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## Iconoclasm, Holistic Vision, and Patient Watchfulness: A Personal Reflection on the Modern Chinese Intellectual Quest

**J**OSEPH R. LEVENSON, in his thought-provoking interpretation of Confucian China and its modern fate, lamented that “there has been so much forgetting in modern Chinese history” and that “the current urge to preserve, the historical mood, does not bely it.” To underscore “the forgetting,” he thought fit to conclude a story of China with a tale of the Hasidim:

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the “Maggid” of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he, too, went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. And when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding the suggestiveness of the Hasidic parable for our appreciation of the perennial problem of the gradual erosion of a cherished tradition—especially of a prophetic one with its sacred

place, its religious ritual, and its esoteric meditation signifying an intimate “I–Thou” relationship with the transcendent—its relevance to the Chinese situation is ambiguous. For one thing, as Lin Yü-sheng notes, “one of the most striking and peculiar features of the intellectual history of twentieth-century China has been the emergence and persistence of profoundly iconoclastic attitudes toward the cultural heritage of the Chinese past.”<sup>2</sup> If we must employ the theme of “forgetting” to depict the antitraditional mentality of the modern Chinese intellectual, we may have to imagine a sort of voluntary and active forgetting, in fact an outright rejection of and a frontal attack on tradition. As Benjamin Schwartz points out in his foreword to Lin’s seminal study on modern Chinese “totalistic iconoclasm,” China, “often regarded in the West as the very paradigm of traditionalism” during the nineteenth century, “had become for many the land of revolution—a society which had effected a total, fundamental break with the entire cultural and social order of the past” by the mid-twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Paradoxically, even iconoclastic intellectuals inadvertently subscribed to certain of the enduring “Confucian” presuppositions: “the notion of the integrated wholeness of culture, the notion that every aspect of society and culture could somehow be controlled through the political order, and the notion that conscious ideas could play a decisive role in transforming human life.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, these notions that “formed a powerful, widely shared syndrome of ideas within the cultural tradition”<sup>5</sup> contribute to the ambivalences and complexities of modern Chinese intellectual discourse.

When Lin Tse-hsü (Lin Zexu, 1785–1850), judged by the distinguished British diplomat and Sinologist, H. A. Giles, to be “a fine scholar, a just and merciful official, and a true patriot,”<sup>6</sup> sent his celebrated letter to Queen Victoria in 1839, his argument against the opium trade—expressing all the moral indignation characteristic of the Confucian scholar-official—showed that he had good reasons for taking an uncompromising attitude toward “those who smuggle opium to seduce the Chinese people and so cause the spread of the poison to all provinces.” He was absolutely certain that “such persons who only care to profit themselves, and disregard their harm to others, are not tolerated by the laws of Heaven and are unanimously hated by human beings.”<sup>7</sup>

While Lin's moral tone may sound naive and unrealistic to us, with our advantage of hindsight and knowledge of China's mighty fall from the Middle Kingdom to a semicolonial state in a few decades, he in fact spoke from the perspective of "a totally integrated social-cultural-political order presided over by a class which managed to embody within itself both the spiritual and political authority of the society."<sup>8</sup> Though such a perception was much more myth than reality, "the endurance of tradition seemed to be a function of its all-encompassing wholeness"<sup>9</sup> in imperial China.

A generation later, when Tseng Kuo-fan (Zeng Guofan, 1811–1872) decided to send young men in their teens abroad to study superior Western technology as an integral part of the "self-strengthening" movement in 1871, he proposed that there be "interpreters and instructors to teach them Chinese literature from time to time, so that they will learn the great principles for the establishment of character, in the hope of becoming men with abilities of use to us."<sup>10</sup> Prepared to take bold measures to learn from the West, to make compromises in Sinic education to achieve practical ends, he was clearly willing to reorder his sense of priority, no longer certain that the world would long be governed by the principles that seemed so reasonable to him.

Yet, in Tseng's mind, the price exacted for some measure of Westernization was not only affordable but painless. While he raised the issue of cultural identity in response to the challenge of the T'ai-ping Rebellion under the leadership of a Christian convert, the danger of a radical rejection of the Confucian tradition—not only by feeble minds corrupted by Western influences but by some of the most brilliant shapers of the Chinese intellectual landscape—was almost beyond his imagination. Tseng, an exemplar of the scholar-official, a distinguished literatus, an accomplished calligrapher, a sophisticated interpreter of Sung (Song dynasty, 960–1279) learning, an able administrator, and an effective military commander, had no doubt (as is evidenced in his copious writings) that the transformative potential of the Confucian tradition was great.

