

A New Vision for China: The Case of Liu Xiao Feng

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It is 27 April 1989. Troops of the Liberation Army have moved into Beijing to prevent students from staging another massive demonstration. At nine o'clock in the morning scholars from such diverse fields as literature, philosophy, religion, and sociology have assembled in the Academy of Social Sciences to hold one of their regular discussion meetings. In spite of the tense situation, about twenty people have followed the invitation to the meeting called and chaired by the Institute of Literature of the Academy of Social Sciences.¹ The top of the morning's discussion is Liu Xiao Feng's book, *Salvation and Leisure*.²

Soon the scholars are engaged in a lively give-and-take of views. They are not always in agreement with the theses of the young author, but they admire him for his rich knowledge and his courage to discuss religious questions in China and the West that have been taboo for many Chinese scholars. It soon becomes apparent that quite a few participants do not really feel at home in matters of religion, and they are ready to admit this. It comes as a surprise to them to see how deeply issues in their own fields are connected with religious questions.

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- 1 At the time of writing this paper (July-August, 1989), the situation has drastically changed. The Academy of Social Sciences is occupied by army units, certain contacts with members of the Academy are severed and hard to reestablish. The whereabouts of several scholars is not known.
 - 2 *Zheng jiu gen xiao yao* 拯救跟逍遥 (Shanghai: People's Publishing Company, 1988), 540 pp. The term *xiao yao* is difficult to translate. Chinese-English dictionaries circumscribe it with "free and unfettered" or "leisurely and carefree."

The discussion begins to focus on the issue of values in China and questions of ultimate concern. With a view to the student demonstrations and the 70th anniversary of the May 4th Movement, the question of what may have been missing in China during the last seventy years is then raised. Could it be that Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy should have been joined by Mrs. Religion? The participants in the discussion round are aware of the fact that Liu Xiao Feng 劉小楓 has been writing a series of articles in Christian theology for 讀書 *Du Shu* (*Reading Monthly*). They are told that these articles are especially well received by young intellectuals who are beginning to discover entirely new values in the realm of religion. Should this not be taken as a signal for the intellectual circles in China? Such are the kinds of questions raised in this unique discussion.

Preliminary Questions

QUESTIONABLE VIEWS OF MODERN CHINESE INTELLECTUALS

In the introductory passage³ of his main work, Liu Xiao Feng confronts what he considers misconceptions on the part of Chinese intellectuals. He disagrees with the cliché that social ethics and aesthetics constitute the basic elements of Chinese cultural tradition whereas the West has almost exclusively concentrated on such phenomena as rational analysis, social changes, rationalization of the natural world, scientific methodology, and scientific achievements.⁴ He accepts the view that the web of Confucian and Taoist thinking has permeated Chinese life, moralized social life, and provided Chinese culture with a transcending aesthetics. He is also aware of the fact that rational analysis, logical thinking, and the scientific spirit are very important aspects of Western culture, but it is obvious to him that these aspects are but part of Western tradition. The Greeks excelled in rational and scientific thinking, but at the same time they cherished deeply their spiritual world. The Hebrews and Christians put even greater emphasis on spiritual values. Rationality and religion are thus the two forces that have been instrumental in the development of Western culture.

3 *Ibid.*, 1–40.

4 In the chapter “T’ang Chun-i’s Concept of Confucian Self-Fulfillment,” Thomas A. Metzger speaks about T’ang’s simplistic view of the Greek preoccupation with “purely intellectual rationality.” See Metzger’s *Escape from Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 30.

It is deplorable that modern Chinese thinkers have not or only superficially looked at this phenomenon. Since the May 4th Movement they have concentrated on the study of Western science and technology but ignored or even rejected the spiritual-religious tradition of the West. Certain Confucianists have even proposed an exchange between China and the West in which China accepts the scientific-technological knowledge and knowhow of the West and the West is offered Chinese ethical and aesthetical values, which may save Western culture from what they consider its present nihilistic tendencies and from disintegration.⁵ The author scoffs at ideas such as these and asks pointedly whence Confucianists draw the courage to “save” the West when presently China finds herself in total cultural disarray and when a nation with its 5000 years of cultural heritage is unable to stand the test of modernization. He seems to agree with Heidegger’s opinion that the problems of our present technological age can only be solved at the place where they originated, that a solution to the problems and much needed reforms can only be expected through serious occupation with the European cultural heritage.

