The Closing of the Confucian Perspective in China

By

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To see the cultural not as the source of conflict—different cultures—but as the effect of discriminatory practices—the production of cultural differentiation as signs of authority—changes its value and its rules of recognition.

— Homi Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders”

Whatever Chinese term was used in the twentieth century to label what is broadly called “Confucianism” in English, whether Kongjiao, Ruxue, or anything else, it must be kept in mind that any such designation represents a substantial diminution of a larger discursive field that had existed in China prior to the end of the nineteenth century. As Benjamin Schwartz noted long ago, even the reform generation of Chinese thinkers who lived immediately before the New Culture movements of the late 1910s, “trained in the classical texts, . . . lived sufficiently within the Chinese cultural tradition to see it not as a monolithic entity, but as offering alternatives, conflicts and possibilities that left room for the integration of new ideas.” One of the definitive moments of “modernity”—the narrowing of the view of the intellectual world of traditional China on the part of the new group of Chinese intellectuals that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century—had everything to do with the redefinition of Confucianism that took place at the same time. This chapter attempts to trace out a few of the ways in which intellectual developments in China between 1895 and 1919 shaped a discourse on Confucianism that differed significantly from what had existed prior to that time.

I would by no means try to deny the existence of a substantial body of doctrine and practices that existed prior to 1895 and that educated people quite self-consciously regarded as Confucian. I do wish to make evident, however, some of the ways in which this rubric was significantly transformed by the onrushing events and ideas that affected China in the years after its war with Japan [1894-1895]. Responses to ideas found in the West were inescapably part of this transformation, as were reactions to the wave after wave of political crises that washed over China in the new century. In the end, it must be concluded that the Confucianism we talk of at the start of the twenty-first century is a different entity than anything that could have existed before this time. It has been colored in a number of critical ways by discussions that had reached a particular set of definitions in the discourse leading up to and surrounding the events of May Fourth 1919.

Confucianism as the Unmarked Case

In pre-1895 China the field dominated by the disposition to take Confucian texts as foundational was not limited to discussion of the practices associated with political orthodoxy and the canonical texts established by administrative and popular usage. In many ways, it served as the scaffold for intellectual life in general. Some sense of the world of Chinese learning in the late imperial period can be gleaned from the entry on Matteo Ricci’s Tianzhu shiyi (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven) in the Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao (Synopsis of the Titles in the Complete Collection of the Four Treasures), the classified guide to a comprehensive collection of Chinese books put together in the 1770s. After first giving the themes of the book’s eight chapters, the entry ventures a few comparative comments:
Chinese learning here stands as the unmarked case, with Rujiao implicitly forming the major portion of it. Ricci is seemingly significantly more concerned to identify a specifically Confucian set of attributes as its core than is the Chinese commentator. Christianity (and Buddhism) are presented as being undeniably different from Chinese thought, but the only difference of real note concerns the curious notion of life after death. The author of the entry seems struck with an idea presumably so odd that he assumes that Christianity and Buddhism must spring from common roots in order to have key doctrines that are at once so eccentric and so similar to one another. Above all, however, the brief passage demonstrates a ready capacity to taxonomize Western learning. It can seemingly be rendered transparent in most crucial respects, and the basis of that understanding consists of an easy ability to recognize its constituent elements within the indigenous range of learning, in this case with reference to a well-known Buddhist idea.

During the years after the wars with England and France in the middle of the nineteenth century, however, it became clear that Western ideas were more than just theoretical oddities. Reformers of all stripes were thus faced with a more urgent sense of trying to fit those ideas actively within contemporary schemes of learning. The question of whether these Western ideas could continue to be taxonomized within the prevailing structure of knowledge became acute. Between the 1860s and 1890s, the so-called yangwu thinkers (students of foreign learning) were able to finesse this issue by claiming ultimate Chinese origins for the Western ideas that seemed most essential to the revitalization of state and society. By locating references to ostensibly proto-scientific notions, as well as alternative ideas of social organization in pre-Han texts, the yangwu school was able actually to widen the theoretical scope of Chinese learning. This taxonomy had the added advantage of fitting within the paradigm of mainstream learning in the Qing: by claiming to discover forgotten wisdom in the pre-Qin period these thinkers were able to maintain the system of Han Learning archaism, merely pushing it back a few additional decades. Moreover, by stipulating that the process by which this knowledge was lost was part of the general decline from the wisdom of the ancients, yangwu scholars fit into the entire scheme of post-Song dynasty notions of the course of history, and the emphasis on renewal (xin) in late Qing writing harmonized with even the orthodox Lixue of the Zhu Xi school.

