

FOREWORD

PENSIVE RECOLLECTIONS OF A SOJOURNER IN THE UNITED STATES

by Yun-han Chu

For the last 20 years, I have served at the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange in Taiwan. This rare opportunity in life has allowed me to have close contact with many contemporary leading lights whom I have long admired, and I have been so fortunate as to receive edification and enlightenment through their words and their examples, from which I shall benefit for a lifetime.

Mr. Cho-yun Hsu is among the venerable elders who have offered me the most illumination over the last two decades. Conversations with him often left me with the astonished feeling that I had imbibed a decade of learning in mere moments, expanding my horizons with respect to the grand narrative of world history, and offering startling insight through his penetrating analysis of four millennia of Chinese history.

Mr. Hsu took up residence in the river valley of Pittsburgh, but his heart strings are still tied to China, and he has unfailingly observed the goings-on in the world. He takes an interest in domestic affairs, national issues, and the cares of the world, with compassion for the world and the nations and people which fill it, extending to all living things. Mr. Hsu may have noticed that I, as a member of the younger generation, have also taken up his habit of concern for the world's woes, as I frequently engage via SKYPE with him sharing his observations, thoughts and feelings on current events around the world.

This influence of this milieu in the last 20 years has also given me the confidence as a young scholar to offer inferences on the ways of the world, and pass judgment on the heroes and reprobates. Because there is a 12-hour time difference between Taipei and the East Coast of the United States, our chats inverting day and night across the ocean's span often concluded with the parting sounds of "good night" and "good morning."

Mr. Cho-yun Hsu sent me an initial draft of *American Life: A Chinese Historian's Perspective* in electronic form in October of last year (2018), and conferred upon me the great honor of requesting that I take up my pen to write a foreword to his new book. Mr. Hsu has lived as a sojourner in the United States for 60 years, transforming this alien place into a home. The United States has served not only as the place where he settled to pursue his life's work, but also as a window for observation of modern Western civilization, and furthermore as the greatest social laboratory for dissecting the roots of the rise and fall of empires. This book represents reminiscences from the life of a sojourner, and it is a diagnostic report dissecting the ills of American society, or still more a moving epic brimming with pensive lament, as it vividly outlines how the American social and political system has moved step by step toward decline.

He has not only shared with me his important personal experiences in the course of 60 years in the United States, vividly presenting before my eyes the people, events, places, and things which left the deepest impression on him and which are most worth savoring from his life in America: through his unique and astute perspective on history and sociology, he has helped readers situate these living people, events, places and things encountered by chance within their contemporary context and historical setting, restoring their cultural, institutional and social fabric. He also

* This book was originally published in Chinese under the title 《美國六十年滄桑：一個華人的見聞》(台北：聯經出版事業公司，2019)，which literally translates as "Sixty Years of Change in America in the Eyes of a Chinese Historian."—Ed.

places changes to the appearance and essence of these people, events, places and things in different eras within a comprehensive framework for historical analysis, seeking to respond to the collective concerns shared by the elite minds of many generations of Chinese expatriates in the United States with experiences similar to his own from the perspective of geography, culture, religion, race, industry, urban-rural relations, class, politics, military affairs, and the pursuit of empire.

As he candidly lamented, “My heart weighs heavy thinking of the great excitement which I felt upon arriving in the US 60 years ago, and my eagerness to learn whether this historically unparalleled young nation, which was founded upon such lofty ideals, would actually be able to achieve the dreams of humanity. Sixty years later, I have seen historians and sociologists declaring that this fledgling system of government has fallen prey to incurable sickness.” As the book draws to a close, he again sighs, “Looking back, when I first arrived in the United States, I held its founding ideals in such high esteem. Over the course of my six decades as a sojourner in this land, it has undergone many changes, and I have often lamented at the sight of a country with such a beautiful natural landscape and such a diverse population gradually inching toward destruction.”