It must be judged a grave error that after the May 4th Movement little or no consideration was given to the spirit of Judaism and Christianity contained in Western cultural tradition. This is all the more deplorable since in Judeo-Christian ethics and religion the value of salvation has played such an important role. In Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition man, equipped with free will, may embrace evil, he may exchange darkness for light, the angel may become a devil. But man may likewise turn from darkness to light, he may long for salvation that is promised to him. Through his suffering in love, Jesus Christ established the basis for salvation, for the defeat of evil and all dark powers. By rejecting an absolute foundation for human values, by basing ethical values on society and on human thinking, Chinese tradition found it very hard to avoid the danger of irrationality and absurdity.⁶ What makes this error even

5 In his assessment of Liang Sou-ming’s and Liang Ch’i-chao’s attitudes towards their Confucian heritage and towards Western culture, Jerome B. Grieder exemplifies Liu Xiao Feng’s observation with the following statement: “Liang Ch’ichao promoted a kind of Chinese missionary movement to carry the glad tidings of spiritual peace to the troubled West, while Liang Sou-ming maintained that the West, having reached the end of its road, would necessarily turn to the ‘Chinese way’ even if it remained ignorant of China’s intellectual and social tradition.” See his *Hu Shih and the Chinese Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 144–7.

6 With the advent of science in China, this danger has increased. Hao Chang speaks of a threefold disorientation in modern China: moral, existential, and metaphysical. In this context he refers to what he calls a bewildering phenomenon: “Historians who study the intelligentsia in twentieth-century China have often observed their intriguing susceptibility

much graver is this fact: it prevented Chinese scholars from establishing a sound basis for comparing Chinese and Western cultures.

What is lacking – according to the author – in traditional Chinese culture is an absolute truth that could be considered the basis for ethical and scientific judgments. What really is “Heaven” in the saying “Tian ren he yi” 天人合一? The Chinese Heaven is certainly not God and Chinese ethics is not religion. Unless clarity is achieved in these matters, genuine comparative work will be impossible.

CONDITIONS FOR A DIALOGUE WITH TRADITIONAL CULTURE
AND FOR A DIALOGUE BETWEEN DIFFERENT CULTURES

A dialogue with traditional culture or between various cultural traditions is different from a study of cultural history, where facts and the interpretation of facts are the subject matter of the undertaking. In a dialogue with traditional culture(s), we accept historical facts and then enter into a question-and-answer process, preferably with historical personalities on the basis of our present-day consciousness. We accept Hamlet and Qu Yuan and their works as facts, but we then begin to ask them questions of our common concern and try to answer respective questions raised by them. In other words, we face the facts of cultural history and shun wishful (ideological) thinking. However, we do not treat these facts as dead relics but bring them back to life in a meaningful exchange of experiences and ideas.

Such a dialogue with cultural history or between different traditional cultures will result in meaning for the future; tradition moves in front of us. We inherit tradition, but we also produce it by dialoguing with its philosophers and sages. However, all this presupposes that there are generally or commonly recognized meanings of cultural values. It also presupposes an attitude where neither the cultural history is condemned in its entirety (cf. Hu Shi)⁷ nor criticism of any kind is flatly rejected (cf. Xiang Shi Li).

to totalistic philosophies and ideologies. It also reflects a certain metaphysical need to find some all-inclusive world view, a cognitive map on a cosmic scale by which to anchor and orient oneself See Hao Chang, “New Confucianism and Contemporary China,” in Charlotte Furth, ed., *The Limits of Change* (Taipei: Rainbow-Bridge Book Co., 1976), 282.

7 Jerome B. Grieder considers “rejection of the past” a pervasive element in Hu Shi’s thought and he interprets the latter’s “transvaluation of all values” as a “declaration of emancipation from the past in its entirety.” Op. cit., 319.

For dialoguing with cultural history and among different traditional cultures a common language has to be established. What do expressions such as culture, democracy, religion, heaven, hell, faith, etc. mean for Chinese and for Westerners? When talking about Christian salvation, a common language, i.e., a common understanding of the questions involved, is needed. We are not dealing here with a preference for either the Chinese or any Western language, neither will translation from one language into the other be of much help here.

Liu Xiao Feng suggests that Christianity has time and again entered into a dialogue with its cultural heritage in the course of its long history. Because of the many and often rapid changes in cultural consciousness and because of the growth of scientific thinking in the West, Christianity had to reexamine and to clarify again and again traditional concepts, values, and their linguistic expressions. This process is still going on in our age. Bultmann's "demythologization" is a fitting example and is discussed at length by the author.⁸

The various antitradition campaigns of the 20th century have scared many Chinese. Bultmann's work shows that in the West many more and much more dangerous antitradition campaigns were launched, especially against Christianity, which is an essential part of Western culture. He refers to such movements as the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, Historical Criticism, 19th-century Historical Relativity, and others that threatened to destroy the basis for religions as well as for general values.