When K'ang Yu-wei (Kang Yuwei, 1858–1927) used his reinterpreted Confucianism as an ideological basis for reforming imperial institutions in 1898, the Confucian moral order was significantly compromised. To accommodate the Western impact as both a cultural challenge and as a military threat, the grammar of action,

defined in terms of wealth and power, gained ascendancy on the intellectual scene. A sense of urgency, prompted by the belief that the survival not only of the imperial polity but also of the Chinese form of life depended on the success of basic institutional changes, led him to undertake a comprehensive examination of all the available symbolic and spiritual resources for social reconstruction in the Confucian tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Chang Chih-tung's (Zhang Zhitong, 1837–1909) catchphrase, “Chinese learning as substance (*t'i* or *ti*) and Western learning as function (*yung* or *yong*),”<sup>12</sup> coined in the same period, shows how an eclectic blending of indigenous cultural values and imported Western ideas was deemed necessary to provide an ideological formula for coping with the Western tide.

The “difficult task” of the Chinese intellectual, defined later by the charismatic Liang Ch'i-ch'ao (Liang Qichao, 1873–1929) was fourfold. Liang wrote:

I therefore hope that our dear young people will, first of all, have a sincere purpose of respecting and protecting our civilization; secondly, that they will apply Western methods to study our civilization and discover its true character; thirdly, that they will put our civilization in order and supplement it with others' so that it will be transformed and become a new civilization; and fourthly, that they will extend this new civilization to the outside world so that it can benefit the whole human race.<sup>13</sup>

Levenson perceived in Liang's wishful thinking the dilemma common to the mind of modern China: an emotional attachment to China's past and an intellectual commitment to Western values.<sup>14</sup> Yet underlying all such intellectual efforts to come to grips with Confucian China and its modern transformation was the strong faith in the ability of human consciousness to understand and to shape historical reality. While the undifferentiated masses might not have the vision or the persuasive power to effect fundamental changes in society, it was both the duty and the responsibility of the intelligentsia to do so.

The generation of the May Fourth Movement (1919), witnessing the abortive attempt by the Nationalist Revolution to bring about an integrated polity after the collapse of the imperial dynasty, resorted to a wide-ranging iconoclastic attack on the Confucian tradition. This was seen as a strategic move intended to prepare the ground for “wholesale Westernization.” For a brief time, China was hospitable

to virtually all brands of Western thought: liberalism, pragmatism, vitalism, anarchism, socialism, romanticism, idealism, and nihilism each found a sympathetic and indeed enthusiastic audience.

In less than four generations after the Opium War, many of the most articulate members of the Chinese intelligentsia, notably those who had studied abroad, deliberately relegated their cultural identity to the background, taking it for granted that China's survival depended on her ability to adapt to the brave new world now defined in Western terms. It was perhaps no accident that Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the paradigmatic revolutionary, emerged as a political leader and national hero from the periphery of traditional Confucian culture.

Yet, without exception, Chinese intellectuals remained obsessed with Chinese culture, past and present. Nowhere in China is there a counterpart to the radical Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), who, despite his solid Confucian education, openly advocated the policy of “cutting loose from Asia” to allow Japan successfully to play the Social Darwinian game. Ironically, the great scholarly accomplishments of the Chinese westernizers were principally in traditional Chinese studies. The lifelong work of Yen Fu (Yan Fu, 1853–1921), who singlehandedly translated the works of Thomas Huxley, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Adam Smith, and others into classical Chinese, was an exception.<sup>15</sup> Yet, even in the case of Yen Fu, as the recent publication of his completed works in the People's Republic of China shows, his primary concern was with Chinese studies.

This combination of cultural iconoclasm and cultural obsession made the relationship of the post-May Fourth intellectuals to their Confucian tradition both ambivalent and complex. The deliberate effort to forget was never fully realized; conscious rejection and unconscious identification with traditional symbols and values were pervasive among the most influential figures in Chinese intellectual life. Levenson speculated as to whether the modern fate of Chinese culture, so unlike the museumization of ancient Egyptian culture by foreign curators, was not also a sort of museumization. He wrote:

By making their own museum-approach to traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese kept their continuity without precluding change. Their modern revolution—against the world to join the world, against their past to keep it theirs, but past—was a long striving to make their museums themselves.

