

CONFUCIAN
CHINA AND
ITS MODERN
FATE: A Trilogy

Joseph R. Levenson

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A TRILOGY

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VOLUME ONE: *The Problem of Intellectual Continuity*

VOLUME TWO: *The Problem of Monarchical Decay*

VOLUME THREE: *The Problem of Historical Significance*

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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-

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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

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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

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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 excrescence, 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

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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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VOLUME ONE

THE PROBLEM OF INTELLECTUAL CONTINUITY