

Chapter 2

The Anti-traditionalism of the May Fourth Movement and Academic Freedom

It is almost seven decades since the May Fourth Movement. How should we evaluate this great movement—how much “science and democracy,” the goal of the movement, have been achieved? Especially, how should we navigate our cultural development under its shadow? These are still issues requiring exploration. At the core of the problem is the relation between tradition and modernity. This paper intends to provide my view on certain points of the issue, not a comprehensive evaluation.

In some scholars’ view, both at home and abroad, there is a tendency in the May Fourth Movement to repudiate totally traditional Chinese culture, and for that reason it should be criticized. While the negative vision of traditional culture since the Movement is simplistic, however, in my view that is not the main fault of the Movement; on the contrary, it did not provide critical views of traditional Chinese culture, that were sufficiently substantial to guide the sprouting of modern culture in China.

The question is whether the total negation of traditional culture is the solution. The answer is obviously not. For one thing, the critics themselves are involved in traditional Chinese culture; for another, even they did, the best result they could achieve was to denounce feudal dross, but that would have nothing to do with rational analyses and comments affecting our societal progress and leading us to modernize our culture.

It is often said that we should take the approach of critical inheritance, selecting the essential and discarding the dross. In reality, it may be quite easy to criticize the “dross” (though sometimes it may not be very easy to identify what the “dross” is); however, it may be more difficult to inherit the “essential.” It is hoped that there is a line of demarcation clearly defining the dross and the essential of traditional Chinese culture, which could benefit us not only now but also in the future.

However, is there such a dichotomy in traditional Chinese culture? Perhaps not. Certain methodologies are involved. Certain components of traditional culture seem to be essential now, but may not actually be so under closer scrutiny. It is rarely possible to take any “raw materials” from our traditional culture straightaway into

the organic body of our modern culture; they have to be transformed to become part of modern Chinese culture.

Here is a point worth further discussion: certain elements in our traditional culture that have always been regarded as “essentials” may in fact exert negative influence on the making of our modern culture. This aspect, which has been neglected since the May Fourth Movement, perhaps requires our further attention. The following are some of the more typical and important thoughts.

2.1 The Dao of Sageness Within and Kingliness Without

Hu Shih, a representative of anti-traditionalism in the May Fourth Movement, advocated Westernization in the hope of building Chinese society into a free, democratic, progressive and prosperous one resembling the West. He believed that Chinese society can only be transformed in this way by a “good-people-government,” as he first put forward in 1921. He said, “We need a bunch of good people to form a good government to play an active role in people’s social life, otherwise it will be carried out by bad people.”¹ In 1922, he wrote another declaration, signed by another eminence Li Dazhao, proclaiming that the only way out for China’s political reform is to have a good bunch of people with bold fighting spirit.

I wonder what kind of ideology lay behind his proposal to reform China? Moreover, is there any connection between his thought and traditional Chinese thought? In my view, the traditional Chinese way is “rule by man,” based on the “*Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without.”

“The *Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without” originated from the “the World” in *Chuang-Tzu*, infusing into traditional Chinese culture, Daoism, Confucianism, and some of the modern ideas in China. Even around the May Fourth Movement, this infusion attracted more eulogy than criticism. Most notably, as Liang Qichao (1873–1929) pointed out, “The term ‘the *Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without’ embodies Chinese scholarship with the true meaning of cultivating the self internally and enabling statesmanship externally.”²

Xiong Shili (1885–1968) paraphrased the phrase based on the *Great Learning* in his *Outlining the Classics: xin-xing* (mind-nature) is the root of investigating things, extending knowledge, rectifying hearts and seeking sincerity, which constitute sageness within; regulating families, governing states, and making peace of the world are manifested as kingliness externally. Therefore the eight great items of the *Great Learning* are typified by “the *Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without.”³

¹Hu Shi, *Collected Works of Hu Shi*.

² Liang Qichao, *Making Textual Criticisms and Explanations to the Analects*.

³Xiong Shili, *Outlining the Classics*.

Feng Youlan (1895–1990) put it even more bluntly in his *New Inquiry on the Dao* (also known as *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*), “the *Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without is the core spirit of Chinese philosophy,” “in whatever school of Chinese philosophy, the belief in ‘the *Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without’ is emphasized.” He further explained that only sages are capable of being kings, who run the country as paramount leaders. If this logic proves right, which we all believe it is, then, following the pattern, what Chinese philosophy pursues is the way of making sages, namely the “the *Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without.”⁴ And in this regard, Confucianism has been the most prominent among different schools of Chinese philosophy over the past two thousand years.

It is recorded in “Gong Meng” of *Mo Zi*, “Master Gong Meng said to Mo Zi that among sages in the past, the top one was set to be an emperor, while the second best became senior officials. Nowadays, since Confucius is insightful concerning literature, rituals and myriad things, he should be seen as a sage, and consequently shouldn’t we extol him as an emperor?” This argument supported the belief that a sage was considered the top ruler. At the end of the Warring States Period, disciples of Xun Zi extolled him as having the virtue of Yao and Shun, which was rarely found among his contemporaries. His wisdom had reached a supreme sphere where everything is disciplined according to the *Dao*. Indeed, he was so wonderful that he should be the emperor! This kind of ideology of “the *Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without” has been dominating our society over the past two thousand years.