According to Bultmann it is important for us to understand that the language of science is quite different from that of religion, that the world view of science and that of mythology do not converge. Whenever such concepts as heaven, hell, resurrection after death, etc.⁹ are termed nonsensical or utterly meaningless, we are dealing with the problem of not discriminating properly between the language used in their different realms. Bultmann maintains that the world is full of things man cannot explain through reasoning. Mythology explains his relationship to these things, especially to the problems of his existence, of his life. Realities

8 Mo (Liu Xiao Feng), "Shen sheng de xiang Yu" 傾聽跟奧秘 (Holy Encounter), in *Reading Monthly*, April 1989: 107-13.

9 *Salvation and Leisure*, 27-32.

expressed through mythological terms such as heaven, hell, etc. concern man directly. They tell man that he is responsible for good and evil (cf. the sin of Adam and Eve). Demythologization attempts to translate mythology (e.g. the words of the Bible) into the language of modern man, of the modern believer, into his own experience and consciousness.

As to a common language for a dialogue between different cultural traditions, Liu Xiao Feng suggests that life itself provides such a language. Common experiences such as deep joy and suffering, hope and despair, good and evil, love and hate, and basic human relationships such as that between one human and another, male and female, man and nature, or sinners and God provide the basis for a language that is understood by people of all times and all cultures. Although people of diverse cultures and people of different cultural epochs may differ considerably in their assessment of certain cultural phenomena, yet when it comes to most basic values, if they are dealing with “ultimate concerns,” they will readily understand one another across cultures and epochs.

CHINA AND ALIEN CULTURES

Liu Xiao Feng turns our attention to yet another question important for a dialogue between the cultures of China and those of the West.¹⁰ He asks whether culture is so bound to race, place, and time that it could only be appreciated in this context. In other words, is it reasonable to accept a foreign culture, to accept Christian values in particular, in China? Liu’s answer to the question is that reason cannot judge values such as love, happiness, freedom, justice, and salvation. We cannot reject the love of the Christian God just because he is not part of our local or national culture. The author finds himself in disagreement with the many Chinese intellectuals who at the beginning of the 20th century were preoccupied with the study of Western culture. What was taken over? An anti-Christian bias which would only confirm them in their own antireligious attitude.

The question that should determine the acceptance of elements of an alien culture is simply this: Are they valuable or not? In a special article on Rahner’s theology, Liu deals with this question in greater detail. The concept of God, of the father of all mankind, is of great appeal to him.

¹⁰ Mo Mo, “Qing ting gen au mi” 神聖的相遇 (Attentive Listening and Mystery), in *Reading Monthly*, March 1989: 111–8.

God is not the God of some particular race, place, or time. He is the father of all human beings and thus the absolute basis of truth and of democratic values. Jesus is not the Messiah of a particular race or nation, he has wrought salvation for all mankind.

For many Chinese, Christian religion is still an alien religion, the Christian God is still an alien God. Chinese tradition is at odds with these phenomena. Many Chinese are still occupied with their race, geography, and tradition rather than with the question of the highest truth. The mandate their culture has bestowed on them is not to become man but rather to become Chinese. What the Chinese lack – so Liu Xiao Feng maintains – is a deeper understanding of general social and anthropological realities and relationships.

In his attempt to provide a foundation for an understanding of the mystery of God's existence, Liu refers to Rahner's anthropological theology. For Rahner man is a being that can ask questions. Asking questions makes man the spiritual center of the world where God's message can be heard. If man does not raise any existential questions, he will be little more than a smart animal. In his anthropological approach to the mystery of God, Rahner tries to solve the conflict between Christian faith and national, historical, racial, cultural, and other phenomena. In Jesus mankind has asked the deepest questions and has been provided with the most meaningful and consoling answers. Who else in the world has given to so many people of all times the spiritual power to love? The question whether the Chinese have heard the voice of God in their cultural history is answered by Liu through reference to Rahner's well-known theological theory of the "anonymous Christians."¹¹

Questions of Ultimate Concern

CHINESE TRADITION AND ABSOLUTE VALUES

In his book *Salvation and Leisure*, Liu Xiao Feng deals extensively with Qu Yuan's major work, *Tian Wen* 天問. He finds it absurd that Qu Yuan raises questions about nature, the universe, mythology, the origin of history, and other basic concepts, but fails to give answers to these ques-

¹¹ Liu Xiao Feng does not mention that Rahner's theory is rather controversial. See Johann Baptist Metz, "Erste Fragen an die Theorie des Anonymen Christentums," in his *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1980), 141–3.

tions.¹² While taking a closer look at *Tian Wen*, Liu is interested in answers to the following questions: Why does Qu Yuan even raise these questions at all? What is the nature of these questions? What is his methodological approach to raising questions? What does it mean for the poet to raise questions? He feels that answers to these questions will not only reveal some of Qu Yuan's characteristic limits but also those of Chinese poets in general.

