

# INTRODUCTION

## SEARCHING FOR THE SPIRIT OF CHINESE CULTURE

The news we read every day is mostly about disasters and tragedies: countries attack other countries; people hurt other people. Believers in monotheistic religions criticize the followers of other faiths for believing nothing, and even within monotheistic religions, Muslims and Christians criticize and harm one another. In multi-ethnic countries, groups with different skin color, groups with different religious beliefs, even groups with different accents all ostracize one another. Refugees flee disasters in boat after boat, car after car, many dying violent deaths along the way. Other refugees flee hunger and poverty in the hopes of finding another place to live, an opportunity for a better life. Yet as they approach the frontiers of a better life, they are shut out, arrested and deported. Inequalities between rich and poor are also growing within countries. In times past, when inequality took the form of owning a lot of land or owning no land, the lifestyles of the two groups remained roughly similar. Now, however, the rich in any country enjoy a lifestyle completely different from that of the middle class; and it goes without saying that the poor in the same country can barely make ends meet and have no hope of leaving poverty behind.

In the modern world, the industrial revolution has produced rapid increases in productivity. More recently, new advances in science and technology have yet again pushed the exploitation of our resources to another

peak. Scientific exploration has brought us new understandings of the universe and of life; newly invented medicines can cure almost any illness, even if eternal life still is out of reach. In sum, people's lives are more comfortable and convenient than at any time in history. From another perspective, the improvement of public health conditions and the gradual elimination of contagious diseases has allowed the world population to balloon from 1.3 billion to 6.5 billion in the course of a mere century.

We are rapidly consuming the world's resources, despite the many new things we have discovered and invented, and the planet on which life relies will be unable to provide for the needs of the existing population, to say nothing of the fact that the population continues to grow. To survive, humanity will face even fiercer competition. There will not only be competition among individual humans, seeking to seize limited life-sustaining resources, but entire nations may enter a stage in which they seek to monopolize these resources. To create a more convenient life, humanity has altered the earth's climate, and the changes accelerating throughout the world threaten our planet with ruin. As the ancient adage puts it, "in the absence of skin, where will the hair grow?"<sup>1</sup> In the future, humankind may discover that the world they inhabit is no longer able to sustain their existence.

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century world seems to have parted company with the past history of humankind. Our progress seems to have boarded a deadly train that is speeding toward destruction. To quote Dickens from *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Within this larger framework, the Chinese world is also facing changes. China's human-centered society, its order and ethics built out of human relationships, was once very different from the Western world based on the

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1 The Chinese saying, "*pi zhi bu cun, mao jiang yan fu* 皮之不存，毛將焉附，" comes from the Chinese classic *The Zuo Tradition* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳). The meaning is that things cannot exist without the basis on which they survive. —Ed.

premise of people competing against one another. More than a century ago, using its weapons and its economic power, the West established world supremacy. East Asia, with its nation-states enveloped in Chinese culture and existing as agricultural societies whose social goals were peace and stability, had no choice but to strive to emulate the West to ensure their survival. Within this larger East Asian world, Japan, following its slogan of “Leaving Asia Behind”<sup>2</sup>, was the best student of the West; indeed, such imitation produced the arms and economic might that fueled Japan’s later plunder and invasion of China.

Under the banner of modernization, the Chinese people went through three revolutions, as well as the New Culture Movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>, doing their best to turn themselves into Westerners. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China experienced an earth-shaking change, when a new political regime was established on the Mainland. However fearsome this earth-shaking revolution might have been, the changes wrought by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) were even more wrenching. Today’s China should not be taken lightly in terms of its economic and military power. At the same time, in social and cultural terms, and especially in terms of personal behavior, it is completely different from traditional China. Motivated by practical considerations, many people blindly pursue their material interests. Chinese people are tough, which surely pushes economic development forward, but they often hurt other people without realizing it. The coldness and lack of feeling between people may lead to the division and collapse of Chinese society. In their interactions with the environment,

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2 This reference is to a famous editorial by the Japanese intellectual Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), published on March 16, 1885 in the Japanese newspaper *Jiji shimpō* entitled “On Leaving Asia Behind,” in which he argued that Japan should take immediate measures to reform its economy and society and hence “join the West.” —Trans.

3 The New Culture Movement (*Xin wenhua yundong* 新文化運動) in the 1910s and 1920s criticized classical Chinese ideas and promoted a new culture based upon Western ideals like democracy and science. —Ed.

the Chinese people have the habit of overdoing things and cutting corners, of “pulling up the sprouts to help them grow,” or of “draining the pond to get the fish,” as two Chinese sayings have it, reminding us of the fact that one day, there may well be nothing left. If one fourth of mankind becomes a kind of savage, and a sixth of the world’s land turns into wilderness, how will the Chinese manage? And how big a disaster will it mean for humankind?

