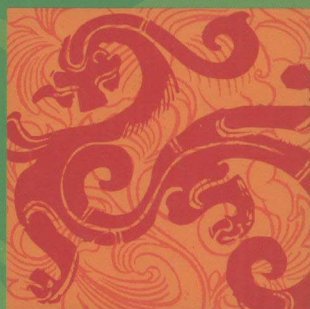


ETHNIC STUDIES

WANG GUNGWU

# TO ACT IS TO KNOW

Chinese  
Dilemmas



EASTERN UNIVERSITIES PRESS

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“To act is the completion of knowledge”  
— Wang Yang-ming (1472–1528)

“Act and then know, that is the Way”  
— Wang Fu-zhi (1619–1692)

**In memory of Lim Boon Keng (1869–1957)  
who lived with the dilemmas longer than most  
others in the Nanyang**

“When the common people have recognised the real source of their strength, they will appreciate the teaching of Mencius and will profit by the experience of Europe. Not waiting for governmental action, they will initiate reform work and compel the authorities to give them a hearing. To effect such a desirable change, the Chinese people must survey their own social world with impartiality and with a clear vision.”

Lim Boon Keng, 20th August 1895

## Preface

No one who pays attention to world affairs can have missed the speed at which China has changed since 1978. But we should also note how much China changed during each of the decades before that. The speed of change in the earlier period was not as spectacular, but those changes were dramatic and transformed its politics, culture and society, and these caught the world's attention. Some of these earlier changes were actually negative, as major Chinese institutions were rapidly dismantled where they had not collapsed under their own weight. Yet the many torches the Chinese continued to use to shine on their history remind us how much the past still weighed heavily on their lives.

Ever since 1968, when I went to the Australian National University, I felt that the Chinese, despite their revolutionary slogans, would not be able to escape their history. The year 1968 was when the Cultural Revolution experienced the worst of its violent beginnings, with threats to wipe out all features of the "feudal" past. Indeed, the evidence that young Chinese, inspired by Mao Zedong, were doing the wiping out with enthusiasm and thoroughness was piling up in all the documents that the ANU and National libraries in Canberra were able to gather. Political commentators everywhere suggested that the Chinese no longer loved their history and perhaps never really did. All that the young Chinese needed was the encouragement to unburden themselves of their baggage and seek a modern freedom. The trouble was, the revolution they were undergoing offered them only an apparent freedom that was double-edged. The harder they beat their past, the more they were confronted by that past.

One did not have to be ideologically hostile to communism to see that China without its past had no meaning. If Sun Yat-sen was right to think that the Chinese people were like loose sand in a large dish, what would they be like if there was nothing left of the dish that gave China its unique identity? Therefore, despite the growing skepticism about the future of China's past, I remained steadfast in claiming that the Chinese would be lost if they did not affirm their

past, and that included Mao Zedong himself. When Mao was excoriating China's past failings, he was also railing against the decadence of European and Soviet socialism, and this left him with nowhere else to turn for ideas and inspiration. Thus even he could not avoid being a prisoner of the very past he threatened to destroy. That paradox, however, is still difficult to explain.

Today, after 20 years of the open-door policy to economic reform and a thorough reappraisal of the role of capitalism in history, there are indeed serious cracks once again in Chinese faith in their turbulent past. Is it really relevant for where they want to go? Now that it has become obvious how little the ordinary Chinese know, or seem to want to know, about their history, it may be time to reassess the view that the past really matters to the Chinese. In that context, I have re-read some of the essays and articles I wrote at the time that reflected my confidence that history would always be alive in the Chinese mind. These tell me that my confidence might still not be misplaced. I therefore decided to bring the essays together here to have that confidence tested.

Of the 16 essays, eight were published in the 1970s or earlier and five in the 1980s.\* The eight that I wrote in the 1970s, in particular, were influenced by work done by scholars who were themselves, protagonists in the Cultural Revolution. The way they used the past in polemical debates in support of political factions struggling for power demonstrate how that past, revolution or not, continued to stimulate the Chinese imagination. This did not necessarily mean that they were respecters of historical truth and accuracy. The power of the past lies in its rich offerings to myth-makers. The Chinese have been expert in making traditions work for their present for a long time. They certainly did not give that up during these years of history-destroying violence. Indeed, it is indicative of their priorities that the two major journals that never ceased publication throughout the Cultural Revolution were two that covered ancient history, *Kaogu* (Archaeology) and *Wenwu* (Material Culture). They presented the past so systematically that my own appreciation of ancient Chinese history was greatly enriched during those troubled years.

This is not the first collection of my essays that reveal my inclination to take contemporary Chinese uses of the past seriously. My earlier collection, *The Chineseness of China*, which was published

in Hong Kong in 1991, includes several essays that take a similar position. In that collection, I was more concerned about what history meant to the Chinese throughout history. In this collection, most of what I have to say deals with how the Chinese seem to love the past because they know how to fight with it and use it in their political struggles.

Wang Gungwu  
East Asian Institute  
Singapore  
12 February 2001

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\* I have retained the original Wade-Giles transcriptions and not changed them to *pinyin*.

# Acknowledgements

## Part One

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## CHAPTER



# Reforming the Revolution

When the republic of China was proclaimed on 1 January 1912, Sun Yat-sen called its government that “of a revolutionary era”. Two months earlier, when he was in the United States and heard that the uprising in Wuchang was succeeding, he thought that only the governments of the United States and France, which had had their own republican revolutions, would support the Chinese revolution, while the German, Russian, and Japanese governments would not. British support was crucial. Britain was the Great Power in the East. If it sided with Russia, Japan, and Germany against the new Republic, then French and US support would not have been enough. Sun Yat-sen hoped to use public sympathy in Britain to persuade the government to back his rebellion. Although the government was undecided, the people were sympathetic. When he reached London a month later, he spoke of the unstoppable tide of enlightenment and progress which would soon enable revolutionary China “to join

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\* First published as “To Reform a Revolution: Under the Righteous Mandate,” in *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Cambridge, Mass., Spring, pp. 71-94.

the civilized and freedom-loving nations of the world”.<sup>1</sup> Thus, China acquired parts of a modern face. Sun Yat-sen saw the Republic as having broken from the past and from all the futile efforts to reform and save the imperial Confucian system. It had become part of modern world history — there was to be no looking back.

