

High-Tech Pan- Materialism and Humanist Ethics

High-Tech Pan- Materialism and Humanist Ethics:

*From a Chinese-Western
Historical Perspective*

By

Youzheng Li

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	viii
Introduction	xix
A Semiotic-Epistemological Perspective	
Part One: The Worship of High-Tech Commercialism and Materialism in the New Space Age	1
Chapter One.....	2
High-Tech Commercial Compounds and the Future Orientation of Human Civilization	
Chapter Two	10
Redescribing the Interaction Patterns between Spiritual Faiths and Material Programs in Historical Civilizations	
Chapter Three.....	18
New Humanist-Ethical Criticism in relation to Materialistically Directed Cosmic Worship in the New Space Age	
Chapter Four	30
Socio-Cultural Consequences of Materialist Fundamentalism	
Chapter Five	34
The Scientifically Directed Outer-Space Dream Functioning as a Secular-Style Quasi-Religion based on Trio Materialism	
Part Two: The Necessity for the Reorganization of Global Human Sciences in the Robotization Era	43
Chapter Six	46
Problems with the Formation of Human Sciences in the High-Tech Pan-Materialist Age	

Chapter Seven.....	61
Human Sciences and Multi-Ideological Analyses	
Chapter Eight.....	73
The Semiotic Spirit: Its Multi-Rational Renovation and Ethical-Pragmatic Orientation	
Part Three: The Modernity of the Historical Experiences of Chinese Humanist Ethics.....	83
Chapter Nine.....	84
A Prelude to a Historical Model of Humanist Ethics	
Chapter Ten	95
The Semiotic/Hermeneutic Distinction between Confucian (仁 <i>ren</i>)	
Ethical Idealism and the Ideology of Confucianist (儒 <i>ru</i>) Imperial Power	
Chapter Eleven	108
The Epistemological Modernity of <i>ren</i> Ethical Humanism Revealed after its Separation from Historical Bondage	
Chapter Twelve	119
The Modernity of Ancient <i>ren</i> Ethics in Early Modern China: The So-Called “Golden Decade” and its Epistemological Implications	
Chapter Thirteen.....	133
The Potential Intellectual Interaction Between the <i>ren</i> Ethical Spirit and Modern Human Sciences	
Chapter Fourteen	148
<i>Ren</i> Ethics and its Commensurability with Modern Scientific Thoughts	
Chapter Fifteen	155
Historical Humanist Ethics and its Heuristic Role in the New Humanist Enlightenment	
Epilogue.....	166
On the Justification of Re-Establishing Ethical Subjectivity	

vii

Postscript	181
Recommended Further Reading	185

PREFACE

The current globalizing world consists mostly of pan-materialist-oriented, high-tech-guided, totally commercialized civilizations. In these terms, all social/cultural/intellectual situations are reorganized/reoriented along the same lines. The material/spiritual balance of earthly civilized history is therefore seriously broken and constantly criticized. The related criticisms could be divided broadly into two categories: a practical/social moral one in a social-scientific framework on one side and a philosophical/theoretical ethical one in a human-scientific framework on the other. The effective analyses and related actions in the former are part of current civilizations and therefore do not belong to our theme. Our concerns are about the latter one related to the negative intellectual/spiritual consequences that make the humanities unable to undertake their duty in the face of the pan-materialist challenge to human existence; the major flaws of the theoretical humanities are displayed in their general a-ethical attitude and irrational ways of thinking. In other words, it is current major human-scientific theorizations that should have led the critical reflections on human destiny at the moment of the huge historical change, but so many representative thinkers/theoreticians tend to abandon empirical realism and ethical stances in their irrational/nihilist theoretical fantasies. “The thinker” is defined by journalism in terms of the actual influence of his thinking or actions on social reality, while such kinds of creators should be taken as the products of objective circumstances, being in fact constructive actors rather than critical thinkers. In our sense, the thinker should come out from human sciences not owing to his influence on scholarly communities but owing to the relevant direction of his critical thinking to both academic and social realities. However, our discussions in this book are not focused on intellectuals but on the objective conditions and structures of the academic establishment that makes irrational theorization possible. So it is the objective conditions that decide the currently less effective intellectual/scholarly approaches/directions; for example, the so-called creative originality of many post-modernist thinkers is implicitly/indirectly “produced” by the related objectively determinative conditions that are further under the sway of high-tech ecology.

The current intellectual/theoretical situations in human-scientific academia are based on the dominant academic framework that is

