

Western Ideas and the Development of a New Identity and "Self-Awareness" among Contemporary Chinese Intellectuals*

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This article will examine new developments in Chinese intellectual thought since 1978 by focusing on the central issue of "self-awareness." The article begins with a discussion of the impact of Western ideas on modern Chinese intellectual discourse. Proceeding from this starting point, the relation between China's search for modernity and the various new approaches and conceptual changes in Chinese thought during the last fifteen years will be reviewed.

This article will also discuss the "paradigm" shift in Chinese intellectual circles and its effect on redefinitions of "self-identity." The privatization of China's belief system during the last decade has brought unprecedented intellectual diversity and in-depth reflection. The dramatic social changes which have marginalized China's intellectuals have also redefined their traditional functions and identity, allowing them to develop a more professionally-oriented consciousness and become less culturally bound.

The article concludes that despite uncertainty during this time of transition, Chinese intellectuals' newly-acquired "self-awareness" will help them adjust to the new climate of intellectual diversity. Rejections of old ideological certitude and abstract universality will enable them to play a more colorful and pluralistic role in society.

Keywords: intellectual discourse; self-awareness; reflexivity; Chinese intellectuals

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After 1840, when the Western powers first forced the opening up of China's coastal cities for commercial trading, along with Western

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gunboats, commodities, and missionaries, modern European ideas began to enter China to challenge two thousand years of Confucian tradition. Faced with a deep crisis at almost every level of Chinese society, many Chinese intellectuals over the last one hundred and fifty years have attempted to seek "the truth" from these ideas in order to "save" China. Whether educated in the West or in China, Chinese intellectuals from Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Sun Yat-sen to Hu Shi and Mao Zedong have all drawn substantial intellectual inspiration from Western sources. It can be said that to a certain degree, virtually every major current of modern Western thought has exerted an impact on the development of modern Chinese intellectual discourse, and one of these, Marxism, even became the dominant official ideology of China after 1949. The introduction of Western ideas into Chinese intellectual discourse has been a complex process whereby sophisticated interaction has taken place between the Western and Chinese traditions. Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this complex process in detail. Instead, this paper will focus mainly on the impact of Western thought on the formation of a new "self-awareness" (*zijue*) among Chinese intellectuals over the last decade. In analyzing the conceptual structure and theoretical content of contemporary Chinese intellectual "self-awareness," it is possible to formulate an important perspective which helps us see more clearly the ever-changing relationship between Chinese intellectuals and society. It is also through this perspective that the Chinese intellectual's self-defining and self-adjusting role in the turbulent process of Chinese modernization will be discussed in comparison with that of his Western counterpart.

Chinese Tradition, Western Enlightenment Modernity, and Four Intellectual Premises

Thomas A. Metzger, a well-known American Sinologist, has written extensively on the issue of the modern Chinese intellectuals' "self-awareness."¹ In his work, Professor Metzger discusses the in-

¹See Thomas A. Metzger, "Continuities between Modern and Premodern China: Some Neglected Methodological and Substantive Issues," in *Ideas Across Cultures*, ed. Paul A. Cohen and Merle Goldman (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 263-92; and Thomas A. Metzger, "The Sociological Imagination in China: Comments on the Thought of Chin Yao-Chi," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (November 1993): 937-48.

tellectual continuity between the premodern Confucian cultural heritage and the modern Chinese consciousness. He concludes that, in spite of substantial Western influence, mainstream Chinese intellectuals still share certain basic presuppositions which have their intellectual roots deeply embedded in China's past.² Metzger summarizes the four intellectual premises that have been extremely widespread in twentieth-century China: "emphasizing a utopian goal," "adopting an 'optimistic epistemology' centered on 'reason' as a universal cognitive and moral capacity able to distinguish between good and bad political choices," "seeing history as a globally teleological process of 'progress' based on 'reason'," and "identifying an epistemically and morally privileged group able to help China catch up with the global tide of progress."³ According to Metzger, these premises have been taken for granted by Chinese liberalism, "modern Confucian humanism, Sunism, Chinese Marxism and post-Mao trends on the Mainland,"⁴ etc.

