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Focus: China, tradition and modernity

Introduction

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This Introduction was written in November 2002, when the 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was being held where more than 2000 delegates (representing 66 million Party members) decided on future policies and changes in the leadership. The way these decisions were prepared and endorsed reminds us how China differs from Western democracies. However, apart from the political structures, to what extent is China different?

The following five essays, all written by Chinese scholars, allow us a glimpse into contemporary Chinese culture through informative reports on philosophy, cultural studies, fiction, gender construction and women's poetry, and traditional Chinese medicine. Of course, these articles are far from covering all aspects, or even all major aspects, of Chinese culture, yet they offer us views of specific areas by experts who, from their insiders' vantage points, lead us into the heart of the intellectual debate in contemporary China.

Although the authors of these essays, with few exceptions, hesitate to generalize on present conditions and possible future scenarios, their arguments have something in common and suggest, perhaps unknowingly, important clues for understanding Chinese culture. When reading these essays, I am struck by the following, recurrent aspects.

A preoccupation with hierarchy

A preoccupation with hierarchy implies a focus on the political centre in Beijing and a dichotomy between centre and periphery. It also involves a keen interest in the relation between China and 'the West', the latter being differentiated as a more powerful America and a Europe of less importance. The hierarchy of

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political and military power in the West has immediate repercussions on cultural and academic exchange, as appears in the article on cultural studies by Wang Ning.

If the US is more important than Europe, China's major competitor is the US. (According to the Chinese view, Japan plays no role in this respect, for there is nothing China can – or wants to – learn from Japan, since in the historical past 'about all' of Japanese culture was borrowed from China. Moreover, vivid memories of the war with Japan and a cruel Japanese occupation during the Second World War impede a close relationship.) At a recent conference in Beijing, where postmodernism and postcolonialism were discussed, I was surprised to be confronted with the direct question of whether I thought, in view of China's competition with the West, that by the year 2050 Chinese culture would have achieved supremacy in the world.

In general, hierarchies are robust. As the essay by Jeanne Hong Zhang shows, 50 years of communist rule have hardly changed male-dominated social structures. Wan Junren writes that the Department of Philosophy of Tsinghua University was 'the most important stage for philosophical studies in the first half of the 20th century'. The implication is that, on the basis of this brilliant historical record, Tsinghua may again try to become Number 1 in philosophy, in spite of the fact that, for decades, philosophical studies at this university had a low profile. This leads to the following point.

Respect for the historical record

Just as philosophers at Tsinghua may hope to become the major centre of philosophical studies in China, on the basis of Tsinghua's historical record, so China may attempt to become the centre of world culture on the basis of its long recorded history. Probably more than anywhere else in the world, historical continuity counts in China. Historical experience dictates the critical absorption of Western influences and the continuity of the Chinese tradition. This appears most clearly in the article on traditional Chinese medicine. The historical dimension of an uninterrupted Chinese culture finds a parallel in the geographic and demographic scale of the country.

The geographic and demographic scale of China

Although the territory of China is not as large as that of the Russian Federation or Canada, certainly more of it can be inhabited. With 1.3 billion inhabitants, China is the most populous country in the world, with great differences between the eastern coastal areas and remote regions, and between cities and the countryside. The Chinese people have responded to the given vastness of the empire with a regime of hierarchically structured government and a strong

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sense of cultural identity based on a glorious historical past. Keeping the empire together has always been a primary concern of any Chinese government. The present one has set its hopes on the ever-expanding Communist Party. There are very few signs of class struggle anymore, although there is, of course, political struggle. Initiatives for further democratization may come from outside as well as from inside the Party.

The present system draws a sharp line between 'official' and 'non-official' opinions and statements, although to outsiders it is not always clear where that line is running. Wang Ning mentions that it is very cumbersome to start a new journal, but to publish a series of books is not difficult at all. The point is that, for a new journal, you need official approval, but not for a book. As a result, there are many 'unofficial' journals, which were started despite the official rules, and thus can have only limited circulation.

The unofficial networks of family, teachers and students, specific professions and religious sects have always been of paramount importance. Where the government cannot be present or is not heard, these unofficial networks take over and set their own rules. As a provincial governor said sometime ago, everything that has not been explicitly forbidden by the centre, becomes possible, in particular at the periphery; and 'periphery' should be interpreted here not only geographically, but also in a social and cultural sense. This explains the relative freedom of scholars and writers, the enormous productivity in translating Western publications, and the amazing openness to foreign visitors and scholarship. Apart from the political strictures of the centre, there is space for individual initiatives, industrial and commercial entrepreneurship, and artistic and cultural innovations. The booming cities with their impressive shopping malls and relaxed idlers make foreign visitors forget about politics.