Although Taiwan’s Kuomintang government claims to do its utmost to protect Chinese culture, in fact, the rapidity and depth of the progress of Westernization have meant that the traces of Chinese culture remaining in Taiwan are increasingly rare. With the division between the Mainland and Taiwan, Taiwan’s pursuit of autonomy, and the fear of what is happening on the Mainland, most people in Taiwan tend to be extremely opposed to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In this general climate of insecurity, most young Taiwanese are concerned solely with today’s security and comfort, and have abandoned larger life goals. But a society that doesn’t think about the future may well lose its way in a rapidly changing world.

Having gone through these political changes, especially the New Culture Movement and the Cultural Revolution, and the changes in cultural ideas wrought by these movements, a natural question arises: how is a Chinese person supposed to know how to act? This is especially true because today’s West is also facing rapid changes. With the development of modern science and industry, modern society—originally defined by the Protestant ethic and the capitalism that grew out of this ethic—has gradually betrayed the basic spirit of these beliefs, and is now fueled by a new belief which consists solely of the pursuit of wealth and power. In the battle between capitalism and society, both will be destroyed. Modern society has already experienced an extreme change: as individualism surges, the distance between people grows and they care less about one another, at which point society sinks into disorganization and chaos.

The once gleaming Western world, the object that the Chinese have been emulating for a century, has now lost its way and is facing disintegration. What are the Chinese people to do? Yet the mode and direction of

Chinese development will also impact the future of the entire world. In this book, I will investigate the past and the present, and offer a number of questions that we should all reflect on. Perhaps it will be of some use as we probe ourselves and attempt to rebuild our societies.

This is an ambition that I have nourished for a long time, but I have never turned my hand to it until now. A work that inspired me long ago was Feng Youlan's *Purity Descends, Primacy Ascends*, a series of six related books composed during the Sino-Japanese War between 1939 and 1946: *A New Philosophy of Principle*, *A New Treatise on Practical Affairs*, *A New Treatise on the Way of Life*, *A New Treatise on the Nature of Man*, *A New Treatise on the Nature of Dao*, and *A New Understanding of Words*.<sup>4</sup> The aim of Feng's work was to try to "take the pulse" of China's cultural spirit, in the hopes of offering new solutions. The first of Feng's books was published in the third year of the Sino-Japanese War (1939), and the last in the year following the end of the war (1946). This period was one in which China was in a difficult life or death struggle, and ultimately triumphed with the national renewal following the end of the Sino-Japanese War. During this period of wartime difficulty and uncertainty, China's intellectuals, in part out of concern for the nation and for democracy, but even more to ensure the survival of Chinese culture, continued teaching and learning in air raid shelters, amidst the sound of alarms, or seated outside underneath the trees, hoping that the roots of Chinese culture would not perish in the conflict.

Feng Youlan was a professor at Tsinghua University who was deeply steeped in Chinese culture because of his family history; he also studied in the United States, specializing in Western philosophy, which meant that he was equally learned in Western studies. In these six books produced under the strains of war, Feng strove to revisit the origins of Chinese culture, at the same time seeking a way to connect Chinese culture with world

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4 For the Chinese titles, please see Preface, Note 1. —Ed.

culture. Among the six volumes, *A New Philosophy of Principle*, *A New Treatise on the Nature of Dao*, and *A New Treatise on the Way of Life* more or less focused on reinterpreting the Chinese philosophical tradition and finding a way to combine Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought in a way that would be both critical and innovative. *A New Treatise on Practical Affairs* and *A New Treatise on the Nature of Man* largely dealt with the ethical concepts that Chinese of a new age should possess.

At the time, Feng's work provoked considerable reaction, and academic philosophers criticized his comprehensive theory on the basis of the concepts and methodologies of their particular scholarly attachments. Most intellectuals, however, were profoundly moved, finding that Feng's work both incorporated the past and looked toward the future, and might well play an important role in China's eventual revival.

Yet very rapidly, following the changes produced by China's Civil War (1927–1949) and the change of regime to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Feng's research, based on his metaphysical standpoint, clashed with the materialism of the new regime. Under political pressure, Feng had no choice but to compromise and come up with a blend of materialism and idealism. This was, in fact, a difficult task, and the result did not convince Feng's readers. As a result, no one paid much attention to his original *Purity Descends, Primacy Ascends* collection. Elsewhere in China and abroad, Confucian scholars like Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995) and Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909–1978) carried forward the original ideas of their teacher Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968), hoping to revive Confucianism, and people have paid more attention to them than to Feng's *Purity Descends, Primacy Ascends*.

