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CHINA'S MULTIPLE REVOLUTIONS

THERE ARE MANY kinds of revolutions in human history: technological, demographic, economic, cultural, ideological, intellectual, political.* They overlap, intertwine and weave in and out of each other. In the course of the last two centuries, Chinese life as experienced by both ordinary and extraordinary people has been through all of these, often more than once, in a fascinating—sometimes terrifying—kaleidoscopic variety. People can and do refer to ‘the’ Chinese revolutions of 1911 and 1949, meaning in the main particular sequences of twentieth-century military and political events, and this is acceptable as shorthand. But perhaps the most effective way to acquire a feeling for these life-changing processes as a whole is to begin, not with the political on its own, or political events over a relatively brief space of time, but with the deeper changes in the imagined but emotionally powerful *stories* in terms of which people understand their lives, as a long-term phenomenon.¹

The number of ‘stories’ in which the Chinese have been, so to speak, ‘living’ in modern times—believing and then disbelieving, preaching and then jettisoning them—has been remarkable. Just to illustrate, not one but *two* very different, elaborately articulated and government-sponsored systems of sacred-text-based, quasi-religious belief have been in effect abandoned by the Chinese in the course of four or five generations: the first was scriptural Confucianism, which ceased reproducing itself around the beginning of the twentieth century, when the imperial civil-service examinations were abolished; the second was the intellectually degraded but emotionally powerful simplification of Marxism by Mao and his think-tank of ideologues—Chen Boda, Ai Siqi—which did not really survive the end of the Cultural Revolution in the later 1970s.

And this is not to mention such short-lived florescences as the faith the Taiping rebels borrowed from the missionaries in the 1850s and early 1860s: 'Christianity with Chinese characteristics', as it might be described, and including toward its end a modernization programme. Or the well-intentioned but intellectually unconvincing attempt at a cult of Sun Yat-sen's thought (*Sanminzhuyi*) in Taiwan a century later. The period also saw parallel national-historical developments: the decline of China, as one of the four great Eurasian empires during the eighteenth century;² and then its mid-nineteenth-century humiliation by Western military forces—though *not*, as is sometimes implied by loose statements about 'imperialism', its general *conquest*, excluding limited foreign occupations of relatively small areas; there was never a foreign Viceroy in Nanjing, in contrast with the one in New Delhi under the British, and I doubt if there ever could have been. Decline has been followed in its turn by China's recent resurgence to be at least a potential future superpower.

This epoch was also the beginning of the gradual but extensive—and still continuing—transfer of most of the West's advanced technological skills into Chinese hands, starting seriously in the 1860s in Shanghai with ships and machinery.³ The chemical fertilizers invented in Germany, following the discoveries of Justus von Liebig (1803–73), were the single most important aspect of this transfer, without which it would have become impossible for China to feed its swelling population of the later twentieth century. It also saw the arrival of modern science, the key transformative factor in the modern world, which had been missing in China before this time—apart from one or two isolated successes, and the marginal though analytically demanding field of reconstructing the ancient and medieval pronunciations of the Chinese

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¹ As Sartre has written, 'a man is always a teller of stories; he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, and he perceives all that happens to him through these stories. And he seeks to live his life as if he were telling a story.' Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (1938), Paris 1958, p. 57.

² See the map 'Competing Imperialisms in Eurasia' in Caroline Blunden and Mark Elvin, *Cultural Atlas of China*, New York 1998, pp. 34–5, showing the growth phases of the Qing-dynasty Chinese, Tsarist Russian, English Indian, and Ottoman territories.

³ For the early part of this process, see Mark Elvin, 'Le transfert des technologies avant la seconde guerre mondiale', *Nouveaux Mondes* 2, Summer 1993.

language.⁴ All of these phenomena were interwoven with politics, to varying degrees; but probably the only indispensable political aspect was the opening of the door to trade and diplomacy with the western world, in the 1840s and 1850s, by the two conventionally but inadequately labelled ‘Opium Wars’.⁵

Some years ago, in *Changing Stories in the Chinese World*, I tried to show, mainly through extracts from five novels directly or indirectly about Chinese society in their period, and some Qing-dynasty poems on everyday life, how dramatically the Chinese experience of living and of understanding the world and its history, had changed since the 1820s.⁶ Let us begin by sketching the socio-political world that we are considering through a summary of what this survey shows. The story is an intricate one.

Warning bells

The first novel is *The Destinies of the Flowers in the Mirror* (*Jinghua yuan*), by Li Ruzhen. Written in the years before 1828, it is a Chinese *Gulliver’s Travels*, full of subtle humour, mocking—with a serious didactic intent beneath the laughter—the many pompous pretensions and foolish beliefs of Qing society, not to mention the self-satisfied inadequacies of too much of its scholarship. It also champions the case for women—and even, at times, the young and the non-Chinese—to be taken as seriously and treated as respectfully as men. At a deeper level it is a richly self-contradictory mix of unflinching belief in both the moral and ritual proprieties of Confucianism—notably, filial obedience and the self-denial of faithful widows—and the Buddhist-Daoist karmic justice of the unending reincarnation of human, animal and even spirit selves. Deeper still, Li Ruzhen holds that there is a predetermined web of causation that is forever largely unknowable to mortals, but ‘the roots

⁴ Mark Elvin, ‘Some Reflections on the Use of “Styles of Scientific Thinking” to Disaggregate and Sharpen Comparisons between China and Europe from Song to Mid-Qing Times, 960–1850 CE’, *History of Technology* 25, 2004.