Here Metzger accurately depicts the main features of modern Chinese thought, establishing a deep-rooted continuity between China's Confucian tradition and the deep structure of the modern Chinese mind. Doubtlessly, all four of these premises can be traced back to the theoretical origins of Confucianism. At the same time, however, as Metzger himself acknowledges, one can easily argue that the modern versions of these premises have also been shaped to a large extent by European Enlightenment thought. The utopian goal of a perfect society, the emphasis on secular reason as the universal criterion for knowledge and morality, a belief in progress based on the teleological process, and an intellectual elite comprised of a privileged few who know the destination of mankind, all constitute the cornerstones of modern European Enlightenment thought. For the last hundred years or so, mainstream Chinese intellectuals have enthusiastically embraced these fundamental ideas. For them, "science," "reason," "historical necessity," and "the ideal society" have been the essential building blocks for the construction of any modern Chinese intellectual-cultural discourse. Fortunately for these intellectuals, the new European ideas on progress, knowledge, society, and history were

²See Metzger, "The Sociological Imagination in China."

³*Ibid.*, 944.

⁴*Ibid.*, 944-45.

not fundamentally alien to the underlying theoretical assumptions of their own Confucian tradition. After an initial superficial "clearing away" of China's "feudal legacy," they were quite comfortable with the notion of "using the past to serve the present," while at the same time incorporating "the past" within the "present." Although certain intellectual radicals like Mao Zedong or intellectual liberals like Hu Shi attempted to reject Chinese tradition by criticizing its Confucian legacy, their intellectual influences were Western Marxism and Scientism, respectively, both of which are closely related to the four premises previously mentioned. Even Chinese conservatives like Liang Shuming, who realized the limitations of modern Enlightenment thought and emphasized the importance of Chinese tradition instead, could not resist the temptation to seek a perfect utopian society through social engineering.⁵

The response of mainstream Chinese intellectuals to the challenge of modern Western ideas has, up until very recently, been the basically one-sided adoption of Enlightenment modernity—European intellectual thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The best explanation for this phenomenon is that China's cultural soil provided a particular historical framework or mind-set in which some modern Western ideas could be more readily appreciated or incorporated than others (for example, Western ideas relating to the dark side of modernity, such as existentialism, only became fashionable in China during the 1980s).

The fact that Enlightenment modernity has dominated Chinese intellectual discourse over the last hundred years has also defined the role of Chinese intellectuals in society. In adopting the utopian model for their society where all contradictions, conflicts, and dichotomies are resolved, mainstream Chinese intellectuals have taken as their main task the construction of this ideal society. In order to attain this final phase of human evolution, Chinese intellectuals (as a privileged social group possessing the highest consciousness of historical necessity) need to use universally valid reason to criticize and judge social existence, reforming reality through social engineering based upon a blueprint of the grand social design. These intellectuals regard it as their historical mission to lead the social transformation and

⁵See Xu Jilin, "Liang Shuming: The Anti-Modern Utopia of a Cultural Nationalist," *Ershi yi shiji* (Twenty-first Century) (Hong Kong), no. 15 (February 1993): 50-54.

modernization of their country. Far from being detached scholars observing the rapidly changing social process from the sidelines, they are all active participants in the sociopolitical process.⁶

Historically, there has always existed a very close relationship between Chinese intellectuals and their state or society. It is perhaps due to this fact that up until the late 1980s, there was a noticeable lack of well-developed "self-awareness" among them. In comparison with their Western counterparts, mainstream Chinese intellectuals usually place too much faith in man's capacity to define cognitive truth and moral good, and often have too much confidence in the intellectuals' role in reforming society and human nature.⁷ The lack of a reflexive "self-awareness" and the close relationship between intellectuals and their sociopolitical reality are mutually supportive, and these two elements constitute the most important characteristics of Chinese intellectuals. It is also a reflection of historical reality that the Chinese intelligentsia has, unlike their Western counterparts, consistently failed to achieve social autonomy and intellectual freedom. The submissive nature of the relationship between them and their political masters has further circumvented the formation or development of this vital "self-awareness." It is true to say that both Chinese and Western intellectuals attempt to act as the spokespersons for the social conscience, the critical commentators for social, political, and moral issues, and the bearers and developers of cultural values and knowledge. However, as modern Western society has become more diverse and complex, bringing a more clearly defined social division of labor, contemporary Western intellectuals have become more critical, not only in their theoretical discussions about society, but also in terms of their own self-defined functions and roles. They have become less certain about their central, avant-garde, privileged position in terms of defining and judging cognitive truth and moral values, becoming increasingly cautious about universal claims and utopian versions of the future. This trend can be clearly seen in the work of many modern Western intellectuals, such as Karl R. Popper,