They had to make their own accounting with history, throwing back a new line, and holding fast to it, while heading in quite the opposite direction.<sup>16</sup>

This reading of the ability of Chinese intellectuals to detach themselves from the past by externalizing and objectifying it so that it may be safely packaged for display is too optimistic, if not simple-minded. The truth of the matter is that the Chinese intelligentsia—including many who were consistently iconoclastic—maintained unacknowledged, often unconscious, continuities with the culture of the past on every level of life: behavior, attitude, belief, and commitment.<sup>17</sup>

The gradual erosion of the Chinese intellectual's faith in the viability of Confucian culture to sustain the fundamental restructuring of the Chinese polity (an inevitable consequence of Westernization) may be witnessed in Lin Tse-hsü's moralism, by way of Tseng Kuo-fan's pragmatism, K'ang Yu-wei's reformism, and Chang Chih-tung's eclecticism, which eventually led to the iconoclasm of the May Fourth generation. Lin believed in the power and authority of the Celestial Court and the place of the Middle Kingdom under Heaven; he thought that he knew the proper ritual for dealing with uncivilized foreigners, and was confident that he possessed the spiritual resources to expiate sins against humanity. Tseng believed also that China was the center of the world, that she had the spiritual resources to strengthen her national defense, but he was willing to learn the formula, the know-how, from the West. Although K'ang continued to believe in the supremacy of the imperial system and Confucian culture, he recommended drastic measures to revitalize both. For him, China's place in the world, her methods of governance, and the spiritual resources she could command in coping with the unprecedented crisis in her history had all become problematic.

Chang Chih-tung's eclecticism, rightfully dismissed by Levenson as a fallacious rationalization, was a desperate attempt "to consolidate Chinese devotion to Chinese culture in the modern world of western techniques":

Chinese learning, which was to be the *t'i* [substance] in the new syncretic culture, was the learning of a society which had always used it for *yung* [function], as the necessary passport to the best of all careers. Western learning, when sought as *yung*, did not supplement Chinese learning—as the neat formula would have it do—but began to supplant it. For in reality, Chinese learning had come to be prized as substance because of its function,

and when its function was usurped, the learned withered. The more western learning came to be accepted as the practical instrument of life and power, the more Confucianism ceased to be *t'i*, essence, the naturally believed-in value of a civilization without a rival, and became instead an historical inheritance, preserved, if at all, as a romantic token of no-surrender to a foreign rival which had changed the essence of Chinese life.<sup>18</sup>

The sense of crisis experienced by the Chinese intellectual after 1895, when Japan, having successfully transformed herself into a Western-style power, threatened China militarily as a full-fledged imperialist, cannot be adequately appreciated in a traditional-modern/China-West dichotomy.<sup>19</sup> The psychocultural dynamics of the Chinese intellectual community, informed by a profound historical consciousness, added layers of complexity to the public debates, which, on the surface, seemed to follow neatly the two-line struggle between the traditionalists and the westernizers.

Wang Kuo-wei's (Wang Guowei, 1877-1927) agony was symptomatic. Caught between idealism and pragmatism, he, an aspirant philosopher, ruefully remarked that what he really loved (idealistic claims of the life of the Spirit) was no longer believable; what he believed to be true (empirical proofs in natural sciences) was utterly unlovable.<sup>20</sup> The painful recognition that the culture of the past, with its richly textured history, philosophical insight, aesthetic sensibility, and literary taste could not be entrusted with the urgent task of "saving the nation," that Western ideas of science and democracy, functionally necessary for making China wealthy and powerful, did not in fact move the heart or inspire the soul, made many a Chinese intellectual both emotionally frustrated and intellectually unfulfilled.

The story of the life of the mind of the modern Chinese intellectual has yet to be told. The sense of urgency with which he or she has been impelled to deal with personal, familial, communal, or national crisis has not so far been congenial to long-term scholarship or deep thinking. The psychology of uncertainty, caused by continuous wars, hunger, and famine, not to mention political persecution, social unrest, and economic chaos, has constantly haunted the intelligentsia. It is understandable that for the overwhelming majority the political questions have loomed large. For them, the contemplative life was never a real option; at best, it was a dispensable luxury. The demand for relevance, participation, and activism was so overwhelming at times that those who opted for teaching or writing almost always

developed a profound sense of guilt. The historical allusion to Pan Ch'ao (Pan Chao), who, fired by a strong patriotic impulse, threw his writing brush on the ground and joined the army, became a pervasive theme in the profile of the modern Chinese intellectual.

Ironically, as the intelligentsia accepted the rhetoric of relevance, with participation and activism appearing as the authentic way to engage in the struggle to save the nation, the rationale that the intellectual community was a center of critical reflection and long-term deliberation was relegated to the background. As a consequence, the politicization of culture became inevitable. The unreflective patriotism of the Chinese intellectual undermined the power of the pen as a prime weapon of social and political criticism in modern China. The spirit of self-sacrifice, with its attendant willingness to subordinate all personal concerns to the well-being of the group, motivated by an idealism to involve one's body and soul actively in the revolution to save China, served to weaken the intelligentsia in a way unprecedented in Chinese history.

The triumph of Marxism–Leninism as a political ideology demonstrates this point. When the Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921, the philosophies of Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, James, Dewey, and Russell were all more important than that of Marx. Although Li Ta-chao (Li Dazhao, 1888–1927) enthusiastically hailed the victory of Bolshevism in an article published in the influential *New Youth* in 1918, his Marxist study club, with its messianic hope for the future, attracted very few recruits. The intellectual debates that centered around scientism and the philosophy of life in the early 1920s were dominated by pragmatists and idealists.