⁵ Several decades ago I read through items mentioning opium in the *Veritable Records of the Qing* (*Qing shilu*) for the 1830s, and found that, just prior to the first ‘Opium War’, references to the internal problems of the opium trade—China by then being a considerable producer of the drug—well outnumbered references to opium brought in from overseas. The British did not force opium on China, but sold—very profitably—to networks of Chinese dealers already well-established.

⁶ Mark Elvin, *Changing Stories in the Chinese World*, Stanford 1998.

determine the blossoms, just as the magnet is drawn toward the iron'.⁷ The novel has a knowledgeable fascination with technology, including accurate clocks (useful, among other things, for measuring the speed of sound), imagined flying machines, and the details of the engineering needed for the hydraulic control of waterways. It is also haunted by a sense of the gap between the ideal and the actual. China is seen as undoubtedly 'the root of all other countries', but unfortunately a flawed one that needs improvement.⁸ The universe is run by a celestial bureaucracy of lesser gods and spirits under the Lord on High (*shangdi*), but one as much riven with vicious personal rivalries and imperfections as its human counterpart on earth. But, crucially, China was believed to be at the heart of all that mattered, whether in human history or human ideas—a belief that was to be largely in ruins a hundred years later. The loss of this comforting delusion created an agonizing nostalgia for a past which was indeed great—but not uniquely great—that has not, even today, been completely laid to rest.

This was something of an elitist vision. Almost none of the common people could speak for themselves directly in our historical sources. But there were many poets—some of them of modest origins, though, through their sophisticated literacy, real or virtual members of the 'gentry' class—who were acutely aware of the injustices and suffering that poisoned the lives of the poor and the powerless. In *Our Dynasty's Warning Bell of Poesy* (*Guochao shiduo*) of 1859, Zhang Yingchang compiled an anthology of two thousand or so of their often startlingly poignant poems.⁹ The themes covered include droughts, famines, flooding and drowning by high tides and swollen rivers; taxes, conscription, the exactions of local bullies and money-lenders; not to mention landlords demanding rent, backed by threats of local government force, as well as the sale of children and their parents' suicides due to poverty. They told of the back-breaking toil of women, both in textile manufacture and farming—for female work of this latter sort was becoming common in Qing times, in areas under the greatest demographic pressure of a denser population—and of the savage psychological mistreatment by some mothers-in-law of their daughters-in-law. In contrast, but with strong ideological implications, they also depicted the joys of devoted and uncomplaining married women, who rose above their difficulties to

⁷ Li Ruzhen, *Flowers in the Mirror*, Berkeley 1965, ch. 90; henceforth FM.

⁸ FM, ch. 16.

⁹ Reprinted as the *Qing Warning Bell of Poesy* (*Qing shiduo*), 2 vols, Beijing 1960.

become loved and esteemed matriarchs at the end of their lives. These themes are accompanied by a miscellany of other topics: the pampered but submissive existence of girls raised and trained from birth to be sold as expensive secondary wives to the well-to-do; the precarious existence of travelling entertainers, tea-pickers, coal-miners and charcoal-burners, servants, soldiers and prisoners; and, most numerous of all, the seasonal labours and dreams, bitterness, frustrations and transient happinesses of farmers and their wives and children. These paintings in words form an unrolling scroll of otherwise unseen lives, with few if any parallels in other literatures. A warm and sympathetic human feeling runs through most of the poems, alongside open or implied condemnation for those exploiting others,¹⁰ yet there is no awareness that a social, political or ideological *system* might be at least in part to blame for people's sufferings. Understanding that this was perhaps, even probably, the case had potentially revolutionary implications; but it was a change of perspective that began to occur in China only toward the end of the nineteenth century, mainly as the result of Western influences and, to some extent, of Western example.

Dangers of absurdity

By the start of the 1920s, however, there erupted what can only be called 'a crisis of absurdity' in the more developed parts of Chinese society. Timms, in his book on the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus at about the same time, has pointed to 'the contradictions between a given social structure and the forms of consciousness in which it [is] apprehended' as the mechanism which produces a sense that life is absurd.¹¹ This is not a trivial matter. To feel that one's existence is absurd is a dangerous emotion. It is one that probably contributed, through the need for its denial and suppression, to the rise of National Socialism in Vienna, and then Germany. Such a sense of absurdity is probably a symptom of a transitional phase in the breakdown of an old pattern of meanings, whose inappropriateness is becoming ever more apparent, even though it retains a grip on people's minds. A comparable form of mental

¹⁰ Counterbalanced on rare occasions by an insistence that even the government and money-lenders had their own problems—such as suppressing rebels and surviving the loss of loans that were not repaid—which deserved to be taken into consideration.