characterized by the disciplinary-centric compartmentalization. This is the major cause of establishing the academic institutionalization and orientation of the humanities/human sciences, involving, above all, the traditional technical difficulty concerning free-intellectual communication. Thinking and doing research within the established framework necessarily suffers from various linguistic, inferential, and institutional barriers. This is the simple reason why we should promote semiotic/hermeneutic-directed interdisciplinary ways of thinking and methods. Unlike the popular gestures of superficially decorative interdisciplinary gestures, a genuine interdisciplinary strategy must be directed at getting rid of institutional restrictions fixed on the compartmentalizing academic systems. Recommended innovative scholarly tactics include the linguistic-semantic and analytical-institutive reorganizations beyond the normality of and the standard procedures prevailing in the academic world. For example, many post-modernist and liberal-artistic thinkers have indicated their great influential impacts in both academic and social areas so as to express their seemingly deep concerns with real life, so many famous international humanities thinkers also undertake the role of the public intellectual. This kind of dual personality of human-scientific theoreticians, who create various irrational theories in academia with their unrealistic style but behave as protesters in socio-political arenas with realistic manners, prove to be thinkers who are still disconnected from realities at both the epistemological and the social level, being far from qualified theoreticians in human sciences. For they could fail on both sides: in academia, they do not follow the proper scientific line in dealing with human sciences, and in the social reality, their role as socio-political protesters in a romantic-utopian style cannot be taken as one of true knowers and relevant actors with respect to the actual socio-political reality. The dramatic/romantic expressions of those post-modern theorizations at academic and socio-political levels would turn out to be even a negative cover-up of the general epistemological flaws in human sciences. A true theoretician is tested by being an effective knower of both social and scholarly realities rather than by showing up as a public fighter at a social level in our times. The irrelevant unification of two divergent practices discloses a double (epistemological and pragmatic) confusion prevailing in contemporary theoretical humanities. The personality split is in fact the result of predominantly commercialized journalism. It is interesting to note that for the past century in modern China, the same inclination of intellectuals has been prevailing, leading to a nationwide phenomenon: pragmatistic wisdom of opportunist intellectuals realized in a mutual promotion tactic between scholarly and social reputations. As a

result, searching for a reputation of any kind becomes the true motive/aim of humanities scholars, and so-called scholarly theories become merely the means for attaining the aim. Furthermore, high-tech-guided commercialized journalism would help this operation by refining the efficiency of the means with non-scientific skills. The feasibility of the present-day non-scientific practices in the humanities is technically also thanks to the traditional communicative barriers at the linguistic and analytical levels. Our semiotic/hermeneutic approaches are directed in particular to these problems, while the confusing semantic/inferential ways are in fact rooted in a more basic historical-interpretative manner, which should be anatomized by our historical-semiotic theory.

Therefore, our innovative interdisciplinary exploration in modernizing global human sciences leads to a historical-semiotic epistemological division between two different practical historical paths—socio-political and intellectual-spiritual—in terms of two conceptual divisions between the historical-natural and intellectual-functional levels.¹ So the above semantic clarification about the role/identity of a theoretical thinker involves our relation-centric historical-hermeneutic studies too. The present work is intended to outline and analyze the inter-relational networks of several major significant phenomena in current social, cultural, academic, and intellectual spheres in terms of their interdisciplinary/cross-cultural approaches as well as from a humanist ethical perspective. According to our theoretical outlook on the developing dual-historical tracks, the natural wholeness of history should be functionally divided into three relatively separate sections: the social/political/material (A), the academic/ethical/spiritual (B), and the externally AB interactive-relational (C). Despite keeping close external interactions between one another, A and B maintain divergent directional/operative autonomies, each of which has its own different faiths, goals, methods, productions, and evaluating systems. Contemporary A, except for its political systems, mainly refers to the high-tech-driven, totally commercialized communities characterized by its most successful pan-materialism embodied in all social fields in human history; let us say it metaphorically follows an “A-logic.” Comparatively, B, especially its central part of human sciences, should unfold along a “B-logic” marked by empirical-rational/ethical-spiritual principles, while despite the unprecedentedly rich intellectual/spiritual productions accumulated in

¹ Youzheng Li, “Power-organizing and Ethic-thinking as two paralleled praxes in the historical existence of mankind: A semiotic analysis of their functional segregation,” *Semiotica. Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* 2018, no. 225: 313–352.

modern history, the theoretical humanities today have widely deviated from the empirical-rational route set up in the Enlightenment. Owing to the habitual-functional blending of A and B in experience and thinking, as well as owing to the epistemological blending of the subjective-ethical and the social-moral mechanisms, the truly critical situations of B are far from having been perceived and grasped clearly until today. The current B, as we have constantly emphasized, should mainly be expressed in and symbolized by the theoretical human sciences, which, however, have been transformed into the mere material/instruments used for carrying out the prefixed academic/educational procedures eventually determined by “A power” such that their scientific-rational character has been rapidly weakened and their ethical-spiritual ethos has been gradually disappearing. In light of the modern empirical-rational humanist principle originating in the Enlightenment, the pertinent intellectual/spiritual creations should be performed in accordance with the empirical-rational humanist ethics, which, however, has been extensively neglected and even denied by many current international eminent theorists today. The increasing reduction of humanist rationality in B at present has led to two serious consequences: the stagnation of the active development of theoretical human sciences and their subsequent powerlessness in the face of the spiritual challenge of the age.² Briefly speaking, the above functional historical view attempts to get rid of the commonsense limitation of the natural units of historical events, laying emphasis on functional divisions in terms of the three separate functional-operative historical zones of A, B, and C. By the way, modern controversial arguments about the Enlightenment, capitalism, socialism, and countless other ideological-controversial topics are mainly caused by the naturalist blending between natural units and functional units employed in historical events/discourses.

