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CONFUCIAN CHINA AND ITS MODERN FATE: A Trilogy

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Problems, problems. How does one introduce this kaleidoscopic theme? Perhaps I should tackle the "problem of intellectual continuity" in my own studies, and find the point of departure for *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* in *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China*. In the middle and end of that work, I related the early Jesuit to the later Reformist Confucian-Western syncretism. These syncretistic efforts (the first in the seventeenth century, the second in the 1890's) were comparable, but not analogous:

The intervening centuries of decline and fall had made the difference. In the Jesuit episode, a syncretism was necessary to western thought to effect its entrance into the Chinese mind; when Liang wrote, a syncretism was necessary to the Chinese mind to soften the blow of the irresistible entrance of western thought. In the first case, the Chinese tradition was standing firm, and the western intruders sought admission by cloaking themselves in the trappings of that tradition; in the second case, the Chinese tradition was disintegrating, and its heirs, to save the fragments, had to interpret them in the spirit of the western intrusion . . .

When orthodox Confucianists of the nineties saw the Reform Movement simply as a new phase of a traditional battle between the Confucian "rule of virtue" and the Legalist "rule of law," when they identified western invasions with the earlier, "traditional," barbarian invasions, their wisdom was but the knowledge of dead secrets. A new civilization was flooding into China, and Liang had known, in his early years, that Confucius must either preside over the process or be drowned in it.

But the Jesuits had known that, as for their intrusion, Confucius would either preside over it or block it. Somewhere, then, in the course of the years between Matteo Ricci and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, Confucianism had lost the initiative. The orthodox Confucianists, standing still, had been moving towards oblivion. In the beginning, their idea was a force, the product and the intellectual prop of a living society. In the

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end it was a shade, living only in the minds of many, treasured in the mind for its own sake after the society which had produced it and which needed it had begun to dissolve away...

That was a way of putting it — not very satisfactory. We could sum it up (moving from *Liang* to *Confucian China*) in a dull old pair of words: Confucianism moving from “objective” to “subjective” significance. As the world changed, the world view lost its wholeness and contemporary relevance. Confucianists had always been historical-minded; now they became historical themselves. Modern men could still voice Confucian thoughts, but the complexity of a Confucian system was gone. Fung Yu-lan, the philosopher, still talks about *jen* in the midst of Communist China — “human kindness” (humankind-ness), “benevolence”, in the midst of Communist “struggle.” The idea (one hopes) is eternal; but is it being *perpetuated* in China, with its associations in the old high culture? Or is it rather being *preserved*, precisely because its currency is past? Fung sides with Mencius while Mao Tse-tung confronts him. If he thinks Mao is wrong (understandably enough, he does not quite say Mao is wrong), then he thinks — he is driven to think — that Mencius is right.

And Mencius, and Fung, may well be right. But “thought” and “thinking,” “truth” and “life” need not be identical. Living history is full of “error,” and death and truth are far from incompatible. Something logically plausible may be psychologically uncongenial. Something theoretically defensible may be historically undefendable. That is what we mean when we say that history is not a morality tale, and when we feel the poignancy of a lost cause — the loss of objective mastery — not just coldly clock the passing, changing years.

At the end of Volume One, I speak of intellectual history as the history, not of thought, but of men thinking. “Thought” is constant, ideas or systems of ideas forever meaning what they mean in themselves, as logical con-

structions. But “thinking,” a psychological act, implies context (changing), not disembodiment, and men mean different things when they think thoughts in different total environments. Therefore, as studies of intellectual history, these volumes, even when they seem most rarefied, at least imply the social context. *Monarchical Decay*, with its “institutional” theme, is properly the centerpiece. The “amateur ideal,” so prominent a motif in Confucian China and in *Intellectual Continuity*, was institutionalized as well as conceptualized. Indeed, paying respect to the good Confucian “one-ness of knowledge and action,” I cannot separate the one from the other. It is no use waving a cheerful good-bye to Imperial China, as though the bureaucratic monarchy were inessential (or the Communist regime were preserving its essence), and pretending that Confucianism is essentially undisturbed. A set of Confucian attitudes, even if one could deem them uncorroded, does not sum up the *gestalt*. Intellectual history, after all, is only a type of the history men write, only a method, an avenue of entry, not an end. “Out there,” in the history men make, the web is never rent, and intellectual, social, political, economic, cultural threads are interwoven. In the specialized approach, one tampers with the unity of nature; but the end is, to restore the whole in comprehensible form.

