INTRODUCTION

THE HUMANIST VIEW

The main focus of this book is the significance of the tradition of Confucian values in contemporary society. It reflects on the discussions about culture and sociology that have taken place and are still ongoing since the contemporary era. Since my own viewpoint is formed according to the principle of ‘critical continuity’ and I hold that the tradition of Confucian values, just like the traditions of other great religions, still has significance in modern society, hence I hold a critical attitude to full-blown anti-traditional radicalism. Thus I am sometimes asked for my views on so-called ‘cultural conservatism’. I take this opportunity to discuss this concept as it is found in the humanities.

1. Cultural Conservatism

In the academic world of the recent past, the history of Chinese thought has been marked by three main schools: Marxism, Liberalism and Neo-Confucianism. Meanwhile, in the history of political thought in contemporary China, the main schools have been radicalism, liberalism and conservatism. However, while it is recognised that there are differences and oppositions between the schools, most people realise that “the issues they think about and seek to resolve are largely about how to respond to tradition, how to accept the West, how to build China’s new culture. They all carry a strong sense of national feeling: to save what is dying and aim to preserve it. To revive China is their common and central topic. They all look to the West for truth, but all seek to avoid the many contradictions and serious failings that have been exposed by the development of western culture. They all hope that China will leave the Middle Ages and move into modernisation. Their thought may be characterised as pertaining to cultural enlightenment.”

1 Cf. Fang Keli, “Two Questions that must be addressed for the future of Confucian Studies”; Guan Dong, "Retrospect and Prospect in the Study of modern new Confucianism: An interview with Prof. Fang Keli.” Also see Tang Yijie, “General Preface to the
radicalism, liberalism and conservatism are categories that Western academics use to deal with political philosophy and political thought. In truth we cannot just add the term ‘cultural’ before each of them and then transform them into views about culture. For instance while it is possible at the level of definitions, to talk about cultural conservatism and cultural radicalism, it makes no sense to speak of cultural liberalism. Moreover, a political liberal may be a cultural radical or a cultural conservative. Since that is how things are, most people acknowledge that for a long time Chinese scholars have thoroughly studied Marxism and liberalism, but there has been very little research into, or theory provided for, cultural conservatism.

Now, in the history of China’s contemporary thought, what should ‘cultural conservatism’ be understood to imply? Benjamin Schwartz pointed out early on, “For the intellectuals who emerged in the May Fourth period, we must coin a new name, to differentiate them from the ‘upholders of the old’ school. This name is ‘cultural conservatism’. He noted that twentieth century China virtually had no Burkeian style conservatism:

Modern Chinese conservatism is largely cultural conservatism and not basically a socio-political conservatism committed to the prevailing socio-political status quo. Many Chinese cultural conservatives are, of course, much more definite about the elements of the culture which are to be preserved.3

Furthermore, since the Chinese expression ‘conservative’ (baoshou) already has deprecatory connotations, even western China experts do not approve of translating the western term ‘cultural conservative’ by ‘baoshou’, but would rather use ‘shoucheng’, that is ‘cultural conservatism’ (wenhua shoucheng zhuyi) as the expression that best fits the western term. Originally, conservatism and anti-modernism do not only not have pejorative connotations in western languages; they even have a deeper meaning. But in China’s historical-cultural discourse it is

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Collected Works of the 20th century Chinese Culture Debate”. Tang Yijie notes that in the process of cultural transformation, these three approaches gave rise to different reactions and different levels of thought. The combination of three different cultural tendencies is beneficial for cultural development.

2 Translator’s note: The term ‘May Fourth’ refers to the political and cultural movements that arose in China around 4th May 1919 in response to the decision by the Versailles Peace Conference to grant Germany’s erstwhile colonies in China to Japan.

3 Benjamin Schwartz, “Notes on Conservatism in General and in China in Particular,” 16.