This book intends to discuss the related issues in connection with the recently strengthened pan-materialist conditions, the epistemological confusions in the theoretical humanities, and the desirability of reviving empirical humanist ethics. Embedded in human nature, the origin of an empirical-rational humanist ethical spirit would certainly be displayed in all civilized human histories. The stability of basic human nature and the changeability of the interactive consequences of human nature and circumstances have often been confused. Without this stability of the dynamic identity of human nature, the ethical-spiritual essence of humanity would be impossible. Accordingly, the humanist-ethical spirit

² Youzheng Li, *Organizational Power and Ethical Subjectivity: In Light of Comparative Historical Semiotics* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 74–115.

could have formed at the beginning of the spiritual civilizations of mankind. Two ancient humanist sages, the Greek Socrates and the Chinese Confucius, presented similar human-natural ethical thoughts around the same historical period (several hundreds of years prior to Christ's birth). The historical fact reveals the essential identity of humanist ethics that originates and is deep-rooted in the empirical nature of *homo sapiens*. Man's nature and historical-evolutionary manifestations are different things; the confusion of the two is one of the reasons why so many modern thinkers are unable to recognize the basic constancy of human nature, which is, in fact, the existential substrate of humanity and its existential meaning. Our conception of humanism is above all defined at an epistemological rather than a humanitarian level, so its ethical/moral dimensions derive from human nature. Accordingly, so-called "humanist ethics," which is the guiding concept in our discussions, is universally valid across different spatial/temporal sections, although its internal/external expressions depend on different interactive combinations between it and historical conditions. It is the latter that makes the mode and inclination of human nature appear in divergent forms in different civilized areas. The original dynamics of human nature and the interactive result between human nature and external conditions are different things, but this difference cannot be used as a reason to deny the existence of human nature. In this regard, this book also presents a brief introduction to the historical expressions of humanist ethics in Chinese civilization from a Chinese-western comparative perspective. The amazing historical expressions of full combinability and highly constructive interaction between genuine Confucian humanist ethical spirit and modern western humanist enlightenment rationality in early modern China convincingly proves the essential coherence of all types of empirical-rational humanist spirits.

The book consists of three parts. The main themes of Part One cover the present-day high-tech-guided pan-materialist/solely-commercializing, civilized orientation followed, to various extents, by all the major countries; the arrival of the space age as the symbol of an advanced/strengthened version of pan-materialist civilization; humanity turning out to be increasingly robotized in mentality and lifestyle; and how this one-dimensional civilization should be balanced by an expected relevant spiritual counterpart through modernizing theoretical human sciences. The main topics of Part Two cover the current tendency of the theoretical humanities, which are characterized by the weakening of empirical rationalism and the lack of an ethical consciousness, and how the development of new human sciences should be guided by the relevant

empirical-rational humanist ethics, the kernel of which lies in the awakening of independent ethical subjectivity. The topics of Part Three are connected to Chinese intellectual history, which indicates the historical experience of the historical possibility and actual ways to perform the primitive empirical-rational humanist ethical thought that is revealed to present modernity because of its human-natural origin. Part Three also presents a typical historical case about a well-balanced interaction between the old awakened Chinese humanist mind and modern western scientific rational thought. It includes the following aims: reformulating traditional Chinese intellectual history to demystify the misleading heritage of the imperial moral ideology; depicting the implicit separate existence/operation of humanist ethics as the genuine Chinese national spirit that is used one-sidedly and deformed ideologically by the imperial power; effectively displaying the brilliant expressions of the Chinese humanist ethical spirit in the early modernizing period of China so as to offer a historical example of the epistemological link between historical humanist ethics and modern western social/human sciences under favorable historical conditions; disclosing the real modernity in the short-lived prosperity of this modern Chinese intellectual history of the traditional ethical spirit rooted in historical human nature; demonstrating the comprehensive epistemological inter-consistence among natural/social/human sciences and empirical humanist ethics in terms of the general scientific principles of empiricism, rationality, and positivism; and establishing applicable principles for knowing about both the natural and the human world, including genuine human sciences and humanist ethics. Finally, the Epilogue adds that the current crucial issue should be focused on reviving/re-agitating humanist ethics and humanist subjectivity in order to confront the urgent task of how to promote the master/spirit balance in future human civilization.

The current empirical-rational high-tech civilizations need to be balanced by well-organized and rational human sciences, even though the latter is paradoxically under the control of the former, and new human sciences should provide humanity with a new spiritual ethos, even though the necessary ethically driven potential has been already disdained by academic institutionalization. Driven/inspired by the spirit of the western Enlightenment, modern Chinese communities have been engaged in technical-westernizing development at the cost of abandoning both western and Chinese humanist ethical traditions. However, it is the latter that would provide the formation of theoretical human sciences with some universal humanist-ethical inspiring strength. This work will indicate that, having grown in human nature, Chinese intellectual-historical

antiquity could imply an ethical-epistemological modernity, which would be revealed through a hermeneutic explanation of multiply complicated historical-hermeneutic intertwinements.

The above brief introduction presents many miscellaneous themes and irregular topics that differ from present-day academic standards and methods. We intend to point out that the comparative/relational presentation of the selected wide-ranging themes and relevant problems, by dint of interdisciplinary/cross-cultural approaches, is a suitable formulation with a view to looking into the humanist mission of the distant future of mankind. The main strategic focus is laid on presenting the general inter-relational/interactive networks of several major sections of global human civilizations at the causal-connective and ethical-spiritual levels, involving no detailed historical and scholarly discussions. More exactly, we want to unfold a schematic diagram of related problem groups at the epistemological and ethical levels. Practically speaking, as is well known, it is very difficult to implement any deeply interdisciplinary studies; no disciplinary scholars, especially experts, could be quite familiar with material and problems in other disciplines, especially those from other civilizations. From a human-scientific point of view, however, almost all human affairs and intellectual histories in different social/cultural traditions should be interconnected/communicable in principle from a humanist point of view. The inevitable limitations of the interdisciplinary/cross-cultural communicative technique is one of the reasons why the present conditions of global human-scientific studies are far from being scientifically satisfactory in spite of the plenty of accumulated achievements in various mutually compartmentalized disciplines. This is another reason why we have chosen to write this book by presenting a comprehensive epistemological topography of multi-relational-connective problematics. Therefore, the book is intended to be intelligibly interesting to all social/human-scientific scholars and interested readers without the need to involve specialist scholarly details. Most topics and concepts discussed in the book are well-known; without engaging them with disciplinary procedures, the discourses are arranged at a general relational-linking level.