Reading between the lines, I can fully perceive and share his downcast mood, because our many generations of intellectual expatriates in the United States have all been attracted by America’s liberal system and atmosphere of freedom, and have long believed in the superiority of America’s material prosperity, economic vitality, and international leadership and prestige. Like Mr. Hsu, when I take the pulse of the trends of social and political decline in the United States, I have always done so with feelings of commiseration. The decline of the United States not only signifies that the entire Western-centric world order has lost its most important pillar, but has the potential even to stir up turmoil in the entire global political and economic order. Just as American policy-makers have long harbored doubts as to whether China can peacefully rise, we have also had to worry about whether the United States can peacefully fall.

I first set foot in the United States in the summer of 1981, nearly three decades after Mr. Hsu. I did not personally experience the grand spectacle as American national power reached its peak in the period from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, nor did I witness how the United States fragmented amidst the social upheaval sparked by the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. At the point when I gained the opportunity to observe the United States first-hand, the scars which the Watergate scandal left behind on the legitimacy of the political system were gradually fading, but the wounds inflicted upon the American economy by two oil crises had not yet healed, and Reagan took it as his mission to reverse stagflation, setting in motion a neoliberal revolution in American society.

This paradigm shift, which enshrined market omnipotence while demonizing government intervention, became the prevailing economic ethos for the next 30 years or more, sweeping across the globe. Not only did the tide of neoliberal revolution spread American-style capitalism with its emphasis on the maximization of shareholder interests to all the Western nations, it also swept away all manmade barriers impeding the pursuit of maximal returns on investment around the world. Hyper-globalization driven by multinational corporations and international financial institutions thrust its way into every corner of the earth at unprecedented speed, resulting in the rapid and total reorganization of the division of labor in global production network as well as the supply chain; at the same time, the multinational corporate elite and the ultra-wealthy class took advantage of this opportunity to acquire unrivalled political power, allowing them to override the government, manipulate the rules of the social game, and dismember piece by piece the economic regulations and social welfare system designed to protect the interests of disadvantaged groups, workers, and the middle class. They rejected any and all mechanisms for global governance or oversight that might constrain their freedom of movement and return on capital, flexing their power to exert influence on US legislations and international regulations, and sway the views and policies of the International Monetary Fund and the U.S. Federal Reserve Board.

The deregulation of finance as directed by neoliberalism further stimulated financial capital to flow toward the speculative virtual trading, not only ushering in unsustainable, systemic financial risks for all nations, but also majorly distorting and disrupting the real economy. At the urging of Wall Street, beginning in the late 1980s, the US took the lead in implementing significant financial deregulation, demolishing the financial firewalls, completely lifting the restrictions on derivative financial products, and pressuring other nations to remove all regulation on the transnational flow of capital and abandon government intervention in the foreign exchange market, with the result that substantial amounts of capital were poured into carry trading in currency and commodity futures, and speculative trading took precedence over the real needs of risk hedging, as hot money stirred up trouble around the world, creating a tide of money games, asset bubbles, and financial crises. The most recent global financial tsunami triggered by the subprime mortgage crisis inflicted unprecedented economic trauma on the US and Europe, from which they have not fully recovered to this day. On witnessing how Wall Street has taken the United States government hostage, Joseph Stiglitz, a recipient of the Nobel Prize for economics, could not help but lament how far American democracy has fallen today, creating a political system of the 1%, by the 1% and for the 1%.

The neoliberal revolution gave rise not just to an unprecedented economic boom in the United States, but also to the aggravation of social disparity and political corruption. This revolution caused government agencies to be gradually divested of the ability to reverse the polarization in the distribution of income and wealth under capitalism, while slowly losing the ability to safeguard the level playing field for the disadvantaged groups and guarantee the basic protection for the workers in the labor market, and furthermore forfeiting the ability to moderate the abuse of monopolistic power by a few multinational corporations of titanic scale. Democracy as a political system based on nation-state has thus been transformed into a hollow shell, powerless to defend the welfare of its citizens or satisfy their policy needs, with the result that the foundations of its legitimacy have been severely eroded.

