

Revolution and Revolutions in China

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Without the other, I am not. Without me, the other is not. This is close but how can it be thus is hard to say.
Zhuang Tze

We propose to call "religion" the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality. Emmanuel Levinas

The interpretation of another culture is not dissimilar to translation. Good translators hope more for not misleading their reader than for finding the perfect words to translate. And in cases such as poetry we can only try to convey a very small amount of feeling the words invoke. How much greater the troubles are when we consider the interpretation of what it means to be Chinese from both within and from without.

It might seem to be a relatively simple matter to discuss revolution in China. The CCCP has recently celebrated it's sixtieth anniversary and there are abundant materials describing the course of recent history as well as even more abundant material on the theories of Marx should give us much to work on. In many accounts the CCCP has been very successful politically. There are no major political alternatives which compete for power, the economy has improved tremendously in the past twenty years, and China is finally at the stage where it has enough of a working class to call itself a modern nation. And what are now called the excesses of the cultural revolution are being addressed, however slowly, by attempts to rebuild and restore at least some parts of traditional Chinese culture. But the restoration of culture is not just to counter balance Mao. In fact it is absence not presence most clearly describes the political self-understanding of Mainland China today. How one relates to another in the public sphere cannot be said to be guided by any school of thought. The vigors of revolutionary have successfully pushed older models of order out of the public sphere.

But, the success of destroying traditional thought has come with deep skepticism. The belief in Marxism and in a perfect harmonious society which will come in the future[1] has faded so much that even Confucianism has been promoted by the government.[2]

But neither civilizations nor people can turn on a dime. If the belief in Marx has faded the institutional structures have persisted. For the past sixty years western thought has replaced Chinese thought. From the economic works of Ricardo to works on religion from Feuerbach the modern Mainland Chinese has more in common with Europeans than with Chinese.

But if self-understanding is something praised it is also something acquired with difficulty and with limits. When we try to understand across cultures and in history our difficulties multiply. Consider these two poems from the Tang Dynasty.

Liu Zongyuan

***READING BUDDHIST CLASSICS WITH ZHAO
AT HIS TEMPLE IN THE EARLY MORNING***

I clean my teeth in water drawn from a cold well;
And while I brush my clothes, I purify my mind;
Then, slowly turning pages in the Tree-Leaf Book,
I recite, along the path to the eastern shelter.
...The world has forgotten the true fountain of this teaching
And people enslave themselves to miracles and fables.
Under the given words I want the essential meaning,
I look for the simplest way to sow and reap my nature.
Here in the quiet of the priest's temple courtyard,
Mosses add their climbing colour to the thick bamboo;

And now comes the sun, out of mist and fog,
And pines that seem to be new-bathed;
And everything is gone from me, speech goes, and reading,
Leaving the single unison

Wang Wei

MY RETREAT AT MOUNT ZHONGNAN

My heart in middle age found the path.
And I came to dwell at the foot of this mountain.
When the spirit moves, I wander alone
Amid beauty that is all for me....
I will walk till the water checks my path,
Then sit and watch the rising clouds --
And some day meet an old wood-cutter
And talk and laugh and never return.

Which poem invokes Buddhism more? For those who have enough awareness it is the latter not the former which is infused with the spirit of Buddhism. (Unfinished paragraph. Some more details about what is needed to understand the difference in feeling between the two poems.)

Let us consider briefly the word revolution. In the west we commonly say that Marxist Revolutions are prefigured and influenced by the French Revolution which was in turn influenced by the Reformation. And the Reformation was countered by the Counter-Reformation as the French Revolution was followed by the Restoration. While what will follow the Marxist Revolutions is still too early to say we need to consider the universality of this movement. In Chinese the word revolution only refers to twentieth century revolutions. In this way, it picks up little from the French Revolution and almost nothing from the Reformation. And the confusion is not merely on the Chinese side. On the western side analysis of revolution has an aura of inevitable universal history that is not always matched in confidence from non-western sources.

But if the Chinese at the turn of the century poorly understood the path of history taken in the west it does not mean that they were unaffected. But China has a long history and much experience in changes of dynasties. It is sometimes said that China has cyclical history but not linear history. This is unwarranted. Every dynasty begins with a linear history justifying its new beginning. And standing above every linear history which comes with change is the Chin dynasty which can be said to be the first dynasty understood in the sense followed by latter dynasties.

And how much can the west help in Chinese self-understanding. It is not just Voegelin who has noted the problems of understanding the west from the point of view from scholars such as Weber :

On the one hand, for instance, there are the voluminous histories of Chinese Philosophy and science; on the other hand, competent authorities assure us that China had developed neither philosophy (only a kind of wisdom) nor logic and mathematics, and consequently no science. On special problems we meet with such flat contradictions as: China's early religion was polytheistic, and China had no polytheism; or Confucianism was a religion, and it was not a religion, and so forth.[\[3\]](#)

Furthermore, much has been made of China's isolation from others. But this scarcely hold up to historical analysis. The Chinese have always had difficulties with neighboring countries and, even as far, back as the Han Dynasty were aware of civilizations such as Rome even if they poorly understood what was happening there. Furthermore, China split in the Song Dynasty but the Khitans, rulers of Liao, invaded and ruled by the Mongolians in the Yuan Dynasty and then by the Manchurians in the Qing Dynasty. Not only that, Chinese spent hundreds of years working to understand and appropriate Indian thought and then in a project which started in the Ming Dynasty and proceeds to today have been trying to understand and learn from the West.

And in fact, it is even more complicated than that. If we chose to learn Chinese we cannot but be affected by the problems of modern China. For this paper I will not focus on the problems of Taiwan and Mainland China having been separated not only politically and geographically but also culturally but it should not be assumed that this is not important.[\[4\]](#) And if we can't decide whether Confucianism, or Buddhism, is a religion or not

we also now have the problem of Marxism.

[1]

[2] Much of Den XiaoPing's ideas on how to improve the economy were earlier promoted by Sun Yet Sen. And, interestingly enough there has been a gradual change of opinion about the KMT. In official history, the KMT leaders are now portrayed as having had their hearts in the right place but somewhat misguided.

[3] Page 286 The Ecumenic Age. Eric Voegelin.

[4]