We expect that the way the book is formulated will present clearly readable expressions and analyses. So we will not engage concretely in direct discussions or debates with others' theories, following the methods designed by many thinkers, but all topics in connection with other scholars and historical backgrounds will hopefully remain at a popular and commonsense level. The theme of the book will unfold mainly at general levels to highlight the causal/moral/ethical/spiritual connections of

different historical manifestations. If the significance of the analyses of the book is not reflected in the arguments concerning various disciplinary details, we hope it will still be displayed at the causal/ethical-relational level in connection with several big historical/social/scholarly sections. Notwithstanding, this form of presentation should not be taken as an individual monologue; in fact, the thoughts expressed in the book are the result of our extensive communication with lots of domestic and international intellectual resources. Limited by the space of the book, we do not include others' quotes from original texts either, and there is therefore no need to list the "reference works" of other writers, although the latter can easily be found in my other publications. The main reference books in English and Chinese by me are cited because most of the arguments raised in the book are formed in terms of my special interdisciplinary/cross-cultural theoretical approaches, which will be difficult to find in international bibliographic sources.

Nevertheless, the wide-ranging thematic presentations in the book and the specially chosen formulation may cause something of an inconvenience in the course of reading. The following suggestions could therefore be useful as reminders. As we explain in the book, the traditional difficulty in intellectual dialogues concerning the humanities is firstly due to the polysemes and semantic ambiguities of ordinary languages. Usually, the précising of expressed thought depends on the readjustable contextuality that is linked to related disciplinary knowledge. To avoid being involved in interdisciplinary communicative complicity, we tend to choose the widely and commonly accessible contextual backgrounds in unfolding the discussions, reasoning, and inferences. If the reader finds anything disagreeable/unacceptable in the statements and/or evaluations of the book, these could hopefully be decreased/relaxed if more attention is given to the related contexts/backgrounds provided. After all, a more substantial aim of the book lies in a relevant and effective presentation of the crucial problems facing the sharp challenges of our new age.

Moreover, any disagreements of readers about judgments in the book could easily be related to our interdisciplinary-directed reformulations about some well-known thoughts, which are regularly organized discipline-centrally. Some different opinions could be due to misunderstandings that might be simply caused by different definitions of the objects under discussion; because of the unavoidable language-saving customs in writing, the same names could refer to different signifieds that are contained in the same natural objects. The related intellectual divergence could be due to the different strategies concerning thinking/writing/reading. If pragmatic/behavioral thinkers are used to organizing their thinking at a

perceptive natural plane (the object refers to natural things), then structural/semiotic thinkers could be used to thinking about their objects at levels that are lower than the natural one. When talking about common human affairs, people are naturally liable to fall into the divergence caused by different chosen grades of the “basic unit” of thinking. For example, the term “Enlightenment” refers to an entire historical event in a broad sense, but it consists, of course, of many different dimensions, comprising different geographic areas, intellectual aspects, historical backgrounds, causal lines, consequences, and changeable evaluations. In this regard, how could we simply ask: “Is it good or bad?” Regardless of a lot of current wrong judgments made from different political-ideological stances, we especially emphasize the merit of the basic empirical/rational/humanist spirit of the Enlightenment in the book. Of course, we know about many of the positive and negative consequences of it but prefer to choose to put them aside from our discussions because those associated problems are related to our theme. But the habit of free association would lead some readers to spontaneously involve some preferably associated topics in their specific reading, resulting in reference confusion.

In relation to modern humanist empirical-rational intellectual movements originating from the European Enlightenment, I would like to review the statement I gave at the concluding meeting at the 2004 IASS Congress in Lyon, in which the current structural-semiotic movement was compared to a “new enlightenment” that wished to be a spiritually directed continuity of the 18th-century Enlightenment in France. Among the different European and American contributions to the general Enlightenment movements, the French one should certainly be taken as the archetypal one. During the celebration of the bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989, I happened to visit MSH Paris, and during this visit I read a lot of controversial debates about the positive/negative meanings and values of the Revolution and the earlier French thought of the Enlightenment. These academic/political contentions were full of very obvious multi-blended questionings and reflections caused by divergent angles, areas, aspects, and anachronistic judgments, especially those about the partisan confusions about the interactive relations between political, intellectual, and academic factors. By the way, regarding the human-scientific theoretical originality since the end of the Second World War, no other western theoretical human-scientific thought could be compared to the French theoretical genius, but it is ironic that modern French intellectuals in the last century are less effective than some other western intellectuals with respect to their judgments on current politics and political morality. Both the Revolution and the Enlightenment and their multi-interactive

