pick. It is, and very directly so, a tremendous transformation in human life, not just culturally, socially, politically, and economically, but even physically. For example, improved health care leads both to the increase in the numbers of people who live beyond the age when productive labour is possible for them, and simultaneously, causes declining rates of child mortality, to increase the population at a rate very different from the rate of economic growth.

There is a potential contradiction here that no amount of wishful thinking will resolve. When urbanisation is seen as a sign of modernity and is therefore encouraged by government policy, profound social change takes place both in the class structure of society as well as in the cultural behaviours and morés. The city is not simply a large village. It is a different socio-economic-political organism with vastly different problems than the problems of, say, social life in a small village.

After the first generation of urban migrants with their emotional ties to ancestral villages is replaced by the next generation of urban citizens—whose lives have been fashioned in every possible way by the very fact that they are urban people, not village folk—no attempt to tie urban populations to village roots by substituting census fictions for lived realities will accomplish anything but the promotion of greater unreality in the development of institutions and policies.

This argument begs to be carried a step further. To the extent that modernisation is both symbolised by, and is a consequence of, participation in the institutions and relationships of a “globalised” world, the shape and structure of the increasingly “traditional” nation-state is, inescapably, heavily impacted by its desire for acceptance in, and for the fruits of, the contemporary international economy.

“Failed states” are the consequence of the inability of their leaders and of their intelligentsia to fully grasp the inevitable totalising consequences of modernisation and, therefore, of their inability to think their way through to a vision and to policies

that will consciously strive to avoid the pitfalls that lie in wait along the path to modernisation.

What does all of this suggest for Bhutan? There are far too many issues to enumerate them here. But there are some, within the context of this Journal, that are important to mention, however briefly.

First, “progress” does not necessarily mean improvement. In fact, as Steven B. Smith, echoing many contemporary thinkers and observers, suggests, “the narrative of progress is no longer sustainable...”<sup>2</sup> How in a world of increasing wealth for a very few and hugely greater inequality for the many can we find a definition of “progress” that is satisfying?

We may well find individuals and small groups here and there who understand that “progress” does not necessarily mean “growth” or “improvement” and, consequently, consciously choose to withdraw from the path of progress to follow another way of life. But once we embark on the path of measurement, whether it be of economic growth or of happiness, we are embarked upon a path of change that differentiates clearly between a past that, at best, may be on life support and a future that we can barely glimpse. The act of preservation leads either to museumification or to an almost mindless repetition of ritual behaviours divorced from the surrounding world. As Karl Marx wrote of the consequences of change:

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profane, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.<sup>3</sup>

In short, if we are to survive as the unique community of governance and culture we believe ourselves to be, we must learn to manage change by beginning with as clear a vision as possible of what we want to become; and then we must pursue that vision through carefully thought-out and considered policies informed directly by that vision. Bhutan must consider progress as a challenge, not a fact, and the definition of progress and modernisation must become the focus of public discussion and debate if we are to avoid the pitfalls for which we can only hold ourselves responsible.

<sup>2</sup>Steven B. Smith, *Modernity and its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 352.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.