Liu comes to the conclusion that Qu Yuan does not provide any answers in *Tian Wen* because he is not able to, because he has not seriously approached any of these questions. We cannot even expect him to come up with answers since he has never been concerned with such metaphysical problems as the universe, nature, the nature of man, life, etc. As a Confucianist he is interested in the education and formation of the individual. Once that has been achieved, everything is in order:

perfection of the inner man, as well as harmony with society, history, and the universe. The Confucian ethical person is strong, self-conscious, and self-confident, quite in contrast to the individual in Judeo-Christian tradition who is considered weak, easily submits to pride, is constantly confronted with the problems of suffering and evil in society.

The question arises whether the individual person truly has the power (almighty power?) to solve his own problems and those of social history. What is meant by "perfecting one's self," which will lead to perfecting one's family, then to perfecting one's country, and finally to achieving world peace? Is there any mechanism that could be applied to assure success? Is there any objective standard to judge the situation? We are faced here with the real danger that such historical problems as suffering, injustice, and evil may be sidestepped or overlooked by this ideal, rationalistic ethics. It seems that no road is leading from the Confucian world of values to the real world of man, the two are separated by a vast abyss.¹³ Natural science had no chance to develop in China since Confucian personal ethics did not distinguish between its philosophy of life, its view of nature, and its view of history.¹⁴ "West, however,

12 See 90ff

13 Hao Chang speaks of the failure of Confucianism to bridge the two realms. *Op. cit.*, 294-8.

14 The historian and philosopher of science Stanley L. Jaki supports this theory. See e.g. his statement that refers to Needham's *Science and Civilization in China*: "Needham, in spite of his avowed Marxism, gave prominent place among causes that prevent the escape of science from its blind alley in ancient China to a theological cause, namely, the early vanishing among the Chinese of a belief in a rational Lawgiver or Creator of the world. Lacking that belief, the Chinese could not bring them selves to believe that man was able to trace out at least some of the laws of the physical universe." *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 14.

always distinguished clearly between such fields as science and theology; religious knowledge was never lumped together with historical and scientific knowledge.¹⁵

Liu Xiao Feng questions three basic Confucian principles: (1) that every individual person is one with history, (2) that every individual is one with social order, and (3) that every individual is one with the heavenly principles.

History may be called the Road of Humanism travelled by the sage kings. This road (Way of the Kings, *wangdao* 王道) was revealed to them by Heaven (objective laws of history). The individual person has to conform to this Way of History, has to follow the sage kings if he wants to become perfect (*ren*). Liu Xiao Feng cannot but pose the following questions: How can it be proved that the old kings received revelation? How can we say that there is only one royal road and that each individual must unconditionally follow it? Is it permissible to make of history a rationalized ethics? Should we welcome the prospect of seeing every individual person's will in conformity with the Way of History or should we reject it as a terrifying prospect?¹⁶

15 Although Liu Xiao Feng's statement cannot be accepted as it stands, it does point to the important historical fact that science and philosophy in the Christian West were distinguished from theology even when the former were considered *ancillae* of the latter. But it should also be noted that it was theology – especially the medieval concept of a rational, personal Creator-God – that gave great impetus to philosophical and scientific studies (search for rational laws in nature) and prepared the way for the scientific revolutions of the 17th century. Recent studies in the history of science have provided us with a wealth of information on the topic that should greatly influence modern man's understanding of the relationship between science, and religion. See e.g. Stanley L. Jaki's monumental *Uneasy Genius: The Life and Work of Pierre Duhem* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984). A careful study of this work of an eminent scientist and historian of science will make it impossible to subscribe any longer to sweeping statements such as the following: "Out of Greek ideas about nature and love of intellectual exercise in systematic thinking – following intermittently through the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the French Revolution and receiving great impetus from the industrial revolution, through which it greatly improved its instruments and technique – natural science has grown to its modern stage." See Chiang Monlin, *Tides From the West* (Taipei: The World Book Co., 1963), 250.

16 Events in China's most recent history show the relevance of Liu Xiao Feng's questions.

The Confucian virtues of *ren* 仁, *shifa* 師法, and *li* 禮 were meant to make the individual person one with Society (*he er wei yi* 合而爲一), in intention and result. The individual person had to follow the established rules of etiquette, had to be one with his family clan, his country and the king; he could never step outside these given frameworks to determine his own lifestyle. Questions that arise under such circumstances are: What about the values of the individual, notably his freedom? How could one be sure that the values of the country and the will of the king were a sound basis for man's happiness and his ideals? The role of the individual amounted thus to little more than to serve as an instrument in the hand of the king and in the grip of the country. Wars of liberation and revolutions have turned again and again into nightmares for the individual person without ever liberating him. How many poets and philosophers were killed by the kings or in turn used soldiers to kill people for the king!

Chinese humanism turns out to be an ambiguous term. It sounds beautiful, but what constitutes the fundament on which the values of the individual are based? If the will of the individual person is not to succumb to evil inclinations, it must be guided by a legal basis. But respectful laws ought to be grounded on absolutely reliable principles. Can king and/or country provide such a basis?