In a characteristic analysis of the problem presented by Western dynamism, the prominent reform statesman Chen Chi (d. 1899) broke it down to an historical issue of theory and practice well within the parameters of mainstream learning:

The realm (tianxia) originated long ago, and, order and chaos have alternated ever since. Chaos reached an extreme during the Warring States period [403-221 B.C.E.]; this was carried on by the Qin [221-207 B.C.E.]. Heaven was at a loss as to what to do. So, in order to pattern people’s minds and achieve the heavenly dao, it gave birth to Confucius. But preserving the dao requires implementation (qi), and these means of implementation cannot be so dispersed such that there becomes no place to maintain [the dao]. The Qin administration was fiercely cruel, so China had no place for [the implementations], and the people and rulers of the Roman empire thereupon arose to fill the gap. Their declarations about the cultural artifacts (wenwu) that inspired them always [have it] that they came from East to West. Thus they had [only] the implementations to model themselves upon, so that although all their techniques became highly refined, they had no dao to hold them all together. There was, therefore, no century [in the West] that did not witness chaos. [These implementations], which
have been separated from us by an alien regime for over two thousand years, are now about to be brought back to China.

The rhetoric of decline here is in the familiar Neo-Confucian mode. The almost utopian emphasis on imminent renewal, however, perhaps speaks to an underlying anxiety as to whether the fit between the Chinese system and these new ideas can be worked out as smoothly as Chen would wish his readers to believe.

As late as the turn of the century, there was a sense of a variety of intellectual practices being regarded as parts of a widely ranging repertoire of ideas quite distinct from one another, but all comfortably within the range of orthodox practice. Within a very few years after 1895, however, this range of ideas would come to be lumped together as merely parts of a stifling Confucian tradition. Liang Qichao’s 1901 account of his own Bildung, or experience of intellectual development, Sanshi zishu (Autobiography at Thirty), provides eloquent testimony to this earlier intellectual diversity. Liang begins his short saga by recounting how at 12 sui [Chinese years] he entered a preparatory academy near his home, where he
daily worked at examination prose (tiegua), and although I was not satisfied with it, I did not realize that there was anything on earth other than examination prose that could be called learning. So I immersed myself in it. But I still loved belles lettres (cizhang), and my grandfather and my parents gave me Tang poetry from time to time, which delighted me far more than did bagu [i.e., essays in the examination style]... At 13 sui, I first learned of the philology of Duan [Yucai] and Wang [Niansun]. I liked it very much, and gradually developed the ambition to cast aside examination-style prose.... [At age 15 sui, I took up my studies at the Xuehai tang in the provincial capital, an institution founded by former Viceroy Ruan Yuan (1764-1849) in the Jiaqing period (1796-1820) in order to train the Cantonese in philology and belles lettres. At this time, I decided to give up examination prose in favor of these pursuits, and I came to the realization that aside from philology and belles lettres there was nothing on earth that could be called learning.

In the autumn of 1890 (and by now a prodigious eighteen-year-old juren [scholar]), after returning from an unsuccessful attempt at the jinsht [highest] degree in Beijing, he returned to Canton, and was told by his classmate at the Xuehai tang, Chen Qianqiu, of the political activity and of the novel ideas of the activist scholar Kang Youwei. Upon first going to see him, the two younger men stayed the whole day, and Liang describes the experience as being like
cold water poured on my back, or like a direct blow to the head: in one moment the entire structure of my old [learning] (gulei & A) was gone, and I was at a loss as to what I was doing. I was elated and amazed, repentant and contrite, full of doubts and fears. That night, I shared a room with [Chen Qianqiu] and neither of us could sleep the whole night through. We went again to visit the next day, and asked for scholarly guidance, and the teacher [i.e., Kang] taught us of the Xinxue (Learning of the Mind and Heart) of Lu [Jiuyuan] and Wang [Yangming], as well as touching upon the basics of history and Western learning. From this time on, I determined to cast aside the old learning, so of course I withdrew from the Xuehai tang and the next day sought to continue my studies with Mr. Nanhai [i.e., Kang Youwei]. What I know of learning in my life began from that moment.

It is not particularly remarkable for a young Chinese to register such oscillations of scholarly orientation in a tumultuous period like the 1890s. From a post-1919 perspective, however, it is extraordinary that such an account of intellectual peregrination can represent the new learning from the West as only a small part of the knowledge that he eventually came to take as definitive, much subsidiary to Lu-Wang Xinxue. While one suspects that the advent of Western learning actually represents a much larger part of his transformation than Liang allows here, the fact that as late as 1901 he is able to portray an almost purely domestic intellectual world marked by substantial variety and scope is significant. If the West understandably occupies a larger presence in the scheme of things than in the days of the compilation of the Four Treasuries collection, Liang is still able to represent it with apparent conviction as being just a minor byway of one scholarly avenue among a number of others.
That being said, however, there is a clear sense of desperation between the lines of Liang’s writing that is utterly absent in the description of Ricci’s book from the Qianlong period. While he makes heroic efforts to contain it, there is a tenacious restlessness inscribed within the description of Liang’s intellectual movements—when exposed to new ideas, he not once but twice avers that he only now has come to know the true meaning of learning. One of the major complications of intellectual life by the time Liang began writing was that, led by Yan Fu, respectable scholars had suddenly come to abandon the theory of ultimate Chinese origins that had rendered the pursuit of Western learning intellectually safe for the previous generation. One could argue, in fact, that it is Liang’s very efforts to downplay the importance of Western learning that most clearly reveals its corrosive power. If he is no longer able to comfortably locate the position of Western learning within a familiar terrain, what are the practical options open to him for its final disposition?