The biggest problem in American politics is that political parties and the political elite are all held hostage by a small number of special interest groups. The proxies of military-industrial complex, Internet giants, mega banks and investment groups of Wall Street, multinational energy corporations, major media groups, pharmaceutical and healthcare industry, and other major interest groups are entrenched within each of the standing committees in the two houses of Congress. These special interest groups can also drive law firms, accounting firms, credit rating agencies, and think tanks large and small on the East and West coasts that rely upon donations by business executives to offer advice for their schemes and help them steer public opinion. The result is that, for the last 30 years, the structure of American economy has become increasingly centralized, as the strong grow stronger and the big grow bigger, and the dominating monopolistic capital runs amuck. This has inevitably given rise to severe corruption and rent-seeking. These giant corporations occupying a position of oligopolistic monopoly are able to seize the lion's share of profits by crushing their competitors: under this model, their enormous profits are derived not from innovation and efficiency, but rather by relying on their monopoly over the market and their political influence over laws and government policies, enabling them to buy up emerging startups in the industry, exploit intellectual property protections and the legal system, and benefit from lawful tax evasion and outsized tax subsidies.

Let us take the example of the healthcare industry. US healthcare spending represents as much as 18% as a proportion of GDP, far higher than the average shares seen in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. Yet average life expectancy in the US is in last place among the OECD countries. Furthermore, the US has been the only developed country in recent years to see a decline in average life expectancy (chiefly due to drug use, the proliferation of guns, and rising suicide rates). In 2017, average life expectancy in America was 78.6, shrinking the gap with mainland China by approximately two years, yet per capita healthcare spending in mainland China is only one twelfth that of the United States. This signifies that the American healthcare

system is burdened by excessively high costs, squandering of resources, and unnecessary check-ups and treatment, along with a severely uneven distribution of healthcare resources.

The policy changes ushered in by the neoliberal revolution have also inevitably given rise to an unequal distribution of the benefits and risks of globalization, and today, many of the Western countries are facing a fierce political backlash from the losers in globalization. The United States has gone the farthest on the path of neoliberalism, as the Supreme Court, which has long been controlled by a Republican majority, continues to open wide the flood gates of plutocracy on behalf of the wealthy class, with the most salient problem in closing off of channels for upward social mobility, while the most acute conflict is the clash between the proponents and opponents of globalization. The pressure of this growing social conflict ultimately found temporary relief through the election of the populist politician Donald Trump, but this portends even greater tears in the social fabric of the United States in the future.

Trump was able to commandeer the support of the White blue-collar class, because these voters have a pressing need to know: Where will job opportunities that can sustain a middle-class income be coming from in the future? When will the government finally be able to substantively rebuild its woefully dilapidated infrastructure? Will their children benefit from equal and fair opportunities for education and social advancement? Will the social security system survive once the baby boomer generation retires en masse? How will the polarizing trend of the last 30 years, in which the rich have become richer as the middle class becomes poorer, be reversed? Mainstream politicians in the two major American political parties have, one by one, lost the confidence of this bloc of voters, because if these familiar faces have not already been taken hostage by special interest groups, then they find themselves at a loss in the face of economic and social problems, and the voters would rather deposit their hopes in new hands with no political experience whatsoever.

However, Trump does not have a sound strategy for mitigating America's economic predicament and social conflict. On the contrary, his

haphazard approach to domestic governance and foreign affairs has given rise to concern among observers that he may be a prodigal president accelerating the national decline, who not only fails to understand the precious nature of the political assets accumulated by his forebears, but conversely chooses to rashly pawn off the American patrimony. He has helped the rich and corporations to significantly reduce their taxes, inevitably resulting in the abrupt worsening of the fiscal health of the federal government; in 2019, the federal deficit passed the critical point of one trillion USD for the first time. He has treated immigrants as scapegoats for the erosion of job opportunities in the United States, and his efforts will likely result in the curtailment of this key source of human capital needed by the American economy. His implementation of unilateralism, symbolized by the slogan “America First,” has been both crude and rash. As noted by Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a neoconservative leader who has garnered great respect within the Republican camp, the actions taken by Trump’s national security team have caused the United States to increasingly appear in the guise of a “rogue superpower,” charging across red lines with respect to moral, ideological and strategic considerations.