According to Confucian philosophy the individual person is one with the "Heavenly Principles" (*tian ren he de* 天人合聽). Liu Xiao Feng maintains that the ancient Chinese venerated Tian, a spirit with free will, the origin of everything, the final arbitrator of good and evil, an absolute authority.¹⁷ Except for human features, he was quite similar to the Western God, an absolute being that man could pray to. Liu thus can state that Westerners have no exclusive claim on God and that the Chinese have no reason to reject this God.

However, China never had anything in its literature like the Old Testament where the relationship between man and God is described in most intimate terms. For Confucianism in the Han period Tian had become the universe, the concept of a personal spiritual being was no longer alive, and it has never been recaptured ever since. In other words, only the ancient Chinese knew a spiritual, personal God. But his influence in Chinese spirituality has been weak, it is in no way com-

17 Fung Yu-Lan holds that in certain passages of the *Analects* the concept of Heaven denotes a purposeful Supreme Being. See his *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1983, 57.

parable to the powerful impact the Biblical God had, and still has, on the Western world.

With the influence of a spiritual, personal God on the wane, Confucianists began soon to emphasize the will of man as the realization of God's will (*tian ren Cong yi* 天人同一). That is why man's will became extremely powerful, almost almighty, in no need to expect anything from outside elements or factors. In many discussions, the strength of the human will, the greatness of the ethical person, was glorified. Liu Xiao Feng feels compelled again to raise some pointed questions: Does the will-power of such an ethical person make that man peace-loving? What are the ethical values of that person? Are they reliable? The will of the Christian ethical person is grounded in God. Man can never replace God. However, in Chinese literature we find many expressions claiming that man has virtually replaced God: God does not speak; all power, all decisions have been entrusted to the king or the country.

Liu raises the all-important question: How far is all this reliable? How can we be sure that one is pursuing the Way of the Kings and not an evil way? Speaking in terms of a class system, who dares to maintain that he does not promote his own class? Looking at the problem from the ethical point of view, who ventures to state that he has really reached perfection and is no longer prone to evil? Once man can honestly claim that he represents God, he is then justified to do just about everything (*ti tian xing dao* 替天行道) the slogan *tian ren he de* becomes *ren ren he de* 人人合聽. But without an absolute God, what is the very basis of ethics, what is the meaning of honesty? Are we not inviting absurdity?

Tian and *ren* in Confucianism have merged just as *tian dao* and *ren dao* are the same, they are one, with man as basis. The concept of *tian* has no longer any transcending meaning, therefore any kind of transcendent world is alien to Confucian thinking. If modern Confucianists speak of transcending possibilities, they still do not venture beyond man's realm, beyond an inner-worldly framework; the transcending element does not – in the final analysis – exist apart from man, is not something beyond man (transcending nature, life, universe, history).¹⁸ Man therefore saves himself, there is no recourse needed to salvation from somewhere else.

18 Chiang Monlin categorically states: "For the Chinese the gods are but part of nature, while to Christians nature is but the creation of God" (*op. cit.*, 252). Although the "Hong Kong Manifesto" (1958) of prominent Confucianists attributes to Confucianism a high degree of religiousness (unity of heaven and humankind), and although it refers to *tian* as the metaphysical ground of being and source of meaning of the "Numinous Beyond," it does little to clarify the transcendent character of *tian* and does not explain how an encounter between a rational, personal human being and the "Numinous Beyond" could possibly take place. See Hao Chang's discussion of the Manifesto, *op. cit.*, 288-93.

Another problem resulting from the Confucian view of man (personal ethics) is the limits it imposes on the domain of inquiry and knowledge. Complacency with the individual person's knowledge prevented many scholars from searching for further knowledge, from raising questions, from delving into such problems as first principles, as was done by the Greeks and by Christian philosophers. The latter discovered that man is contingent, open-ended; that he is not the absolute master of himself and his life; that his doubts lead to new insights and new knowledge.¹⁹ The Chinese sages did not appreciate this approach, they saw little value in doubting any given knowledge and in analyzing new situations. They preferred to acquire and pass on knowledge handed down by the authorities of history and society. Thus they thought they knew all that there was to know concerning heaven and earth and fate.

Liu Xiao Feng suggests that even Confucius was prone to intellectual self-confidence and complacency when he defined knowledge as "It is to know both what one knows and what one does not know" and left it at that.²⁰ Confucius was not plagued by doubts; his was the task of answering questions, not raising questions that might have opened up entirely new vistas to him. In this respect Socrates differed greatly from Confucius. When Socrates died, he confessed that he lacked true knowledge. His search for radical self-understanding and his inquiry into last

19 It was the Christian medieval thinkers who prepared the ground for the great scientific revolutions. That is to say, it was on the fertile ground of Christian medieval Europe that the seed of modern science was sown and grew up and not at any other place in the world. In this context, statements such as the following reveal gross ignorance, to say the least: "One universe cannot be expected to produce the fruits of another. The fruits of the tree of science ripen in intellectual gardens alone – within the system of Christian dogma or that of Chinese moral precepts no science could have been produced." Chiang Monlin, *op. cit.*, 253.