Even as Liang in this essay is revealing the diverse expanse of various Confucian discourses in the late imperial era, other scholars of the period are purposefully attempting to set up sharp contrasts between Chinese and Western learning. Given the pressures exerted by the Western presence on the China coast, the powerful need at this time to create a manageable distinction between China and the West can be understood as, among other things, a way to account for relative Chinese political and economic decline. But even more important was the need to provide an instrumental means to effect change in China. Thus Yan Fu in 1895 goes to great lengths to create two distinct discursive universes demarcated as China and West, but it is interesting that in the seminal essays of that year, China is never equated with any simple notion that can be translated as “Confucianism.” Instead, we have China described as a set of historically based practices that emerge from a dialogue between the “Sages” and rulers of the enduring empire that followed. In a rather traditional fashion, the rulers are blamed, whereas when the ideals of the sages are brought up at all, it is with a positive connotation. The split attitudes in Yan’s early writings between continued respect for the intellectual contributions of the foundational figures of the Chinese tradition on the one hand and the blame he places on those who eventually came to (mal)administer the empire on the other is striking. It is also an intellectual frame of mind that at once hearkens back to Ming-Qing political writing and is to be mirrored in the political thinking of many thinkers in early twentieth-century China, including the early thought of Chen Duxiu.

This discourse clearly led in the direction of increased notions of essential difference between China and the West, as Liang Qichao himself makes clear in his Xin min shuo, written only a year after his autobiography. In this text, Liang develops the distinction between gong and si, first raised by Yan Fu in 1895 as merely one dyad in a long list of binary distinctions, into a fundamental marker of difference between China and the West:

It cannot be said that our nation was not early in developing morality. Although this is true, we have developed private morality (si de) and lacked in public morality (gong de). If one looks at works such as the Confucian Analects and Mencius—all toscins to our people and the sources of morality—nine out of ten moral teachings are private morality, with fewer than one in ten devoted to public morality.

After citing a number of examples of how this is true, Liang goes on to specify the differing national contexts of private and public:

Because of [these teachings represented in the examples], one cannot compare the old Chinese ethics with the new Western ethics. The categories of the old ethics are: ruler-minister, father-son, older brother-younger brother, husband-wife, and friend-friend. The categories of the new ethics are: family ethics, social ethics, and national ethics. What the old ethics emphasize are matters between one private person and another, but the new ethics emphasize matters between one private person and the group. [emphasis added]
Of course, both of these terms had a long history within Chinese political and ethical discourse, with *gong* the clearly valorized term. The new spatial distribution of the term, however, demonstrates the extent to which this differentiating between China and the West imposed new and severe limitations on the width of the indigenous discursive ground. Significantly, this narrowed ground has become the locus of all that is undesirable for the devoutly wished new social and intellectual order.

**The Reform Era**

In the years between 1898 and 1911, all parties, including a previously recalcitrant court, came to recognize the pressing need for fundamental reform. Traditional ideologies, however, continued to play the major role in developing the theoretical basis for any modifications that came to be recommended. Conventionally, historians have broken down those who advocated change into two groups, the reformers and the revolutionaries. The former, best represented by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, sought change within a constitutional monarchy guided by what they somewhat ostentatiously regarded as original Confucian precepts, cleansed of the pollution imposed by later thinkers. The latter, perhaps most articulately represented by Zhang Binglin, sought to overthrow the old system and the ideas that supported it. On the surface, the diagnosis of the flaws of contemporary ideology set forth by each party seems diametrically opposed. For their part, Kang and Liang envisioned the problems as stemming from the fact that the fundamental ideas of Confucius had been lost in the welter of competing ideas that arose after Xunzi had instituted an overly intellectualized and less practical version of the sagely teachings. Zhang, on the other hand, regarded the problem as resulting from an overly accommodating ideology, in which divergent ideas were all too readily submerged in doctrinal syncretism. As a result, for Zhang Chinese thought became excessively diffuse (*hanman*), lacking in necessary distinctions and with too much compromise among what should have been regarded as different ideas. From one perspective, the reformers are lamenting a lack of intellectual unity, while Zhang seems to see too much unity as the problem. From another perspective, however, both are bothered by a lack of focus in the Chinese intellectual tradition. Kang and Liang simply would locate the desired focus within a renewed devotion to the true doctrines of Confucius. Zhang, on the other hand, expresses his preference for the vibrancy of a number of clearly defined systems of thought in unmistakable competition with one another, something he sees as having been embodied in the intellectual life of the Warring States period.