¹¹ Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna*, New Haven 1986, p. 10.

self-torture, though of course in a Chinese cultural mode, spread through educated China during the early Republic; it was one of the psychological causes that drove a number of often brilliant and idealistic activists and intellectuals to form the early Chinese Communist Party. There was an aching need for an understanding of what was going on, in the midst of confusion and humiliation; a hunger for certainty, for mastery and for hope; in the end, whatever the cost.

Many readers will want to argue that there were enough valid objective reasons for people to want to turn this way. This is not entirely untrue. A hard-headed, self-critical, non-dogmatic Marxist analysis based on facts could have been both useful and inspirational. But to say this is to miss the point. This was not what the founders of the Party wanted. Once they had acquired their quasi-religious doctrine and, in due course, the apologetics of a winding path through history—which let them tolerate the otherwise intolerable changes of Party line, as Ai Siqi was before long to preach in *The Philosophy of the Masses* (*Dazhong zhexue*)¹²—they bent their knowledge of reality to fit their beliefs, with ultimately terrible consequences. Many readers will understandably ask for some proof that such bending took place; as it happens, there are a few instances where this can be done directly from the CCP's own records. Let us therefore diverge from the main theme for a moment, and consider an example based on Hsiao Tso-liang's *The Land Revolution in China, 1930–1934*.¹³

Rural myths and realities

Landholding patterns varied from place to place in China, but, following John Buck's well-known survey of the late 1920s, it is fair to say that in broad terms the early-twentieth-century farming sector was a world of smallholders: over a half of farmers were owners, under one-third were part-owners, and 17 per cent were tenants. The median size of farm was a diminutive 1.34 hectares, and land was not in itself a very good investment for those with funds, other than for increased security, when

¹² I have not been able to find a copy of the original edition, but, so far as can be told, the theory was long-established by this time. The basic idea is that since the phenomena of the world are always changing, our ideas must change to correspond with this development. So, to put it crudely, different views become 'true' under different circumstances. See *Philosophy of the Masses*, p. 123.

¹³ Hsiao Tso-liang, *The Land Revolution in China, 1930–1934: A Study of Documents*, Seattle 1969; for my review of it, see Mark Elvin, 'Early Communist Land Reform and the Kiangsi Rural Economy', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, April 1970.

compared to usury and trade. A significant proportion of the larger landlords tended to be city-dwelling absentees with scattered holdings, with a limited or nonexistent personal presence in local communities. Socio-economic divisions between peasants were for the most part slight, and those that existed were mostly compressed within narrow limits, while social mobility both up and down between these limits, or, for a few, even beyond them, was relatively rapid. When the CCP armed forces occupied part of Jiangxi province at the beginning of the 1930s, they had to draw the finest of fine distinctions between categories of peasants deemed to be ideologically distinct, in order to create even a semblance of the 'rural feudal power' spoken of by Mao. They had, for example, to use as a criterion the *percentage* of household income drawn from rents, which could easily brand a temporarily labour-poor household unfairly as an exploiter. In one county the first survey of land ownership found 1,576 'landlord' and 'rich peasant' households; Mao's supplementary investigation of 1933 then found 536 more; but a re-examination of cases resulted in 941 clearing themselves of these 'exploiting' statuses. Thus the Party ended after all this effort with only 74 per cent of the percentage found by the initial survey.¹⁴

The yoyo-like revision of the figures speaks eloquently of the practical difficulty of creating a plausible picture of a stable, stratified class *structure*, with data drawn from reality; for reality here predominantly took the form of a class *continuum*, with permanently unstable statuses. The speed of social mobility meant that the CCP investigators decided that 'landlord' or 'rich peasant' status could be regarded as having been established in three years. But even they wrestled to categorize cases such as that of a landless hired labourer who rose in twenty years to being a landlord and money-lender. One unusually plausible CCP document also observed that 'well-to-do middle peasants constitute a considerable proportion of the population in the rural districts [of Jiangxi province].'¹⁵ When the general economic level is low, small differences can of course count for a lot; but it is a reasonable guess that the land reform movement drew most of its support by mobilizing the fierce competitiveness of those who felt they were losing out against those who were close to being their social equals, rather than from any structural antagonism between clearly differentiated classes. Such a class structure had indeed earlier existed in many parts of central and southern China; lasting until,

¹⁴ Hsiao, *Land Revolution*, p. 117.

¹⁵ Hsiao, *Land Revolution*, p. 263.

in the seventeenth century, it was largely demolished by tenant-serf uprisings.¹⁶ It should not be forgotten that there have been important *premodern* revolutions in China, even if less extensive and dramatic than those resulting from contact with the modern West.

