CHAPTER FOUR

RADICALISM IN THE CULTURAL MOVEMENT OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Culture is not an unchanging substance but a process and fullness of changes within space and time. Therefore, at any time culture is moving. In this sense the course of Chinese culture in the twentieth century may be said to one great cultural movement. However, what is generally termed ‘cultural movement’ always happens at some particular time and place, hence it has a definite content and direction and is especially formed by the culture of the intelligentsia and is a process of social culture of considerable scope and influence. By this standard, although twentieth century Chinese cultural history has been full of all kinds of cultural debates and even of cultural phenomena named ‘movements’, yet the only real cultural movements that have extended beyond local or regional areas are the New Culture Movement of the pre- and post-May Fourth era and the Culture Fever of the 80s that swept the whole of the motherland.

The influence and scope of the Cultural Revolution of the late 60s was clearly far greater than that of the New Culture Movement or the Culture Fever, but the leadership of the Cultural Revolution was political and it was a mass movement that was political in nature. It was not led by the intellectuals nor was it an activity that was cultural in nature or in which they played a core role. Precisely the contrary, during this ‘revolution’ in which simple masses engaged in praise of the “proletariat and poor peasants”, the intellectuals who were the authors of cultural productions became the object of attack of the Great Cultural Revolution. Hence this kind of movement at the level of the masses, showed itself as opposed to culture and it offered no creativity or progress of any cultural significance. However, although it is hard to see the Great Cultural Revolution as a real cultural movement, yet from the 1966 campaign to ‘Sweep out the Four Olds’ to the 1973 campaign to ‘Criticise Lin Biao and Criticise Confucius’, this ‘revolution’ which went on for many years, both in its slogans and in its effects had an
undoubted significance in the sense of cultural criticism. In the context of a complex history it led to certain concepts and values seeping into the deep recesses of thought of the intellectuals of the time and the people as a whole. To a considerable extent it influenced the way in which the intellectuals thought about and analysed cultural issues. The cultural point of view and values envisaged and propounded by the Great Cultural Revolution besides coming from a partial understanding of the original works of Marx, clearly also were in continuity with the viewpoints and values of the New Culture Movement of May Fourth. In the most recent cultural movement, we can still see the influence of May Fourth and the Cultural Revolution. In this sense the Cultural Revolution still has the sense of a cultural movement and should be placed among the cultural movements of the twentieth century and analysed accordingly. In the process from May Fourth to the Cultural Revolution and the Culture Fever, cultural radicalism has always played a key role. Scholars have suggested that in the development of twentieth century Chinese thought, there have been five peaks in the revival of Confucian Learning. In fact, radicalism reached a high point during all three movements of cultural criticism and its scope was great and influence profound, so much so that any attempts to reconstruct Confucian Learning do not bear comparison with it. The slogans of radicalism have far surpassed the call for (cultural) conservatism. In this sense it may be said that the entire twentieth century Chinese cultural movement has been directed by radicalism. Twentieth century cultural radicalism is not simply a matter of empty slogans, nor does it have only a very romantic flavour. It also has strong idealism and critical spirit and is based on certain cultural viewpoints and a cultural awareness. Reflection on this cultural radicalism that has directed Chinese history in the twentieth century is the starting-point for heading into the twenty-first century.

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1 Translator’s note: On 18 August 1988 Lin Biao spoke at Tian’anmen: “Beat down the capitalist potentates, reactionary bourgeois authorities, all wicked devils and evil spirits. Do away with the ‘four olds’: old thought, culture, customs and habits.” China News Analysis 637 (18 November 1966), 1a. Lin Biao was thought to be the successor to Mao Zedong but lost favour and died while fleeing the country.
2 Cf. Jiang Yihua, “Transforming Confucianism,” 21st Century, Vol. 1, 28–35 at 28. The five peaks are (1) the turn of the 19th–20th century, (2) the New Culture Movement, (3) the 1930s, (4) the late 1950s to 1960s and (5) the past decade, i.e. 1980–1990.