

The Silent Brush

"The towns are destroyed ... years of noise. There is no end to noise. The fish in the lakes and rivers die, and worms, insects, and reptile breed prolifically¹."

1 "Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage from a Hieratic Papyrus in Leiden," translated by Alan H. Gardiner in 1909. G. Olms Verlag, 1990 page

The study of politics and current history cannot be separated from the study of symbols, meaning and history. And, if we examine another culture we have the added problem of translating symbols into another language. Furthermore, when we turn to China we have the further problem in so far as both the West and China have been working on mutual understanding and mutual misunderstanding for centuries. And much still needs to be done. The classic metaphor for government since Confucius wrote his classics on history, the Zuo Zhuan is that of a boat on a river. Smooth waters can allow the boat to travel swiftly and safely. But these same waters may become turbulent and overthrow the boat. We might be prudent in keeping this analogy in mind while we explore the situation of current China.

In China, there is a class of scholars who have traditionally been absorbed in the problems of symbols and the extent to which symbols have lost connection with experience and the attempt to revive the lost connection. They are called in Chinese Shu Fa school². Among these people, it is often said that they are the only people who can intelligently discuss the political situation of China today. While, it is quite understandable that those whose research and ways of study differ may not agree with the Shu Fa school.

To fully study the problems of China from the perspective of a shufa student would require detailed explanations of their work, their progress and decline as well as integrating that into related fields where explorations of symbols and meaning converge. But we may, at least, return to a brief overview of China today and see a particular problem facing Chinese today, that of the corruption of language and politics, where the work of those in the ShuFa school maybe of interest to the political scientist.

2 It is preferable to say Shu Fa rather than calligraphy because Shu Fa is not beautiful writing. Unfortunately we don't even have a name for calligrapher which clumsily points at the writer of Shu-Fa. If we say the artist we are already distorting language because the first thing said of a shufa writer whose culture is not of sufficient quality is that he is merely an artist. One paper cannot solve all problems. But it is better to note problems than to sweep them under the rug. Furthermore, the word 家 (Jia) is here crudely translated as school. The primary meaning of the word is family but it is also a classifier for families, business philosophical schools of pre-Han China or, in this case, specialists in areas from music to even revolutionary activity. It often can simply respond to English endings such as -ist, -er, -ary, or -ian.

China is a land bustling with activity and business. It is rapidly coming to understand and work more and more with the west in ways more than just science and technology. However, it is quite uncertain as to what role China will play in the world. Often resentment arises because China is no longer the center of all under heaven. Also, resentment towards other countries who have entered China thinking they have entered a weak and powerless country. Japan is often the most disliked country in this regard due to the recent war even though the GNP of China is roughly six times that of Japan and China possesses more naval equipment and some of which is of much higher quality.

Had it not been mentioned that the GNP is higher than Japan one would most likely presume that the above is a description of China today rather than of the Qing dynasty. Recently the Party has celebrated its 60th anniversary so perhaps we may turn there to see how China has changed in the past one hundred years. The Peoples Daily Online has described the changes for not only Chinese but the rest of the world as this is one of the newspapers which is written in English.

What are the most important things that the party feels has changed from the Qing Dynasty.

Under the first generation of collective leadership, with Mao at the core, the People's Republic of China was founded and the "three big mountains" of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism that had oppressed the Chinese people for years were toppled.³

But what then happened in the years from 1912 to 1949? Much of the first two were overturned during this time. In fact, it is a bit peculiar that both 1912 and 1949 are marked as the beginning of New Culture China⁴. If the first two are not immediately seen to having been removed by the socialist movement's bulldozers surely the last would be a strong point of a socialist government. Yet

3 People's Daily Online, "Socialism is Chinese People's Historical Choice" June 18 2009

4 The old slogan of "Without the KMT there is no New China" has been changed into "There is no New China without the Party" and can be seen or read all throughout China. There is even a chain bookstore called New Culture Bookstore.

further down in the article we may read the following.

In spite of the remarkable achievements they have made, China and the CPC are faced with severe challenges, such as the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, fighting corruption, energy saving and emission reduction, and the improvement of people's livelihoods⁵.

If even the party can only come up with lukewarm answers to improvements made in the past 60 years in regard to the rule of China it can be hardly surprising that many here would say Mao was just a typical Chinese Emperor and that nothing much has changed at all in China.

And, for the student of Chinese history, we may say that, especially in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution⁶ That is remarkably similar to middle of the eighth century of which Eric Voegelin has written of quite well.