20 The Master said, "Yu, shall I teach you what knowledge is? When you know a thing, to hold that you know it; and when you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it. This is knowledge." *Analects* 3:17, cited in the translation of James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol.1 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970), 151.

principles such as the highest good or the absolute goodness had shown him the limits of human knowledge, had made him humble and careful. Yet at the same time it had opened up to him the road to transcendent knowledge that helped him face the death sentence with a peaceful conscience. Qu Yuan, however, condemned by the state to a life in exile, was not able to free himself from the constraints of Confucian ethics and reach out to transcendent values. He saw no way out of the absurdity of his situation. He committed suicide and left this world in despair.

CHINESE TRADITION AND THE PHENOMENA
OF SUFFERING, FEAR, EVIL, AND SIN

Liu Xiao Feng²¹ deplors the fact that in the Confucian ethical system there is little or no concern for suffering, man's weaknesses, temptation, despair, death,²² and the like, as there is in Christianity where God has sent his own son to save man. In China there is no God who hears the cries of the suffering people. None of the three hundred poems in the *Book of Odes* deals with suffering and death. What really do they have to say about man? Why does Confucianism show so little interest in tears and blood? And why is there so much talk about joy and serenity?

Taoism does not accept the present world as it exists. According to Zhuang-zi, man is without the concept of sin, but he is full of suffering and unable to escape death. By rejecting history, by rejecting culture and established values, man can overcome these products of cultural history. Once he has freed himself from all these phenomena and has achieved harmony with nature, he will enjoy peace and happiness. In this state of mind he is beyond time and place, good and evil, love and hate, life and death.

Christianity accepts the world as it is, but not unconditionally. For Christianity the world is beset by sin, evil, and suffering. Liu Xiao Feng puts special emphasis on the concept of Original Sin (Adam, Original Sin, Redemption). Man cannot free himself from sin, he is in need of grace. The Taoist relies on himself to escape from misery and suffering, the Christian does not rely on himself and therefore turns to a spiritual

21 *Salvation and Leisure*, 83–7.

22 Neo-Confucianism also tries to come to grips with the most important source of existential anxieties – death. It treats it in the framework of self-cultivation and with a view to communion with the Numinous Beyond referred to in note 18 above. See Hao Chang, *op. cit.*, 299.

power – God. Without God, man cannot be saved, man does not even know what he is to be; reason and nature can provide only vague ideas and impressions.

God's love and salvation through Christ are the absolute conditions of the Christian for accepting this world: not just the beauty of life, but also all happenings, man's sinfulness, all kinds of suffering, even death. Salvation through Christ encourages us to face sin, evil, and suffering; to identify with the "useless," the "weak," the "sick," the "outcast" of society; to look at the woes of an unhappy society and lead beyond. In an article on the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Liu Xiao Feng shows us how the theology of God's redemptive power and love is applied to modern politics, history, ethics, and business.²³

Niebuhr observes that the 20th century abounds in high-sounding claims and slogans. However, the political reality is far from encouraging. He criticizes Liberalism and Marxism for not acknowledging the evil and sinfulness in man's nature, which he considers the very root and source of all social and political problems. For Niebuhr sin is not only a religious phenomenon, it has also social and political dimensions: lust for political power, social injustice, corruption of officials, violation of human rights, etc. Christians have to fight for true justice in this world. Christian realism does not conform with existing realities, neither does it turn away from reality and politics.

Niebuhr emphasizes the following contribution Christians ought to make in our modern society: criticizing present policies and forwarding a value system based on respect, on preserving and defending the values of the individual (freedom, rights), providing a better basis for true humanity and genuine human rights by considering the fact that human beings are sinners and at the same time children of God. Niebuhr voices his conviction that only he who believes in God will be able to ward off all kinds of outer and inner controls, will free himself from empty dreams and silly slogans, and finally from despair. Only he who believes in God and relies on him, will gain enough freedom to become an honest and fearless politician.

THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUES OF LOVE, HOPE, AND JOY

Liu Xiao Feng's reflections on religious values culminate in his praise of Christian love.²⁴ God is love and this love is creative. God has given

23 Mo Mo, "Bu bao huang xiang, ye bu jue wang" 不抱幻象,也避絕望 (Do not cherish illusions and you avoid despair), in *Reading Monthly*, January 1989: 114-21.

24 A recent article discussing Liu Xiao Feng's *Salvation and Leisure* considers love the main theme of the book. See He Guang-hu, 'jie ge shi jie zui xu yao ai', 這個世界最需要是愛

man a share in his creative love. This is evidenced in the incarnation of Christ and in his crucifixion and death for mankind. The cross of Jesus Christ has become the symbol of God's love of man and is therefore the sign of hope for all mankind.