The upsurge of interest in Marxism–Leninism politically may be attributed to the increasing popularity of the Soviet Union as a revolutionary model. Ideologically, however, the fact that Marxism–Leninism was Western to the core, while thoroughly critical of imperialism, made its persuasive power overwhelming to many totally iconoclastic and fiercely nationalistic intellectuals. Also, the breakdown of the traditional order in the economic, political, and social realms did much to generate a powerful ferment among Chinese intellectuals:

Nothing is untouched: the self, the idea of nature, the relation to the other person, to the family, the group, the State. Love, ambition, respect, friendship, all are challenged at such intimate depths that anger becomes a protective reaction, pride a defense, hatred a strategy and contempt a reflex.<sup>21</sup>

The demand for a holistic vision—a worldview that would situate the Chinese problem in a global context, in a broad historical perspective—was urgent. Hu Shih (1891–1962), inspired by Dewey’s pragmatic instrumentalism and frightened by Marxist–Leninist ideology, urged his followers to avoid “isms” and to concentrate all their efforts on solvable problems. His plea for reason, liberty, and independent-mindedness was widely interpreted as being both unrealistic and irrelevant, if not positively selfish. After all, Dewey’s instrumentalism grew out of the safe academic environment of the United States; it was never intended to address the burning issues of the kind that confronted the Chinese intellectual. A totalistic ideological turn was almost inevitable.

While the timeliness of the Marxist–Leninist ideology, as embodied in the Soviet revolutionary model, may have captured the imagination of the Chinese intelligentsia, it was the participation of the peasantry, the perpetual carriers of traditionalism, that fundamentally changed the political dynamics of the country and eventually brought about a revolution. The principal beneficiary of the rise of communism in China was not the intelligentsia, however instrumental it may have been in providing the symbolic resources that helped form a broad consensus, thereby preparing the whole nation for it. Though the Chinese Communist Party explicitly demanded a total iconoclastic break with the feudal past, it was in fact nativist to the core. Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong, 1893–1976) may have been a creative interpreter of Marxism–Leninism, but he was by no means a westernizer. Even discounting what has been revealed of Mao’s style of leadership during the Cultural Revolutionary period (1966–1976), Mao Tse-tung’s thought was a deliberate attempt to bring Marxist–Leninist modes of analysis to bear upon the concrete situation in China; as such, it functioned primarily in a Chinese linguistic universe.

However, the Chinese linguistic universe that produced the thought of Mao Tse-tung and that was subsequently influenced by it

cannot be seen as traditional. One does not prove Mao's traditionalism by pointing to his frequent use of historical allusions, conventional expressions, and classic literary styles; the message Mao tried to convey was iconoclastic; the utopia he envisioned was communist. Still, by and large, he was a traditionalist; his aesthetic sensibility, life-style, political skills, self-image, and conceptual apparatus were reflected in his familiarity with Chinese poetry, fiction, history, and thought.

While the Chinese communists may have emerged from peasant movements and guerrilla warfare—and while the Long March and the Yanan Spirit certainly evoke sensations of earthiness, symbolically explaining why the Red Star over China is inherently rural rather than urban, nativistic rather than foreign—and while there is much truth in all such characterization—the other side of the coin must also be considered. Chinese communists, as nationalists, returned students, intellectuals, and ideologists, are also the self-assigned inheritors of May Fourth iconoclasm. The Chinese Communist Party, Leninist in its conception and organization, assumed the role of “saving the nation” as its manifest destiny. The belief that Marxism smashed the two great mountains—feudalism and imperialism—that had blocked China's way toward modernity for decades led to the self-righteous claim that the wave of the future was neither Western nor Chinese but socialist, combining the most “progressive” elements of both.

The intelligentsia's active participation in this, or at least its tacit acceptance of the communist agenda for “saving the nation,” was crucial for developing an ideology with broad popular appeal. If Mao's investigation of peasant conditions in the heartland of Chinese agriculture in the 1920s helped him design a strategy for reordering China's power relationships (which involved the development of tactics of class struggle and brainwashing), his constant wrestling with intellectuals also taught him the complex art of symbolic control.