Is the “good-people-government” proposed by Hu Shih a refurbished traditional idea in modern society? Are the so-called “good people” the most qualified to be the top leaders of a society and to form a government? Following “the *Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without,” can China become a modern democratic society? I do not believe so.

Modern democracy means having a government ruled by the people and guaranteed by a political and legal system. However, the Confucian “*Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without” is based on the idea of “sage-to-be-emperor” in the hope of a sage man emerging to save his people. The question is: how can the people have august wisdom by themselves? How can people’s well-being rely on sages’ personal morality and cultivation? This kind of belief is actually an illusion originating from small-scale farming, in the same way as farmers call on Heaven for the sweet rain. In fact, the histories of both China and foreign countries have proven that democracy and a legal system are not the gift of sages or “good people.”

How could “the *Dao* of sageness within and kingliness without” be produced by traditional Chinese culture? In my view, this arose from the Confucian intention to moralize politics as well as politicize morality. Although there are connections

⁴Feng Youlan, *Omnibus of Feng Youlan*.

between morality and politics, the two are nevertheless in separate domains of value systems.

Mixing up the two may have two consequences: sugarcoating politics with the abstract morality the politician advocate; and subordinating morality to politics, making people believe that everything is moral so long as it fits politics.

In modern democracy there is no such thing as “sage rulers,” which can only lead to “ruling sages.” In Chinese history, only Confucianism fabricated and deified some “sage rulers” such as Yao and Shun, who in fact never existed. What actually merged were self-glorified “ruling sages” who had either usurped power by any means or attempted to do so. “Noble eulogy” was either blandishment or foolish flattery peddled mainly by junior or senior Confucians.

Moreover, emperors are not qualified to be sages, since if they did they would attempt to apply the unrealistic Confucian doctrines of “ruling the world” to society, nor they would fool themselves by presenting a false appearance of peace and prosperity.

In my view, the so-called sages are in fact the least qualified to be emperors. If they became rulers they would lose their sagacity since they were fantasists who would be committed to something they knew that was mission impossible.

Emperors had to confront reality, which cannot be dealt with by idealism without stripping them of their sagacity. If moral doctrines were used by the “sages” to reform society, which was doomed to fail, they would be regarded as trying to deify reality.

Having said that, I do not believe there are no special values in Confucian sagacity, merely that sages should always be alienated from official duties. From the moral high ground they can always play a consultative but not participatory role in politics, exerting moral and scholarly influence on society. In my view, the true value of “sagacity theory” in traditional Chinese philosophy, especially in Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties, lies in its insight into universal life.

An understanding of universal life is a kind of internally transcendent philosophy, which cannot be realistically implemented. Actually ruling a country is rarely if ever compatible with the sages’ knowledge of universal life, which is impractical and hard to apply by sages or emperors.

Those prominent thinkers in Chinese society in the past, who intended to be philosophers who would both set their own hearts on Heaven and Earth and set life for people, would in all probability end up in tragedy.

Their ideology might be to embrace their compatriots and their well-being, however in reality the best they could do was to follow the flow and ease tension. I therefore believe that the thinkers’ task is to understand universal life and raise people’s spirits, but not to create a society with extreme ideologies. A healthy and rational society has to be maintained by its corresponding institutions, not by sages with personal virtues.

2.2 People-Oriented Thought

In discussing Mencius' thought, Hu Shih also pointed out that his political concept of "people-orientation" had a lot to do with today's civil rights, which put people as individuals above rulers to enjoy their maximum benefits.

Another prominent figure during the New Cultural Movement, Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) also argued that "Since ancient times, there has been the idea of coordinated cultivation of the nobles and the populace advocated both by Xu Xing and Confucius' 'equalizing wealth' ... all these lofty ideas have proved that in our social economy there are ingredients of rule by the people."

As we all know, under the banner of anti-old feudal ethics and traditional morality, the May Fourth Movement had played an active role in criticizing the old ethical code, old moral and feudal traditional culture, but very rarely people have seriously analyzed the "people-orientated thought" in traditional Chinese culture. On the contrary, leaders of anti-traditionalism have either treated it as the thought of civil right or the thought of governing the state by the people. Are they correct?

As it is said in the "Song of five masters" in the *Book of Classic History*, "Rulers should be intimate with the people without losing their status. The foundation of a country is its people; once the people are properly treated with respect, the country will be at peace." This means once people are living and working in peace and contentment, sovereignty will be consolidated, since among the people there is a mighty force or tool determining the fate of governance.

The truth is that there is no such thing as civil rights in traditional Chinese culture, only rulers' rights. As the great Chinese thinker Zhu Xi pointed out, "Everything has to be scrutinized by the emperor himself 100 % and then can be carried out; not even if 80 and 20 % left to the prime minister,"⁵ let alone to common people.

To authorize emperors' power, the "theory of the divine right of emperors" was created. Sometimes, for the sake of stabilizing society and avoiding its subversion, "confining emperors' power to the limits of Heaven" was advocated, but never were civil rights mentioned. The true meaning of so-called "people-oriented thought" was to say the common people are important because they are the main workers, without whom the rulers have nothing to rely on.

