

丁往道 著

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A Continuing Climb

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INTRODUCTION

"A Continuing Climb" is the story of a Chinese scholar, Yu Wen, who has not only spent his life studying some of the finest expressions of traditional Chinese values — the poetry of the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties — but has also tried to live by them. During his lifetime, however, traditional Chinese values have been under constant attack, accidentally at some times and systematically at others. The climactic assault came during the years of the Cultural Revolution. And, paradoxically, it is Yu Wen's very adherence to the values the Cultural Revolution is explicitly devoted to extirpating that enables him to survive it, and in fact to emerge triumphantly through the time of trouble.

Western readers may need help placing the story chronologically, since some of its time frame is established obliquely. Yu Wen was born in 1930, and graduated from his university in 1952. Politics began troubling his life in 1955. The Great Leap Forward began in 1958, the resulting years of famine lasted from 1959 to 1961. The Cultural Revolution started in 1966 (Yu Wen's daughter is born shortly after its beginning), and

lasted until Mao Tse-Tung's death in 1976.

Much has been written about Chinese suffering in the turbulent years Yu Wen's story covers; in fact, so much has been written that the complaints of survivors actually constitute a recognized literary subgenre, known as "scar" or "wounded" writing. But "A Continuing Climb" does not belong in that category. It is, as its title suggests, not the story of a victim but of a striver. Refreshingly, Yu Wen is a clear-eyed observer, undamaged himself as he contemplates the damage done to the country he loves so deeply.

His indestructible values have preserved him from destruction. He embodies a Taoist flexibility and indifference to material things with a Confucian stoicism and moral fervor and a Buddhist compassion for suffering humanity. He prizes sincerity, spontaneity, and simplicity, believing that the cultivation of these qualities will lead to the serenity he values above all. He has no worldly ambitions, but devotes himself, following traditional Chinese ideals, to scholarship and the refinement of his conscience. He resists not only the allure of luxury, but the more insidious temptations of simple safety and guaranteed security — a resistance which is particularly impressive given the harrowing dangers and wrenching insecurities of the times he has lived through.

Yet he is not an artificial paragon, but a very

human being. And he is not smug, but ambivalent. He recognizes that the very strengths that have enabled him to survive include aspects of weakness; the Taoist Way of Inaction may be the height of wisdom, but looked at in another way, it could also be a rationalization for cowardly or unimaginative passivity. He knows himself to be better off having lost his first love, but is wistful at the thought of her. He reproaches himself for simply accepting her desertion, and while he realizes that her own greed and ambition were what kept her from the fulfillment and even happiness she might have attained, he comes to believe that he himself bears some responsibility for her fate because he did nothing to check her actions at a time when he was in a position to influence her. In fact, he is too fair-minded to see anything one-sidedly; he mourns at seeing the defeat and disappearance of so many of China's glorious traditions during his lifetime, yet sincerely rejoices as he observes how the resulting social changes have improved the lives of peasants and, especially, of women.

Ding Wangdao spent the first half of his illustrious academic career teaching English, and devoted the remainder to teaching Chinese culture in English, in China, in the former U. S. S. R. , and in the U. S. A. He is the author of more than ten books, four of them about traditional Chinese culture, two of those specifically about Confucius. He shares many of Yu Wen's beliefs;

he has recently said that he believes firmly that "Chinese culture has its irreplaceable value and will help push civilization forward." And Professor Ding himself lived through the times he is describing here; many of his experiences were similar to Yu Wen's. Professor Ding went to the countryside to do manual labor, and, like his hero, taught rural peasants when his day's exhausting work was done. So while "A Continuing Climb" is moving as a work of fiction, it is also valuable as an authentic chronicle of a scholar's experience in singularly trying times — and an authentic expression of a scholar's judicious assessment of the history the story covers. As such, it fills a real gap. Chinese writing about that period that has been translated into Western languages is uniformly shrill and strident. This is not to say the outrages of the period should be glossed over, of course, but that there is true value in hearing the moderate voice of someone who considers his own sufferings to have been quite trivial.