In an article on Dietrich Bonhoeffer,²⁵ Liu Xiao Feng castigates the "wisdom of secular man" that despises Christianity for its preoccupation with suffering and sin, that ridicules the Christian "Way to Heaven" as an escape from the realities of this world.

Liu Xiao Feng feels that this "secular wisdom" with its emphasis on happiness in this world, is little concerned about man's suffering and despair in this world. Such a wisdom can never reach a height where it would sing the praise of suffering, where it would look at love as something truly great. God has given us Christ, who came into this world to suffer and thereby destroy and reject everything that endangers the values of human life.²⁶ God has suffered and is still suffering in Christ, not a glorious suffering! But it is a suffering for man's freedom, peace, and happiness and therefore a suffering that deserves the highest praise! What distinguishes Christianity from all other religions and certainly from all secular wisdoms is that God has come in Christ not in his power but rather in weakness and suffering to help man, to be with man. He has come in love. That is the message of Christ's suffering.

No rational ethical system will ever face up to the problems of suffering, emptiness, absurdity, despair, and death. Neither will it find an answer to the phenomena of evil and sin in mankind. God sent his son into the world so that man could be redeemed and share in God's redemptive love.²⁷ In this context Liu Xiao Feng raises some important questions: Why did the Chinese fail to develop the concept of personal sin? Why do we hardly find any traces in Chinese poetry of the evil in man, of human failures and human sinfulness? Did the Chinese poets never realize that the evil in cultural history is man-made? Why is there so

(What this world needs most is love), in *Reading Monthly*, June 1989:5-17.

25 Mo Mo "Can gen shang di de tong ku" 看見上帝的痛苦 (Join God's suffering), in *Reading Monthly*, February 1989: 118-25.

26 *Salvation and Leisure*, 136-9.

27 *Ibid.*, 160-8.

little praise of the holy in Chinese poetry and so much praise of personal achievements?

In a discourse on love, Liu Xiao Feng projects a new vision for man.²⁸ Love is creative, it transcends everything, it destroys evil in man. God's gift of love liberates man from his sinfulness (selfishness), creates a new world in him. God forgives man his sins, man in turn learns to forgive. Love is compassionate, it endeavors to enhance life and love in the suffering. Love creates joy, which finds its culmination in the joy of the Holy Spirit given to the lover and the beloved.

Liu Xiao Feng draws our attention also to the theological virtue of hope. In an article on the theology of Moltman,²⁹ he reminds us of the fact that we are not too far from Orwell's dreadful vision expounded in his 1984. What is left in China of such concepts as hope, ideal, liberation, or future after the Cultural Revolution? Do they have to be crossed out in our dictionaries? Liu Xiao Feng conceives of the theology of Moltman as a witness to hope in our dreadful age.

For Moltman Christianity means hope. Christ's death and resurrection brought hope and new ideals. In hope we expect the resurrection from the dead, eternal life, a life of love and justice. However, only after undergoing suffering, death, and resurrection with Jesus Christ shall we be able to experience true hope.

Christian hope is not an empty slogan, but a future promised by God. It is not a natural process, it is based on Christ's cross, his redemptive love. Our understanding of misery and suffering and hope must be based on this crucified Jesus. He is the only true help for our disillusioned world. Since the loving God is still with us in human suffering, we must resolutely face our present problems, sufferings, evils, death and all kinds of pressures and tensions. Because Jesus is with us, we fight for love, justice, peace, for the kingdom of God on earth. In Christ's death and resurrection we have the promise of final liberation (the new Heaven and the new Earth).

Conclusion

Liu Xiao Feng's publications suggest that many of his ideas coincide with those of a Christian. His understanding of the Christian God has

28 *Ibid* 184-96.

29 Mo Mo, "Shi zijia shi da di de xi wang" 十字架是大地的希望 (The cross is the hope of the world), in *Reading Monthly*, May 1989: 111-18.

set him on a road to new vistas, has provided him with an intellectual and spiritual foundation on which he projects his new vision for China. His religious ideas help to explain why in the discussions of many cultural and traditional issues he sides with the Christian West against his own cultural traditions. At times it seems to make him prone to partiality and oversimplification with regard to certain problems. Liu Xiao Feng's writings are not free of sweeping statements. They reveal a certain impatience with his own people and traditions.³⁰ They tend to overlook or at least underrate certain values the Chinese heritage entails, and the religious seeds the Chinese soil contains.