The reformers’ wish for ideological unity can be most concretely detected in Kang’s advocacy of Confucianism as the state religion. And as Shimada Kenji has noted in regard to this project of Kang’s, “there is no doubt that Kang’s starting point with regard to the principles of a Confucian religion lay in the role played by religion (namely, Christianity) in the formation of the wealthy and powerful nations of Europe.” Zhang Binglin had already discerned this early on, writing in 1913: “Seeing how the teachings of Jesus and Martin Luther gradually spread to our country, they [i.e., Kang and his party] are trying to resist it by establishing a ‘Confucian religion.’” Even setting aside the fact that Zhang himself had called for the establishment of a national religion, it is hard to avoid the impression that Zhang’s wish for principled intellectual contention among opposing ideas was largely inspired by the Social Darwinism that had swept Chinese learned circles since Yan Fu had introduced it in 1896. Both sides in this debate, then, are being pushed by a sense of need to reformulate Chinese intellectual life in order to meet the challenge of the discursive power of Western ideas. Along with this sense of a powerful Other came a concomitant need to construct an essential identity for China, whether as a means of resistance to the intruder, or as a convenient means of classifying and containing indigenous weakness. Given the preeminent position of ideologies specifically invoking Confucius and his ideas in imperial China, it is hard to imagine any thinker working from any other rallying point, whether affirmative or negative.

It was thus probably inevitable that the abridged Chinese portion of these carefully demarcated cultural differences came eventually to be regarded as coterminous with a new and truncated notion of “Confucianism.” As such, Confucianism became the site where negotiation between powerful Western ideas of social organization and perceived resistance to those ideas was played out. Confucianism was, as a consequence, eventually overdetermined by such modern
discourses as nationalism, democracy, scientism, Social Darwinism, and Marxism, which end up at least partially defining it as the indigenous system of thought that lacked the characteristics of the modern that these other ideologies shared. The gap between the term itself and the comprehensive range of self-consciously “modern” entities that now make up the Other of Confucianism became a location of anxiety. The new distance between Confucianism and practical knowledge that is revealed in the writings of reformers of all stripes points to the rhetoric behind the redefined term as a principal site of the epistemological crisis that has gripped China over the course of the last century.

The political uses to which various definitions of Confucianism had been put after 1890 were numerous and contradictory. In the end it was probably inevitable that the monarchists made the most unequivocal claim to the legacy and deployed it as a prop to a dynasty in serious decline. Kang Youwei’s efforts to have Confucianism declared the national religion had contributed much to the augmentation of the personal authority of Confucius, the “Uncrowned king” (suwang). It thus comes as no surprise that “the first two of the five new educational principles proclaimed in 1906 by the Empress Dowager were ‘loyalty to the emperor’ and ‘reverence for Confucius.’ At the same time Confucius was promoted to enjoy the highest sacrificial rites, the ‘Great Sacrifice,’ hitherto reserved for Sage Emperors.” As a consequence, serious opposition to the institutions of Confucianism became embedded in the thinking of the revolutionaries who overthrew the Manchu government in 1911. As Chow Tse-tsung suggests, however, the objections were less a matter of principled ideological resistance than a part of a struggle to dismantle the institutions of the old regime after the revolution took power in 1912.

Yuan Shikai’s full support for attempts to restore the prestige of Confucianism in the wake of the iconoclastic reforms of early 1912 can similarly be understood as integral to his efforts to increase his own power. In the words of Tang Baolin,

After the failure of the 1911 revolution, under the pressure of the restorationism of Yuan Shikai, the tide of cultural reform was “cut off.” To begin with, in order to coordinate with the restorationist movements of Yuan Shikai and Zhang Xun, the feudalistic thought of Confucius and Mencius was raised to a pinnacle. Beginning in the second half of 1912, societies for Confucianism (Kongjiao hui) and for the Confucian Way (Kongdao hui) were set up all over the country. . . . In October of 1913, the “constitution” of the Yuan Shikai government formally established that “The education of the National Citizen (guomin) will take the way of Confucius as the basis for self-cultivation.” In November it further formally promulgated the order mandating the veneration and offering of sacrifices to Confucius. In 1914, the Yuan government also mandated that “All schools shall worship (chongfeng) the ancient sages and take them as [moral] models. They should also venerate Confucius and Mencius, upholding this as the foundation for practical life,” and “All primary and secondary schools shall add a course in studying the classics.” This move abolished the reform measure instituted by the Sun Yat-sen-led Nanjing Provisional Government in 1912 that stipulated “all primary schools shall eliminate courses on studying the classics.”

The Rise of Iconoclasm

Yuan’s efforts to bolster his political position by calling upon traditionalistic supports elicited significant opposition. Given his effective monitoring and censorship of the press, even in the semiprotected zones of the Shanghai concessions, any opposition at first had great difficulty manifesting itself directly. By September of 1915, however, Chen Duxiu’s new Shanghai magazine, Qingnian zazhi (Youth Magazine; later renamed Xin qingnian, New Youth), had begun to voice notes of protest. Given the imperative for indirection, however, the locus of discussion came to rest on issues with cultural comparison between China and the West. This was hardly a new area of discussion, but the single-mindedness of the new journal’s critique of the legacy of the indigenous past reached unprecedented levels from the very beginning. The more general motivation for this renewed activity was, once again, a sense of cultural crisis, centering
on the question of China's disadvantaged position in the world, a question that had been on the intellectual agenda for quite a long time.