Professor Ding chose to write this novel in English rather than Chinese. He has said that he made this decision from a desire to help foreigners understand traditional Chinese culture. That task is not as simple as it might seem. The Chinese language itself is a formidable barrier to outsiders' understanding of Chinese culture; it is so unlike Western languages, in so many ways, that much, much more is lost when it is translated into

Western languages than when one Western language is translated into another. But the English Ding Wangdao uses here has very Chinese features, its frequent parallel constructions and antitheses, and its strikingly beautiful rhythms, for example. At places it reads like a translation from a Chinese source, but it is not merely the result of someone thinking in his own language and translating into another before writing. It is not the English of a native speaker, but another kind of good English, developed, like the language the ingenious novelist Eileen Chang uses to tell stories of China in English, to convey some of the structure of Chinese thought itself. And Chinese thought is what this novel is concerned to promulgate. Just now, on the verge of the twenty-first century, China itself appears rather ambivalent about the value of traditional Chinese thought, but perhaps the rest of the world will find it easier to appraise it objectively.

In recent years, China has gone hog-wild for Western culture, and Chinese culture has become increasingly fashionable in the West. Chinese women are wearing Chanel suits, T-Shirts, and blue jeans; Western women are wearing the mandarin collars, the frog closings, the side slits of traditional Chinese clothes. Ballroom dancing and American fast food are all the rage in Chinese cities, while America has embraced martial arts and *feng shui*. Near the end of this novel, Yu Wen,

inspired by meeting an American professor who teaches Chinese literature in her own country in English translation, initiates a program of cultural exchanges at his university in China. And by writing this novel in English, Ding Wangdao is offering something similar. It is up to the reader to complete the exchange.

Lindsley Cameron

Preface

Traditional Chinese culture should be recognized as being one of the main factors that have shaped Chinese history. It has helped to unify the country and to make it possible for such a huge population to live as one nation in such a large area. The growth of Chinese culture has been continuous for 5,000 years, although border minority races have more than once ruled a part or the whole of the country. These rulers, it is interesting to note, eventually adopted Chinese culture — a rare case in world history of rulers being culturally assimilated by the people they ruled.

In the past years, especially during the Cultural Revolution, I was often puzzled to see this splendid culture disdained and denounced. Of course it has its defects, but throwing it away would simply mean cutting China's own roots off. Rather, what is good and healthy in it should be accepted and developed, and only what is backward and harmful should be discarded.

After teaching courses related to Chinese culture, in China and abroad, for over ten years, I came to realize that foreigners as well as Chinese could benefit by learning about it. I have written and translated several books on Chinese cultural subjects for this purpose.

Recently, it occurred to me that a story in English which conveyed something about the essence of Chinese culture might make interesting reading. The result was this small book: *A Continuing Climb* — a climb up the hill of understanding and conforming to traditional Chinese culture.

I had a warm response from my American friend the writer and editor *Lindsley Cameron* when I mentioned the idea of writing this story. She not only encouraged me to start the project, but offered to proof-read and revise each chapter I had written. I could not have produced the book without her generous support and guidance.

丁往道 (Ding Wangdao) :

安徽省无为县人，1924年生。1946年毕业于四川大学外语系。1950年起在北京外国语学院英语系任教，历任助教、讲师、副教授、教授。曾担任中国英语教学研究会秘书长，在美国西华盛顿大学和俄国莫斯科外语大学任客座教授各一年。1991年离休。独立或参与编写的主要著作有：

《当代英文散文选读》

《英语文体学引论》

《英语写作手册》

《英语写作基础教程》

《英诗入门》

《中国神话及志怪小说一百篇》

《孔子新评》

《孔子语录一百则》等。

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One

He sat down to have a rest after dusting the room and cleaning the window-panes. The door and window were left open to let fresh air come in.