Mencius's concept of people-orientation might have some progressive and estimable meanings, but it definitely had nothing to do with today's "civil rights." We have to realize that the feudal Chinese system was a society bound by patriarchal relations, with the emperor on top of the hierarchical structure and officials at different levels ruling the people. In ancient China, the relations between the emperor, officials and the common people were not only political (ruler-ruled), but also patriarchal, in the way officials at different levels were honored as "parental officials," and the emperors were parents of the world. In that way "sage-emperors" and "clean officials" were expected, with the best results of wise rulers ruling those

⁵Zhu Xi, *Selections from Classified Conversations of Zhu Xi*.

ruled. All in all, in feudal Chinese society, it was rule of the people but not rule by the people.

In a modern democracy, it should be the people, rather than officials, who determine the fate of a society. This relationship had been reversed in ancient China, where “people-oriented thought,” in and of itself, bore no relationship whatsoever to the concept of modern democracy, and the opposite might also be true.

2.3 Social Responsibility and Historical Mission

The Chinese people in general, and Chinese intellectuals in particular, have always had a strong sense of social responsibility and historical mission. There are sayings in Chinese: “Every man alive is responsible for the fate of his country,” “Die for a just cause,” “Dying for righteousness.” Surely, this kind of consciousness among Chinese intellectuals was on the one hand estimable, but on the other was easily headed in the direction of “seeking quick success and instant benefits” by directly participating in politics and official affairs. I cannot really figure out whether it was fortunate or unfortunate for intellectuals to have such a sense of mission. For me, intellectuals should be solely making their living out of creating and dispersing knowledge; they should be critical of politics and intolerant of “pseudo-truths” or “half-truths” including the “consultative-but-not-participatory” approach to politics; the virtue of a gentleman who by nature should be a member of the independent social group performing special functions in society.

However, an over-strong sense of social duty and historical mission has often led Chinese intellectuals to cross the line, making becoming an official their ultimate goal. As a result, they lost their critical functions and became dependent on political power.

Surely, history defies generalization: there were exceptional Chinese intellectuals. However, compared with intellectuals in the West, Chinese intellectuals on the whole have been more sensitive to social duty and historical mission, and more desirous of obtaining official posts. Even secluded scholars, like Ji Kang and Ruan Ji, deeply sucked into Daoism, initially all wished “iron could turn into steel,” and when their wishes failed they then became hermits.

I have no intention to deny that there were some true gentlemen in Chinese history, carrying out their social duty and historical mission honestly. For their honorable ambition and spiritual pursuit of faithfulness, kindness and beauty, my admiration is unbounded. However, more often than not, they overdid it in their excessive sense of mission, resulting in what Chinese call “trying to draw a tiger and ending up with the likeness of a dog,” namely attempting to save the world through over-ambitiousness and tragically resulting in failure either as hermits or martyrs.

Since every society requires a group of people to carry out managerial duties, politically powerful groups are formed. However, since “power corrupts,” it is therefore necessary to have a group of people to criticize and supervise these politicians and that is the duty of intellectuals. In addition, there should be entrepreneurs to promote social wealth. When these three social groups are interactively balanced, we can expect a healthy and rational society.

As a special social group, Chinese intellectuals should have a thorough and historical understanding of their social duties, which have been characterized as a “consultative and non-participatory” approach to politics. As the saying goes, “The true face of Mount Lu is lost to your sight, for it is right in this mountain that you reside.” Intellectuals should therefore keep a certain distance from politics, in order to maintain their sober, objective and critical power, so as to assist social progress as outsiders.

The May Fourth Movement, despite its shortcomings, exerted great positive influence on Chinese society and can be characterized by its anti-traditional spirit, which needs to be carried forward even today. History tells us that only in a free academic environment can various schools of thoughts truly contend. Around the May Fourth Movement, for example, all kinds of western thought flooded into China through translation, such as anarchism, pragmatism, neo-realism, bergsonism, Nietzschean philosophy, Schopenhauer’s philosophy, Babbitt’s Humanist philosophy, Marxism and so on.

Some scholars insist that we should further promote traditional Chinese culture or integrate Chinese culture with western culture while in the process of accepting western science and democracy; some, hold an even more conservative view, of anti-western culture rejecting western culture and wanting comprehensively to protect traditional Chinese culture. All these can be discussed as issues concerning the development of Chinese culture on an equal footing with western culture.

I believe that we should today carry forward the critical spirit of the May Fourth Movement in creating a free academic environment, where multiculturalism instead of monoculturalism is promoted, so as to benefit the healthy development of Chinese culture. As is said in *The Book of Poetry*, “Although Zhou is an old state, it dedicates itself to reform.” Although China is a country of a few thousand years old, we are dedicating ourselves to a new historical mission of realizing modernization, which is the rejuvenated goal of all Chinese people.

Anthology of Philosophical and Cultural Issues

An exploration into new frontiers

Tang, Y.

2016, XVII, 231 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-10-1868-8