⁶See Metzger, "Continuities between Modern and Premodern China"; and Xu Jilin, *Zhizhe de zunyan: Zhishifenzhi yu jindai wenhua* (The dignity of the scholar: Intellectuals and modern culture) (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1991).

⁷Of course, exceptions have always existed. Lu Xun in his later years, for example, became very skeptical and even pessimistic about the notions of "progress" and "evolution."

Thomas S. Kuhn, Friedrich A. Hayek, Isaiah Berlin, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty. Self-doubt and a self-critical attitude have now become virtual hallmarks of contemporary Western intellectuals, the core of their reflexive "self-awareness." This development, which has been increasingly influential in Western intellectual circles since the 1960s, has also gradually come to be a feature of the Chinese intellectual scene since the mid-1980s. It has altered the old cultural-intellectual discourse by challenging certain fundamental sacred beliefs deeply rooted in mainstream Chinese thought.

"Self-Doubt" and Reflexive Awareness

Both the shock waves created by the new currents of Western thought coming into China and the collapse of the official Marxist ideology resulting from the social and economic reforms initiated during the previous decade generated a real spiritual, moral, and cognitive crisis for the Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s. It was at the same time, however, that, through the process of this crisis, a reflexive "self-awareness" gradually came to be formulated. The 1980s witnessed the virtual abandonment of the old all-embracing belief system and the emergence of several new competing intellectual trends.⁸ The pluralistic or diverse situation in the contemporary Chinese intellectual arena also indicates a deep structural change in Chinese intellectual discourse, a crucial transformation that will lead to the construction of an autonomous civil consciousness. This change can be described as a major breakthrough, or "paradigm shift," in Chinese intellectual history. Obviously, intellectual diversity alone cannot be equated with deep structural change; it is a change in the core beliefs underlying the intellectual diversity, and the reflexive awareness inherent in these different conceptual sources that give rise to the "paradigm shift."

This "paradigm shift" is first evident in a kind of positive cynicism based on the conscious realization that human knowledge is inevitably fallible and that there are fundamental limitations to human nature. In other words, many Chinese intellectuals have begun to

⁸For a detailed discussion on the new intellectual developments in the 1980s, see Lin Min, "From Neo-Rationalism to Neo-Conservatism: An Overview of Chinese Intellectual and Ideological Developments in the Post-Mao Era," *New Zealand Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (June 1993): 50-83.

discard a long-held naive optimism and almost blind faith in the omnipotence of human knowledge and the idealization of human nature, claiming instead that a certain level of skepticism or cynicism is essential to a proper understanding of human life and the world.⁹ The weakness and fallibility of human beings and their knowledge systems should thus be the starting point for any serious theoretical reflection. No theory, however comprehensive or sophisticated, can ever properly explain, much less solve, the fundamental problems of human beings. Such skepticism should not, however, drive us to deep despair, since, on the positive side, it prevents us from falling into the usual pitfalls associated with the passionate pursuit of the ideal, the perfect, and the infallible.¹⁰

In one sense, these intellectuals were clearly aware of the deep-rooted tension between what one hopes for and what one can actually achieve. The basic dilemma was that they were, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, "informed of contingency while believing themselves to narrate necessity, of particular locality while believing themselves to narrate universality, of tradition-bound interpretation while believing themselves to narrate the extraterritorial and extratemporal truth, of undecidability while believing themselves to narrate transparency, of the provisionality of the human condition while believing themselves to narrate the certainty of the world, of the ambivalence of man-made design while believing themselves to narrate the order of nature."¹¹

The prevailing mood of cynicism and critical skepticism among China's intellectuals indicates the development of a theoretical maturity and sophistication. This "self-awareness" is based on the conscious recognition of human limitations and deficiencies. Overconfidence and blind optimism, coupled with cognitive naivety, can only lead to a simplistic version of the real world, as opposed to a reflexive consciousness, with which the complexity of human existence can be perceived.