Accordingly, when I conjure up dichotomies — objective/subjective, intellectual/emotional, history/value, traditional/modern, culturalism/nationalism, Confucianist/Legalist, and the like — these are offered, not as stark confrontations really “there” in history, but as heuristic devices for explaining (not conforming to) the life situation. Only categories clash, categories of explanation. What they are used to explain is the overlapping, intermingling, noncategorical quality of minds, situations, and events. Antitheses are abstractions, proposed only to let us see how, and why, their starkness in definition is mitigated in history.

Thus, when the early Jesuits faced those early modern

Confucianists who still retained the initiative and "objective significance," Confucianists repelled them with "value" objections, anti-Christian ideas that might have come from Descartes or the Enlightenment. Certainly these were universalistic ideas, not just particular, "historical" reactions. But there were psychological satisfactions in wielding these weapons of logic. A tradition can always be attacked or defended on intellectual grounds. Yet, the emotional feeling for native ground is always there. "History" and "value" (as an example of antithesis) are always — together — there.

I do not suggest, then, that some ("emotional") Chinese minds were attached purely to history, as against some ("intellectual") minds attached purely to value: "traditionalists" with the first attachment, "iconoclasts" with the second. Wherever men stood on the traditionalist-iconoclast spectrum, concern for history and concern for value suffused their formulations.

Even when the world was upside down, and attacks on Christianity helped Chinese to desert Confucianism, not to defend it, the history/value dichotomy was relevant. Intellectual disenchantment with the great Chinese tradition had emotional repercussions; and the emotional drive was translated into intellectual terms (was Darwin the answer? Dewey? Kropotkin? Marx?). Some alternative had to attract if Confucianism repelled them. For the rejection of what had once been defended in a cool Cartesian spirit could not be cool. Even when clearing the ground, Chinese wanted desperately to own the ground they stood on. They wanted to continue making *Chinese* history even when — or rather, by — making the products of Chinese history . . . *history*.

From writing *Liang*, to writing *Confucian China*, to reading Benjamin Schwartz's masterly *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* — at least the last step supports the battered theory of progress. In Yen's life (1853-1921), and in Schwartz's life of Yen (the famous

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translator of Huxley, Spencer, Montesquieu, and others), there is plenty of modern fate, and one can infer there a good deal of what my trilogy is about. Unlike the "self-strengtheners," middle and late nineteenth-century officials who bungled the industrial effort, Yen reasoned as though both *yung* and *t'i*, material function and spiritual essence, could be traced to western sources. But if Yen was farther gone in defection from the Confucian tradition than any of these predecessors, he was not *déraciné*, as so many of his younger readers and successors would seem to be. The stamp of tradition on his personal culture was indelible. And he adapted traditional fragments (a Confucian *personal* culture was itself a fragment of a personal-public whole) to his genuine anti-Confucianism. The half-way house was his natural place — neither at home with Confucian tradition, nor in the utterly strange lands of revolution. He deliberately sought out early Chinese intimations of his new intellectual values — Hsun-tzu for Spencer, Lao-tzu for Darwin, for example. But in both what Yen inherited from Chinese history and in what he discerned in it, he never claimed and did not exemplify the persistence of "Chinese essence." Chinese thought, before his, might be seen as full of suggestive *aperçus*, analogous to or anticipating certain modern universal conclusions. But the systems of thought that drove these conclusions home were western; and it was in the light of these systems, especially eighteenth-century French and nineteenth-century English, that the *aperçus* could be perceived.

Herbert Spencer, not Confucius or any Confucianist, persuaded Yen that China was an organism, and it was to this organism's survival and growth, not to any Way divined at a stage in its past, that Chinese individuals ought to be committed. Yen, conservatively, saw a place for Confucianism as a moral preservative while roads to evolutionary advance were being prepared. It would militate against racialism, revolution, irresponsible libertarianism, which he saw as blind alleys to helplessness. But this

was Confucianism as social cement, not truth. The morality of the "moral preservative" was instrumental, not final. As the product of a stage of evolution, and a tool during another stage that was well before the last, it was sure to be superseded, to be ultimately undefendable and therefore indefensible.

To say that something is indefensible because undefendable is the ultimate immorality. What led Yen, not entirely comprehending, to this equation (or to positions from which it had to be inferred) was the social Darwinism that convinced him about stages of evolution. Social-Darwinist determinism is nothing if not a solvent of morality. Where Spencer attempted to reconcile a Darwinian blind self-assertiveness with an innate moral sense, this was incongruous. But Yen did not see it. On the issue of liberty he was ready to see Spencer as a moralist (with Spencer himself, against all logic) — and to see Mill as a statist (against Mill's intentions). It made it easy for Yen to break with the Confucianist within himself without unequivocally confronting him.

