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COMMENTARY



Experience the world as a weak person

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ABSTRACT

On 23 June 2019, as Dean of the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) at China Agricultural University, I delivered a speech entitled 'Experience the world as a weak person' at the graduation ceremony. However, in our society, everyone wants to become strong, and no one wants to be weak. It is observed that in Chinese society the increase in material wealth has gone hand in hand with an increase in rage and hostility. One of the reasons behind is that many people approach society and treat others with the mentality of a strong person. In fact, people are not at all able to comprehend the life realities and inner worlds of the weak ones, thus we need to maintain an attitude of trying to experience the world as a weak person.



KEYWORDS

Weak person; strong person; ordinary people; respect

Author's note:

In 1983, Robert Chambers published his masterpiece *Rural Development*, in which he stated that in the everyday practice of rural development, one of the important issues is to reverse the biases of different actors involved, such as officials, professionals, peasants and so on. He suggested that professionals should see and feel the world from the other end, and try to experience the world as a poor and weak person.¹ After almost 40 years, Robert Chambers' statement is still as forceful and noble as ever.

On 23 June 2019, as Dean of the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) at China Agricultural University, I delivered a speech at the college's graduation ceremony. The title of the speech was quoted from Robert Chambers' statement, the main message of which is to ask society to see, understand and respect the ordinary people, especially the weak ones. This speech has been widely disseminated and read in China. A great number of official media and social media outlets shared the speech, including the Official WeChat Account of *People's Daily* on 27 June 2019. More than 1000 WeChat Accounts posted the speech in its entirety, with at least 10 of them receiving more than 100,000 views. Thousands of Weibo (Microblog) accounts posted the speech. The speech was selected as reading material for Chinese classes in some high schools; thus, quite a number of high school students have read the speech. According to a

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¹Chambers, R. 1983. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, 201. London: Longman.

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rough estimate, the speech has been read at least 100 million times. Even today, the speech is often quoted in some essays on social media.

During the global pandemic of the past three years, there has been a great deal of uncertainty regarding many things and in many places. Everyone in the world has been greatly affected, in terms of both health and daily life. Those who have been affected most are, again, the ordinary people. While many of them lost their basic livelihoods and struggled to survive, it is in fact these ordinary people who have made the greatest contribution to keeping society functioning, including the vulnerable food production and supply, onerous medical services, and so on. I see peasants continuing to farm the land and raise animals despite the blockade of villages and rising input costs, peasant workers continuing to work in cities even though they face high risk of quarantine, food delivery workers delivering food, medicines etc. to those under quarantine despite being required to undergo frequent nucleic acid testing, hospital cleaners continuing to collect large amounts of waste even though they face the risk of infection, and so on and so forth. Almost all of these ordinary people are from rural areas, and they are obviously the weak ones in the broader society. Against this backdrop, I think it is all the more important that in this twenty-first century we see, understand and respect the weak in our society. Therefore, I wish to share this speech in English (it was originally given in Chinese).

Dear fellow students:

Congratulations on your graduation! In no time you are going to start your new life in new positions. At this moment, I will not summarize your study and life in the college during your several years' bachelor's or postgraduate studies, since the best conclusions need to be made by you, yourselves.

I introduced the philosophy and ideals of the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) to all of you when you started your studies here. If you remember, I particularly highlighted that a university should offer students not only knowledge but also thoughts. I believe that they are different, as knowledge is material, thought is conceptual; knowledge is empirical, thought is philosophical; knowledge is utilitarian and thought is free. I believe that we should go to university not merely to gain knowledge so as to change our fortunes, but above all to acquire thoughts, so as to enjoy freedom. Among the thoughts that the College of Humanities and Development Studies is determined to share is concern for ordinary people. This is critically important.