consequences are highly complicated constitutive compounds, so how could we judge them straightforwardly as some historical-natural wholeness? However, the French Enlightenment is still the central soil leading to the modern rational age, which is especially marked by its empirical-scientific development and humanist evolution. In addition, from an epistemological-methodological point of view, we find that compared to other western mental tendencies in the 18th century, enlightened French thought uniquely indicated an interdisciplinary-directed way of thinking, which continues along the same lines in contemporary French positive historical theory and structural semiotics. The scholarly direction of interdisciplinary theorization, which is contrary to any traditional philosophical-central theorizations, should also be one of the essential preconditions of modern theoretical-semiotic scholarship. By highly estimating the contribution of the French structural semiotics movement, which is taken as contrary to both earlier existentialism and later post-structural irrationalism, our focus is mainly laid on its empirical-positivist rationality displayed in historical, sociological, cultural, and literary/film-theoretical fields. What we emphasize is the rational-positive theoretical relevance of their analyses in relation to the formation of human sciences. In this sense, comparatively speaking, their theoretical contributions have remained highly significant since the last century, although we should recognize various shortcomings of structuralism as well. According to the position of this author, one of the main epistemological deficiencies of structuralism lies in its weakness in introspective psychology (which is different from various Freudian schools from an epistemological point of view) and ethical theorization.

By anticipating the continuous development of French structural semiotics along its traditional positive-rational line, our ideal perspective is directed toward a more synthetic combination of all western classical Enlightenment schools, the general principle of which should be the empirical-rational-positive humanism that is also the main principle of current human sciences. This should also include the humanist ethical-theoretical aspect originating from both western and non-western traditions.

Youzheng Li

New Year's Eve, 2022

Written during the period of avoiding the Covid-19 epidemic in the San
Francisco Bay Area, USA

By way of completing this Preface, I would like to express my cordial thanks to Cambridge Scholars Publishing (CSP) once again for accepting this writing project. Living in a totally institutionalized academic world, how earnestly an independent scholar wishes to find a genuinely independent publisher that takes scientific originality rather than marketing as its priority. My deep gratitude is especially sent to Mr. Adam Rummens, the commissioning editor at CSP, whose understanding and encouragement have always been active factors in my carrying out this project ever since my first book was published by CSP.

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Youzheng Li

March 5, 2022

Added after knowing the book project was accepted by CSP

INTRODUCTION

A SEMIOTIC-EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

One of the main reasons why there have been such wide and sharp debates about political, social/human-scientific, and cultural issues in the modern world lies above all in traditional/conventional languages that are full of semantic ambiguity, polysemy, and pragmatic randomness. This irregular semantic character in conventional linguistic constitutions provides different aggressive-minded people with convenient expressive tools to create smartly misleading effects in confrontations with rivals, opponents, and the majority of the masses. Semantically unclear conceptual expressions are used pragmatically to produce various needed effects, either positively or negatively. Accordingly, many highly controversial discourses prevail in domestic and international media today. In extreme cases, for example, most theoretical discussions using big terms like “capitalism” and “socialism” are replete with conceptual, thematic, and political-pragmatic confusions, which are made either unintentionally or intentionally. If intentionally, the confusing linguistic expressions provide the debaters with specifically ambiguous words to carry out attacks/defenses at pragmatic/utilitarian/ideological levels in which communicative expressions function as rhetorical devices to bring about profitable effects while ably hiding true intentions and ulterior aims. Apparently, people can discuss and argue in reasonable linguistic ways shared by all while, in fact, the same language devices can play different roles by playing off the semantic ambiguity inherent in human language.

Essentially speaking, one of the semiotic-epistemological methods to maintain conceptual clarity rests first of all on how to fix a rightly chosen expressive unit or entity of the object concerned at both the concrete and the abstract level. Not only a natural object but also an abstract notion could be taken as a combined complex of units in reference to different analytical levels. For example, the term “truth” is widely known as an extremely ambiguous or indefinite notion. According to the semiotic view, we shouldn’t ask: “What is truth?” Instead, we only ask: “How do you use the term ‘truth’?” For truth, far from being a definite notional unit, can be related to different signifieds and referents in different contexts. It is the

same case with the term “reality”. On the one hand, some analytical/behavioral-aligned thinkers are used to taking those abstract words, which are transmitted from ancient times and used conventionally, as naturally fixed conceptual units; on the other hand, some speculative theorists take such semantically uncertain concepts as the reason why we should reject the existential objectivity of those terms. Actually, linguistic-expressive ambiguity/polysemy and epistemologically referential certainty are separate matters. Those generic terms could have definite meaning if definition and context are clearly given. This apparently pragmatic way of using abstractive terms could lead to another wrong inference if the applicant attempts to extend at will his single usage of a term, which is defined specially by himself. That means the trouble would happen if they tried to apply those selectively defined meanings of the used word to other unrelated objects through disconnecting with the originally chosen contexts. Furthermore, the same term could be used to refer to different semantic units; say, regarding the term “reality”, no matter how definitely defined it is, it still can be a combined entity in usage, containing different internal traits and external references. So we can hardly take it as a fixed “notional monad” or single abstractive object. By using this notion in discussions, what are concretely signified/referred could be only certain constituent traits of that object; confusion of one element and conceptual totality would be formed owing to using the same word as a signifier. The foregoing also implies a reminder that a doctrinaire usage of generalization would lead to the more extensive misuse of the abstract term through irrelevant synthesizing across constitutionally divergent domains. Therefore, neither the term “truth” nor the term “reality” can be used to refer to certain united referents with respect to different ontological, supernatural, and empirical-social realms, as philosophers are used to doing. There is a more serious categorical confusion between the scientific and the literary-artistic object domains. Generally speaking, either the pragmatic way or the literary way of applying conceptual words is justified in their own respective fields for their own suitable operative fields. But a confusion of the two object domains and essentially different operative principles would produce self-contradictory results. Simply put, this categorical confusion in intellectual practices would lead directly to the undermining of human rationality, which is the necessary foundation of social/human sciences as well as one of the essences of humanist ethics, which is not only empirical but also rational.

