

Book Report on Aldous Huxley's *Island*

Patricia Szeto Wan Jun

Aldous Huxley, the author of *Island*, is a much-celebrated writer in contemporary literature, not particularly for his literary skills or breath-taking plots, but for his skepticism on modernity, and visions on the alternatives to build a better society. Born in the late 19th Century, Huxley witnessed how drastically a change technological breakthrough had brought to the economic and social structure of society. Such transformation, however, did not result in "a better world" as many believed; instead, Huxley saw a lot of new problems created, such as loss of social order, overpopulation, mechanization, and irrational worship of science, as portrayed in his famous work *Brave New World*, written in 1932. Thirty years later, Huxley created another society – an "island" which acts as juxtaposition to the "brave new world" – to express his views on how the fall of mankind as prophesied can be prevented.

In his last book *Island*, Aldous Huxley depicted his vision of Utopia through the protagonist Will Farnaby's experiences on Pala, an island where he discovered a society with equality, compassion, intellect, and "science side by side with art". Will came to the island pretending to be an innocent traveler, but his agenda was really to obtain a contract for rights to Pala's rich oil reserves. However, as things developed, Will found himself becoming more and more interested and involved in the Palanesian way of life. Will was a cynical and bitter man who "won't take yes for an answer"¹; but even so, he could not help but fall into the cradle of benevolence of the Palanesian with the goodness, affirmation and happiness they radiated. The novel, however, ended with a rather sad note as it was when Will was about to convert to the Palanesian way of life that the military forces from Rendang, Pala's neighbour country, seized the island and the paradise was destroyed forever.

Through the dialogues of the characters, Huxley explored the meaning of human existence and the possibility of creating an ideal world through fusing western science and oriental philosophies. For Huxley, Pala and the values it held were the solution to the major problems that he pinpointed in *Brave New World* and the real modern society in general. In this report, I will discuss two important themes of this book, namely Huxley's answer to his question of the meaning of existence – eastern philosophies, and the mingling of the western and eastern worlds as the remedy to modern social problems.

Right at the beginning of the book, the readers' attention was already drawn to the word "attention", which carries great religious significance and is a recurring idea in the book. The Palanese practiced the principles of Buddhism and Hinduism, but instead of being a route to escape from the world, their religious belief actually encouraged them to be fully aware of who and where they are in relation to their surroundings. As mentioned by Ranga, a Palanese nurse who took care of Will, a Tantrik (a person who practices Tantrik Buddhism) "does not denounce the world or deny its values; you don't try to escape into a Nirvana apart from life...No, you accept the world and you make use of it; you make use of everything that happens to you, of all the things you see and hear and taste and touch, as so many means to your liberation from the prison of yourself"². Hence, in the spiritual Palanese culture, involvement in the world and awareness and appreciation of life, even in times of suffering, were essential in order to obtain true enlightenment. Children were thus taught to live "with the minimum of strain and maximum of awareness"³; they were thus driven to climb a dangerous rock precipice which reminded them of the presence of death and paradoxically, life and existence. So how can you be fully attentive of yourself and your connection with the

Universe? Meditation, Huxley answered. It helped your mind be "blue, unpossessed and open"⁴, liberated from your body and sufferings, and at the same time enhancing your intuitive understanding of who you are, your relation with the universal force, and your potentials – that "man is infinite as the Void"⁵. In this sense, this mixture of eastern philosophies works at two levels – in stressing the importance of meditation, it united people with the spiritual ground; on the other hand, in stressing the importance of attachment to the world, it encouraged people to strive to improve humanities. Such this-worldly approach in life actually coincides with that of the Chinese's Confucianism, which emphasizes one's responsibility in creating a better society for the people.

The Palanese philosophy laid a foundation for Huxley to develop his most significant theme of *Island* – the desire of getting "the best of all worlds"⁶ – the east and the west. Huxley believed that in achieving so, "the worlds of still unrealized potentialities"⁷ would be created. Indeed, the theme of the synthesis of western science and oriental spirituality has been thoroughly illustrated by the book. The founders of Pala were a Scottish doctor called Dr. Andrew, a symbol of Western science, and the Old Raja, a symbol of Eastern mysticism. Together, they built Modern Pala, which adopts Western science and language – English, but practiced Oriental religion and its art of living. The Palanese unreservedly embraced the achievements of western technology and science, but its influence was only limited to the area of medicine and nutrition; full-scale industrialization was seen as unnecessary, and thus shunned.