At all times and in all negotiation settings, Trump’s diplomatic team has invariably and nakedly exploited their advantages in asymmetric bilateral power relationships to the furthest degree, seeking to compel their counterparts to make the greatest concessions, with little good will for either friend or foe, and little consideration of the past or thoughts for the future. This has obliged the traditional allies, trade partners and rivals of the United States alike to regard the America represented by Trump as an untrustworthy and unscrupulous rogue nation that could renege on its promises at any time, endangering the world and confounding right and wrong. The mainstream foreign policy elite of the United States are apprehensive now that Trump will cause irreparable harm to the credibility of the international leadership role of the United States in the course of his four years in office.

The observations which I have presented above merely serve as a footnote to Mr. Hsu’s diagnosis of the country’s social ills. The neoliberal

mindset elevates personal freedoms, while also rewarding selfishness, self-interest, and greed, and encouraging the unbridled pursuit of material desires. The income tax rate for wealthy Americans is the lowest among the developed nations; meanwhile, multinational corporations make all possible efforts to hide their profits in offshore tax havens, and their selfishness has reached such a degree that they seek to evade even the most basic duties to society. This stands in corroboration of Mr. Hsu's comments: "The United States has been shaped by the Puritans, who sought a land where they could be free: under their brand of individualism, the individual was constrained by faith and a sense of propriety. Today, faith has faded away, and individualism has degenerated to selfishness."

In the last few years, Mr. Hsu has published a series of unequalled works that have garnered widespread appreciation, enabling the vast readership of the Chinese-speaking world to steadily absorb the crystallizations of his wisdom and the essence of his knowledge through the smooth flow of his pen. His many well-grounded works, from *China: A New Cultural History*, *On China: The Transformation of a Complex Community* (*Huaxia lunshu: yige fuza gongtongti de bianhua*), *Myself and the Other: Distinctions Between the Intrinsic and Extrinsic in Chinese History* (*Wozhe yu tazhe: Zhongguo lishi shang de neiwai fenji*), and *The Transcendental and the Mundane: Chinese Cultural Values in Everyday Life to The World, China, and Taiwan: A Process of Parallel Development, Entanglement, Union and Division* (*Shijie, Huaxia, Taiwan: pingxing, jiaochan, he fenhe de guocheng*), all capture one's attention from the first glance, leading the reader from one gem to another. These works, amounting to almost one million Chinese characters, were refined from the extensive experience and masterful wisdom which he has accumulated over his lifetime, along with the knowledge derived from comprehensive study.

The broad extent of knowledge contained in these works is quite beyond the power of a less profound scholar such as myself to offer commentary, and I would be hesitant even to offer my impressions after reading, let alone write an introduction. Only for *American Life: A Chinese Historian's Perspective* was the threshold a little lower, such that I could

offer a little in the way of adornment, and as I was loath to show myself undeserving of Mr. Cho-yun Hsu's kindness in teaching me in accordance with my abilities, I bestirred myself to pick up my pen on New Year's Day in 2019, and jot down a far from adequate addendum.

*The pupil Yun-han Chu, from my desk in Dachengtang, Beitou, Taipei
Winter of the Wuxu Year (2018)*

Yun-han Chu is an Academician of Academia Sinica, a fellow of the World Academy of Sciences, a distinguished research fellow at the Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica, a professor by joint appointment in the Department of Political Science at National Taiwan University, and the President of the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange. Professor Chu is a political scientist of international renown, and the research team which he leads has examined the quality of governance and the legitimacy of political systems in different nations, along with the issues of sustainable social development, drawing high praise from scholars and think tanks around the world.