In *They*, the five-minute film of the College of Humanities and Development Studies, there are only three sentences, i.e. seeing them, engaging them, and narrating them. The message we want to deliver is that in the era of great development, people often see skyscrapers, high-speed rail and expressways, while ignoring hundreds of millions of ordinary people behind the great development. It is the mission of this college to see those ordinary people, to engage them through our teaching, our academic research and our social actions, and to narrate them through our academic writings, public discussions and policy advocacy.

At the last moment of your stay in the college I want to remind you all, once again, not to ignore 'the ordinary people' in your future work and life. Please pay attention to them, especially to the weak among them.

In Robert Chambers' masterpiece *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, published in 1983, he reminds officials, scholars and even students in development industries and development studies, who are urban-based and urban-biased, that if they want to optimize the impact of their work and make rural development benefit ordinary people, they should see themselves as unimportant and try to experience the world as a weak and poor person.² Only then can we understand the realities and life worlds of the weak and the poor, the livelihood pressures they face and their everyday needs.

However, in our society, everyone wants to become strong, and no one wants to be weak, since being strong is a symbol of success, while being weak is a representation of failure. So, it is very easy to say 'experience the world as a weak person', but not so easy at all to do. It is especially difficult for those who have power, resources or identity advantages.

We all have witnessed the rapid economic growth and remarkable accumulation of wealth in China in recent decades. Almost every Chinese family has benefitted from such economic development. Our society has entered an era of enormous material richness. However, the increase in material wealth has gone hand in hand with an increase in rage and hostility in Chinese society. This is not an exaggeration. Its severity is beyond our imagination. For example, in restaurants, busses, subways, high-speed trains, and even planes, people quarrel and fight for seats. Other phenomena, such as hospital disturbances, school bullying, domestic violence, queue jumping and road rage are commonplace. Sometimes a fight or a beating can occur just because of a passing glance. On websites, it can be even worse. Many high-ranking people and those belonging to social elites abuse each other and use very bad words on the WeChat group.

Why? Why is it that our material life is getting better and better, but people are becoming more and more hostile and more prone to rage? There are many reasons, but I think one of them is that many people approach society and treat others with the mentality of a strong person. People who hold this strong mentality are often ego-centric and self-oriented.

People with this strong mentality usually ignore other people, assume they have exclusive priority, cannot tolerate others' opinions, and won't allow others to go beyond them. There are too many examples. We can find them everywhere. For instance, I have often seen parents who take their children to school in the morning parking their cars directly at the main entrance of the school even though there is a sign clearly prohibiting this. Some people in high society park their cars directly on the lawn. They curse each other on websites and sometimes fight each other over different opinions. Too many people fight in restaurants, on roads, in high-speed trains and even on airplanes over trivial matters.

The worst performance of this strong mentality is bullying the weak. For example, customers assault waiters and waitresses in restaurants; residential owners insult security guards; men abuse women; strong adults abuse children and the elderly; the powerful insult the powerless; the rich insult the poor.

Such a strong mentality not only runs counter to building a harmonious society, but also does not contribute to us realizing a new concept of social development. For example, with reference to Wang Zhihe's analysis of the hegemony of modernity³, such

²Chambers, R. 1983. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, 201. London: Longman.

³Wang, Z. H. 2005. "Foreword to the Chinese Translation". In *Donna Haraway and GM Foods* (Chinese Translation), auth. G. Myerson, trans. J. H. Li & Z. Su, 19. Peking University Press.

a strong mentality is reflected in many relations. In the relationship between human beings and nature it is often manifested as conquering, transforming or exploiting nature, while not respecting nature or having reverence for it. In the relationship between rationality and sensibility, it advocates calculating, prioritizes efficiency, has contempt for sensibility and has no concern for personal feelings and social meanings. In the relationship between natural sciences and humanities and social sciences it manifests as scientific chauvinism, that worships the objectivity and utility of science, and despises the critical nature and 'sentiment' of humanities and the social sciences. In rural–urban relationships, such a strong mentality usually implies that the countryside should look up to, and follow, the example of the city, even sacrifice the interests of the countryside and peasants for the interests of urban construction and urban people.