In the academic area of social/human-scientific scholarship, the rational communicational conditions have been greatly improved mainly due to the influence of modern natural sciences. The three main scientific

spheres—natural, social, and human sciences—all originate from the empirical rationality derived from the Enlightenment. They share the same first-grade rationality, which is typically represented by mathematics and natural sciences, the remarkable success of which is firstly characterized by their systematically made semantic clarification/unification. The term “scientific”, used firstly by Greek philosophers, is defined by the semantic certainty of used concepts. If the modern humanities want to be more rationalized regarding their constitutions and functions, they have to improve or reform the semantic certainty of the concepts they use. Therefore, comparatively speaking, the semantic flaws of the traditionally transmitted languages have remained one of the main obstacles to the modernization of the theoretical humanities. One of the tasks of contemporary semiotics should lie in promoting the formation of genuine human sciences through presenting a semantic-analytical methodology in terms of an interdisciplinary-lined operative strategy. Nevertheless, the current antirational/irrational humanities theories indicate a mental propensity against the humanist rationality raised in the Enlightenment.

This work attempts to emphasize another semiotic-epistemological position in connection with some conventional stances prevailing in social/human scientific discourses. The term “semiotics” as such is divergently used like many other titles. At first, the question “What is semiotics?” should also be more reasonably and more feasibly replaced by the question “What is the chosen usage of the term semiotics?” (As is well known, the French trend and American trend have quite different usages for the term.) The precise understanding of the thoughts marked with the term “semiotics” can only be revealed clearly in terms of the analytical methods employed. Briefly put, a more comprehensive phrase depicting the semiotic may be summarized as its emphasis on the linguistic-semantic and multi-institutional analyses for the purpose to present the semantic clarity of discourse. Institutional semantics, which I have specifically discussed before, is about how to more relevantly organize the method of questioning that is linked to both the linguistic-semantic and institutional relations concerned. So, one of the semiotic-analytical points of view applied in this book is about how to set up a proper problematic in relation to a certain topic, or, first of all, how to fix the pertinent “object” in our chosen subject matter. The usual scholarly habit tends to choose some “natural phenomenon” as the object of discussions. The chosen object is usually selected from some natural matters (things and events), which are habitually perceptible or pragmatically usable; namely, they are various synthetic entities with different constituent elements, aspects, and associations. During debating processes, a shared natural object, which

consists of constituent sense elements, could signify any selective set of constituent sense elements that form the synthetic sense compound carried by the object. So different debaters could use the same name of the object to refer to different sets of sense elements. Accordingly, mutual misunderstanding will quite easily occur, primarily because what different debaters signify with the same word could have different referents and meanings (related connotations could be freely made). Another epistemological aspect concerning the natural object regards the proper questioning concerning the subject matter. According to a semiotic point of view, a more concise presentation of the topic is not broadly related to the chosen natural object but rather to its connections to other chosen/related objects. In general, our subject matter should be a certain chosen relational network around a natural object in order to keep the range of the topic more concretely defined. This epistemological-methodological readjustment can be pertinently applied to discussions or debates about countless natural objects expressed by “big terms” imbued with different recognitional/ideological constituent senses.

The foregoing semiotic illustration can be used to discuss the subject of this book concerning the interactive relationship between high-tech economic materialism and the formation of the modernized human sciences guided by humanist ethics in the upcoming new space age. The subject matter is certainly connected with many social/cultural/academic backgrounds and is especially associated with economic-centric globalization, which is connected with current and sharply controversial scientific and ideological discussions. Without engaging in any special topics in economic and political disciplines, our subject is mainly centered on two themes. The first is the reciprocal causal/axiological interconnection mentioned above, leaving aside many other practical issues that are often involved. It is not our intention to obtain any judgments/evaluations of practical debates regarding related “natural objects”—the materialist economic-centrism; instead, we confine our discussions to clarifying the causal/ethical connections between the two objects selected in this project to highlight their relational issues. The second theme is about a predictive inference between advanced high-tech economic materialism and the ceaseless progress of the materialist worship of a cosmological quasi-religion. The overlapping/combination of the two themes would further aggravate the materialism of our civilization in this new space age. The strategy of our analysis may be compared with an elementary mathematic analytical method: among several variables in a complicated causal network, we should artificially set up constants and variables and focus on analyzing the definitely chosen causational/axiological relationships

between certain related variables while leaving aside many set constants. The latter refers to many other related fields concerning the high-tech economic mechanism that certainly maintain different “positive” or “negative” causal/moral relationships with many other subjects that are neglected in this current project.

In terms of the above-mentioned analytical-strategic designs focusing on relation-centric issues, the theme of this book is not organized around natural objects. That means the usual manners of connotative associations should accordingly be somewhat adjusted. The statements given in the discourse are limited to the chosen relational subjects without linking to or hinting at many other neighboring subjects, especially ideologically controversial social/political topics. For example, the lasting debates around capitalism and socialism are full of disorderly arrangements consisting of different ideological/political positions, analytical angles, disciplinary methods, fighting tactics, and true motivations. What is absent in discussions remains untouched. Therefore, the term “pan-materialism” shared by all types of regimes today is extensively applied in our writing, but the term has nothing to do with traditional philosophical-ideological arguments concerning materialism-versus-spiritualism. The semiotic-theoretical approach is totally disconnected from those displayed in philosophical history. Therefore, readings of this discussion should be focused on the directly mentioned topics as such without involving other popular derivations. In order to organize human-scientific analyses at a higher strategic level, the epistemological attention here is therefore focused on highlighting the relational-linking topography.