Symbolic control, in this sense, refers to a governing mechanism that gains its coercive, persuasive power through its appeal to cultural values and social norms. While legal sanctions are also applied, these are used only as a last resort. Social order is maintained not by law but by ritual. Members of the community, with varying degrees of sophistication, all have personal knowledge of the boundaries within

which they interact as centers of specific relationships, not as isolated individuals. Underlying all overt behavior and revealed attitudes, but also in subtle and inarticulate signs of human interaction, is a tacit understanding of what is acceptable, what is expected of each member. A seasoned member knows precisely the operational rules that derive from such understanding. This is not to say that individual members tend to think and act alike according to standards imposed from above; it does suggest, however, that the governing mechanism relies heavily on shared values and norms. Leaders cannot afford to take lightly a society's value orientation as a political force that is capable of enhancing or undermining their authority and power in consensus formation.

Mao and other founding members of the Chinese communist movement in the Party, but also in the government and in the army, were absolutely serious about ideology. The slogan "politics is in command" means more than that the civilian is in control of the military; it implies that every aspect of society, civilian as well as military, has to be guided by principles that emanate from the power center, where a holistic vision of China's destiny resides.

The intellectuals, especially well-known professors and prominent writers, are not in this sense "rootless cosmopolitans"; they are dangerous shapers of public opinion. Having privileged access to the holistic vision because they have helped formulate it as the core of the Sinicized socialist ideology, at least in principle, they have the authority to suggest an alternative vision, formulating such a new vision when occasion demands it. Theoretically, and occasionally in practice, Chinese intellectuals have exercised their right to criticize the state and the symbolic resources used by the state to legitimize both its *modus operandi* and its very existence. The thoroughness and incisiveness with which political, social, and cultural criticism was directed against the Party and its legitimizing ideology during the Hundred Flowers campaign in 1957 clearly demonstrates that when intellectuals are given the opportunity, they are not unwilling to be outspoken critics. However, it is one thing to be thoroughly and incisively critical of a regime, and quite another to become an active dissident as a declaration of conscience.

The authentic possibility of becoming a dissident in Chinese political culture is very limited. Neither the political push nor the

ideological pull has ever been strong enough. Historically, the Chinese intelligentsia was an integral part of the governing mechanism of the body politic. Although tension existed between the ruling minority and the cultural elite, the examination system (a Confucian contribution to social mobility in traditional China) enabled the literati to staff the higher echelons of the bureaucracy. As a result, politics was seen not only as a power game but also as an exercise of symbolic control. The intellectuals' role, as the most articulate members of society, was crucial to the success of any such governing mechanism. It is difficult to imagine that the imperial court in traditional China actually imposed Confucian ideology on the literati; rather, the literati, as carriers of the Confucian Way, initiated, implemented, and judged the whole process of symbolic control from the political and bureaucratic center. Marxism–Leninism, as an implanted young ideology in the historical landscape of China, was imposed on the intelligentsia by the central government. However, given the fact that the rise of Marxism–Leninism in China was neither the result of an international conspiracy nor a domestic misunderstanding, but was a deliberate ideological choice made by the intellectuals (instrumental in creating the agenda intended to save the nation), it is entirely conceivable that they see themselves as the carriers of the socialist message. If they remain the government's collaborators, despite wave after wave of anti-intellectual campaigns, it is in large measure due to their perception that they have actually participated in the formation of the holistic vision of nation building. Chinese intellectuals may well be economically disadvantaged and politically oppressed; they are not ideologically alienated.

The collective memory of China's modern fate is so vividly implanted in the mind of every educated Chinese that—despite significant differences among historians' interpretations and evaluations of each major event—the chronology illustrated by Lin's abortive attempt to stop the British, Tseng's self-strengthening effort to catch up with the West, K'ang's reform inspired by the Meiji Restoration, and Sun Yat-sen's revolution, later guided or misguided by the Russians, shows that saving the nation is of great historical significance; that nothing else deserves more focused attention. By comparison, the fate of any single individual, however painfully unfair, can never match the cumulative injustice and humiliation that China, as a civilization-state, has endured in modern times.

The personification of China's woes in literature, history and philosophy—in text books and the mass media—has done much to heighten the awareness of the young. Each generation relives and reexperiences the century-long tragedy of China, sharing a poignant sense that new painful realities will have to be endured as well. No one in the Chinese cultural universe is spared this historical and existential weight. While the Chinese have never known the Holocaust, they have suffered collectively a series of holocausts, a few self-inflicted by the people of the “land of ritual and rites,” as the traditional Confucian scholar would choose to characterize the Middle Kingdom.