By the middle of the eighth century, when the ritual kingship of the ecumene lost its power, something happened that, by Near Eastern standards, was extraordinary. For neither did the kingdom of the ecumene disappear under the impact of power politics, to be replaced by newly organized society; nor was the dynasty overthrown by and replaced new one; nor was after an interregnum, the old order restored. Instead the compact cosmological order dissociated into power and spirit, as attested by the appearance, on the one hand, of the politicians and their legalist advisers in the kuo, and on the other hand, of the two types of Confucian and Taoist sages.⁷

But we have further problems today as Chinese have also become estranged

⁵ Ibid

⁶ And it must be remembered that although Chinese Culture was the subject of destruction in the revolution the two combatants were both in the party. It was a battle of the ideologically pure versus the party itself. The party won but at the expense of the spirit of Marxism.

⁷ In China today most of those calling for change can be divided into two camps; those who feel the most important thing is a revival of Chinese culture and a rectification of names and those who feel China should open up and be a more democratic country. Those two camps, which I have roughly described as they would have themselves described, unfortunately, rarely see that there are many areas which they might well be in agreement rather than be opposed to each other. And it must be stressed that if the second group is more easily understood by western readers we should not overemphasize that which we can more readily understand.

from their own history and traditions. One of the greatest scholars of China has written of this extremely well so it is worth quoting at length.

When I commenced the serious study of China's civilization in China more than fifty years ago, my Chinese teachers and fellow students all perceived the past as alive in the culture of the present. Both the learned Chinese and the ordinary people, who lived in intimate conjunction with all the reminders of China's past life, thought of that past as continuous with the present. They were the latest—perhaps the last—living bearers of a tradition that resonated in their social attitudes and values, in their daily language, in the allusions by which people expressed themselves, in the images and the attitudes that were shared in all facets of their lives. When they wrote school examinations, they wrote in the language learned from studying the texts of Confucius and Mencius, and they had read many of the finest writings of the subsequent 2000 years....People knew who they were; their behavior, even when rebellious, reflected expected patterns. The still widely shared high culture exerted a powerful influence up to the middle of the twentieth century, for it was still alive in their minds.⁸

But today's Chinese are unsure of themselves in many ways. Marx is the thinking of the east, as long as one removes any reference to class conflict whereas Ruism and Buddhism are local specialties of Taiwan⁹. Beijing is the host of the Olympics but schools for migrant students are closed because the buildings must be demolished for real estate development. Without real estate development the coffers of the local government would not be filled, GDP would not be increasing and chaos would follow. It is a country where Starbucks and MacDonalds are common, more and more middle class children are able to study overseas but also a country where riots severe enough to require soldiers are a weekly occurrence.

What then does the student of ShuFa have to do with all of this. The answer is two fold. First, the practice of Shufa is not unlike meditation or even prayer. It is a way to calm the mind in a turbulent world. Second, it is their task to look for

⁸ pages 971 to 972 F. W. Mote *Imperial China 900-1800* Cambridge Mass. Harvard University Press

⁹ Mainland Chinese have seen my books of classical studies and asked me why I was studying

corruption of language and symbols. And while it may not readily appear in their art it is a prerequisite to having the depth of culture necessary for beautiful works of art. If we return to anniversaries we may see an example of language problems which might be of interest to the student of Shufa.

In his July 1 speech commemorating the 90th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, President Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) listed four dangers that faced the both the party and China.” Lost vitality (精神懈怠), insufficient capacity (能力不足), alienation from the people (脫離群眾) and rampant corruption (消極腐敗). These are the translations I have found amongst Chinese newspapers and web pages. But, there is something odd about the English translations. They are in fact clearer than the Chinese. The most striking change is for rampant corruption. It is in fact a connection of two words 消極 and 腐敗 which are both usually used as adjectives. The first two mean negative, passive, inert or even lazy and the second means corruption, to corrupt, to rot, rotten. It is not at all clear what is the difference between passive and active corrupting. So the English was changed into rampant corruption in order to give sense to the phrase that is not there in the original.

While the ShuFa student may or may not directly write about such things the discussion and examination of the corruption of language is part of their work. And if corruption of language is pervasive many who pick up the brush are not ready for the task. Their knowledge and depth of study in cultural matters is simply not enough for them to pass beyond writing beautifully rather than both beautifully and cultured. Nonetheless, there may very well be more talent than is readily seen. Finally, even parents of children today are away of problems of cultural collapse and the degeneration of language. Some, but obviously not all, have seen that studying Shu Fa is a good way to restore not only meaning of language but, also, a restoration of having a meaningful life.