Here, with this problem of the tension within Yen, exemplified sometimes in his idiosyncratic interpretations of western thinkers, sometimes in his facile acceptance of their own idiosyncracies, we face a problem of interpretation. How important was "the Confucianist within himself?" That part of Yen that resented China's apparent lack of success responded to demands to make it new. But a part of Yen (and of many others) resented the West's apparent success, too, and this part spoke for the Chinese past, or waited to speak, against the compulsions to scuttle it. To the World-War and post-War Yen, the Darwinian "struggle for existence" became, on Western military form, a moral excrement, and evolution a failure. An organic definition of societies could authorize a traditionalistic particularism ("national essence"), a psychological rather than a practical conservatism, quite as directly as a taste and hope for evolutionary change. And Yen ended his days closer to this conservatism than to that of the period

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of his great translations. This was still not authentic Confucian commitment; he was fundamentally "modern" and could never really go home again. But had he really always been longing for what only the War gave him; a chance to see Chinese values as defensible, hence defensible, once more?

For Yen and other Chinese intellectuals of his generation were tinged with a malaise. Overtly, Yen wrote about China, patient, not agent, able only to be acted upon, not to act, because it lagged in wealth and power. But he was writing about himself, too. Translating and expounding Montesquieu, Mill, Huxley, Spencer, he felt himself to be dealing with intellectual actors, men who had changed history. But Yen was a reactor. The fact that he had to go to them to find his affirmations — even though he changed them in the process — meant that anyone translating and expounding Yen would be explaining Chinese history, not going to Yen for his affirmations. Darwin and even his epigones were intrinsically, supra-historically, interesting. Yen was interesting for what he made of them. What was weak about modern China was not simply what Yen detected with his social Darwinist vision; it was what he reflected, too, in depending on that vision. What China lacked — and what drove Yen to an intellectual life that exemplified the lack — was more than wealth and power, conventionally understood. It was power to launch a Yen Fu into universal significance, instead of holding him down, just historically significant, while he made a particular, Chinese record by reacting to what he considered universal.

By the time Yen died, in 1921, "scientism" (the assumption that all aspects of the universe are knowable through the methods of natural science) was permeating the Chinese intellectual world. As D.W.Y. Kwok describes it in *Scientism in Chinese Thought 1900-1950*, scientism, though triumphant, proved emotionally charged and intellectually flat. But the "spiritual" efforts to counter it were even more jejune. The total picture is drab, as

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though to confirm Yen Fu's malaise and the depressed state of modern China — the very state that provoked so many thinkers to put themselves in the picture in the first place. What was weak about modern China was not just the paucity of science which the scientism coterie detected. It was what the scientism reflected, as something ostensibly universal, but merely historically significant in the end: too banal as disembodied *thought* to be anything more than an index to Chinese *thinking*. Anyone interested in Chinese history can profit from Kwok's discussion of the 1923 debate on "Science and Metaphysics." Anyone interested in science and metaphysics need not give it another glance.

Yet, one's interest in Chinese history now is of a universal order, the interest of cosmopolitans in a burgeoning cosmopolitanism, which was rising from the ashes of cosmopolitanism. The very iconoclasm of "scientism," its dismissal of Confucian "spirit," was a ticket-of-leave from a Chinese world to a China in the world. The Chinese world had had its own provincials within it while Confucian sophisticates ruled. It was when this world faded, and a nation began to emerge, that the old sophistication began to fail. Cosmopolitan in the Chinese imperial world, Confucianists struck a provincial note in the wider world of the nations, and they passed out of history, into history. Confucian ideas may live. There is hope for *jen*, for example, in a new cosmopolitan complex, in the extra-historical life-in-death which Whitehead terms "out-of-time-ness," or immortality. But Fung Yu-lan, *jen* and all, is fairly out of the Confucianists' time. In the manner of their passing they bequeathed their particular world (universal, to them), where they had been historians in particular, to historians in general.

It is not only Fung, confronting Mao, who may seem to stand for a still vital Confucianism. Mao himself, requiring the "sinification of Marxism," has been seen as a typical ruler with perennial Chinese purposes. But when

Mao salts his pronouncements with classical citations, these appear, as much as any Reformist classical reference of Liang in the nineties, just subjectively significant. The early Jesuits had found that Confucian authority could not be safely flouted: there was a world (*the* world, for confident Confucianists) that had to be taken, on Confucian terms, as objectively existing. Today, however, in the world in which Mao has to operate while claiming universality, the Classics are irrelevant, and the citations, if anything, only undermine the claim. The only possible universal in the current Chinese way is the model of revolution, a political and economic model. Culturally — with reference to specific, historical Chinese culture — Mao has no message for the world. Old China claimed to be exemplary because others were different and therefore lower. New China claims to be exemplary because it identifies affinities, a common plane of victimization and a common destiny, so that the Chinese mode of liberation should meet the needs of others.