The Chinese intellectuals' desire for a strong center, dictated by the modern conception of wealth and power as the essential imperatives for national survival, has been so pervasive that weakness, backwardness, and poverty have seemed even more heinous than dictatorship. Ting Wen-chiang (Ting Wenjiang, 1888–1936), the champion of scientism, is alleged to have told his liberal friends that if Chiang Kai-shek could defeat the Japanese by becoming a dictator, there was nothing wrong with dictatorship. It is well to recall that the communists, as well as anarchists and liberals, joined the Nationalist government in its fight against Japanese aggression. If Chiang had faded from the scene in the early 1940s, he would be honored today as a national hero in China. The prestige that Sun Yat-sen now enjoys on both sides of the Taiwan Strait seems to have come from the perception that he was single-mindedly committed to the Nationalist cause. The deification of Mao in the Cultural Revolutionary period (1966–1976) may have been an aberration in this long and strenuous effort to find an incorruptible center from which a holistic vision of national reconstruction could be persuasively articulated and effectively implemented. Mao's strength in mobilizing a nationwide revolution came not from the power centers of the bureaucracy but from the authority of ideology. His ability to shape profoundly the direction of national sentiment may be attributed to his strategic choice not to exercise power directly through the Party apparatus. Had he, for example, been closely associated with implementing the Party's educational policies, he would have lacked the leverage to deal with the student demonstrations in the summer of 1968.

The reasons why ideology is still vitally important in China are many. To begin with, the mass mobilization of energy from various

echelons of the society to achieve national goals depends on the ability of the leadership to set the course of collective action in terms understandable and persuasive to the country as a whole. Because the agenda for saving the nation since the late nineteenth century has demanded a concerted effort to involve every Chinese (including those overseas), the art of persuasion, with emphasis on credibility, public-spiritedness, and goodwill, is not so much moralizing propaganda as an essential ingredient that defines Chinese society.

Lurking behind the scene, however, is the dilemma of the May Fourth Chinese intellectual—caught between the necessity to learn from abroad and the urgency of consensus formation based on a shared cultural identity at home—which continues to haunt the communists. The vicious circle of wholesale Westernization, together with the Boxer mentality, which generates both strong admiration for and rejection of foreignism, continues to aggravate all the highly charged ideological debates. Moreover, the imposition of a superficially domesticated ideology on a bureaucracy that is deeply rooted in peasant traditionalism has made the political culture in the People's Republic a pattern of domination that combines feudalist traditionalism with Leninist collectivism.

Unfortunately, the intellectuals who wholeheartedly support the communist agenda have found themselves targets of attack in wave after wave of political campaigns since 1958. The Chinese Communist Party, thought to embody the messianic hope for “saving the nation,” consists mainly of peasants, workers, and soldiers; the majority have little more than a primary education. Vigorous recruitment of college graduates in recent years notwithstanding, illiterates still greatly outnumber those with any experience of higher education. The confrontation between the brightest but marginalized intelligentsia and the least educated but most powerful cadres seems almost unavoidable.

Still, the intelligentsia's willing participation in this most recent joint effort to make China both strong and wealthy remains the norm. Despite the activity of highly publicized dissidents, the Chinese intellectual community as a whole has never challenged the leadership of the Party. The phenomenon of *refusenik*, a familiar and common one in the political and social landscape of the Soviet Union, is not likely to have its counterpart in China in the near future. The

idea that a member of the intelligentsia, influenced by the Enlightenment ideas of the West, would deliberately alienate himself from the ideological claims of the state to live a meaningful life guided by an alternative sense of truth and reality, has never been even a rejected possibility—though, given the intellectual effervescence of recent years, it may become an authentic existential option for an increasing number of writers-as-prophets in Chinese life.

I would suggest that two new mountains have emerged after the Cultural Revolutionary earthquake: Confucian humanism and democratic liberalism. It is too early to tell whether they will block China's predetermined course toward socialism. However, the articulated goal of China's reform effort, "to build China into a great socialist modern civilization-state with a Chinese character," suggests that the iconoclastic attack on Chinese culture as poisonous feudalism, together with the total rejection of Western civilization as bourgeois imperialism, is no longer tenable. The antispiritual pollution campaign of 1983 and the more recent criticism of bourgeois liberalism do not appear to have the support of the intelligentsia. The upsurge in comparative cultural studies, evident in the systematic annotation of major traditional Chinese works in literature, history, and philosophy but also in the comprehensive translation and interpretation of Western classics, past and present, has fundamentally restructured the ideological landscape. The relevance of Confucian humanism and democratic liberalism to the viability of Marxism, if not of Leninism, as a continuous socialist ideology in China has been imaginatively and creatively explored by some of the most seminal minds in China today. Even if we choose to believe that the power struggle in China is more a political game than an ideological debate, it is worth noting that the widely accepted way to exercise power in this political game is through ideological debate.