Here, the key word is "reflexivity." It underpins the deep structural, or paradigm, change in the Chinese intellectual arena. It is also the inner core of the Chinese intelligentsia's new "self-

⁹See Han Shaogong, "Words from a Night Walker's Dream," *Dushu* (Reading) (Beijing), 1993, no. 5:62-69.

¹⁰See *ibid.*, 62-68.

¹¹See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 231-32.

awareness." As one European scholar observes: "Reflexivity involves a profound and deep undermining of any assumptions that the order of things should be, indeed could be, taken for granted."¹² "Reflexivity also 'means the attitude in which the subject of inquiry is seen as an intrinsic part of the object of inquiry'."¹³ With regard to the first quotation, certain widely-held views or basic assumptions underlying the belief system of mainstream Chinese intellectuals have been seriously questioned. The four fundamental premises of Chinese intellectual thought analyzed in Metzger's work are, to a large extent, no longer taken for granted by a substantial number of contemporary Chinese intellectuals. Many of them have begun to challenge some of the basic principles of Enlightenment modernity which share a close structural affinity with traditional Chinese intellectual discourse.

First, the unified, all-encompassing view of the world has been deconstructed, and the world and human life are no longer perceived as rational constructs based on immutable essence and historical necessity. The rational structure of a holistic world and a universally valid way of human life are now regarded more as sacred myths, rather than reality. Several young Chinese intellectuals have, through their theoretical and creative works, seriously questioned this naive world view, bringing multiplicity into recent Chinese intellectual discourse to replace universality, diversity instead of uniformity, contingency replacing necessity, and absurdity replacing rationality.¹⁴ The deconstruction of the sacred myth of a unified world is an important step in the Chinese intellectuals' search for a multidimensional understanding of the world and reality. According to these young intellectuals, who have drawn their inspiration from many Western postmodernists, the world and human life are much more complex than the optimistic Enlightenment rationalists would allow, and the concepts of rationality, regularity, necessity, and universality have an extremely limited function in describing modern reality. On the contrary, the world and life are full of irrational incidents, contingent

¹²See Keith Tester, *Civil Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 12.

¹³*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴See Liu Xiaobo, *Xuanzede pipan: Yu sixiang lingxiu Li Zehou duihua* (A selected critique: A dialogue with the leading figure in Chinese intellectual circles Li Zehou) (Taipei: Fengyun shidai chuban gongsi, 1989); Bei Dao, *Waves*, trans. B. S. McDougall (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1985).

relations, individual particularity, and unpredictable uncertainty.¹⁵

This reflection naturally leads to the challenge of a second important myth of Enlightenment modernity, that is, the unifying, absolute, and monist views on truth, knowledge, and morality. If a world view is based on the assumption that a rational unifying structure is no longer acceptable, then the logical extension is the inevitable rejection of an optimistic epistemology. The central claims derived from this overconfident or optimistic cognitive system consist of three interrelated suppositions. The first is the assumption that there is a unitary truth system which embraces all areas of human activity; it is a cognitive system possessing a universal validity that crosses the boundaries of culture and history. The second is the quasi-religious faith in "reason" or "scientific rationality," which assures that only human reason or formal (scientific) rationality has a monopoly on all truth claims ("reason" was conceived as the universal criterion against which all knowledge claims should be judged). Third, and perhaps the most important principle is the assumption that there exists a transcendent-absolute realm in which all cognitive dichotomies and moral dilemmas can be reconciled.