The debate that developed around this question focused on the issue of the nature of the differences between China and the West. If China's problems could be defined as only a slightly different species of a genus of general questions affecting humanity as a whole and the modern world in particular, then solutions to them could be found by looking at ideas from both China and the West. If, on the other hand, China's problems turned out to be the result of uniquely disadvantageous historical circumstances, and completely inseparable from them, then the only alternative to suffocation was a "totalistic iconoclasm." The latter perspective virtually required the substitution of a wholly new panoply of ideals and values for the old. Practically speaking, "new" meant the ideas that had animated the modern history of the progressive West, which had achieved such material success in recent centuries. Given the severity of the political crisis, which extended even to the question of the how to reconstitute an effective central state, some choice between these two alternatives seems to have been unavoidable to any profound reexamination of the political options available to China. In turn, the perceptions both of what Confucianism had been and what it had meant for China became inextricably caught up in this dilemma of how to conceive the adaptability of the Chinese historical tradition.

It should also be noted that the inevitable instrumentality of the choice here could not help but shape the very way in which contemporary thinkers perceived the differences between China and the West upon which they based their analyses. The old issue of whether ideas were universal property or were products unique to a particular culture was to surface again, with even more resonance and staying power this time around. This was a question around which the cultural crisis had long revolved, and that had proved so vexing to all prior would-be reformers, from the yangwu theorists after the 1860s to Yan Fu and Liang Qichao after 1895. To the iconoclasts gathered at Qingnian zazhi, however, it was from the beginning an article of faith that China and the West were as profoundly different as it was possible to be. That the Western way was superior was also something that they sought to position in such a way that it could never really be put in question. The only issue for them was how, or even whether, Western ideas could usefully be brought to China.

As the debate over the proper mix between Chinese and Western ideas waxed in the years after 1915, there was a widespread feeling among all the contending parties that the stakes were now much higher than they ever had been before. If in the past the continued existence of the Qing government had lent discussions of reform and revolution a certain abstract quality, the continued decline of the political situation even after the departure of the Manchus disabused anyone that there were any easy solutions to be had. Moreover, the unifying spectacle of former leaders of the anti-Qing revolution now having joined the antirepublican camp of Yuan Shikai combined with the sense that perhaps only by including new groups in the political process could there be any progress were both factors that hardened radical resolve. At the same time, the beginning of the catastrophic European war, the consequent rapid economic growth in urban China, and the accompanying expansion of a cosmopolitan elite with a vastly more sophisticated knowledge of the West and its ideas had consolidated a new a body of opinion-makers. This group, based primarily in Shanghai (at least prior to the reorganization of Peking University under the new administration of Cai Yuanpei in 1916), could much more confidently deal equally with Chinese and Western issues on the same intellectual horizon. For instance, the pages of the magazines of political opinion, such as Dong'fang zazhi (The Eastern Miscellany) and Jiayin (Tiger Monthly) dating from the years prior to 1916 bear witness to a profound ability of the various contributors to negotiate with both indigenous and foreign concepts.

It is significant that in his first contribution to his new journal Chen Duxiu—perhaps merely from force of habit—allowed Chinese historical precedent and ideas to be part of his recommendations for reform: "Alas! The iron steeds of the Europeans have entered into your house; even if you wanted to sleep soundly in the clouds, where could you now find the place? I would prefer that youth act the roles of Confucius or of Mozi rather than those of the [hermits] Chao[fu] and [Xu] You. And: "In respect to matters of popular welfare (liyong housheng) [itself a key term in traditional political economy, originating in the Documents Classic], esteem for
practicality and disdain for the insubstantial had been characteristic of the ancient people in our
country,” although Chen hastens to add that the Zhou and Han dynasties had installed the system
of empty invocation of Confucius as model and the appeal to the original roots of popular culture
prior to contamination by later despotisms are both virtual clichés of post-Song political writing.
Chen’s resort to them in a hortatory essay otherwise intent upon an iconoclastic denunciation of
Chinese cultural practice reflects, at least, an old habit of thinking of domestic instances as part of
a universal repertoire of ideas.

In another article published in the same issue of the new journal, however, Chen begins to
demarcate a much stricter sense of division of China and the West, one that would render any such
easy invocation of indigenous ideas much harder to contemplate thereafter. After beginning with the
assertion that “civilization” (wenming) has a common source and meaning in all ancient societies,
he goes on to say that for modern (jīnshì) civilization, however,

East and West must be distinguished as two completely different entities. India
and China represent Eastern civilization. Although these two civilizations do not
lack for differences, in the main they are similar, in that they are essentially
unable to depart from the set patterns of ancient civilization. Even though we
might call them “modern,” in fact they are still the remnants of ancient times.
That which can be labeled modern civilization is the sole possession of the
Europeans, and is thus Western civilization, or it can also be called European
civilization.