It appears that the ideological debate, centered on the proper way of realizing the Chinese dream of building a "socialist modern civilization-state with a Chinese character," has taken a pluralistic turn. With the influx of Western ideas and practices and the exodus of Chinese officials, scholars, and students, the intellectual discourse has become more subtle and nuanced. It must sound positively cacophonous to those who assume that the intelligentsia automatically subscribe to the Party line. The days when the Party elders could actually "set the tone" for any ideological debate are gone. In their

attempt to redefine socialism, they must now confront the challenge of both Western and Chinese humanism espoused by some of the most sophisticated journalists, columnists, and Marxist theoreticians. Deng Xiaoping's reformers may want to confine the current ideological discussion to the Four Modernizations of agriculture, industry, military, and technology with only limited attention to institutional adjustment, but university students have called for participatory democracy, constitutionally guaranteed liberties, and legally protected human rights as essential features of modernity. The question of how a socialist modern society with a Chinese character should evolve is particularly intriguing: Who should have the authority to interpret and judge the rightness of such a concept for the nation as a whole—intellectuals or cadres? A communal critical self-awareness of the Chinese intellectuals is taking shape. Whether or not a civic society will emerge that significantly changes the conventional pattern of symbolic control in which the state is not only omnipresent but also virtually omnipotent, the conscience of the intelligentsia has already been voiced and heard.

In the spring of 1985, I had the good fortune to offer a lecture course on Confucian philosophy in Chinese at Peking University. About 150 people attended the class, mainly graduate and undergraduate students at Peking, Beijing Normal, and People's Universities, but also members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, visiting college teachers from other provinces, and foreign students. I was struck first by the iconoclasm on the campus. There was nothing there to evoke a feeling of a traditional Chinese academy. The campus itself, the original site of the now discontinued missionary Yenching University, is charming. Though the University is blessed with more than eighty years of history, the collective memory is remarkably short. As a response to strong student campaigns, new bronze statues of Li Ta-chao and Ts'ao Yuan-p'ei (Cai Yuanpei, 1867–1940), the famous president of the University in the May Fourth era, added a little variety to the otherwise monotonous domination of the two gigantic stone figures of Mao.

Indeed, since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, Peking University has undergone such dramatic change that many find it traumatic to recollect what it was like even a decade ago. The idea that an academic institution such as Harvard University, founded in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), could survive the

Manchu conquest, the T'ai ping Rebellion, the collapse of the Ch'ing (Qing) dynasty, the Warlords, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Cultural Revolution (as I tried to suggest in conveying a sense of continuity in the history of Harvard, which was celebrating its 350th anniversary) produced only incredulous looks among my Chinese students. They found it revealing that the United States, supposedly youthful, has enjoyed an uninterrupted history with impressive traditions for more than three centuries, while the ruptures in Chinese society in modern times have been so profound that many of the most salient features of the Chinese tradition, including the kind of Confucian humanism we were disposed to study, seem little more than distant echoes.

Despite my fears that a sympathetic reading of the *Confucian Analects*, *Mencius*, *Hsün Tzu (Xun Zi)*, *Reflections on Things at Hand*, and *Instructions for Practical Living* might seem like outmoded feudal ideology, the response to the material and the communication among us in lectures, seminars, small group discussions, and informal conversations was extraordinary. No one seemed in the least offended when I remarked, jokingly, that I was introducing a "foreign culture" subject. They even tolerated my paraphrasing of Clifford Geertz's idea, the liberating experience of confronting radical otherness, and my suggestion that the reintroduction of Confucianism—a form of inclusive humanism, as I interpreted it<sup>22</sup>—could serve for comparative purposes as a "radical otherness" to the Marxist mode of analysis with which they were so familiar. In being confronted with this "foreign culture" subject, they were, in theory, being offered the possibility of a liberating experience.

Before long, however, I came to realize that Confucianism, far from being foreign, is an integral part of what a leading contemporary thinker in China, Li Zehou, persuasively argues is the "psycho-cultural construct" of the contemporary Chinese intellectual, no less than of the Chinese peasant. The problem, indeed, is that they have been for so long, so thoroughly, and often so unreflectively immersed in this tradition that its very familiarity has bred contempt for it. Few could see much potential for creative transformation in a feudal ideology that has so repeatedly frustrated China's quest for modernity. Indeed, their lived experience in a society shaped by traditional habits of the heart has definitively, if not conclusively, persuaded

them that the Confucian heritage—the embodiment of authoritarianism, bureaucratism, nepotism, conservatism, and male chauvinism—must be thoroughly critiqued again. As iconoclasts, they are indeed children of the May Fourth movement.

My attempts to show that the Confucian tradition, as an inclusive humanism, needs to be studied for its own sake as a necessary precondition to any critical reappraisal of its modern significance struck a number of sympathetic chords in my audience, which grew substantially when I gave later presentations at other universities and at scholarly conferences in other cities. Still, on several occasions, while I was speaking, the image of Rabbi Israel of Rishin—seated in his golden chair and telling the story of how it was done—did come to mind.