'Official' and 'non-official'

Sometimes we are just misinformed about the difference between 'official' and 'non-official'. The official authorities, too, often appear quite open to views and publications from abroad. The 15th volume of *The Cambridge History of China* (1991), dealing with the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, i.e. the period from 1966 to 1982, in more than 1000 pages, contains elaborate chapters by various Western sinologists, offering a detailed and critical account of the recent political and cultural history of China. In Chapter 4, 'The Succession of Mao and the End of Maoism', Roderick MacFarquhar gives a lucid description of the power struggle at the top of the Chinese Communist Party, which reads like a thriller, although to most persons involved it was a nightmare. This is the best survey of the political upheaval, of all the coups and countercoups, during the Cultural Revolution I have ever read. It is amazing that in 1998 a rather accurate Chinese

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translation of this voluminous book appeared, published by the state-sponsored Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in an edition of at least 30 000 copies.

Among the enormous amount of data presented by MacFarquhar, we find a resolution adopted by a plenary session of the Central Committee in June 1981 that puts the blame for the Cultural Revolution squarely on Mao Zedong. The resolution reads: 'The "cultural revolution", which lasted from May 1966 to October 1976, was responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people since the founding of the People's Republic. It was initiated and led by Comrade Mao Zedong' (p. 391). The resolution added some qualifications, such as that Mao's leftist error had been 'the error of a proletarian revolutionary', but the blame for all the sufferings was put on Mao. This passage also occurs in the Chinese translation. Of course, since these are quotations from an 'official' document, there is no reason why this should not be made accessible to Chinese readers.

However, more piquant is MacFarquhar's description of the 'Democracy Wall' and the arrest of the dissident Wei Jingsheng, who was tried in 1979 for having requested a fifth modernization – democracy – and was sentenced to a 15-year jail term. A couple of months later the constitutional right of free speech was restricted. MacFarquhar concludes: 'For the moment, the democracy movement had been shut down' (p. 385). This analysis of the 1979 movement for democracy has been accurately translated in the volume published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Apparently, Chinese institutions are quite free in publishing translations of scholarly works, even if these are dealing with politically sensitive issues.

A big country provides a breeding ground for paradoxes. Think of the official repudiation of Mao Zedong versus a still continuing personality cult, with statues of Chairman Mao in many cities; and the political supremacy of the Communist Party versus an enormous cultural and economic activity, which has freed itself from almost all political inhibition. The following essays belong to the latter category: they are expressions of cultural creativity and ingenious research.

Wan Junren's article on 'doing philosophy' in China wrestles with the legacy of traditional Chinese philosophy and the problem of its compatibility or non-compatibility with Western philosophy. It also exemplifies the desire to connect with the glorious record of pre-communist philosophy. However, most strikingly, the horizon of future developments is completely open. The author, who is Head of the Philosophy Department at Tsinghua University in Beijing, has written several books on ethics (in Chinese). It appears that there are almost no restrictions on the philosophical debate. Wan Junren reports, for instance, that in 2001 Jürgen Habermas lectured in China on various topics, including 'The intercultural discourse on human rights'.

Wang Ning, teaching English, Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies,

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also at Tsinghua University, describes how Chinese scholars adopted Cultural Studies as a new, interdisciplinary branch of research. He takes his cue from the concept of Cultural Studies as defined by the Australian Simon During in his influential *The Cultural Studies Reader* (1993). However, Wang Ning's interpretation of the concept is selective. Cultural Studies concentrates on contemporary culture and ignores the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, but he is silent about the epistemological consequences of During's approach. In During's view, Cultural Studies, from the very beginning, was a politically engaged form of analysis and hoped to work 'in the interests of those who have least resources' (p. 2). During rejects knowledge based on statistical techniques, because it 'belongs to the processes which "normalize" society and stand in opposition to cultural studies' respect for the marginal subject' (p. 18). Here, the ethical respect for the marginal subject interferes with uninhibited research; certain problems and certain research methods are excluded, as a consequence of a preconceived political concept of society.

Wang Ning himself points to the Marxist inspiration of critics such as Fredric Jameson (in the US) and Terry Eagleton (in the UK), who paved the way for Cultural Studies in North America and Britain. Their concept of Cultural Studies coincided with that of Simon During. The Marxist dimension of Cultural Studies has certainly enhanced its introduction and popularity in China, but this hardly plays a role in Wang Ning's argument. On the contrary, somewhat surprisingly, the political motivation of Cultural Studies is not emphasized at all by the author, who sees Cultural Studies primarily as an instrument to counter scholars who merely wish to focus on the study of traditional culture and to defend the 'elitist' canon of Peking Opera, traditional literature and art. His argument for expanding the field of research and including contemporary literature, film and TV studies is quite legitimate, but it is not politically motivated. For Wang Ning, assimilating the idea of Cultural Studies means incorporating it in a Chinese context, to slight its Western Marxist inspiration and, in short, to Sinicize it. His ultimate goal is to bring Chinese scholarship onto a higher level, which will enable Chinese researchers to take part in the international debate.

