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Cover illustration A memorial from the chief eunuch Bian Dekui — “The Legal and Social Status of Theatrical Performers in Beijing During the Qing” by Ye Xiaoqing, see p.81.

LIU DONG AND HIS DEFENCE OF THEORY AND CONFUCIANISM AS PRACTICE

史 Gloria Davies

Liu Dong's 刘东¹ somewhat dystopic view of the contemporary mainland Chinese intellectual scene was first widely publicized when his 1995 polemical essay, "Beware of Designer Pidgin Scholarship" ("Jingtí renwéi de 'yangjīng-bāng xuēfēng' 警惕人为的洋泾浜学风") appeared in the prestigious Hong Kong-based Chinese academic journal *Twenty-first Century* (Ershiyi shiji 二十一世纪).² In that essay, Liu singled out for criticism several emergent trends in recent Sinophone scholarship that he claimed were based on wrong-headed appropriations of EuroAmerican critical concerns and theoretical accounts. He ridiculed such trends as constitutive of "designer pidgin scholarship" aimed at making Chinese issues appear fashionable in a Western academic context but which distorted the substance of these issues. That he named particular individuals as producers of "designer pidgin scholarship" may help to explain the controversy that was generated upon his essay's publication.

Some years later, Liu Dong observed that "the battle of voices sparked off by my article did not begin on an equal footing for all."³ He felt that his essay had been inappropriately framed by the editorial board of *Twenty-first Century* as the centrepiece for a staged controversy that he had never intended. *Twenty-first Century* had published Liu's essay, accompanied by responses from three prominent figures in contemporary Sinophone scholarship, Lei Yi 雷颐, Cui Zhiyuan 崔之元 and Gan Yang 甘阳, under the general heading, "Pidgin scholarship" or "epistemological privilege" ("Yangjīngbāng xuēfēng" haishi "renshilun tequan"? 洋泾浜学风还是认识论特权) to highlight the issues raised by Liu as akin to a debate over new knowledge claims. Since that moment of fame and notoriety in 1995, Liu Dong has continued to hold the view that, in their rush to master the range of "Western theories" in the humanities and social sciences, many Chinese intellectuals (whether in China or overseas) have produced flawed accounts of both modern Chinese history

¹ Liu Dong holds the position of Professor at the Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultures Institute, Peking University. His doctoral dissertation on the history of Chinese aesthetics, completed in 1990, has led him to explore various issues in the fields of Chinese intellectual history, comparative aesthetics and modern Chinese thought. He is also actively engaged in publishing critical commentary on emergent trends in contemporary Chinese scholarship and Chinese studies.

² Liu's article, "Beware of designer pidgin scholarship" [Jingtí renwéi de "yangjīng-bāng xuēfēng"] first appeared in Chinese in *Twenty-first Century* 32 (Dec. 1995): 4–13. An extended revised version of this article appears in English translation as "Revisiting the perils of designer pidgin scholarship" translated by Gloria Davies with Li Kaiyu, in Gloria Davies, ed. *Voicing concerns: contemporary Chinese critical inquiry* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 87–108.

³ Liu Dong, "Revisiting the perils of designer pidgin scholarship," p.91.

⁴ These quotations have been extracted from the translated essay, “The Weberian view and Confucianism,” which follows this introductory text.

and contemporary Chinese society.

The translated essay that follows provides an elaboration of several issues first raised by Liu Dong in “Beware of Designer Pidgin Scholarship,” with specific reference to the reception of Max Weber in contemporary mainland Chinese intellectual circles over the past two decades. According to Liu Dong, Chinese intellectual engagement with Weber’s ideas since the 1980s has largely been superficial and unproductive. He sees this as the consequence of both historical and contemporary factors that have proven to be detrimental to the development of robust critical thinking in mainland China. References abound in Liu’s text to the historical, cultural and political contingencies or conditions that have shaped Chinese knowledge production, but without any clear indication of what these contingencies and conditions might be. These deliberately oblique references serve as tactical glosses that allow mainland-based Chinese scholars to alert their readers to the ever-present danger of political intervention into their scholarship.