A new generation of educated Chinese, including Mao Zedong, picked up the call during the May Fourth Movement after 1919 and many wanted China to go much further. This second generation produced the leaders who established the People's Republic of China in 1949 as an advanced country in “the vanguard of world revolution”. Mao Zedong himself was impatient to realize this ideal and finally launched a violent “cultural” revolution to achieve that goal. Consciously or not, he did so by putting on parts of a Chinese face, invoking features of authority and power which had the effect of reversing recent trends and restoring older political values and structures.<sup>2</sup>

After his death, the word “reform” regained efficacy and replaced the word “revolution” in China's policies and goals. Since the disintegration of Soviet power after 1989, the word revolution has lost its universal appeal even more rapidly. The Chinese word for reform, *gaige*, is now used for everything. *Geming* (revolution), however, is widely greeted with indifference and a tinge of fear. Some of the third generation of educated Chinese have shown, especially during the decade leading to the tragedy at Tiananmen on 4 June 1989, that they are prepared to contemplate radical changes amounting to yet another revolution in political and cultural values. What do these words, reform and revolution (*gaige* and *geming*) tell us about modern Chinese, the country's struggle to free itself from the past, and the brave new world it has so much wanted for its people?

The question reminds us that it has always been difficult to approach any subject about one civilization using terms derived from another. Should we use indigenous terms in original contexts to try and portray reality as the local people see it themselves? Should we translate the terms as best we can, but interpret them in a language familiar to the foreign audience we write for? Or, should we assume a oneness of history and accept the language of discourse dominant at any one time and define everything accordingly? These are old questions for which answers become even more difficult when we

deal with what appears to be global events in modern history. The more complex the phenomena and the more entangled the current developments are in a civilization's traditions, the harder it is to understand and explain what is happening, and least of all to predict future changes.

Not surprisingly, this is especially difficult with events in China. The tight-knit cultures within its borders hide a great deal, even from its own people. Its long history of dynastic empires thrusting out beyond existing borders or pulling into itself, and its image as a country which had experienced cycles of cultural and institutional sameness have been especially misleading. Certainly the size of territory and population had led its rulers, whether Imperial, nationalist or Communist, to give priority to, and use all available resources to ensure unity and conformity, and to encourage bureaucratic simplification of the institutions of social and political control. If necessary, reality could always be made to fit the current ideology.

Students of modern Chinese history cannot but be struck by the distance between hopes, intentions, and goals of every generation and the compromises, betrayals, and what may be described as the burdens of China's history. Another kind of distance is that between the modern ideal of seeking to meet the needs and demands of the ordinary people (however defined) and the reality of their helplessness in the face of the traditions of centralized power. There are also other kinds of cultural distance derived from the dissonances between imported ideas and technologies, on the one hand, and native pride and inspiration on the other.<sup>3</sup> Whichever kind of distance it is, our efforts at explaining contemporary China remain a continuous struggle, because each manifestation of distance is not created by mere ignorance or naivete, nor even by dishonesty. It is implicit in the idea of China, whether as a country, a civilization, an empire, a nation-state, a cultural subcontinent, or an integral part of an interdependent world.

It is in this context that the words, reform and revolution, as taken from Western and world history and applied to China, are explored here. In their Chinese manifestations, revolution is compared with *geming*, the tradition of a violent but righteous (Heavenly) mandate to rule which is deeply rooted in Chinese history, and reform with *gaige* which is often taken for granted and rarely explicit as each



dynasty renews and strengthens itself.<sup>4</sup> These comparisons immediately bring out the fact that there are many paradoxes prevailing in China today.

Among them are those which suggest that the old men of today who had launched the Communist revolution now want nothing but reform and the younger ones who have tired of revolution are willing to contemplate a new kind of revolution to replace the one that had failed. This may not really be so, nor is it unique to the Chinese. Much depends on what meanings are attached to words like reform and revolution and what qualities are emphasized. For example, if the speed and dimensions of change are stressed in the definition of each word, reform suggests the gradual improvement of a workable system and revolution connotes a total comprehensive change that has been swiftly, and often violently, achieved. On the other hand, if it is the protagonists who deserve attention, then it may matter whether they have organized for changes from above to meet elite interests or from below to establish new and more responsive power structures.

In the language of modern scholarship, reform and revolution, reformists and revolutionaries, are opposed in order to assist analysis. In reality, the contrasts apply best only during a specific period when the differences seem clear cut. Once past the time when sharp distinctions can be made, however, successful reforms can lead to radical change and even amount to a revolution, and revolutions that faltered or failed may need to be saved by reforms.

In that context, China today may be no different. It can be demonstrated that the revolutions of 1911 and 1949 have successively lost their way. When the first failed to deliver on its promises, a new set of leaders tried to save China by the second, a more thorough and genuine revolution. But when the second also faltered, ironically despite desperate attempts to galvanize the people to greater efforts at revolution, the old leaders fell back on reform in order to save what they had. Suddenly the rhetoric was significantly changed and all the good words connected with reform were brought in to replace the strident expressions associated for decades with revolution. This change of direction may not be peculiar to China. Much of it may be compared with developments elsewhere and conform to modern political and economic imperatives. Nevertheless, there are unique