Shanghai satires

We return to our main theme, the crisis of absurdity, with *Tides in the Human Sea* (*Renhai chao*) by Ping Jinya, who wrote under the pseudonym of 'Mr. Spider in the Web'.¹⁷ This five-volume book, first published in 1927, seems to have been a best-seller by the mid-1930s, and was probably more widely read then than the literature that we now think of as canonical for the Republican period. It is a picture, with interweaving plots, of the society of Shanghai and the countryside around it, starting in the years following the fall of the Manchus. The scenes are drawn with the keen and cynical eye of a lawyer, which was Ping's profession, and a merciless, grotesquely inventive humour whose realistic detail somehow persuades us that he is telling us something important of the truth. Life is surreal, aleatoric, riddled by stupidity and superstition, and driven by greed, lust and deception, with those who are sweet-natured, straightforward, and naïve as its victims. At fleeting moments Ping's underlying sadness at this state of affairs shows through the funny but somewhat heartless surface of his writing, as does his love for the beauty of the world of nature when compared with the mire of the human world; these two emotions give his satire a sudden and unexpected depth. Every historically revered conception and institution is treated either as false or else ill-founded and humanly damaging. Terms for 'Heaven' occur most

¹⁶ See for instance the rebel serfs who called themselves the 'Levelling Kings' (*chanping wang*) of Jizhou in Jiangxi in 1644–45: 'Whenever they held a drinking bout they would order the masters to kneel and pour out the wine for them. They would slap them across the cheeks and say: "We are all of us equally men. What right had you to call us serfs? From now on it is going to be the other way around!"' See Fu Yiling, *Ming-Qing nongcun shehui jingji* [The society and economy of villages under the Ming and Qing], Beijing 1961, p. 109. Note, though, that quasi-servile status was geographically irregularly distributed in late Ming times, being important mainly in central and southern China, and far from existing everywhere.

¹⁷ Ping Jinya, *Renhai Chao* (1927), Shanghai 1935; published by Zhongyang shudian. Henceforth THS. This work was republished in 1991 in simplified characters by the Shanghai *guji chubanshe*, with some useful background material. I would like to thank my former colleague, Professor Rudolf Wagner of the University of Heidelberg, for help in dating the first edition.

commonly in the speech of blatant liars or hypocrites. The effigy of a minor deity, a low-level City God (*chenghuang*), is the object of hilarious sexual mockery when a brothel madame from Shanghai stages the glamorous 'post-mortem' marriage of a lifelike wax model of her favourite and most profitable prostitute to the God, in order to stop the woman's legitimate husband from claiming her back. The husband is, like the local officials, bribed for playing his part in this charade, and he is solemnly given a fake coffin, which he then surreptitiously throws away in a ditch, to be spared the cost of a funeral.

Though simple people may often think the contrary, Ping insists the course of human events is not ruled by the justice of Buddhist-style moral cause and effect: people's lives are casually ruined by accident, often from the personal malice or bad temper of locally powerful bullies, sometimes based on a false understanding of actions and motives. Or, equally casually, they can be enriched. The traditional family is shown as institutionalized oppression and unhappiness. A woman will often do better emotionally and financially, Ping implies, by going off—with her daughter if need be—to work in a reputable brothel. In the cruellest case described, the traditionally honourable fidelity of a young widow who is abused by her late husband's family on the basis of malicious unfounded gossip, leading her to commit suicide, is presented as doubly horrible because it is *meaningless*, being motivated by outdated Confucian ideals in which it is impossible to believe any longer. Though sincere, the suicide is mocked by most bystanders, who assume it is just make-believe intended to put pressure on her father-in-law. The widow is also deluded in thinking that she will be reunited with her husband in the world beyond death, which, as traditionally imagined, is a fiction.

With their mischievous little tricks, senior members of local communities and arbitrators of disputes are almost universally presented as preaching morality and doing exactly the opposite in their quest for money; and as enjoying hurting those whom they dislike by the use of their petty powers. Younger Buddhist monks are shown as panting for sex and pornography, or addicted to drugs, and taking the first possible chance to rob their temples and run away. Traditional medicine and pharmacology appear as practices of conscious fraud under the pretence of learned medical sales-talk that is no more than nonsense in an intellectual sense, but at times literally lethal in its effects. Ping is artist enough to balance evil behaviour with a few examples of honesty and

altruism. The last, though, is shown as having sometimes unavoidably to be done by intrinsically improper means, such as using inventive lies to secure forgiveness for someone wrongly accused.

Shanghai itself, though by the late 1920s already a high-speed engine of financial, commercial and modern industrial growth, is experienced by Ping as nothing but ingenious and remorseless exploitation, in which human life has been separated from nature and expresses itself for the most part through deceit, seductive fakery and grotesque self-parody. There is, for example, a sequence of adroitly convincing scenes showing the world of the city beggars as a simulacrum of the 'respectable' world, with its own social stratification, laws and government, bosses, territories, scholars, even the 'modernization' of begging techniques—and moral standards that are not in fact any worse. The now useless traditional learning of fifty years before is attacked by 'Dr. Duplex' (*Er xiansheng*), once a grade-one graduate of the former imperial exams, but now a sort of beggar who lives by telling fortunes and teaching the Chinese script to a few poor children:

My only hatred is against my parents. Why did they have to make me study since my earliest youth? Why did they have to teach me to recognize written characters? Why did they want me to take the examinations and advance in my studies, so inflicting on me this sort of misery?

