Introduction: Qian Zhongshu, Zhang Longxi and Modern Chinese Scholarship

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In the early 1980s, I was an English major undergraduate at Beijing Foreign Studies University (Beiwai), but somehow I tended to hang around with some graduate students at Beiwai who were from Cohorts 1977 or 1978, so that I got to hear much academic gossip about big-name professors. One such rumor went like this: the real top scholar in China now was Qian Zhongshu, who was competent in several foreign languages and erudite in traditional Chinese learning as well, who wasted his talent translating Mao’s works during the Cultural Revolution, but who was aloof and would not take any graduate student, as few would qualify. Lately, however, a rising star had emerged, a short man from Sichuan called Zhang Longxi, who was excellent in both Chinese and English, and Qian Zhongshu finally found his “chuanren” (student or successor) and gave Zhang many of his books.

The Qian Zhongshu re (craze) was certainly a major event in the post-Mao Reform Era China. On this occasion of celebrating Zhang Longxi’s scholarly legacy, it is helpful to start with a brief overview of the Qian Zhongshu craze in the later decades of the 20th century China, as the lineage between Qian and Zhang was not only personal but also epochal.

Qian Zhongshu’s career was rather emblematic of the tumultuous nature of Chinese modernity, albeit in an ironical sense. “Writing on the margins of life,” to use the title of one of Qian’s collections of essays, perhaps captures the irony of Qian’s literary and scholarly status in the interstices of Chinese modernity discourses. It is precisely Qian’s somewhat self-imposed marginality that put him on the center stage against the dominant intellectual discourses in different periods of modern China.

One defining element of Chinese modernity concerns the understanding of learning and scholarship. Ever since the institution of the Civil Examination system more than a thousand years ago, scholars have occupied a central position in Chinese society, unparalleled when compared to other major civilizations. After the Warring States Period when “A Hundred Schools” flourished, Confucianism, supplemented by resources from other schools, particularly Taoism, certainly became the dominant school and provided major intellectual resources to the knowledge structure of a Chinese scholar. Though the introduction and translation of Buddhism to China constituted a major
challenge, it had been successfully incorporated into the Chinese knowledge structure through a thousand-year-long process of assimilation. When Matteo Ricci and other missionaries came to China in late Ming and early Qing, they brought with them a new world of knowledge. Nevertheless, their impact was limited and did not bring about an epistemic change in the consciousness of Chinese scholars. That took place in the mid- and late-19th century along with Western imperialist encroachment upon China. In 1898, shortly before the Hundred Days Reform, Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909) published his Quan xue pian (Exhortation to Learning), which outlined his famous tiyong doctrine—Chinese Learning as Foundation and Western Learning as Application. Zhang's proposal was taken as a conservative rebuttal of the progressive proposals by the Reformists, but if we read Quan xue pian closely, we will see what a concession the “conservatives” at the time had already made in terms of the learning and scholarship, which an educated Chinese was supposed to possess. While traditional Confucian learning is exalted to assume the “foundation,” it has been shrunk into a skeleton base, whereas the focus was apparently on encouraging Chinese to engage in all kinds of Western learning and to set up translation bureaus to introduce and translate modern knowledge into Chinese.

Historically, Zhang Zhidong’s ideal doctrine of “Chinese Learning as Foundation and Western Learning as Application” never had a chance. Although the “Hundred Days Reform” as a political event failed, the reform and westernization trend never stopped, and in fact accelerated, in the last decade of the Qing regime at the beginning of the 20th century. When the Civil Examination system was abolished in 1905, Chinese youth must go and study abroad (usually to Europe and America or to Japan) in order to acquire their educational capital to be inducted to the elite class. Under such institutional change, the tiyong paradigm became apparently untenable. It was the first generation of students abroad who later emerged as the driving force for the New Culture Movement in the late 1910s. It was also from the first generation of these students abroad that we saw some of the founding figures of Communist revolutionaries. The New Culture Movement, or “Chinese Renaissance” in Hu Shi’s (1891–1962) term, was in every sense a “cultural revolution” in its nominal sense in that it launched an all-out assault against the traditional Confucian value system, which constituted an epistemic change in the knowledge structure for modern Chinese scholars. Ever since the New Culture Movement, “Chinese Learning” itself has become suspect, not to mention upholding its “foundation” status. New Culturalist radicals such as Wu Zhihui (1865–1953) and Lu Xun (1881–1936) never stopped condemning traditional Chinese knowledge as “poisonous” and advised the youth “not to read Chinese books.” For the first generation of Chinese students trained abroad, however, their