In Chen’s famous essay “1916,” published in the first issue of the journal for that year, he added a
temporal boundary to the spatial barrier. As part of this process, Chen significantly augmented the
rhetoric of cultural difference with a bit of racial rhetoric that was mostly alien from Yan Fu and
Liang Qichao’s statements of cultural difference of almost twenty years before:

Let us create the most substantial of boundaries between 1915 and 1916: We
shall regard everything from the founding of our nation until 1915 as ancient
history; let all things from the past perish as of 1916, and everything hereafter
begin with 1916. We should first exert new energy (xinsue) in order to have new
character, a new country, a new society, a new family, a new nation (minzu).
Once we have this new nation, then we will begin to live up to our vows as
humans (chang yuan), we will begin to have enough value to interact with the
white race (yu xiu zhouxuan zhi jiazhi), and we will begin to have the
qualifications to inhabit this piece of land we live upon.

Chen’s efforts in these essays to distinguish Chinese and Western cultures as distinctly as possible
come through plainly here, as does his attempt to render the differences as defining essences. When
he comes to give political specificity to these essential differences, it is perhaps only natural that
he creates a notion of Chinese culture that overlaps significantly with characteristics that had come
to be associated with “Confucianism.” In his “The basic differences between the thought of the
Eastern and Western peoples” (“Dong Xi minzu genben sixiang zhii chayi”) (December 1915), for
instance, Chen sets up “The Western peoples take war as their standard (benwei); The Eastern
peoples take peaceableness (anxi) as their standard” as his first category of cultural difference. He
begins the narrative following the subhead by saying “The Confucians (ruzhe) do not value
contention, so how much less would they value war?”

While Chen allows that the high value accorded war in the West has left a bloody legacy, the
power of his binary thinking nonetheless creates a series of highly invidious distinctions between
China and the West, with China inevitably placed in the subordinate position. For instance, while
acknowledging the extent to which the “Eastern peoples” regard the West as violently arrogant, he
adds that
were [they, i.e., “the Eastern peoples”] able to resemble [the Westerners] even a little, would the peace-loving, peaceable, poised and elegant inferior (liedeng) peoples of the East have become the conquered people they are today?

The Western peoples detest humiliation and would rather fight to the death. The Eastern peoples detest fighting to the death and would rather endure humiliation. What sort of face must a people of this base and shameless nature possess to still talk in lofty terms of the civilization of propriety and decorum (lijiao) and not feel intense shame?

That the series of epithets of praise of the East is immediately followed by the modifier “inferior” demonstrates the extent to which Chen seeks to devalue even the terms in which one might seek to manifest some merit in the traditional Chinese order of things. The subsequent subsumption of all these pacific tendencies under the category of ru is a good indicator of the burden of ignominy that Confucianism will increasingly be forced to bear during the high tide of the New Culture movement between 1917 and 1919. The growing number of articles focusing on Confucianism in the early numbers of Qingnian zazhi and Xin qingnian fairly indicate the extent to which the sins of the ru had now become the scapegoat for all China’s backwardness.

The encompassing concept of Confucianism that Chen contributes to in such writings became saddled with the responsibility for these defects and many more. Paradoxically, however, Confucianism as a category became both narrower and broader than any prior idea adduced under the heading of ru. On the one hand, it had to answer for an entire legacy of systemic rejection of the aggressive qualities that allowed culture to survive in a Social-Darwinian world. On the other hand, it became the repository of only those values and ideas that could be identified with this series of insufficiencies. Any countervailing tendencies apparent within the Chinese tradition either had to be written off as belonging to the schools that Confucianism pushed aside when it was made the orthodoxy in the former Han, or had even more simply to be written off as epiphenomenal and of no consequence. The very process of giving the term “Confucian” a clearer range of meaning also trapped it into answering for qualities

Chen Duxiu was, needless to say, not the only voice in the public realm in this period. In fact, in the early months of Qingnian zazhi it would be hard to argue that his voice had much resonance at all. Writing at the same time was, for instance, Huang Yuanyong (1885-1915), who published under the name of “Yuansheng” Huang, who received the jinshi at the age of nineteen, passed the final examination ever given for that degree, in 1904. He later became probably the leading journalist of the early republican period, serving as (among other positions) the Beijing correspondent of the Shanghai Shenbao as well as for its arch-competitor, the Shibao. Implicated—with little doubt unjustly—in Yuan Shikai’s effort to declare himself emperor, Huang was assassinated in San Francisco on December 27, 1915, probably by an overly zealous supporter of the republican cause. Huang wrote a series of essays after he departed from China in the fall of 1915, which were subsequently published posthumously in Dongfang zazhi, probably the most important magazine in Shanghai (and thus in all of China) at the time. The magazine had been since its founding in 1904 the principal periodical of the Commercial Press, the largest and most important publishing house in the country. In these writings, Huang focuses on the dire straits in which China was mired in a way that sounds many of the same pessimistic notes as Chen Duxiu. The difference between them lies in the fact that Huang’s discussion is more carefully constructed upon a clear underlying theme of human similarity and a sense of the transparency of cultural communication. By avoiding the temptation to create a simple China/West binary, Huang can also avoid creating a concept of Confucianism that takes upon itself all the negative traits of China’s long history.