In fact, questions like those raised by Feng are precisely what we should be thinking about now. This modest book of mine is just such an effort in this direction. The problem is that Feng's is a work in philosophy, and much of it is extremely subtle and abstract. He makes distinctions among different schools within the Chinese philosophical tradition, discussing differences between the School of Universal Principles (*lixue* 理學) and the Learning of the Heart and Mind (*xinxue* 心學)—as well

as differences between Confucianism and Daoism—together with their mutual influence. As a scholarly investigation, such philosophical perspective is necessary, but the average reader has a hard time understanding it, much less applying it to his or her own thought. In terms of philosophy, I too am an outsider, and am not really qualified to join in the discussion. If I bring Feng up here, it is to remind us that to be able to produce such a work under the chaos of wartime conditions reflects the seriousness of such scholarly topics, even for Chinese people faced with extinction after a century of suffering.

At the same time, the era in which Feng lived and wrote is different from ours. From the perspective of the development of modern science, Feng's understanding was based in a cosmology of Newtonian mechanics; today, of course, science has moved on to relativity and quantum mechanics. In fact, compared to the certainties of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, scientific thought today seems better positioned to connect with traditional Chinese thought. In the past half century, the cultural globalization produced by economic globalization has also created a new situation. Compared to the nationalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, today's globalization is hungry for broader, global concepts to replace nationalism's tired focus on borders and territories. At the time, Feng Youlan was motivated by a strong sense of cultural nationalism, a natural concern at a time of national peril. One might even say that in submitting to the pressure of the regime, he was also submitting to the weight of "state" and "people," because he had no other choice. We can only feel compassion for the fate of this generation of Chinese intellectuals.

In the face of today's new circumstances, which suggest a completely different future, the direction sketched out in *Purity Descends, Primacy Ascends* and the new spirit for humankind that Feng proposes seem out of step with today's reality. How can I, as an amateur, hope to follow Feng's masterpiece with my little book? My humble wish, as the culture of the new world forces itself upon us, is simply to revisit the subject. My own training and research was not in philosophy; instead, my research fields, which I explored and accumulated over many years, were sociology,

anthropology, and archaeology. These fields have to do with human beings' concrete lives and daily practices, and not with metaphysical reflections. When I was 15 years old, Feng Youlan's work had a deep impact on my thinking. Seventy years later, it still fills me with emotion. Still, I will seek out a path from within my own disciplines—looking not at philosophical debates but at how ordinary people think—as I revisit the subject of the spirit of everyday people in the realm of Chinese culture.

Wu Wenzao's 吳文藻 (1901–1985) contribution in establishing the field of sociology in China is inestimable. He had three disciples, all of whom wrote important books in the field. Fei Xiaotong created the notion of a “differential mode of association” to describe Chinese relationships: everyone has his or her own network of concentric circles, starting from the self and extending into various interpersonal relationships. Closely related to this was the idea of the interaction between the market and agricultural production developed in Fei's book *Peasant Life in China* (1939). In his work on lineage ties and inheritance, Francis L. K. Hsu 許煥光 (1909–1999) pointed out that the Chinese sense of temporal continuity centers on people and not on the gods. C. K. Yang's 楊慶堃 (1911–1999) work on popular beliefs focused more on the relationship between the people and the gods. He argued that the basis of this relationship was the individual, and that the spirit world was a reflection of the human world. His study of the continuities linking rural markets with cities is an important contribution to ideas about social space in Chinese life. Later on, the American scholar G. William Skinner (1925–2008) enlarged on this idea, and it became a famous school of thought for a time. C. K. Yang's work on the gods and the economy overlaps with and responds to the work of Fei and Xu mentioned above. This shows that Wu's students shared many points in common in terms of concepts and methodology.

In my study of ancient history, I made considerable use of the results of archaeological research. In this field, the relationship between the mode of production, productive capacity, and people's spiritual life is an important subject. Over the course of the long evolution of ancient history, archaeology supplied hints that revealed how people created different



“spirit worlds.” This process is something that neither religious believers nor philosophers have paid much attention to. Did humans create the gods? Or did the gods create humans? I suspect that only archaeology can provide answers to those questions. This is another aspect in which the search for spiritual life in this book differs considerably from a philosopher’s perspective.

Toward the end of this book, I devote considerable time to the observations and theories of sociologists and archaeologists in an effort to develop my own thought. For this reason, my approach is quite different from Feng Youlan’s metaphysics. This “humanistic spirit” is the foundation of this book. Moreover, when I talk about “humanity,” I mean the common people, who might not have paid attention to the theories of the ancient scholars, but who nonetheless could not avoid building a social order and a human ethics on the basis of these theories. For this reason, in the course of my discussion I will spend some time revisiting Chinese traditional culture, but instead of citing the classics to discuss other classics, my approach will be to seek out the overall outcome of these classical thinkers and the impact of this outcome on the people’s daily lives.