These three interrelated presuppositions have come under close scrutiny by some contemporary Chinese intellectuals. The monist all-embracing system has been criticized by Chinese intellectuals as a "dogmatic cognitive dictatorship." Some insist that, although China now faces a serious crisis of belief with a complete breakdown of the ideological consensus, what it needs is not an all-embracing universal belief system shared in common by everyone, but pluralistic systems of beliefs, which include the diverse resources of human spiritual and intellectual creations such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Marxism.¹⁶ Therefore, it is the "privatization of belief," rather than the "universalization of knowledge and faith," which has become the hallmark of contemporary Chinese intellectual development.¹⁷

This privatization of belief has been one of the most fundamental changes to take place in China over the last decade. It has also been essential to the formation of a reflexive "self-awareness" among

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶See Li Zehou and Lin Yusheng, eds., *Wusi: Duoyuande fansi* (May Fourth: Multiple reflections) (Taipei: Fengyun shidai chuban gongsi, 1989), 256.

¹⁷See Shao Dongfang, "Cultural China: Explanation and Communication," *Ming Pao Monthly* (Hong Kong), January 1993, no. 1:11.

Chinese intellectuals. For the first time since the founding of the PRC, Chinese intellectuals have the degree of freedom needed to search for ideas or beliefs through their own personal and private journeys, ideas which are no longer defined by the state or the Party. Though ideological control still exists in China, its effectiveness and practical function have long been substantially reduced. China's intellectuals can now undertake a serious quest for intellectual truth, develop conceptual frameworks for their ideas, and seek transcendent-religious beliefs by means of self-discovery or self-reflection. This process of privatizing one's intellectual endeavors by reclaiming the individual right to free thought has led to the release of enormous cultural energy and creativity, forming a real sense of the individual "self" which constitutes the basis of any reflexive "self-awareness."¹⁸

The key point here is the formation or establishment of the real "cognitive self"—an individual-based autonomous subject who possesses an inner awareness and understanding in pursuing his or her cognitive activities. The process leading to the "privatization of belief" has also led to the inevitable conclusion, widely accepted among Chinese intellectuals, that any universal or transcendent principles or truths, if they exist, should not be taken for granted and imposed on the collective in an arbitrary fashion. On the contrary, it is thought that these truths or principles, which are touted as being universal or absolute, should only be conceived through individual private comprehension or, more precisely, by means of self-cognition or through one's own personal experience. That is to say: "a universal principle of humanism ought to be individually applied in practice."¹⁹ In other words, the less formal but more fundamental aspect of an a priori positioning of the individual subject in China's heavily collective-oriented intellectual discourse has been emphasized and has

¹⁸See Wang Desheng, "The Academic Scene of the Public Arena," *Dongfang* (Orient), 1994, no. 5:56-58. In the last five years, against the background of the increasing commercialization of Chinese society, there has, ironically, emerged a strong voice among the intellectuals for autonomous scholarly pursuit. More than ten different new journals or periodicals which are dedicated to serious academic and cultural issues have been established by various groups of Chinese intellectuals. Most of these new journals, including *Xueren* (Scholar) and *Dongfang*, have acquired semi-independence in terms of their editorial policies, with a more flexible and open-minded approach. They have provided Chinese intellectuals with a less-restrained forum in which to conduct real theoretical debates on many important issues concerning China's cultural tradition and modernity.

¹⁹See Tao Dongfeng, "What Does the Spirit of Humanity Conceal?" *Ershiyi shiji*, no. 32 (December 1995): 136.

now become the starting point for the new epistemology.

The pluralistic and individual pursuit of a diverse conceptual framework has also led to a reexamination of the concept of "reason" and "scientific rationality," as Western hermeneutics has been employed to deconstruct formal reason. To many Chinese intellectuals, the prelogical world of life and the existence of a complex reality beyond analytical reason is more fundamental than instrumental rationality. The limitations of reason, as revealed in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Isaiah Berlin, and Richard Rorty, should be recognized as a given fact in accepting their relativistic and pluralistic definitions of truth. Some young Chinese intellectuals have emphasized the "differentiation of spheres of value" to reject a "basic unity of spheres of value."²⁰ Some have shown a deep appreciation for Berlin's analysis of the predicament faced by Russian and other European intellectuals over their inability to reconcile conflicting but equally important values. They have realized that:

True pluralism, as Berlin understands it, is much more tough-minded and intellectually bold: it rejects the view that all conflicts of values can be finally resolved by synthesis and that all desirable goals may be reconciled. . . . Moral conduct therefore may involve making agonising choices, without help of universal criteria, between incompatible but equally desirable values.²¹

Critical cognitive skepticism has become the dominant feature of many Chinese intellectuals' pursuits. In their major discussions on tradition, culture, and modernity, certain key figures in Chinese intellectual circles have highlighted the deep-rooted dilemmas of modernity, accepting the fact that the positive values of liberty and democracy will inevitably be accompanied by a commodity fetish and human alienation.²² Historical evil and moral good are twin brothers, inseparable in social progress, and several irreconcilable dichotomies, such as individual liberty versus social equality, personal freedom versus moral uncertainty, and material progress versus spiritual estrangement, are also part of the process.²³

²⁰See Li and Lin, *Wusi: Duoyuande fansi*, 72.

²¹See Introduction by Aileen Kelly in Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), xv.

²²See Gan Yan, ed., *Zhongguo dangdai wenhua yishi* (Contemporary Chinese cultural consciousness) (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1989), v-vi.

²³*Ibid.*

That Chinese intellectuals now recognize the existence of these conflicting values is only one aspect of their new awareness or consciousness. What is perhaps more important is their realization that there are no viable solutions to these dilemmas in the ideal realm or in the future.²⁴ They echo Berlin's observation, in his criticism of the unattainable position of utopian idealism, and cognitive and moral dogmatism, that "the possibility of a final solution . . . turns out to be an illusion, and a very dangerous one."²⁵ Berlin's view is shared by Rorty. In his work, Rorty cites Milan Kundera's words in rejection of a grand harmonious future: ". . . chasing after the future is the worst conformism of all, a craven flattery of the mighty. For the future is always mightier than the present. It will pass judgment upon us, of course. But without any competence."²⁶

Though many Chinese intellectuals are still attempting to construct an ideal realm in order to reconcile the various dilemmas, others have begun to reject the utopian legacy closely associated with historical materialism and Enlightenment modernity. For them, the future or the ideal is no longer perceived as a perfect world where all problems can be solved forever without the need for agonizing choices over clashing contradictions.

This awareness is intrinsically linked with the deconstruction of the totalistic approach toward social transformation or revolution based on ideal social design and comprehensive social engineering. Though the urge to seek a perfect future society is still deeply embedded in the subconscious of many Chinese intellectuals, they are increasingly beginning to reflect on the historical reality of social experiments carried out in the name of building an ideal future. This reflection has also been accompanied by a close examination of some of the essential premises of historical materialism, the teleological linear process of human history, the quasi-religious faith in progress and, most of all, the optimistic belief in total social revolution as the best means by which to change human nature and society.²⁷ "Evolu-

²⁴See Liu, *Xuanze de pipan*.

²⁵Isaiah Berlin, "On the Pursuit of the Ideal," *New York Review of Books* 35, no. 4 (March 17, 1988): 14.

²⁶See Eliot Deutsch, ed., *Culture and Modernity* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 14.

²⁷See Gu Xin, *The Historical Image and Prospects of the Chinese Enlightenment* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1992), 211-26.

tion,” not “revolution,” as the most appropriate route to China’s social transformation, has become more consensus than heresy among many Chinese intellectuals.²⁸ In a way, the grand narrative of revolution or utopia has been replaced with more detailed local stories. This consensus has been supported by Chinese intellectuals’ enthusiastic adoption of Hayek’s theory. The Anglo-Saxon tradition of individual liberalism combined with an empirical, cautious approach based on political naturalism has been enthusiastically rediscovered in China. The bitter experience of many failed revolutions has led many to believe that a piecemeal, step-by-step evolutionary process is a much more attractive alternative. The idea of “spontaneous order” has become appealing in comparison with “designed order,” the central creation of the totalitarian society. It is no longer surprising to hear young Chinese intellectuals citing the following words of Hayek in order to justify their newfound political naturalism: “The process of society is the result of human activities rather than the outcome of human conscious design.”²⁹ Thus, natural evolution has replaced totalitarian design or comprehensive social planning, becoming a widely-accepted key concept in the new Chinese intellectual vocabulary.