To illustrate, artificial insemination (AI) was widely practiced in Pala to eliminate hereditary disease and improve the race. Shanta, the girl who discovered Will at the Jungle, was a product of AI since her father's family had a history of recurrent diabetes. AI, in Huxley's opinion, "enriches the family with an entirely new physique and temperament"⁸; he felt that it was "more moral to take a short at having a child of superior quality than to run the risk of slavishly reproducing whatever quirks and defects may happen to run in the husband's family"⁹ Equally important was the fact that "AI has been justified in terms of reincarnation and the theory of karma. Pious fathers now feel happy at the thought that they're giving their wife's children a chance of creating a better destiny for themselves and their posterity"¹⁰. The compatibility of such technology with Buddhism was underscored here by Huxley, highlighting his hopes on the co-existence of western science and eastern beliefs and the resulting success.

The mentioning of AI in *Island* certainly served as a parallel to that of test-tube babies in *Brave New World*. However, for Huxley, the fundamental difference here was that the State was totally and callously in control of the production of babies in *Brave New World*, while in *Island*, the parents in Pala had a say on the issue of production, reflecting the community's respect on the freedom of the individual, which Huxley saw as more desirable in his ideal world.

Another example of the fusion of the eastern philosophies and western science was how Pala dealt with slums and over-population – a problem that haunted the "Brave New World". To control population, "maithuna" – a mental and symbolic sexual union in a ritual context – was practiced, which, by adding meditation in the process, was also considered as the yoga of love. For the Palanese who did not bother with such spiritual practice, the government of

Pala distributed Western mass-produced contraceptives, which are "like education – free, tax-supported and, though not compulsory, as nearly as possible universal"¹¹. With the synthesis of the best of all worlds, the critical problem of over-population was solved.

As we can see, in less than 300 pages, Huxley has painted a fantasy world for the readers, but *Island* is not without a realistic touch, as it has implicitly conveyed his doubts on modernity and his solutions on the social problems posed by modernization. I must admit that I do not like the book as a fictional novel, as there is not much of a plot or character development throughout the story. We learn at the beginning of the novel that Will was a cynical person, and that he came to Pala with a political agenda. Although Will's attitude towards Pala and its people changed in the end, not much of his inner struggles were depicted during that transformation nor do we see any major character growth. Plot-wise, it is bare and unexciting. The whole book consists of chunks and chunks of long dialogues that are mystical and difficult to understand at times and there is not much action going on in the plot. Besides, although the tone of the author seems to be light and optimistic, an underlying poignancy throughout the book affects my mood of reading it.

That being said, judging the book not aesthetically, but from the point of view of a functionalist, it is a different story. Huxley has a lot of reservation about modern society and utopian ideals that he wants to share, and the plot serves as a vehicle for him to express himself. All the benevolent characters in Pala, such as Dr. Robert and Renga the nurse, act as his mouthpiece. The way Huxley starts the story, in my opinion, is terrific, as he draws the reader's immediate concentration on "attention", which is a motif throughout the novel, reminding the readers again and again the importance of being attentive to the present, the role they play in the surrounding and the *self*. Will was in a mental mess when he first arrived at Pala. When he lost consciousness after his fall, he dreamt of his deceased wife and the wrongs he had done against her; he dreamt of his parents and the disappointment he had caused them. It was clear that he was guilt-ridden. However when he regained his consciousness, these unpleasant feelings were immediately pushed aside. He employed the same suppressive tactics when Mary Saojini asked him to describe the whole accident. He shook his head and said, "I don't want to."¹² But upon being forced to repeat the whole accident verbally and mentally, paying attention to the "here and now", Will was immediately washed by a wave of relief and could not see what "the fuss was about"¹³ anymore.

Will in *Island* is actually the representation of many people in the modern world – a pathetic product of rationalization and secularization who has lost the awareness of "self" in this irresistible force of capitalism. In this era of modernity, people find God not in religion (inward force), but in science and industrialization (outward force), which seem to have created a better life for mankind; at the same time, they consider rationality superior to emotions, seeing the latter as a sign of weakness and a barrier to sound decision-making. As a result, people begin to shun religion, questioning its credibility and suppressing their sentiments. They become cold and cynical, developing a "natural" distrust on people and things.

Moreover, under capitalism, hard work and money become an end rather than a means to pursue further things. Without religion as the backbone, all hard work seems to have lost its original meaning and people lose their sense of direction. As Weber puts it, "The Puritan

wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so."¹⁴ Indeed, capitalism has blinded us from finding what we truly want in life.