Or, the way back is the way out: these classical citations may Sinify, but they do the reverse of Confucianize. For in a genuinely Confucian China, a China that *was* the world, to cite the Classics was the very method of universal speech. The Confucian Classics were the repositories of value in the abstract, absolute for everyone, not just Chinese values relevant to China alone. When the Classics make China particular instead of universal, it is a China *in* the world — still China, but really new, even as it invokes (indeed, precisely as it invokes) what connects it to the old.

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J.R.L.

VOLUME ONE

THE PROBLEM OF INTELLECTUAL CONTINUITY

PREFACE FOR VOLUME ONE

ALTHOUGH its themes may seem separate and miscellaneous at first and the chronological line irregular, this book deals with one continuous process of change. This is the change: during much of Chinese history new ideas, to be acceptable, had to be proved compatible with tradition; in more recent times tradition, to be retainable, has had to seem compatible with new, independently persuasive ideas. Chinese values have continued to be prized, but by minds that seem more 'traditionalistic' than traditional—modern minds with nostalgia for the past, not minds with the past's authentic intellectual colour. And other minds, of course, have abandoned many of the older Chinese values.

The intellectual history that all these minds have made has sweep and depth, a sweep of change from major point to point, and a depth of change beneath the points themselves. That is why, when we seem to be sailing nicely from nineteenth to twentieth century, describing a transition from t'i-yung to chin-wen emphasis or from early nationalism to communism, we may take sudden dips of a few centuries or so; for the account of a modern transformation of an old idea adds an important dimension to the account of its modern abandonment. Politically nationalistic criticism of traditional Chinese culture, for example, is a story of recent decades. Change in connotations of the Chinese terms traditionally used to correlate political and cultural questions is a story of many centuries. But the stories point to the same conclusion and they ought to be put together, at whatever cost to the narrative ideals of smooth progression and never looking back.

Any writer of intellectual history has to face a challenge from sceptical 'populists': do the literary remains of an educated fringe really relate to the history of a total society? A recent critic has brushed off a collection of studies of formal Chinese thought as really relevant only to a 'mandarin sub-culture'. But just because 'Boxer' masses in 1900 show a peasant hostility to western innovations, shall we conclude that intellectual Confucian 'self-strengtheners' and 're-

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formers', with their various commitments to one or another degree of western innovation, were playing a fancy philosophical game, quite removed from the basic stuff of Chinese history? On the contrary—'mandarin' intellectual currents are as relevant as can be to the fate of Chinese society, right down to its most illiterate and least-recorded strata. And the intellectual historian believes this, not because he assumes, as a simple article of faith, that the spirit of the literary documents naturally permeates the whole society, even to minds incompetent to express it, but (to limit the case to China) because the Chinese intelligentsia has had a traditional role as exemplar in Chinese society. In their growing iconoclasm, literati cannot abandon that role and open a gulf in sentiment between themselves and apparently motionless masses (who traditionally had expected literati to embody their own conventional aspirations), without radically changing not only a 'sub-culture' but the map of the Chinese world.

The plan of the book and a good deal of the content were hammered out for the First and Second Conferences on Chinese Thought in 1952 and 1954. I am especially grateful to Arthur Wright and John Fairbank (the directors, respectively, of the Conferences), to all the participants, to Mary Wright, and to H. F. Schurmann for their criticisms and suggestions. But there is plenty of room for disagreement about the matter of the book, and one should by no means assume that my conclusions must be acceptable to the friends who have helped me.

Parts of the book in different form have been published in *Studies in Chinese Thought*, ed. Arthur F. Wright (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, copyright 1953 by the University of Chicago), *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, copyright 1957 by the University of Chicago), *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, *Pacific Affairs*, *Sinologica*, and *Asiatische Studien*. I wish to thank the publishers and editors for permission to use this material here.

I am also very grateful to James Cahill, of the Freer Gallery in Washington for his help in suggesting and locating some of the pictures used in the Anchor edition to illustrate interpretations in Chapter II, although these interpretations are, of course, my own.

J.R.L.