Another crucial change or development is the abandonment of a mechanical way of thinking, that is, a black-and-white bifurcative mode of analysis or logical reasoning which is based more on the neatness of formal reason than the complex process of the real world. The traditionally accepted division between various conventional opposites such as the private versus the public, the market versus state planning, Western versus Chinese, revolution versus evolution, and socialism versus capitalism should be replaced with a more creative synthesis.³⁰

In other words, the simple rule of logical identity and an absolute one-way reasoning process—all or nothing—should be avoided at any cost. Innovation in ideas comes from the interaction of seemingly irreconcilable factors; thus, traditional conceptual boundaries should be redefined and flexibility and fluidity should be considered as the

²⁸Lin Daoqun and Wu Zanmei, eds., *Beiju de liliang* (The strength of tragedy) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), 209-28.

²⁹Chen Yizi and Li Shaomin, eds., *Zhongguo dalu de gaige yu fazhan* (Reform and development in mainland China) (Taipei: Guiguan tushu, 1991), 169.

³⁰Cui Zhiyuan, “Institutional Innovation and a Second Emancipation of Thoughts,” *Ershiyi shiji*, no. 24 (August 1994): 5-16.

main features of a new Chinese conceptual system. As one Chinese intellectual has stated, a second emancipation of thought is needed to go beyond the old way of thinking.³¹ The rejection of a simplistic and absolute model of reasoning based on bifurcation has clearly redrawn the boundaries between many theoretical premises and categories in China's intellectual discourse. It is now not only concerned with formal structural changes, but also with revolutionizing the content, creating many new possibilities for intellectual innovation.

From the Center to the Margin: New Roles and a New Identity

Perhaps the most crucial development in the formation of the Chinese intelligentsia's "self-awareness"—the core of reflexivity—is their collective self-reflection on their own historical roles, social functions, and identities. It is both a process of self-examination and a process of self-definition and self-adjustment in a new social context. This has led to the questioning of intellectuals' privileged position as society's high priests whose role is to define for others

³¹Ibid. Recent debates on postmodernism and postcolonialism among Chinese intellectuals have also brought an important dimension to this newly-formed "self-awareness" (*zijue*), as they have focused on the complex relationship between China and the West in a global context. A more reflexive understanding of China and Chinese cultural tradition within a situation of ever-changing interaction with the West has become the new starting point for Chinese intellectuals' reevaluation of their own cultural identity and Western influence. The underlying power relationship between the self and others as well as the global hegemony of Western cultural and intellectual discourse have been taken as the crucial elements in Chinese intellectuals' reflection and rethinking of issues such as China's national identity, cultural reconstruction, and the search for modernity. Several key questions on the subtle cultural dominance of the powerful and the voiceless state of the powerless in the global village have been asked in order to deconstruct old patterns of East-West cultural communication. The works of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri C. Spivak have been utilized to counter the excessive influence of dominant Western ideology over mainstream Chinese intellectuals. The total submission of China's intellectual pursuit to a more "advanced" Western conceptual framework in the last two decades, as represented by the TV documentary, *River Elegy*, has been gradually replaced by a new search for a real "hybridization" or "hybridity," based on a dialectical synthesis beyond former dichotomies between the traditional and the modern, the particular and the universal. It has been a conscious attempt by some Chinese intellectuals to break down the old image of the "Oriental other," as defined in the "self-centered" Western discourse. See Zhang Yiwu, "The Anxiety of Interpreting China," *Ershiyi shiji*, no. 28 (April 1995): 134. The awakening of a new self-consciousness among China's intellectuals demands a two-way dialogue in a reconstructed equal relationship between differing cultural traditions. Chinese intellectuals' new desire to seek their own unique voice in a multi-part international chorus is an important indication of the self-confidence and maturity they have acquired in recent years and constitutes an indispensable part of their newly-formed reflexive self-awareness.

cognitive truth, moral values, and the meaning of life. In other words, some Chinese intellectuals, faced with drastic social change, commercialization, and the postmodern relativism of Western thought, have formulated a sense of "self-doubt." They have increasingly accepted the fact that the central position they previously occupied is no longer tenable, and this shift from the "center" to the "margins" has created emotional and psychological upheavals among many of China's intellectuals. There have been numerous discussions on the new roles and functions of intellectuals in the disenchanting process of China's modernization and nostalgia for the old days of high morality and pure values faithfully interpreted and legitimized by establishment intellectuals.