"Laoshi (teacher)!"

It was the sound of a girl's voice. He turned his head to see a student standing at the door, smiling at him. He recognized her as a student from his roommate Li Yiming's class.

"Mr. Li has gone," he said. "He usually goes home on Saturday afternoons."

"I've come to see you, Mr. Yu, if you don't mind," she said, still smiling. "May I ask you a question about a Chinese saying?"

"Please come in, then," he said. Yiming must have told her that he was a teacher in the Chinese Department. He stood up, made a gesture of invitation, and pulled over Li's chair for her. He and Li each occupied one half of the room, and each had a bed, a desk, a chair, and a set of bookshelves lined up along the wall.

"Thank you," she said. "I have often seen the saying 'the minister of engineering has seen this too often to be impressed.' What does it mean? Who is the minister of engineering?"

He happened to know the meaning and origin of this saying, so he started to give her an explanation. He said that this was a line in a poem written by the famous Tang poet Liu Yuxi. Once the poet was invited to dinner by a very important man in the government. During the banquet the host summoned a pretty young woman in his harem to sing songs for the guest. The poet was not only attracted by her beauty, but also impressed by her melancholy songs, which made him sad and made her unforgettable to him. He wrote a poem in memory of this experience, in which there were these two lines: "The minister of engineering has seen this too often to be impressed, but the governor south of the Yangtze is heartbroken." "The minister" referred to that important man, who had a position similar in rank to the minister of engineering; "the governor south of the Yangtze" referred to the poet himself, for he was holding that post at the time.

Yu felt that the girl was listening to him attentively. "These two lines describe the fact," she said slowly. "But perhaps they contain more meaning than that. They show that a high-ranking official and a poet have different feelings, and react in different ways to the same event. A poet is naturally more sensitive and more emotional."

This implication of the poem had never occurred to him. The girl is really quick and sharp in

understanding, he said to himself.

"Are you interested in Chinese literature?" he asked.

"Yes, especially classical literature like Tang poetry."

"That's good," he said. "I hope there are more students like you, learning a foreign language and trying to study Chinese culture at the same time."

From his talks with Li Yiming he knew that students of Li's department were generally not interested in Chinese culture, and that they seemed to think foreign things were always better than Chinese.

When she heard what he had said, a faint red color flashed over her face. She stood up and said, "Could I come again if I have questions to ask?"

"You are welcome, of course. I'll try my best to answer your questions. If I can't answer, I'll ask an older teacher. Please tell me your name. I only know you're in Mr. Li's class."

"Wang Liying." She wrote her name on the piece of paper he had given her, adding to it "Class One, Grade Four". So she was a fourth-year student, and would graduate in a few months. "When I was a child," she said, "the second word of the name my father gave me meant beautiful, but later I changed it, and used the word which means standing up. I wanted to stand up." The change was easy, for the two words

had the same pronunciation.

"My name is Yu Wen," he also wrote his name on a piece of paper. "I'm in the Chinese Department."

"Mr. Li has told me about you. That's why I came."

She left. After he closed the door behind her, he took up the piece of paper with her name on it, and found that the few characters were neatly written. "She has practiced calligraphy," he thought. He tried to recall what she looked like and what she had said. Somehow she had left something in his memory that he wanted to chew upon. She was quite pretty, of medium height and a little too slender. Her two long eyes shone with wit and intelligence. Her clothing was plain in both cut and color, and this plainness seemed to suit her. Her accent was very close to the standard pronunciation, though not natural enough for her to sound like someone born in Beijing. He liked her voice; it was clear and sweet. A pleasant girl with ideas—that was his general impression of her. He had a vague hope that she would come again as she had said.

Saturday afternoons were his free time—unless there was a meeting to attend. He was free to do anything he liked: to read a book for pleasure, to answer letters he had received during the week, to wash clothes or tidy up the room, or to take a walk outside the campus if there was nothing else to do. After