The article on contemporary Chinese fiction was written by Henry Zhao, who teaches modern Chinese literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University. The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the immediately ensuing arrest of the 'Gang of Four' triggered off numerous stories complaining about the abuse of power and the suppression of intellectuals. This so-called 'Scar Literature' was followed by more sophisticated writing, expressing a scepticism or even nihilism that could never have been published in Maoist times. Zhao also identifies a group of writers who were searching for their roots, which, however, often ended in disappointment and cynicism. The fiction of the 1980s continued narrative traditions of the 1920s, respecting the historical record but leapfrogging

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the Maoist years. These promising developments suddenly came to a halt as a result of the Tian'anmen Incident of 1989.

In the 1990s, Zhao sees increasing commercialization and a blurring of ideological positions, the hard-liners were not much needed anymore, now that their opponents were silent or in exile. Superficial pleasure-seeking, romanticism and eroticism taint many recent novels, several of them best-sellers, raising doubts about the possibility of distinguishing between 'high' and 'low' literature, as discussed in Wang Ning's essay. Zhao ends his article with a note on diaspora writing, including the Nobel Prize laureate Gao Xingjian.

In a society which, for ages, favoured men over women, the reconstruction of female gender is a revolution in its own right. However, Mao Zedong did not admit such a separate revolution. Jeanne Hong Zhang, a lecturer of English at Beijing Language and Culture University (now on leave and writing a doctoral dissertation on poetry by women at Leiden University), explains that, in China, any women's movement was subservient to other – national, social or political – purposes. Women's ultimate goal was to serve the state and the people rather than to fight for gender equality. However, in the 1980s, public attention shifted from the collective to the individual, and women engaged in searching for a gendered identity. Models were found in contemporary social life, e.g. well-known historical figures, movie stars (Gong Li) and Western examples (Simone de Beauvoir). Women poets are playing a significant role in exploring the contours of a new identity no longer prescribed by Maoist ideology. The author also briefly discusses the reception of Sylvia Plath in China. The Chinese poems she quotes sound amazingly modern (or even postmodern) and do not eschew the most intimate experiences of private life, which had for so long been ignored or distorted by ideological orthodoxy. Yi Lei's poem 'The Bedroom of a Single Woman', (officially) published in 1990 and incorporated in English translation in Zhang's essay, testifies to a surprising openness towards the female experience of physical emancipation and spiritual freedom.

In the final essay, written by Chen Keji, a renowned specialist in traditional Chinese medicine, and Xu Hao, a young cardiologist, both working in Beijing, the contradiction between admiration for the great Chinese tradition and eagerness to modernize comes most clearly to the fore. The unprejudiced reader of this article cannot but conclude that the integration of traditional Chinese and Western-style medicine primarily means that the legacy of traditional Chinese medicine must be scrutinized by modern means and instruments. The authors do not suggest that the results of Western-style medical research must be subjected to tests inspired by the many-centuries old tradition of Chinese medicine. The idea of integrating Western and traditional Chinese medicine is advocated in order to save traditional Chinese medicine from decline and to keep the best parts of it intact. There is justification for wanting to do this, and it is not merely related to taking pride in

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a glorious past. There are pragmatic reasons for supporting traditional Chinese medicine, after it has been stripped of superstition and unreliable diagnosis. First, there is a wide general knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine among the people, often in remote areas, and there is a wide network of herbal pharmacies throughout China. Some traditional Chinese medicines are as good as Western medicines, some are perhaps more effective, and certainly less expensive than Western ones. The authors believe that the use of traditional medicines in some cases makes surgery unnecessary. If indeed the use of the appropriate herbal medicines can make surgical intervention superfluous this can be of general value, apart from benefiting a sizeable group of people living in remote areas who would have to travel hundreds of kilometres to find a well-equipped hospital.

On balance, traditional Chinese medicine differs from Western medicine mainly with respect to its 'holistic philosophy'. Although psychosomatics is also practised in the West, it is more popular in China. In addition to what traditional Chinese medicine has to offer in the field of herbal drugs, the 'holistic' approach is probably its greatest asset.

All five contributions are more or less characterized by a strong attachment to the Chinese tradition and by questioning the relation with Western scholarship and culture. Somewhere between the lines we can read that China is a great country, with a long history and a population far bigger than that of Europe and North America combined. It is sensible to be aware of these facts and of the emotions they may evoke among a people that for decades lived in isolation but now, with amazing alertness and adaptability, are rediscovering the outside world.

About the author

Douwe Fokkema is Professor emeritus of Comparative Literature, Utrecht University. He studied Chinese and was the Netherlands Chargé d'affaires ad interim in Beijing (1966–68). Some of his publications are: *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence* (1965), *Report from Peking* (1971) and, with Elrud Ibsch, *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1978, 1995) and *Knowledge and Commitment: A Problem-Oriented Approach to Literary Studies* (2000). Several of his books have appeared in Chinese translation.

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