Certain colleagues and students who became my friends (and, on occasion, my fellow travelers) helped, by their persistent questioning, to make me acutely aware of my own boundaries: Would I have discovered the symbolic and spiritual resources overflowing from the Confucian tradition had I myself been raised in China? Educated in Taiwan from fifth grade through college, how could I possibly appreciate the dynamic iconoclastic spirit of the May Fourth movement? My experience as both a graduate student and a college teacher in the United States since 1962 must in important ways have conditioned my sense of the Chinese reality, both past and present. How can I be thoroughly critical of China's past, when I present it to American students as a subject worth studying?

Since 1966, when I first taught a course on cultural values and social change in contemporary China at my alma mater, Tunghai University (Taiwan), I have been greatly interested in the revival of Confucian studies in industrial East Asia. The interest was enhanced in 1982 when I accepted the challenging task of trying to introduce Confucian ethics to interested secondary school students in Singapore. To be sure, the narrowly defined Weberian question of identifying the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic in the so-called post-Confucian states (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) did not greatly excite my intellectual passion, though I became fascinated by the profound implications that the Weberian mode of analysis has for both comparative cultural and religious studies. Today, examining the contribution that the Confucian tradition can make to human self-understanding in an increasingly

secularized and pluralistic world, together with exploring the authentic possibility of thinking both philosophically and religiously about perennial human concerns from Confucian roots, are projects that delight me. While motivated by a strong desire to give a sympathetic and fair reading of the Confucian message to students at Peking University when the opportunity presented itself, might I have given more emphasis to the tragic fact that the great Confucian ideas, as they became crystallized in the power relationships of an oppressive polity, must inevitably enslave the mind, had I been exposed firsthand to its contemporary manifestation?

China is today at an ideological crossroads. The inner strength of the Chinese intelligentsia has been sapped by the collusion of feudal Chinese traditionalism (the remnants of a politicized Confucian moralism) and modern Western collectivism (the outmoded practices of Leninist dictatorship). To release and cultivate the vital energy for self-transformation, the Chinese intellectuals need to tap the resources of both their own tradition and that of the West. That is possible if they are able to identify the two narrow ridges between traditional feudalism and Confucian humanism, between bourgeois capitalism and democratic liberalism. If they are willing to attain the new by reanimating the old, to revitalize the self by embodying the other, a fruitful path could be the creative interaction between Confucian humanism and democratic liberalism in a socialist context. That, in Edward Shils's wise counsel, is "a task for patient watchfulness and tact of the utmost delicacy."<sup>23</sup>

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), vol. 3, pp. 124–125.

<sup>2</sup>Lin Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. x–xi.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>6</sup>William Theodore de Bary, et al., comp., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), vol. 2, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Benjamin Schwartz attributed this perception to China as the symbol of unchanging tradition; see Lin Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, p. ix.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>De Bary, *Sources*, vol. 2, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup>Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning, 1890–1911* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 21–65. Professor Chang's focused investigation of the ethico-religious world views of four of the major intellectual figures of this transitional era is most illuminating for understanding the breakdown of the Confucian moral-spiritual order and Chinese intellectuals' struggle to recreate a new holistic vision to fill the vacuum.

<sup>12</sup>De Bary, *Sources*, vol. 2, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>14</sup>Levenson first formulated this interpretive thesis in his *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953). For a summary of his argument, see his *Confucian China*, pp. ix–x.

<sup>15</sup>For a thought-provoking study of Yen Fu, see Benjamin I. Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

<sup>16</sup>Levenson, *Confucian China*, vol. 3, p. 124.

<sup>17</sup>Schwartz notes in his aforementioned "Foreword": "The unconscious and unacknowledged continuities with the culture of the past on every level of life in contemporary China are being thoroughly examined." See Lin Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, p. x.

<sup>18</sup>Levenson, *Confucian China*, vol. 1, p. 61.

<sup>19</sup>For an informed critique of this sort of dichotomous methodology, see Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>20</sup>Wang's autobiographic account of how he gradually lost interest in philosophy is worth noting:

In general those philosophical theories that can be loved cannot be believed, and those that can be believed cannot be loved. I seek truth and yet I love mistaken forms of it. Great metaphysics, rigorist ethics, and pure aesthetics—of these we are inordinately fond. However, in searching for what is believable, we turn instead to the positivistic theory of truth, the hedonistic theory of ethics, and the empiricist theory of aesthetics. I know the latter are believable but I cannot love them, and I know the former are lovable but I cannot believe. This has caused me great distress during the last two or three years.

See Joey Bonner, *Wang Kuo-wei: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 95.

<sup>21</sup>François Geoffroy-Dechaume, *China Looks at the World* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), p. 131.

<sup>22</sup>Tu Wei-ming, "Toward a Third Epoch of Confucian Humanism: A Background Understanding," in *Confucianism: The Dynamics of Tradition*, Irene Eber, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 3–21.

<sup>23</sup>Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 330.