An example of the difference between Chen's essentializing cultural difference and Huang’s perception of problems resulting from common human traits can be found in an essay of Huang’s published in Dongfang zazhi in February of 1916. In this piece, entitled “Reflections” (“Xiang ying lu”) he writes about the general malaise of the modern even as he anatomizes China’s particular problems. He situates China’s difficulties as part of a common modern problematic:

Now, the people of the civilized countries are also suffering from the vexations and disunity of [contemporary] intellectual life. Because of the omnipotence of
science, religion and philosophy have become mere appendages to it, and, so the
[latter two] are not able to reach their fulfillment (dacheng zhi yu). As for the
functions of science, it would seem to be more than sufficient for manufacturing
(zhiqi), but it is not up to promoting morality and nurturing character. It is for
just these reasons that the more advanced production becomes, and the greater the
power of machines, the more difficult life becomes. The stimulation of the
nervous system is even greater for them [i.e., in the “civilized” countries] than it is
for us. At this point, we have become neither new nor old, neither Chinese
nor Western. Our old grain is exhausted and the new not yet ready for harvest,
just as is the case with them. And what causes particular pain for us is the
predicament of the nation, which is more extreme for us than it is for them.
From the standpoint of a wise man, however, the sense of the experience of life
and the anxieties produced are the same [for us as for them].

Huang does not simplistically equate China and the West here, nor does he demarcate them as two
completely different realms, the one of nature and spirit and the other of science, as Liang Qichao
and Liang Shuming were to do with so much fanfare a few years later. Instead, while not ignoring
the clear differences, the consequences of modernity are subsumed under a sense of general human
crisis, which is described as achieving the same effect on the individual subject whether in China or
in, the West. What allows Huang this uninflected use of the term “modernity” is the underlying
assumption in his discourse that the hurly-burly, of modernity has rendered the “civilized” nations
no better (or no worse) off than poor China, at least in respect of the affective life of their citizens.

Huang’s untimely death renders fruitless any speculation about the part he would have played
in the debates that attended upon the growth of the New Culture movement in the years after 1915.
There is, however, impressive evidence suggesting the role Chen Duxiu’s sharp binary division
between China and the West was to play in the cultural debates that followed upon the inauguration
of New Youth. Du Yaquan (1873-1933), editor of Dongfang zazhi between 1912 and 1920 (and,
perhaps not so incidentally, a pioneer of scientific education both in Shanghai and his native
Shaoxing), took on the major burden of cultural theorizing for the journal after Huang’s
assassination. It is noteworthy that Dongfang zazhi had published very little cultural theorizing of
this sort in the years immediately preceding 1916. Du had written extensively for the magazine as a
political commentator prior to this time. Nonetheless, the scope of Huang’s theorizing caused him
to feel a bit uncomfortable in taking up where Huang left off, something Du acknowledges when he
professes some justifiable modesty in facing up to the obligation to continue the work that Huang
had so brilliantly begun. In an article published in the April 1916 number of the journal, Du makes
clear his debt to Huang in the title he chooses for the piece: “More Remarks on the Clash between
New and Old Thought” (“Zai lun xinjü sixiang zhi chongru”). (Huang’s first article in his series,
published in January 1916, had been entitled “On the Clash between the New and the Old
Thought.”) Like Huang, Du is at pains to advance the notion that differences customarily assumed
be of a fundamental nature between China and the West are actually only “questions of
degree”(chengdu wenti). The reasoning he advances for this position, however, seems to be rooted
in a more embedded sense of the particular natures of the two traditions than had been the case with
Huang:

To say that the intellectual clashes among our people are the result of the
[overarching] clash between Eastern and Western thought is particularly
erroneous.... How can what we refer to as the new thought in China ever depart
from the legacy of traditional Eastern thought? And how can what we refer to as
the old thought ever remain completely stuck in the patterns of traditional
Eastern thought and completely reject that of the West?

While Du, like Huang, certainly assumes the inevitability of hybridity here, the core of
his argument seems tilted a bit more than Huang’s toward assumptions about the
fixedness of particular human characteristics that have evolved through historical
difference. Thus while he finds the evils of selfish desire (liyu) and personal will (yiqi) to
be universal causes of political disruption, he finds these problems to have been uniquely
deleterious to China. Du’s sense of the particularity of China’s problems overtly recalls
the theories or human nature originally advanced by Song dynasty Confucian thinkers, as well as the extensive debate about renyu (“human desire”) that had been carried on throughout the Qing dynasty. In this sense, one might parenthetically note, his remarks earlier in the article about how all thinkers in modern China, reformist and conservative alike, were inevitably beholden to traditional values rings true at least in his own essay.