If instead, from my earliest days, they had sent me to a house of pleasure to learn how to boil water, or to a rickshaw company to learn how to pull a rickshaw, I would have been content from then till now, and in no way obliged to suffer for these many years.¹⁸

Duplex adds that when he dies and goes to the underworld, he intends to settle accounts with his father. So much for filial piety.

In *Tides in the Human Sea*, traditional Chinese literary culture has become an unpleasant mixture of half-remembered classics and ill-digested Western ideas like those of the Realist School (*xieshipai*), which *littérateurs* use as a handy way of glorifying third-rate poems about such things as mosquitoes and lice in a scholar's bedroom.¹⁹ Writers have to earn their living by writing gossip for cheap newspapers and copy for advertisements, while fantasizing (stupidly) about their own tragic greatness.²⁰

¹⁸ THS, II, p. 118.

¹⁹ THS, II, p. 36.

²⁰ See Mark Elvin, 'Littérateurs and Voyeurs: Shanghai Men of Letters of the 1930s', in Rachel May and John Minford, eds, *A Birthday Book for Brother Stone: For David Hawkes, at Eighty*, Hong Kong 1999.

Ping, it should be added, regards almost everything distinctively Western as pretentious, oversold, and more often than not harmful. Thus newspapers titillate their readers rather than giving useful news: in one episode a young wife, the well-intentioned, would-be modernizing head of a primary school, is reading a heart-breaking newspaper story about a Pekinese dog that has been crushed by a car in Shanghai; her husband observes that the vast floods outside which, unnoticed by her, have swept away their school and forced many peasants to flee, are not even mentioned in its pages.

Magical Maoism

There had to be medicine for this spiritual anomie; and such medicine could also easily serve as a powerful means of political mobilization. It is thus understandable that the Chinese Communists, besides attempting more practical measures, some sensible and some not, further provided the Chinese people with an alternative story in which to live. To see what resulted in its clearest form, it is simplest to take an example from near the end of the period of what might be called 'ideologically alive Maoism', *The Children of the Western Sands* (*Xisha Ernü*) by Hao Ran, published in 1974 in a first run of a million copies.²¹ The two-volume novel is set on islands in the South China Sea, historically disputed by several governments. The first volume covers the war with Japan; the second, the years after 1949 and the building of socialism on the islands. The book is written in a brilliant and lucid style, and many of its ideals are—in the abstract—altruistic and worthy, even noble, ones. Its most serious fault, though, apart from a chauvinism that obliterates all other moral concerns (not a problem unique to the Chinese), is that it portrays Maoist morality as having an essentially magical quality, which is a self-deception with cruel consequences. The saddest aspect of its historical role, however, is that it was peddled by power-holders, mostly for short-term political purposes, who had no belief whatever that its messages applied to their own actions.

The story is that of Abao, 'Jewel', who survives her dangerous birth on a fishing-boat during a storm due—it is implied—to her father Cheng Liang's impassioned ideological plea to the elements of the skies and seas to let the dawn return to the poor and downtrodden, and for girls

²¹ Hao Ran, *Xisha Ernü*, Beijing 1974. 2 vols: I. *Healthy Tendencies* (*Zhengqi pian*), II. *Lofty Ambitions* (*Qizhi pian*). Henceforth CWS.

to be valued at their true worth again. Soon afterwards, her fearless mother dies resisting the efforts of the local Fishing Boss, a collaborator of the Japanese, to force her to act as a wet-nurse for a Japanese military crony, and sinks 'with her heart at ease to the depths of the seas of the Ancestral Land, becoming one with its rocks and shoals'.²² This theme of geo-spiritual absorption is an old solution, but in a new formulation—both patriotic and free from superstition—to the question of what happens to people after death.

Before long Abao's father learns from the Communist underground movement of 'the Great Star of Salvation of the poor people of the whole country—Chairman Mao', and when he is admitted to the Party 'for the first time he really and truly knew that his life had a meaning'.²³ A single father, he has his daughter brought up by all his guerrilla comrades together, and conditions her to an indomitable endurance that leaves even the hardened soldiers in awe. When, after the Revolution, Cheng Liang has to arrange emergency supplies in a battle against the South Vietnamese, he puts his daughter last on the list, knowing that she will hold out when no one else can. The effects of this can also be seen in her attitude to sexual stirrings as she matures. Physical proximity to comrades of the other sex is no longer seen as morally dangerous, due to the strength of the new generation's inner psychological controls.