PART ONE

THE WORSHIP OF HIGH-TECH COMMERCIALISM AND MATERIALISM IN THE NEW SPACE AGE

CHAPTER ONE

HIGH-TECH COMMERCIAL COMPOUNDS AND THE FUTURE ORIENTATION OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION

According to this author's earlier usage, the "trio" is the abbreviation of the collective power of the scientific-technological-commercial compound, which is the central dynamic mechanism shared almost by all countries in our times. As a triple-layered dynamic synthetic mechanism, its three parts can be genetically traced back to the intelligent instincts in human nature. Regardless of various social/historical causal relationships, the trio ecology, as a synthetic totality of knowledge, engineering, and dynamics, is established first of all owing to the natural fruition of the human-natural impetus for searching for material profits. The basic task of the trio therefore rests on material production to satisfy material needs at three levels: individual survival at the physical level, interpersonal competition at the social level, and inter-group struggles at the political-military level. In terms of the inter-relational whole of the trio, the commerce part plays a leading role as the general strategic-dynamic organ, whose functions cover the decision of the goal, the political relationship, its financial organization, the technical designs, and its socio-political contacts. Although the three parts together shape an organic entirety containing multiple interactive and mutually stimulating nexuses, the commercial part functions as the general designer, productive guider, and dynamic mover. Briefly, the modern commercial mechanism is expressed in guiding and moving multi-competitive practices among human beings in the current global civilization, so the trio guided by commercial leadership can be compared to the engineering machine pushing forward the competition-directed social world through organizing material productions. It is clear that the current civilization of mankind, guided technically by the trio, is extremely materialist in its intellectual orientation and lifestyle. The special political/economic/scientific problems concerning the trio mechanism are not our theme in this book, however. Our topic here is about the meanings and impacts of the high-tech pan-materialism created by the trio and its

interactions with spiritual-cultural and human-scientific activities in light of a humanist-epistemological presupposition that the trio ecology and its pan-materialism have irreversibly established in the world because they really satisfy the lust for matter inherent in human nature. In addition, choosing this commonplace trio as our topic here is owed to the recent dramatically aggravated pan-materialism occurring in the real arrival of the space age in connection with added philosophical implications, which are pressing enough to urge us to reflect on their new influences on spiritual, social, cultural, academic, religious, and ethical aspects. It is especially noteworthy that in the real space age, humanity was able to fly beyond Earth after its long evolution over millions of years and human history entered a new age to organize its long-standing projects for an actual presence in a boundless universe. In this case, how must one rethink the meaning of humanism? The latter is both physically and valuably rooted in Earth or Earth-centrism.

As regards a great number of current criticisms against excessive environmental developments, there appears a strange phenomenon whereby few critical comments and questions are directed at the spiritual/intellectual consequences of the extreme-materialist shock of the scientific-technological-commercial dynamic compound as well as its economic-centric absolutism/irreducible consumerism in modern times. Most of the positive and negative discussions concerned are only directed at utilitarian-practical dimensions. Permanent economic development and unlimited material affluence have even been universally taken as “moral imperatives” in our current existence. No doubt, all practical-utilitarian critical questions concerning its positive and negative effects are highly necessary and desirable with a view to finding fairer and more reasonable ways to temporarily overcome or alleviate the damage caused by excessive economic exploitation. The fact that the critical comments concerned mainly remain at a utilitarian, practical level could indicate that we modern humans are still bound to this economic-centric imperative that is socially and objectively imposed on our minds; in other words, the necessity for permanent engagement in economic expansion/increasing material satisfaction has already been taken as a most acceptable axiom. It seems as if an implicit Almighty existing in modern times is ordering humankind to lead their lives singly toward materialist happiness and materialist conquests by means of scientific-technological inventions; accordingly, all human beings are doomed to be economic animals whose only interest lies in boundlessly advancing their level of material/sensual enjoyment. From a humanist-anthropological point of view, an understandable interpretation could be that this materialist-centralizing development in

modern civilization, as we pointed out above, is a natural consequence originating from human nature, which is instinctively matter-thirsty. If so, our analyses should also be arranged according to humanist rationality. Why are most people and all governments satisfied with discussing the environmental crisis at a practical/utilitarian level? This strange fact discloses a serious hidden aspect of our civilization whereby the secular spiritual/intellectual ethos is passing away from our current life and people are becoming indifferent to the secular-spiritual paucity; alternatively, supernatural/super-empirical spiritual meditations and artistic creations are used irrelevantly to cover up the fact of this worldly rational-spiritual impotence. (Therefore, in this book, we will raise a conceptual separation between the ethical spirit and the supernatural spirit to avoid confusion about the term “spirit”.) Explicit or implicit pan-material-directed concerns have appeared at both practical and spiritual levels ever since the very earliest civilization. The parallel and contradictory interactive evolutions regarding the material and spiritual aspects of human existence are the subject matter of historical cultural-anthropological specialties, which are not our present topic. Our present reflection is mainly directed at the spiritual/intellectual/academic consequences of this comprehensive materialism guided by the trio.