Looking back at developments in China during the last century, one feels compelled to ask whether Liu Xiao Feng is not justified, after all, to be impatient with his people and to take a critical look at the Chinese heritage. How far has China advanced beyond the manifestos and slogans of the May 4th Movement seventy years ago? Why is it that after decades of revolutions and bloodletting China is still in the tight grip of a socio-political system that promises peace and prosperity but produces horrible cultural revolutions instead and employs tanks to "quell" peaceful demonstrations? Why is it that values such as human rights, freedom of the press, freedom of speech are so difficult to establish in China? Does the traditional Chinese value system lack basic elements conducive to coping successfully with problems of our modern society?

No matter how we judge Liu Xiao Feng's analysis and discussion of certain phenomena of the Chinese cultural heritage, he should be credited for directing our attention to basic questions that have been overlooked or were put under taboo for too long by Chinese intellectual circles; the young writer certainly deserves to be supported for his basic thrust.

For those familiar with the intellectual and educational scene on the Mainland as well as in Taiwan, it is rather obvious that the concept "European Cultural History" has been shaped mainly by scientific and positivistic-materialistic thinking of the 19th and 20th centuries. Expressions such as the dark, backward, superstitious and/or dogmatic Middle Ages are still making the rounds in China. It seems to have escaped

30 This impatience Liu Xiao Feng's publications have in common with *He Shang*, the famous TV series, shown in July of 1988. The text of this series has been published. See Su Xiao Kang, Wang Luliang, *He Shang* 河殤 (River Elegy), Xian dai chu ban she, 1988.

the consciousness of the intelligentsia in China – possibly under pressure from the country's leadership – that a wealth of information is available not only on such fields as medieval art, literature, music, law, the universities, rational philosophy, and science, but also on the ideas of bi-polarity of power (temporal vs. religious); of progress (moving towards a goal, a phenomenon that underlies our technological civilization and the sciences as well as many great political movements); of the conscience and the value of the individual person (element of unrest that transforms the history of the world); of a new “work ethos” (*ora et labora*); of the town as a juridical, autonomous entity where the guilds (corporations) come into existence and begin to exercise power, developing an ethics of work and wages, establishing rationality in finances (business and accounting), setting up special centers for culture and learning, thereby laying the foundation for the modern Western society.

The so-called dogmatic medieval world is, in fact, a pluralistic world with a host of institutionalized conflicts (e.g., spiritual and temporal power, the many nations and territories of Europe, the legal powers existing side by side). All these diverse entities and mutual relationships are directed towards a transcendent/divine origin of the world, a divine origin that relativizes these mutual relationships. This transcendent/divine origin is the religious-metaphysical root of medieval pluralism.

This pluralism is the basis of the enormous dynamism and vitality of European developments. It is a virulent power that makes possible both the searching mind and the freedom needed for the searching mind of the researcher. In this phenomenon, we discover the real and also the deepest continuity of European history: the modern world with its pluralism of religious and temporal views; the pluralism of states, of classes, of parties within a dynamic system. All this is rooted in the Christian Middle Ages, still considered by many a dark, sterile, repressive age.³¹

Liu Xiao Feng, well versed in European cultural history, is not only familiar with the cultural richness, pluralism, and fertility of the European Middle Ages, he knows also about the religious-metaphysical roots of these phenomena. He is aware of the fact that it was not so much

31 See Thomas Nipperday, “Die Aktualität des Mittelalters: Über die historischen Grundlagen der Modernität,” in his *Nachdenken über die deutsche Geschichte* (München: Verlag H. Beck, 1986), 21–30.

the result of Renaissance and Humanism that established modern subjectivity and dynamism, but rather religious ideas such as the medieval problem of sin and grace, of sinfulness of man and the omnipotence of God, of the individual human being standing before almighty God. With Max Scheler³² he holds that an absolute value-system can only be established if it is founded on belief in the Christian God. Man's nature cannot be based on natural/practical phenomena such as rationalism (Descartes, Kant), creation of tools (Marx), biological powers and processes (Darwin), strength of will (Nietzsche), psychological abilities (Freud), or any other features extolled by humanisms, old and new.

The true value of the human person will only be revealed if man is seen in his relation to God, who is love and the origin of all love. Only the love between God and man makes the latter radically different from all other animals. For Liu Xiao Feng it is this love of God, so concretely revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ, that illuminates our earthly life and reevaluates all our values and value systems. It amounts to a new vision for China, provided it comes to a dialogue between China and the Christian West whose language is based on common experiences of ultimate concern.

Little has been said in this paper about the educational implications of Liu Xiao Feng's reflections. If the religious message of these reflections is understood, it should not be too difficult to translate it into educational ideas and programs (religious and otherwise) that could become instrumental for the advancement of Chinese Society. The paper has made it clear that repercussions would not only be felt in such fields as religion, ethics, and philosophy, but also in the realms of science, law, and social relationships.

32 See his (Mo Mo) article on Max Scheler, "Ren shi qi dao de X" 人是祈禱的X (Man is the X of prayer), in *Reading Monthly*, October 1988: 111-9.