In October of 1916, however, Du published a landmark article in Donfang zazhi that marked a significant departure from what had come before in that journal. Entitled “The Quiet Civilization and the Active Civilization” (“Jingde wenming yu dongde wenming”), the essay stakes out a fundamental reversal for Du from his earlier position: in the first paragraph Du proclaims that “as far as my opinion concerning Western civilization and our traditional civilization is concerned, the difference is a matter of quality (xingzhi) and not one of degree” [emphasis added]. In setting out his reasons for this abrupt switch of opinion, Du announces a number of themes that were to resonate greatly in the years to come:

In recent years, the emulation of Western civilization on the part of our people has known no limits. From the great questions of military and state to the minutiae of daily life, there has been no area in which we do not imitate the West. And as for our own traditional civilization, we have paid no attention to it. Ever since the beginning of the European war, however, the assorted Western nations have used the efficient instruments that were invented because of their science to slaughter their fellow beings. The dimensions of this tragedy are not only unprecedented in our own history, but in world history in general. For my part, I thus cannot help but entertain doubts about the Western civilization that I had once held in such high regard. As for those in our country who imitate Western culture, I will no longer be able to credit their expressions of faith in [Western] morality and its other achievements (gongye).

It is noteworthy that Du begins his essay by expressing his frustration with the automatic emulation of the West that had become the very calling card of Chen Duxiu’s new journal. Even more worthy of attention is the way in which the evaluation of the Western qualities that Chen had deemed so worthy of praise and emulation has been turned on its head: qualities defined by Chen as necessary to national survival have now suddenly come to be seen by Du as simply negative and inhumane. In other words, although Du has placed himself in diametric opposition to Chen, he has based his new position on precisely the same binary view of the irreconcilable difference between China and the West that informs Chen’s iconoclasm. Du accepts Chen’s premises even as he rejects his conclusions. Chen’s stark binary thus seems to have become the discursive order of the day, even among those who are trying to salvage some value for Chinese culture. In a recent article Wang Yuanhua suggests that Du’s thesis in this article formed the basis for the idea of Chinese spirituality vs. Western materialism developed a few year later by Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming. If this is the case, then the influence of Chen Duxiu’s iconoclastic cultural binarism on the new Confucianism that grows up after 1920 may well have been decisive to the development of the latter persuasion. As had been true of Kang Youwei’s religious Confucianism, the post-1919 notion of Confucian spiritualism is, perhaps, fundamentally reactive. In this case, however, the reaction is not so much to foreign ideas per se, but to the methods by which the radicals of the New Culture movement sought to justify their introduction into China.

It is more than a little ironic that neither of these sets of ideas is at all new by 1915-16. Chen’s notion of a radical difference between the order of things in China and the West, and the admission of Western superiority implicit therein, can be traced back twenty years before, to Yan Fu’s powerful essays of early 1895. Du’s vision of Chinese spirituality is even older, in fact having formed the backbone of the thinking of the late nineteenth-century conservative theorists who wrote in resistance to the first initiatives of the yangwu movement to advocate the serious study of Western ideas and techniques. One need only read over the Manchu Grand Secretary Woren’s oft-cited response to Prince Gong’s 1866-67 proposal to introduce a science course into the curriculum of the Zongli yamen’s (the new organ of the Qing government in charge of foreign
I have heard that establishing a country rests on valuing propriety and righteousness, not on schemes and stratagems. Efforts toward establishing the fundamentals lie in people’s hearts and minds, not in skills and crafts. Now, however, for the sake of trivial crafts, we will honor barbarians as our teachers. Even if the cunning barbarians—who may very well not transmit their most essential proficiencies—do teach sincerely, and even if the students also study sincerely, the net gain will merely be a few technicians. From ancient times until now, I have never heard that reliance upon technical skills can raise [a country] out of weakness.

The question immediately arises as to why these ideas and the conflict they spawned became so thoroughly entrenched in Chinese intellectual life only by the 1910s. It is probably impossible to adduce a definitive answer to this question. One can only suggest that there was a combination of factors at work. These included the growth of the Shanghai media and the new wealth underpinning it, the horrible negative side of technical progress made inescapably apparent by the mass slaughters on the Western front in Europe after 1915, the reform of Peking University and the consequent gathering of a critical mass of reform-minded intellectuals in that city, and the coming of age of a new generation more comfortable in working with both Western and Chinese intellectual traditions. The extent to which the new Confucian conservatism developed its characteristic voice as a reaction against a newly mobilized and starkly uncompromising radical voice is, however, striking. One is tempted to think that intellectual life as it actually developed was somehow inevitable, and, indeed, given the pressures of nationalism, it is rather hard to imagine how things might have been otherwise. To think briefly about the course outlined by Huang Yuanyong, however, allows one to imagine an alternative arena in which Confucian ideas are dealt with on the same plane as those coming from Europe. Perhaps by not having been driven into such a defensive position, and thereby feeling pressed to carve out a space of absolute Confucian uniqueness, would have allowed traditional Chinese thought a less fraught existence in the twentieth century. But the constant pressure applied by the iconoclasts to gain leverage over change by declaring Confucianism obsolete rendered such an alternative next to impossible.