In our high-tech times, all traditional economic materialist spirits have been ever more deeply and widely enhanced to a comprehensively and solely materialist level that involves all social, cultural, academic, and artistic aspects. This new high-tech type of materialism has been embodied in a more synthetic totalitarian power of the trio and consists of three basic determinative parts: scientific, technical, and commerce-financial. As a strong organizing/commanding system, the trio has today become the most forcible determinist power guiding/controlling all major sections of contemporary civilized communities, including various faith-spiritual ecologies. As a result, many traditional religious systems in advanced societies have also been weakening or losing their independent influences. Among the different reasons for the declining tendency of modern religious trends, a specific one is the implicit alternative impact of the pan-materialist faith imposed by the trio. In a substantial sense, we may even metaphorically describe the latter as high-tech worship guided by the trio, and its implicated new life view could function as a secular type of quasi-religion. The scientifically/technologically-directed cultural spirit, which is supported/organized by financial-commercial organs, could be compared to a new God if this is functionally defined by its superpower to hold the absolute authority, huge might, and especially rigidly regulated patterns of life, work, and thinking for normalizing all human beings. Besides, many

traditional religions should be self-readjusted to coordinate and cooperate with this universal secular quasi-religion, which functions as an empirical-positive (in this world) superpower over humanity in comparison with the supernatural-imaginative (in the afterworld) superpower of the traditional religions. When the exploratory/conquering mission of the trio is expanded to that of its next cosmic stage, the above religious metaphor for the trio in reference to its spiritual/intellectual control could feel more tangibly real. What we hint at here is that its unprecedented great achievements in celestial spaces, in addition to its existing widespread influences in the world, would bring about extraordinarily more profound mutations at the spiritual/ideological and ethical/religious levels. More precisely, this high-tech quasi-religion of the space age could play a much more powerful and durable dominant role on Earth than many old true religions and utopian-lined secular paradox-dreams, just because the resulting conditions could doubly satisfy the rudimentary material needs of human beings. Unlike the stories of all historical conquerors, the irreversible victory of the high-tech pan-materialism of the trio has not only been peacefully/naturally achieved but also brought about naturally overwhelming satisfaction to the majority of the population on Earth.

In fact, this material-centric view of life has been taken for granted ever since civilized history began. The notion of material needs has gradually developed from its simple/passive meaning of securing mere survival in primitive groups to the “material wealth” of civilized societies as a general active means to be created and applied to satisfy three major needs: individual sensual happiness, competitive interpersonal struggles, and inter-country warfare for conquest/defense. All these needs originate from human nature while their forms and scales have constantly varied according to changeable natural and technical conditions. From a traditional religious point of view, the most necessary need is the basic material to support the survival of humans. Earlier religious teachings are mainly about how to cherish a proper attitude toward prevailing poverty/damage on Earth and the promise of unlimited material richness in a heavenly paradise. It is well known that the major traditional religions were shaped under quite low materialistic levels, and the majority of people in history have always been materialistically deficient. Speaking biologically or historically, the need for material remains the central concern for human existence. That is why all images of Paradise firstly have to be marked by its inexhaustible abundance of material enjoyments. (This is almost the only main meritorious characteristic of various paradises.) Similarly, all modern socio-political efforts are first of all expressed by their ultimate goal to incessantly advance the level of various

material productions. So we should note that almost all future dreaming pictures offered by different supernatural and secular faith systems share the same material-centric desires and wishes that can be traced back to the material scarcity of primitive human history.

A more interesting result lies in the fact that all spiritual aspects of different ideologies could also be overshadowed by this materialist essence because, by carefully reading their supernatural or secular-utopian teachings, we will find the contents of their predicted and desirable happiness consist firstly of material-sensual satisfactions. So even the permanent happiness either anticipated in the heavenly paradise or wished-for in the earthly paradise is particularly substantiated by affluent material wealth. (It is noteworthy that, when comparing detailed descriptions of material needs and material satisfaction, all depictions of oppositional spiritual sublimity in the ideal kingdom are given merely in quite sketchy or abstract ways. The bliss is almost only about material happiness and its unlimited extension. All other spiritual/intellectual happiness described plentifully in the humanities will disappear totally in both supernatural and utopian-secular paradises.) In terms of the above statement, we know that modern extreme materialism has its deep-rooted origin in human nature in connection with matter, the need for matter, and the creation of material products. After all, all religious and secular predictive promises need to be defined by their ability to provide sufficient material satisfaction. Putting aside the complicated socio-political issues related to material power as tools for international struggles, let us focus on the predominant conditions of general material production and their serious consequences expressed at the spiritual/intellectual/human-scientific levels in our times. The trio ecology has already totally revolutionized human economic life, the significance of which has already extended far beyond the economic level. Essentially speaking, is this materialist imperative embodied by modern unlimited economic developments really necessary, justified, or desirable for humanity today? As said above, regarding the operations of the economic-productive machine guided and driven by the trio, the central leadership belongs to the commercial part with its marketing instruments. Viewed profoundly, the commercialized materialist philosophy prevailing in the modern affluent age implies a far-reaching influential ambition that goes far beyond the aim to merely satisfy the necessary material requirements. As a result, we see that this pan-materialist truth obtains three different kinds of ideological support—religious, utopian, and high-tech capitalist (economic)—for all good future pictures for humanity presented by the three systems are embodied by the single desideratum of unlimited provisions of material wealth. Under the absolute dominance of