CHAPTER 10

To Honor the Language of Truth: Reflections on Friedrich Nietzsche, Hayim Nachman Bialik, Chen Yinke and Zhang Longxi

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The language of truth endures, while the tongue of falsehood wags from moment to moment.

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The tension between the language of truth and the tongue of falsehood is as old as humanity itself. When the Jewish bible gave it the particular formulation that we find in the book of “Proverbs” (Mishlei), the dialectic became more acute, the choices facing humanity more consequential. We, moderns, inherited an even more aggravated version of this problem, since thinkers and writers from the 19th century onward have been challenging the possibility of truthful speech itself. The four thinkers and writers brought together in this essay share a common predicament and predilection: They sought enduring verities while stumbling upon momentary falsehoods again and again.

Each diagnosed the thinning out of the lexicon for truth in a different historical context, with the cultural tools of his own time and place. Friedrich Nietzsche, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Chen Yinke and Zhang Longxi mark different points along a journey toward the recovery of the possibility for truthful speech in our lives. This is a journey that is far from over, as we can see from the ongoing struggle between readily flowing political and academic discourse about relativism and a much quieter, almost reticent longing for humanity to bring forth some lasting truths.

The spark that fueled this comparative inquiry may be found in a temporal and moral conjuncture (a French concept whose subtleness is easily lost in the English translation). Conjunction suggests the coming together of a moment in time with an ethical challenge that refuses to fade from modern consciousness. The fulcrum of this conjuncture is the year 1873. This is the year in which Nietzsche penned his pivotal essay, “On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense,” (or TL for short hereafter) (Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aufermoralischen
Sinn).  

This was also the birth year of the Hebrew poet Bialik, who would take Nietzsche to heart, while carving out a path for truth seeking all his own. In 1873, as well, the Qing regime in China came face to face with reform and rebellion in a way that demanded a new assessment of Western culture and its challenging assumptions about the classical language used to express Confucian verities. From this encounter would emerge thinkers who challenged the lexicon of traditional political culture and that of modern historiography, including Chen Yinke and Zhang Longxi. If we manage to hear their common dilemmas, we may be able to appreciate more concretely their disparate solutions for strengthening the vulnerable lips of truth over the loquacious tongue of falsehood.

Friedrich Nietzsche was a 29-year-old eccentric philosopher in 1873, already going blind in one eye. From this impaired state, he started the unpublished essay that contained the seeds of his future reflections on language and veracity. *TL*, as logician Maudmarie Clark has argued, lays down a fundamental challenge to conventions of common speech as well as to the epistemology of truth itself. The significance of this challenge was obscured for some decades in the din of European wars and by Nietzsche’s deepening madness. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, *TL* hit its mark among a new generation of iconoclastic writers coming of age in Europe and in Asia.

In China, 1873 had been an acutely difficult year: Imperial coffers severely drained by indemnity payments to imperialist powers were now further exhausted by the challenges of internal rebellion. Large-scale Moslem rebellions had decimated Yunnan and Gansu. Confucian reformer Zuo Zongtang had finally forced the surrender of rebel leaders, thereby freeing funds for new structures of interaction with the Western world. The launching of China Merchants’ Steam Ship Company in 1873 signaled the engagement of native commercial and bureaucratic resources in the service of a new paradigm. Eventually, this new model for reform came to encompass the world of Western ideas as well. With the outbreak of the New Culture Movement in the 1910s, Friedrich Nietzsche became a powerful influence upon the writings of Chinese intellectuals who sought a new path in literary and philosophical studies.

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2 Maudemarie Clark, “Language and Truth: Nietzsche’s Early Denial of Truth.”