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

In this book I narrate events that I witnessed in America, my adopted homeland, over the last 60 years—since 1957, when I came here as a graduate student. Of course, I discuss more than just the events in politics, society, and culture to which I was an eyewitness; I also trace the history of such developments in this young republic. In other words, this is my personal observation of the culture and institutions that gradually evolved in this large-scale experiment in human history, created to replace older European institutes and civilizations brought by the immigrants into this New Continent, and built on the principles of freedom, democracy, and equality, which have long been the fundamental ideas of a Utopia.

From the publication of the Chinese version to today, when an English translation is being started, a whole year has elapsed—a very eventful year. This particular year (2018–2019) has been an eventful period in the American presidency. Today, as I write this, the process of the impeachment of President Trump is taking place, although what the decision is to be made in the House remains unknown. Since I arrived in Pittsburgh, in 1970, I have watched (including this one) three attempts to impeach sitting American presidents.

Think about that. The person in the very top position of a country, elected by the entire population, thrice in 50 years appeared to be

questionable, unqualified, or even abusive of their power. This is a really alarming signal that tells us that the personalities elected through the democratic procedure might not meet our standards. We must then reevaluate the very political institution of American government, rather than just the individuals in office.

Politics, together with culture, economy, and society, form a complicated system of interaction. I invite you, the readers, to explore this relationship in the narration presented in this book.

For over three centuries, we have been, and still are, proud of the design of this new republic. Ever since its founding, we've regarded it as the best way of governing ourselves and managing our society. We all assume that based on Plato's critiques and evaluations of various types of government, that in an imperfect world, ours may be fairer, and feasible. Our founding fathers put into the Declaration of Independence and Preamble to the Constitution noble notions of freedom and equality, checks and balances of powers, and several safeguards to prevent abuse of power by the highest leader, the President. In the Constitution, government of law is the guiding principle, which is based upon the utmost efforts to protect individual human rights. It was a principled, collective effort—even as it was frequently modified by amendments—to make good decisions in order to protect every citizen's sacred right to live a free life. I believe, in the founding fathers' minds, this very structure of government itself is the institutionalization of the Philosopher King. In other words, the very goal Plato put forward in an ideal—that the wisest person with the highest moral standard should govern the state—was applied to, and made into an integrated system.

However, today this very design seems to be facing a questionable future. While the founding fathers followed Plato's principles, they failed to appreciate Plato's warnings of how difficult it would be to establish a worthy Philosopher King. In America we came to see the Greeks' ideals as a formula for government, taking for granted, with wishful thinking, that these ideals could be conveniently put into practice with leaders who would respect the founders' principles.

The early immigrants swore to accomplish a goal in the “new” land, that they would make a great society to replace the old European feudalism, theocracy, and all of the other abusive systems of power that exploited common people’s desire for happiness and wellbeing. With rational government in this country, hopefully there would be no more abuse of public power. There would be no more unfair treatment of one class to another, differentiation of life standards, and it would be possible for all people to develop their endowed talents and capabilities. These are the ideals that I learned from my education in China by reading American history and through observing the public image presented in literature and lectures. In China, the United States of America is called “Mei Guo,” or, “The Beautiful Nation.” American missionaries, educators, and publishers all tried to implant such an image in Chinese minds.

Allow me to raise a few suggestions to consider the problems of this American land, where I, as both insider and outsider, may perceive what many other Americans may take for granted. By deliberating over what we had considered as universally true, we can, with awareness of our shortcomings, improve on current conditions.