For Cheng Liang, developing the Western Sands is an inspiring activity, but not everyone is happy in the new two-class society of cadres who direct, and people who obey. Almost every family tries to get their children out of the commune and into Canton, for special training and a career. Abao, who has been sent to college, quits early on the grounds that all the people going there have the wrong motives, merely wanting a personal career, and 'would do anything to avoid returning to a fishing village to catch fish'. Her father supports her against fierce criticism, saying: 'You are much more advanced than we are! Your father must learn well from you, you of the new generation! . . . *Among comrades there can be no old and no young*'.²⁴ Thus the oldest Chinese principle of all, the superior authority of age, was rejected.

When a traitor spying for the South Vietnamese makes a covert nighttime getaway in a small boat, Abao swims after him, holding a rifle above

²² CWS, I, p. 35.

²³ CWS, I, pp. 65, 75.

²⁴ CWS, II, pp. 38, 41.

her head, and then—in a symbolic reversal of her mother's death—rises from the sea, boards the boat and kills him.

She pressed her young face, her slightly flushed face, lovingly against the chamber of the rifle that was grasped in her hand.

The chamber of the rifle was warm too.

The waves leapt happily at her side. Was it because they wished to come on board the sampan to hug her, or to hold her hand affectionately?²⁵

Hao Ran makes justified killing seem beautiful, and nature a willing accomplice.

The book culminates by exalting the magic of moral power. First, Cheng Liang dismisses mere economics in planning, declaring for instance that a new boat costs 'only sweat'. It is also dangerous, he says, to become dependent on specialists for such things as engines: people must be able to do all these technical things for themselves. This is not altogether ill-judged. But later, much more dramatically, the unarmed islanders in a fishing boat are presented as staring down South Vietnamese naval power by sheer bravado and willpower, threatening the irresistible revenge of China if they are harmed. Then, when the conflict grows more serious, Abao's husband, Sea Dragon (*Hailong*), a captain in the Chinese Navy, prevails in a desperate battle against the South Vietnamese, even though they have disabled his ship's steering gear. He does this by following his chief helmsman's suggestion that the crew form a group to shift the wheel with their bare hands, even though this means standing up to their chests in blood-stained sea-water, while others form a human chain to relay his steering directions down from the bridge. The glory of the revolutionary human being is to become the ultimate interchangeable part, both superior and subordinate to the machine that he or she serves.

Crumbling prestige

A decade later, once Deng Xiaoping's reforms were well under way, this story and its dreams were forgotten as if they had never existed. Indeed, they were increasingly made fun of. It would be unwise, though, to assume that the prevailing story will not change again. How and why did such immense changes happen so rapidly between the worlds of the first two works—*Flowers in the Mirror* and the *Warning Bell of Qing Poesy*—

²⁵ CWS, II, pp. 181–2.

and those of the second two—*Tides in the Human Sea* and *Children of the Western Sands*? The core of the answer is that the late-imperial Chinese polity, compared to most others, was to an exceptional degree a *prestige structure*. Why this was crucial needs a little explaining.²⁶ A prestige structure depends on the creation and maintenance of an image that inspires respect and fear in those who are in contact with it. In addition it must present itself as the guarantor of a future that is thereby destined to arrive; those involved must be associated with it if they are to enjoy good fortune. Prestige of this sort is an all-or-none reputation: a regime—or an ideology—either has it or it does not.

The ancient concept of the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ (*Tianming*) expressed an idea typical of a prestige structure: a dynasty was seen as possessing or as having lost the Mandate, depending on whether or not it had secured the hearts and minds of the people. In modern times, an implicit and more complex secular version seems to have replaced this. A government and a society are seen to have, or to have lost, what might be called the ‘Mandate of History’. There is no standard and commonly understood term in the Chinese language for this idea, though it is not hard to paraphrase. To an increasing number of scholars and thinkers, looking back from the second half of the nineteenth century, China’s relative world-historical success prior to the late eighteenth century seemed to suggest that the Qing state, like its predecessors, had once had a claim to this mandate, but had lost it in the course of the nineteenth century when the Chinese empire and its knowledge appeared weak and backward, when compared with the modern West. And the question also began to be raised: was this failure due not just to a particular government but also to China’s traditional beliefs and values?

Prestige structures are relatively rigid. Perceived overt change risks suggesting past error, and this damages the image. So long as the image is preserved, however, such structures can have considerable flexibility in secret. Once the image begins to deteriorate, a process of positive feedback can accelerate, and lead to sudden collapse. A bandwagon mentality develops: most people resist changing allegiances at first, but once they think they can detect a decisive shift they will move quickly to associate themselves with it. This helps to explain both the swift spread

²⁶ For an earlier discussion of these themes, see Mark Elvin, ‘How Did the Cracks Open? Origins of the Subversion of China’s Late-Traditional Culture by the West’, *Thesis Eleven*, no. 57, May 1999.

of enthusiasm for new movements in China, and the abruptness of disillusionment with them. For politicians in a prestige system, maintaining the façade is the key to survival. They resist even the smallest concession since there is no knowing when the catastrophe of positive feedback may trigger collapse. Control over mental attitudes is vital; the exposure of aspects of reality that cast doubt on the façade is not just seen as embarrassing, but—in a way correctly—as dangerous. This is usually complemented, but not counterbalanced, by cynicism among intelligent people, who possess a certain understanding of the logic of this sort of system, about what is really going on behind the scenes. It was due to a political condition of this kind that the forcible establishment of a handful of Western diplomats in Beijing in the 1850s at first provoked such panic-stricken xenophobia among many of the top Chinese officials.