In the context of today’s cultural environment, China cannot remain isolated from a world shaped by modern Western civilization, and by “China” I mean mainland China and Taiwan, as well as places like Singapore that represent the thinking of overseas Chinese—all of these Chinese societies are fully immersed in the environment of modern civilization. As already mentioned, an important part of modern civilization is a cosmology shaped by modern science. Another is the capitalist economy that emerged from the industrial revolution, as well as socialist opposition to this capitalism. This is an area where modern changes have been especially vast. Economic and social life are intimately linked, and urbanization is a universal development seen throughout the world. The economies of the past organized around herding and agriculture had a corresponding spiritual life. When we imagine the kind of spiritual life we should have now or in the future, we must bear in mind the huge changes that have already occurred.

Topics to be addressed in this book include the cosmological notions

at the heart of Chinese traditional culture: questions of the internal order of the universe itself, and of how the balance is maintained between the universe and humans and between the static and dynamic modes of the order of the universe. Our spiritual life is often divided into sacred and profane aspects, but is this division antagonistic? Or is it rather interactive? Within the sacred realm, which concepts become “anthropomorphic” gods? How are hopes pinned on the gods dealt with in secular society? This is often revealed in the practice of rites and sacrifices. How do we arrive at a satisfying explanation both for the brevity of the life of an individual and the limitless universe? In other words, do life and death mark a genuine separation? Or are they linked? And how are transcendent sacred values expressed in the secular world in terms of modes of interpersonal behavior? How should we treat the natural parts of the universe—the mountains and rivers, the grass and the trees, the birds and the beasts? How should people treat one another? As individuals form groups, are all of the levels of society linked together? Or do the differences between the levels produce antagonisms? Some people are luckier than others, which means that there are those who are happy and those who are disappointed. How should the individual handle this? These are the topics that will be addressed in this book, through an examination of daily life (including eating, living, medical practices, poems and songs, art, literature, and so forth) and of “collective memory,” such as legends, all of which will be treated as historical materials drawn from the lives of the common people.

In sum, my hope is that this book will present the uniqueness of China’s enduring culture through a discussion of Chinese cultural ideals and life practices regarding heaven, humans, the group, and the individual. To my mind, the great Song Confucianist Zhang Zai’s 張載 (1020–1077) description of the holism of culture in his “Western Inscription” (*Xi ming* 西銘) sums up my views quite well:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe

I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. The great ruler is the eldest son of my parents, and the great ministers are his stewards. Respect the aged—this is the way to treat them as elders should be treated. Be compassionate toward those who are alone and weak—this is the way to treat them as the young should be treated. The sage identifies his character with that of Heaven and Earth, and the worthy is the most outstanding person. All those in the world who are fatigued, disabled, lonely, and widowed are my brothers who are in distress with no one to turn to.<sup>5</sup>

The opening lines of great Song-dynasty poet Wen Tianxiang's 文天祥 (1236–1283) “Song of the Spirit of Righteousness” (*Zheng qi ge* 正氣歌) simply yet forcefully convey the view of Chinese culture that the existence of the universe is the origin of all changes:

In the world there is the spirit of righteousness, taking many forms, bestowed on the ever-changing things. Below they are the rivers and mountains; above they are the sun and stars. With people it is called the spirit of honor and fearlessness, so vast it fills the universe. When the empire is tranquil, one pours forth harmony in the splendid court. When times are extreme, true fidelity is seen and goes down in history case after case....What is permeated by this spirit lives on forever revered. It links up the cosmos, so how can life and death compare in importance? The Corners of Earth depend on it to stand; the Pillars of Heaven depend on it to maintain their honor. The Three Relationships really do determine one's life; moral righteousness is the root.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Translation taken from William Theodore De Bary, Wing-Tsit Chan, and Burton Watson, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 469, with modifications.

6 Translation taken from Feng Xin-ming, “The Song of the Spirit of Righteousness,” 2008, [http://tsoidug.org/Literary/Spirit\\_Righteousness\\_Comp.pdf](http://tsoidug.org/Literary/Spirit_Righteousness_Comp.pdf).

In the context of this vast, ever-balancing universe, human beings—because they have rationality and conscience—can make their own minds shine forth, revealing the universe’s “spirit of righteousness,” which is the natural endowment of their existence. From the writings of Zhang Zai and Wen Tianxiang, we can understand that the culture that developed and evolved on Chinese soil—this combination of Confucian culture with the teachings of Buddhism and Daoism—from beginning to end understood and explained the universe itself through the lens of “humanity.”

This introduction is different from ordinary prefaces, because its goal has been to convey my personal opinions, and my hope is that reading this may provide some assistance to the reader in understanding my purpose. My silent prayer is that the Chinese culture I am describing can continue to prosper and be of benefit to the future of the world, so that humans might together build a world civilization without prejudice and conflict. If this hope can be realized, then this book will not have been about summoning ghosts, but instead will greet the pioneers of a new culture.