Introduction:

The Special and General Historical Quests

A traveller, who has lost his way, should not ask, 'Where am I?' What he really wants to know is, Where are the other places? He has got his own body, but he has lost them.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*

WITH the passing of time, ideas change. This statement is ambiguous, and less banal than it seems. It refers to thinkers in a given society, and it refers to thought. With the former shade of meaning, it seems almost a truism: men may change their minds or, at the very least, make a change from the mind of their fathers. Ideas at last lose currency, and new ideas achieve it. If we see an iconoclastic Chinese rejection, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of traditional Chinese beliefs, we say that we see ideas changing.

But an idea changes not only when some thinkers believe it to be outworn but when other thinkers continue to hold it. An idea changes in its persistence as well as in its rejection, changes 'in itself' and not merely in its appeal to the mind. While iconoclasts relegate traditional ideas to the past, traditionalists, at the same time, transform traditional ideas in the present.

This apparently paradoxical transformation-with-preservation of a traditional idea arises from a change in its world, a change in the thinker's alternatives. For (in a Taoist manner of speaking) a thought includes what its thinker eliminates; an idea has its particular quality from the fact

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that other ideas, expressed in other quarters, are demonstrably alternatives. An idea is always grasped in relative association, never in absolute isolation, and no idea, in history, keeps a changeless self-identity. An audience which appreciates that Mozart is not Wagner will never hear the eighteenth-century *Don Giovanni*. The mind of a nostalgic European medievalist, though it may follow its model in the most intimate, accurate detail, is scarcely the mirror of a medieval mind; there is sophisticated protest where simple affirmation is meant to be. And a harried Chinese Confucianist among modern Chinese iconoclasts, however scrupulously he respects the past and conforms to the letter of tradition, has left his complacent Confucian ancestors hopelessly far behind him.¹

Vocabulary and syntax, then, may remain the same, late and soon, but the statement changes in meaning as its world changes. Is there another postulate, besides the postulate of the changing world, which confirms this change in meaning, as time passes, in the statement whose literal content remains unchanged?

There is such a postulate, the logical principle which states that 'a body of knowledge consists not of "propositions", "statements", or "judgments" . . . but of these together with the questions they are meant to answer.'² By this token, a proposition's meaning is relative to the question it answers.³ A change, then, in the question behind an idea, like a change in the alternatives beside it, imposes change on the persisting positive content of the idea itself.

Let us consider, for example, European acknowledgment of the worth of Asian civilizations. In both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were Europeans who denied the doctrine of western superiority to China. But this denial, this freedom from parochialism, was quite a different idea in the eighteenth century than in the next one; for in the first case it was essentially an expression of rationalism, while in the second, it was anti-rationalistic.

Voltaire's admiration of China derived from his deism, a universalist disbelief in particular revelation. His denial of European pretensions was a negative answer to the question,

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'Is possession of Christianity the criterion of cultural excellence?' But nineteenth-century opponents of Europocentrism derived not from Voltaire but from Herder, with his romantic principle that every age and every people has its own particular genius. Rationalism, with Turgot and Condorcet, had developed a theory of stages of progress of civilization and had turned from uncritical admiration of the non-European world to uncritical condemnation; Condorcet lowered China in the scale of nations to the level of the primitive agricultural state of society. 'Civilization', to the rationalists, now meant exclusively European civilization. The romantics, therefore, in their denial of European pretensions, meant to answer, negatively, the question, 'Is "secular progress" the criterion of cultural excellence?' Thus, successive 'same' ideas, western expressions of cosmopolitan sympathies, change as the questions behind them change.⁴

An idea, then, is a denial of alternatives and an answer to a question.⁵ What a man really means cannot be gathered solely from what he asserts; what he asks and what other men assert invest his ideas with meaning. In no idea does meaning simply inhere, governed only by its degree of correspondence with some unchanging objective reality, without regard to the problems of its thinker.

In nineteenth-century China, the problems of thinkers imposed changes on earlier Chinese ideas. Most thinkers, with a strongly Chinese (if not generally human) predisposition towards the offerings of their own particular culture, continued to ascribe to them a universal validity. But some thinkers did not, and more and more of them failed to do so as the decades passed, and western society proved socially subversive in China, and western ideas alluring. In these circumstances of material change and iconoclastic challenge, tenacious traditionalists seem to have become not simply men believing in intellectually compelling ideas, which by chance were the products of Chinese history, but Chinese having a will to believe, an emotional need to feel the intellectual compulsion, just because the ideas in question came down from a Chinese past. When Confucian traditionalism comes to be accepted not from a confidence in its universal