Nevertheless, many of China's younger generation of intellectuals have rejected the traditional role of the Chinese scholar-official. They emphasize the social division of labor by highlighting the importance of specialization and being an expert rather than an ideologue. But more importantly, they applaud the space or distance created over the last decade between intellectuals and the social polity as the critical condition for their new social functions.³²

In commenting on the differences between Heidegger and Kundera, Rorty once said: "It is comical to believe that one human being is more in touch with something non-human than another human being. It is comical to use one's quest for the ineffable Other as an excuse for ignoring other people's quite different quests."³³ Rorty summarized Kundera's view thus: "Nobody stands for anything Other or Higher. We all just stand for ourselves, equal inhabitants of a paradise of individuals in which everybody has the right to be understood but nobody has the right to rule."³⁴

Rorty's words here are a rejection of any privileges claimed by philosophers or intellectuals to be ascetic priests with special access to the essence of reality. Such an anti-elitist mood is now shared by increasing numbers of Chinese intellectuals, and the "ascetic priest" position of certain well-established Chinese intellectuals has been seriously challenged, particularly by some young intellectual

³²Tao Dongfeng, "Shifting Position between the Center and the Margins," *Dongfang*, 1994, no. 4:18-22; and Chen Pingyuan et al., "Discussion on the History of Academic Studies," *Xueren*, no. 1 (November 1991): 1-48.

³³See Deutsch, *Culture and Modernity*, 11.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 12.

rebels.³⁵ Some have advocated that Chinese intellectuals should perform more diverse functions; that is to say, instead of simply focusing on the big issues of politics and society, they should have a wider interest in a whole range of human activities.³⁶ In other words, there is now the realization that if intellectuals establish too close a relationship between themselves and the sociopolitical process, as well as carry the heavy burden of a "historical mission" and become too committed to a particular cause, it will inevitably lead to a false image of themselves as "supreme judges." Several young Chinese intellectuals have stated that a more down-to-earth, mundane role for the intellectual should be accepted gracefully. The shift from a sense of grand historical mission toward a kind of professional consciousness for more detailed and well-defined practical issues is now receiving an increasingly favorable response in Chinese intellectual circles.³⁷

Chinese intellectuals have become more aware of the painful fact that the gradual loss of their central position and their role as "saviours," and their replacement in that role by popular culture in an increasingly commercialized society, is the inevitable price to pay for the modern social transformation they worked so hard to bring about. Their focus now must be to go along with this new social trend and redefine their position in an ever-changing market-oriented society by adopting new means of integrating with that society.³⁸

Inevitably, intellectuals in contemporary China are facing a period of confusion and uncertainty during this time of transition. But to help themselves, they have been consciously drawing new intellectual inspiration from both their Western counterparts and the changing Chinese reality. Ideological certitude or intellectual consensus may no longer exist, but it is their newly-formed "self-awareness" that will enable Chinese intellectuals to live in a world that Eliot Deutsch describes as "deconstruction, destabilization, rupture, and fracture of resistance to all forms of abstract totality, universalism, and rationalism."³⁹ They can now celebrate the exciting

³⁵Liu, *Xuanzede pipan*, 250-52.

³⁶See Su Xiaokang, ed., *Cong Wusi dao Heshang* (From May Fourth to River Elegy) (Taipei: Fengyun shidai chuban gongsi, 1992), 153.

³⁷Chen, "Discussion on the History of Academic Studies," 1-48.

³⁸See Xu Jilin, "Can Elitist Culture Redeem Itself?" *Ershiyi shiji*, no. 19 (October 1993): 137-42.

³⁹See Deutsch, *Culture and Modernity*, 85.

carnival of intellectual diversity, not only in terms of conceptual discourse, but also in the roles they perform in society.