At approximately the same time as this was happening, a remarkable rebellion called the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace occupied much of the Yangtze valley and almost overthrew the Manchu-Qing dynasty. If it had been supported by the foreign powers, rather than resisted, it is very likely that it would have done so. Its ideology, the new story in which it tried to make its followers live, was based on borrowings from a Christian missionary tract blended with elements of both conventional and Utopian Confucianism. It tried to smash popular religion, Daoism and Buddhism as superstitions, and was driven by a vision of what was, in broad terms, a collective economic future. It mounted a crusade against extra-marital sex, opium and gambling. It bred a sense of guilt in its followers, and a desire for repentance and redemption. In other words it used and developed most of the psycho-social potentialities that were later to be exploited by Chinese Communism. Nature was seen as a manifestation of God's unified power, not the workings of spirits and deities. Humankind was a single family, all people being God's children. An innovation in the Chinese context was the Taiping claim that Evil came from a single source, the Devil, identified with the ruler of the Buddhist purgatories, instead of being a multitude of separate afflictions, rather like moral diseases. The idealized Taiping economic system was never put into practice. But the social liberation of women was made a reality to a great extent, including the recruitment of female soldiers. The writings of the founder's cousin, Hong Ren'gan showed that a synthesis of elements of Christian doctrine with elements of Confucianism was quite possible—he defined God, for example, as the self-creating and self-ending power that gave form to forms throughout

the universe, which made him not unlike the Dao. Hong also promulgated a programme for technical modernization, and the elements of a welfare state.

Silent revolution

The Heavenly Kingdom was strategically defeated in 1864, ultimately as a result of the internal quarrels of its increasingly corrupt leadership. Numerous lesser but still serious rebellions were crushed, including the reconquest of the recently acquired, but then lost, Eastern Turkestan. After this there followed more than thirty years of political life in a strait-jacket of conservatism, as senior politicians were fearful of the risks of almost any changes other than necessary tactical adaptations to foreign pressures. A start was made on railroad building and on telegraph lines; modern industry grew fast in Shanghai and one or two other cities; some military officers were trained abroad, and a navy was created. But little more than that. Paradoxically, though, it was during this time, especially the 1890s, that the ideas which sustained the inherited imperial order were undermined, almost imperceptibly, by the persistent questioning of a small number of concerned officials and the growing anxieties of a few remarkable members of the scholar class.

If there was one *deep* Chinese political ‘revolution’ of modern times, it has to be—weirdly but undeniably—what went on in these seemingly almost silent decades. Why? Because at their end, scriptural Confucianism was strategically dead. ‘Dead’ in the sense that there were no more creative thinkers of any importance who were able to revitalize and develop it.²⁷ And, equally critically, the outlines of new policies had been formulated, even if their difficulties were not yet fully understood. The early sprouts of local and then, briefly, higher-level democratic institutions in the first decade of the twentieth century,²⁸ and then the revolution of 1911, are well-known evidence of the seriousness of the impact of conceptual

²⁷ See Mark Elvin, ‘The Collapse of Scriptural Confucianism’, in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 41, March 1990.

²⁸ On the earliest phase, the only full account remains Mark Elvin, ‘The Gentry Democracy in Shanghai, 1905–1914’, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge 1967. See also chapters 5 and 6 on Shanghai in Elvin, *Another History: Essays on China from a European Perspective*, Broadway, NSW 1996. For the later developments, see John Fincher, *Chinese Democracy, the Self-Government Movement in Local, Provincial and National Politics, 1905–1914*, London 1981, and Mireille Delmas-Marty and Pierre-Etienne Will, eds, *La Chine et la démocratie*, Paris 2007.

change, even though they did not live up to their earlier promise. But the Chinese government is also, in a sense, following even *today*, as a major aspect of its foreign strategy, a refined and more sophisticated version of that first proposed by perhaps the most important of these questioners of existing orthodoxy, Zheng Guanying. Zheng was the originator of the concept of ‘commercial warfare’ (*shang zhan*) as a way of defeating the Westerners with their own weapons.²⁹

The scholars who wrote on current affairs in these years almost all agreed that something was seriously wrong with their country, by comparison with others which seemed to be prospering. Interwoven with more transient concerns, six themes with long-term implications dominated their debates. The first concerned the interpretation of history: was the present era just another chapter in the long saga of conflicts between the Chinese and the ‘barbarians’, or was the age a qualitatively new one? If so, in what respects? Was some cooperation, rather than outright conflict, both possible and desirable? The second theme focused on sovereignty: how could China best resist the military and commercial threats from the West? Would something on which everyone agreed, namely the reinvigoration of ‘the resolve of the masses’ (*zhongzhi*)—the phrase used by Liu Xihong—suffice, if combined with strengthened traditional military technology? Or should modern weapons be acquired, either by manufacture or purchase?³⁰ Should China imitate, with its own colonialism, imperialism and religious propaganda, the recent settlement of Western peoples in lands other than their own (‘colonialism’ in the strict traditional sense of the word), or the Western conquest of other people’s lands (‘imperialism’ in the traditional sense of the word), or the Western sending abroad of merchants to sell their goods, and of preachers to convert foreigners to their faith—in other words, should China support the efforts of Confucian missionaries?