The first problem I’ll address is the word “God” appearing in our Constitution, and, even today, printed on our money. This God is the Christian, monotheist God. Christianity’s background is as a very exclusive faith based on tribalism held by the ancient Israeli people. Christian societies underwent many changes through history. The exclusiveness of the religion and its sharp distinction between “We” and others in today’s world inevitably limit our citizenry’s composition by excluding other faiths. The White above the others, and even among the White, the WASP above other Europeans and men above women. The problem is the resulting subconscious exclusion or narrowmindedness, the same such problem that led to the destruction of Native American culture and elimination of the Indigenous population, the enslavement of African captives, and even the subtle class distinctions where one group holds more power than the other (e.g. the “Boston Brahmins” being the unspoken aristocrats). There’s no real equality among all people as programmed in the Constitution.

The monotheism of Christianity itself, for a long time, justified the exclusion of other faiths until the Second World War ended and American soldiers returned with experiences of other cultures and faiths. Such an ideological and intellectual monopoly dismissed other options by labeling them as heretical, barbaric, or superstitious. For a long time, biological Darwinism was prohibited from being taught in school curriculum in the Southern states, because of the power of the church. On the other hand, social Darwinism, a misinterpretation of biological Darwinism, was distorted into the concept of “progression” justified by the progressivism of Protestant Christians.

The second point I must address is the very concept of individual freedom, liberty, and equality. By its etymological root, “freedom” means “free from something” such as free *from* oppression or starvation. Yet, today, most people interpret freedom as a freedom from restraint or obligation, a self-centered free will and ability to do as one pleases. Freedom is now often equivalent to individualism without inhibition and without responsibility to the larger group.

In a Capitalist society, this emerging understanding of freedom often serves as a justification for individuals to pursue their “happiness,” their own lusts for power, material gain, and pleasure. Such an individualism in its utmost form of expression makes any member of a society so solely focused on him or herself that they forget that any individual is, and should be, a member of a group of people who collectively form a community.

In the extremity of defining individual freedom, now we see that fragmentation is a more and more serious problem that hurts social solidarity and integrity. We are entertained and distracted by powerful new communication technologies at the expense of our relationships with those immediately around us. Similarly, a culture that celebrates physical relationships without commitment makes it harder for individuals to commit to the strongest bonds of love in the long term. Families are broken, parents and children grow apart, and filial love becomes transitional and insubstantial.

So we see in sociology the term “the Lonely Crowd,” where any individual only cares about themselves, free of bonds, yet lacking in warmth and love, and

absent of comfort in times of distress. In chemistry we know that atomic bonds are singular atoms coming together to form something bigger than themselves. Helium has no chance to bond with other elements. If the universe were composed of solely helium, there would be no substance of any form, and no change across all of time. In our human society, the extremity of our human “individualism” will eventually terminate our society altogether.

Here I have only mentioned two issues, the exclusiveness and inequality of monotheism and the misinterpretation of freedom and individualism. These two have been the roots of dysfunction. Moreover, in today's society, the daily widening gap between the classes of wealthy and poor, or the endless struggle and confrontation between groups and individuals, will eventually totally divide this country and finally dissolve it.

Externally, American hegemony after two world wars has transformed the United States from a leader of the international community—albeit a Pax Americana—to an empire guarding its privilege and domination by endlessly engaging in conflicts and building up military strength. This has become so costly, it will eventually become a burden so great that it may crash even this wealthy country.

I write these paragraphs with deep sorrow, to watch such a great experiment in human history, an attempt to find the most reasonable and noble-intentioned government, to collapse on its own foundations, sliding into a quicksand of self-destruction, sinking so far that it may never recover. Let us hope that our human intelligence and our basic civilized discipline will lead the people of this country to reflect and reexamine our problems, so that we may avoid the great danger of slipping into a social and cultural black hole.

After 60 years of living in my chosen land, the United States, I feel so sad that it has come to this point. I moved to America with the expectation of living in a new land that would be different from the places that I left. After 60 years I need to express my sorrow. I also need to extend my personal thanks to my parents and my family—four generations of trust and love within our fundamental unit—that gave me the strength to write

this book, to share my difficult conclusions, and to implore my fellow Americans to seriously reflect on these problems.

Cho-yun Hsu
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Pittsburgh, PA

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