On the other hand, greed, the unspeakable force that pushes capitalism forward but has always been held back by the virtue of Christianity, breaks free with the help of secularization, leading to exploitations of workers, the environment and the spirit of the self. To increase efficiency in order to boost production, workers are forced to engage in simple and repetitive jobs, stifling their creativity and abandoning their skills, resulting in dehumanization, a loss of life satisfaction and social alienation.

Since people can no longer find happiness in religion, work, or human relationships, they turn to satisfying their materialistic desires, which is all the more driven by capitalism. In *Brave New World*, we even see how people dwell themselves in superficial mind-numbing pleasure by taking a kind of medication called soma. They do so to escape from "real life"; but what they do not realize is that soma does not provide real happiness; it only provides short-lived fulfillment and distracts people from reality.

As we can see, modernity, and all the processes of industrialization and capitalism that go with it, prevents people from seeing who they are and what they are really doing. They are all trapped in an iron cage together with their frustration, anxiety and loneliness without knowing it. In fact they would rather deceive themselves and shut themselves from anything unpleasant than to pay "attention" to the surroundings, their own experiences, and what their heart (as opposed to mind) tells them. This reminds me of what famous playwright Edward Albee wrote about modern people that interestingly coincides with Buddhism's philosophy of "attention":

"I am very concerned with the fact that so many people turn off because it is easier, they don't stay fully aware during the course of their lives, in all the choices they make: social, economical, political, aesthetic...I am concerned with being self-aware, and open to all kinds of experience on their own terms – I think these conditions, given half a chance, will produce better government, a better society, a better everything else."¹⁵

Indeed, if Will is able to stay fully awake and live in the "now" of immediate awareness – the essence of Buddhism, if he is able to listen to his own heart where the "self" lies and "reconcile analysis with vision"¹⁶, he will be able to connect with the universe and see his own potentials as well as mankind's; he who never "takes yes for an answer" will realize that there is always a *yes and a yes and a yes* in life. In seeing that, he will regain confidence in humanity and strive to search for a better scaffolding of social life for mankind, like what Dr. Andrew and the old Raja did.

As for Huxley's opinion on the synthesis of western science and oriental philosophies, I do think that it is, in theory, a great idea. However, I think it is easier said than done. This is primarily because science is actually rooted from traditional western philosophy, which stresses precision and systematization. It has come a lot way through vigorous processes of rationalization and logic-development. Oriental philosophies, on the other hand, follow a totally different way of thinking. Since culture plays a major part in nurturing the

development of science, I wonder if the spirit of science can be compatible to a culture that practices oriental philosophies. This is indeed something we should think about.

All in all, I think as a literary artwork, *Island* is far from intriguing. With a pretty flat plot, it has little to offer to a plain mind and a bored heart. However, if we read carefully and exercise our brain, one will find the book flooding with interesting ideas and lessons applicable to our daily lives, especially in the chaotic modern world. Indeed, the process of salvation is like what Huxley has written in his last printed poem, *The Yellow Mustard* (1945):

In their own soil those acres found
The sunlight of a flowering weed;
For still there sleeps in every ground
Some grain of mustard seed.

The acres of soil represent individual consciousness while the mustard seed symbolizes goodness and insight, which are buried under the dark soil. In finding sunlight in "its own soil" and not some external entity like the sky, Huxley is telling us, as he has been doing in *Island*, that enlightenment comes from within, and salvation is a process of inner vision¹⁷. And we will all do well in bearing that in mind as we drift forward in this world of toil and sweat.

¹ Aldous Huxley, *Island*, (St. Albans: Triad/Panther, 1976), p. 20

² Ibid, p.85

³ Ibid, p.145

⁴ Ibid., p.86

⁵ Ibid., p.185

⁶ Ibid., p.130

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p.218

⁹ Ibid., p.220

¹⁰ Ibid., p.220

¹¹ Ibid., p.95

¹² Ibid., p.16

¹³ Ibid., p.18

¹⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Karlberg, (Chicago: Roxbury, 2001), p. 123.

¹⁵ Christine Lasek, "Albee's love story 'Finding' comes to Arena for weekend," *The Michigan Daily*, November 27, 2001, Arts Section, <http://www.michigandaily.com/content/albees-love-story-finding-comes-arena-weekend> (accessed January 6, 2010).

¹⁶ Huxley, *Island*, p.138

¹⁷ Donald J. Watt, "Vision and Symbol in Aldous Huxley's *Island*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 14 (1968), 3: 149.