It is precisely because of the huge damage of the strong mentality in our country's social construction and development that I will remind every one of you, at this moment of departure, to remember 'ordinary people's' perspectives on social development and everyday life, which the College of Humanities and Development Studies constantly advocates. In particular, we should try to experience the world as a weak person.

After leaving the university, if you are engaged in poverty alleviation work, please try to understand the life realities of the poor and the livelihood pressures they face. Do not impose your imagined scheme of poverty alleviation on the poor. If they do not accept your scheme, please do not belittle their qualifications and vision. You need to try to experience the world as a poor person.

If you are engaged in rural revitalization work, please try to understand the life worlds and production logic of the peasants. Do not think that an outsider can impose his or her industrial plan or marketing scheme on peasants. Robert Chambers reminded us that taking risks for oneself is one thing, but encouraging others to take risks is quite another.⁴ Perhaps the peasants still maintain the safety-first principle, as James Scott has pointed out.⁵ You need to try to experience the world as a peasant.

If you are a male like me, please try to understand the multiple roles a woman plays and the multiple burdens a woman carries. Do not try to impose mechanical and parochial equality between men and women in all production and job arrangements. Women have always faced inequalities, created by the labor divisions of traditional gender roles. A woman usually does more housework, and is responsible for social reproduction and workplace pressures. In a world dominated by male-based production arrangements and job assessments, a man needs to try to experience the world as a woman.

No matter what kind of work you do, please try to understand the service and cleaning staff and security guards, try to understand those who are powerless and moneyless, and try to understand those who are old, disadvantaged, sick and disabled. Do not think that you are really their God, do not think that you are actually smarter than or superior to them, do not think that you are their savior. Many things, to you, might be extremely trifling, but to them, might be a huge event making them extremely anxious night and day, as if the sky is about to collapse.

⁴Chambers, R. 1983. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, 193. London: Longman.

⁵Scott, J. C. 1976. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, 5. New Haven: Yale University Press.

I want to tell you that a person who has never experienced an impoverished life will never really understand what an impoverished life actually means. A person who has never experienced the difficulty of borrowing will never really empathize with the trauma of having to ask others to lend them money. A person who has never raised a disabled child will never really feel the hardship, which takes many forms, involved in parenting a disabled child.

It is precisely because people are not at all able to comprehend the life realities and inner worlds of the weak ones that we need to maintain an attitude of trying to experience the world as a weak person.

Dear students, people refer to the school they have attended as their Alma Mater. As a mother school, the College of Humanities and Development Studies has no glorious history and no gorgeous appearance, but we do have romantic feelings and sober thoughts. We hope our graduates will stay pure and true. We hope our graduates will dive into society and treasure real meanings in their future work and future lives. We hope you will 'look into the depths of your hearts and heed the secret voice of conscience', as Jean-Jacques Rousseau once entreated. He also said, 'seeing your simple and modest garb, who would not despise vain luxury?'⁶ I want to say to our graduates: 'seeing your simplicity and genuineness, who would not despise stratagems and cunning; seeing your virtuous and pure interests and aspirations, who would not despise the calculating and utilitarian mind; seeing your respect for the weak, who would not despise the arrogance of the strong?'

My dear students, my speech will end, but our connected emotions will not. At this time of parting, like your mother, the College of Humanities and Development Studies is not so concerned about how successful your business will be, or how great your wealth will be in the future, but only wishes you health, safety and happiness all throughout your lives. No matter when it might be, no matter where you will be, you do not need to give us advance notice, you do not need to prepare beforehand; the mother-like College of Humanities and Development Studies will always await your return with open arms!

Disclosure statement

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⁶Rousseau, J. J. 2009. *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Chinese Translation), trans. Y. Gao & Y. Gao, 67, 72. Guangxi Normal University Press.