CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION: WHAT A LIBERAL COSMOPOLITAN ALTERNATIVE MEANS FOR CONTEMPORARY CHINESE INTELLECTUAL DILEMMA

My critical reading of Lin Yutang’s cross-cultural politics in between China and the world investigates the problematic of the liberal cosmopolitan as an alternative intellectual disposition for Chinese modernity. The Chinese modernity project has a history of over a century now, but is perhaps still in its early stage, certainly still very much ongoing and far from being complete. Despite its limitations, the open and cosmopolitan intellectual atmosphere of the 1980s made it possible to re-discover the significance of Lin Yutang’s literary and cultural practices in search for an alternative Chinese modernity different from its master narratives of nationalism and revolutionary radicalism. However, instead of further opening up possibilities for critical reflections of Chinese modernity discourses, the post-1989 contemporary Chinese intellectual world has been too quickly caught up in the schism between the so-called “liberal” and the “New Left” camps (again!). To go beyond the deadlock of the liberal and New Left debate, a liberal cosmopolitan alternative in light of Lin Yutang’s cross-cultural practices seems more urgent and relevant than ever, as it could contribute to all the three major intellectual trends in China today—the Neo-Confucian school, the New Left and the liberal—in a coherent and integrated approach.¹

The 1980s ended violently in the crackdown of student demonstrations of 1989. In the aftermath of the chilling political climate, Chinese intellectuals embarked on a belated sober reflection upon radicalism in Chinese modernity, which in a way started a new kind of intellectual discourse in contemporary China. In a lecture given at the Chinese

¹ According to Xu Youyu, the Neo-Confucianism (or cultural conservatism), the New Left (plus the post-modernism) and the liberalism are three main currents of intellectual thought in contemporary China, and the New Left and the liberalism are locked in a fundamental and irreconcilable difference. See Xu Youyu, “Ziyouzhuyi yu dangdai zhongguo” (Liberalism and Contemporary China), pp. 414–415.
University of Hong Kong in 1988, Yu Yingshi, an overseas historian of the Neo-Confucian lineage, outlined modern Chinese history as a progression of successive radicalism, and by contrast, a lack of sustainable conservatism.\(^2\) Yu’s thesis was that the socio-political turmoil of modern China had precipitated waves of waves of radical thought that culminated in the disaster of the “Cultural Revolution,” mainly because the socio-economic milieu was too immature and hostile to the formation of a middle class to sustain a liberal conservative counter-balance. Yu’s resort to socio-economic rationality for the cause of radicalism may be oversimplified; after all, historical rationality seems a rather risky business today. But Yu’s diagnosis of radicalism as a pervasive modern Chinese intellectual phenomenon has certainly been perceptive and aroused much interest and response from Chinese intellectuals.

Responses to Yu’ critique of radicalism was a turning point for contemporary Chinese intellectual discourses, not so much because Yu’s call for the emergence of a middle class and a conservative counter-balance was certainly a legitimate concern, but more importantly, critique of radicalism re-evaluates the discourse of total Westernization and, by contrast, the relentless demonization of Chinese cultural traditions, that re-emerged in the 1980s. In his essay “Radicalism in 20th Century Cultural Movements” that appeared in the inaugural issue of *Dongfang*, a Neo-Confucian journal, Chen Lai made it clear that there was an apparent discursive link underlying the radicalisms of the New Culture and May Fourth Movement of early 20th century, the “Great Cultural Revolution” and the “Cultural Zeal” of the 1980s. Even though the “Cultural Revolution” was not an intellectual movement but rather a political campaign, there is still no doubt its ideological discourse inherits the radicalism of the May Fourth Movement in a strict orthodox Marxist interpretation, and instead of a critical historical reflection, the 1980s “Cultural Zeal” repeats the discourse of radicalism in the name of Westernization. The common scapegoat for such radicalism was traditional Chinese culture, condemned as “feudal,” corrupt and antithetical to modernity, whether in the May Fourth Movement, the “Great Cultural Revolution” or the “Culture

\(^2\) See Yu Yingshi, “Zhongguo jindai sixiang shang de jijin yu baoshou” (Radicalism and Conservatism in the History of Modern Chinese Thought). Yu Yingshi is a favorite disciple of Qian Mu, the celebrated modern Chinese scholar of the Neo-Confucian school.