Thirdly, vital cultural questions were at stake. If China decided it was obliged for safety’s sake to adopt a selection of Western cultural features, would this not, as Wang Tao asked, ‘virtually amount to making China

²⁹ Often unfactual and rhetorical on this topic, but with a marksman’s eye for the vital spots. See his *Shengshi weiyan* (Words of Warning to a Prosperous Age) in Jian Bocan et al., eds, *Wuxu bianfa* (The Reforms of 1898), Shanghai 1957, I, pp. 83–7.

³⁰ Zhongguo shixuehui, ed., *Yangwu yundong* [The Foreign Affairs Movement], Shanghai 1962, vol. I, p. 284. Henceforth YWYD I. Apart from items at the end on Zheng Guanying, all the documentation for the section that follows is drawn from this volume, pp. 263–599.

into a nation of Westerners?'³¹ So how should the cultural identity of the Chinese be preserved—by intensified indoctrination, or by preserving the emphasis on sensitive concern for others (*ren*) and a sense of public spirit (*yi*) which, Wang believed, had spared China the abrupt rise and collapse of other civilizations, based on force alone? A fourth theme was economic: should Western machinery be used to replace human labour, and to increase output? If so, what were the likely effects on moral values of creating a society unreasonably attracted to profits; and on employment, since machines would take away some people's jobs; and also on natural resources, especially if the latter were exhausted by the increased demands placed on them? Even Xue Fucheng, a passionate admirer of the Western technological breakthrough, and its basis in experiment, noted that 'there is a limit at which the growth of every living thing stops.'³² Wang Bing however argued in opposition, but with some justification for this period, that many of the techniques of Chinese labour-intensive farming were too delicate ever to be mechanized, apart from pumping water, and that ordinary peasants could never afford machines.³³

The fifth theme involved political questions. Since it was believed by almost all officials and scholars that a major source of the strength of Western countries was the close relationship and mutual understanding between their governments and their peoples, would it be useful to China to introduce at least some degree of democracy? If so, how much and of what kind? Finally, the sixth theme to be addressed was the question of science: appreciation for Western advances in this field came late, but, asked Zheng Guanying, was it not the most vital aspect of all recent Western creations?

The reason that *gezhi* {experimental science} exhausts the [secrets of the] springs of Heaven and Earth, and explains the Primal Principles of the Ten Thousand Things, is to supplement the workings of Heaven {sc. natural processes} with human actions, and to put the workings of Heaven {sc. nature} into the service of human affairs. When these pattern-principles {sc. laws of nature} are understood, it is possible for one person to provide for a thousand or ten thousand or a million. Can our China, with her population of four hundred million, and holding the first place on the five continents, [go on] treating her masses as if they were children, and not, as a matter of urgency, make plans for 'nourishing them by instruction'?³⁴

³¹ YWYD I, p. 512.

³² YWYD I, p. 391.

³³ YWYD I, pp. 460–1.

³⁴ *Wuxu bianfa*, I, p. 74.

In other words, Zheng was proposing general education in the natural sciences. Moving beyond the practical matters, which he put first, he further imagined that in the course of time, Chinese pattern-principles (*li*) and the numbers (*shu*) of Western science might be harmoniously combined to discover 'the central axis of human nature and destiny' (*xingming zhi shuniu*).³⁵ Even allowing for some partial links with earlier Ming/Qing period thinkers, especially those like Fang Yizhi who had for a time had links with the Jesuits in the seventeenth century, and a cultural nostalgia for *li*, this was a radical change of vision.

This debate did not of course end in a single agreed programme; but it did identify a set of problems for China, relating to what we loosely call political, economic and social 'modernity', which permanently altered the underlying nature of policy debate in China. It is also possible to argue that, in more sophisticated forms, it was not only the major intellectual factor in extinguishing scriptural Confucianism, but that, in many implicit forms, it has also outlasted scriptural Maoism. There were heavyweight accidental factors in both of China's formally recognized political revolutions: for that of 1911 it was the extraordinary ineptitude of the remaining Qing politicians, who could easily have come to an arrangement with the gentry- and official-class leaders of the movement for a constitution; for that of 1949 it was the escape of the CCP from the closing grip of the Nationalists in the middle 1930s, deflected by the attempted conquest of China by the Japanese. The radical conceptual and cultural realignment associated with the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s has, in contrast, much more of the character of something that was all but inevitable and irreversible. At least, it is interesting to consider such a point of view.

³⁵ *Wuxu bianfa*, I, p. 44.