Liu Dong exercises caution in composing every essay that he writes he knows only too well that to do otherwise would be to risk incurring penalties for transgressing the party-state’s invisible and ever-shifting boundary markers for ideologically acceptable modes of discourse. For instance, he observes that the nascent Marxist humanism which had animated the mainland Chinese intellectual world during the early 1980s came to an abrupt end because of the “external pressures” that were “brought to bear on intellectual work in mainland China.” This euphemistic description of official censorship is then given further elaboration as “a certain attitude of political pragmatism” that Liu regards as detrimental to the development of Chinese critical inquiry. As he puts it, such “political pragmatism”

[...] has had the effect of stifling our intellectual engagement with Marxism. It has prevented us from reaching a level of understanding in our readings of Marx that would allow for the emergence of a critical dynamic relevant to contemporary Chinese social needs. Ironically, despite the emphasis that Marxism places on practice [as opposed to mere theorization], the kind of political pragmatism that dominates our intellectual life has effectively prevented us from dealing with the problems of our day in practical terms.⁴

“Political pragmatism,” as Liu uses the expression, also suggests a degree of self-censorship on the part of individual Chinese authors in response to the strictures imposed by the party-state bureaucracy. For Liu Dong, such “political pragmatism” has made it extremely difficult if not impossible for Chinese intellectuals to provide effective critical agency through their writings, since they are forcibly prevented as well as psychologically inhibited from properly addressing the range of social and political problems that they experience and witness in their own lived environment. In this context, he and many other prominent Chinese scholars have attempted to promote a form of critical inquiry in their writings that could be likened to a defense and even an idealization of theory as practice.

By commenting on the ways in which theories imported from overseas

can facilitate or disable critical thinking within the mainland Chinese context, these Chinese scholars are actively engaged in determining the “lessons” that one might learn from others, with the aim of producing theory specifically attuned to contemporary Chinese needs. Indeed, one could say that the various forms of polemics generated by different determinations of such “needs” are indicative of the generally prescriptive nature of Chinese critical inquiry, aimed (as such inquiry tends to be) at diagnosing what ails the nation, society or the intellectual community from the vantage point occupied by one or another of its spokespersons. Like many of his mainland-based academic peers, Liu Dong takes the pedagogical aspect of his discourse very seriously and seeks to re-direct intellectual inquiry from, as it were, the “wrong” path to the correct one that he affirms. Within the context of an enduring modern Chinese tradition of intellectual agency—of changing China through the dissemination of the proper kind of ideas—it is not surprising that most Chinese scholars of the present-day would still regard theory as a “blueprint” for action.

Given the difficulties that beset critical thinking in an authoritarian political environment where an individual writer’s agency cannot be too clearly defined as a form of active resistance to authoritarianism itself, mainland-based scholars have commonly resorted to historicization as the “theoretical” means for suggesting in safely abstract language that “history” (rather than the political authorities *in situ*) requires a new theoretical “blueprint” that would set things right by correcting the accumulated errors of the past. The critical importance of this historicist mode of theorizing is affectively suggested in the following statements by Liu, with no mention of political intervention or censorship except for an elliptical reference to “invisible ideological constraints”:

A history of ideas which takes into consideration the conditions under which the spirit of a civilization has evolved and which includes some reflection on public opinion, intellectual life and invisible ideological constraints as experienced by the author of such a history would allow us to have a better awareness of the limits of our current wisdom. While we may not be able to fully exceed these limits, nonetheless, we can certainly become more aware of their existence and this will then lead us to exercise greater vigilance in our knowledge production.

In “The Weberian View and Confucianism,” Liu Dong provides an engaging historical survey of various uses that have been made of Weber’s ideas in the last twenty years by mainland-based academics and overseas-based Sinologists in relation to the vexed question of China’s modernization. According to Liu, these uses of Weber’s ideas, or what he refers to as the changing shape of “the Weberian view,” have served neither to better elucidate socio-economic problems in contemporary mainland China nor to provide a better understanding of Chinese modernity as uncomfortably wedged between two contending and entrenched cultural paradigms: “Western modernity” and “Confucian tradition.” In examining the ascendancy of “the Weberian view” in mainland China with specific reference to the fluctuating fortunes of Confucianism since the 1980s, Liu Dong effectively dramatizes the durability of

⁵ This is a mode of scholarship focused on analysing historical and contemporary issues within a framework of knowledge derived primarily from mainland Chinese textual sources and the lived experience of Chinese citizens. It has been particularly influential in the Chinese social sciences and has found publication since the mid to late 1990s in a range of influential Chinese language journals, including *Twenty-First Century, Reading* [Dushu 读书], *Strategy and Management* [Zhanlüeyuguanli 战略与管理] and *Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly* [Zhongguo shehui kexue jikan 中国社会科学季刊].

⁶ An account of the activities of the Academy of Chinese Culture is included in Chen Yong-ching and Jin Guantao, *From youth-j. manuscripts to River Elegy: the Chinese pop 'ur cultural movement and political trans. nation 1979-89* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1997), pp.155-6.

the Confucian tradition by affirming its ultimate “triumph” over the rejection that it had endured in the twentieth century.

The various misreadings of China produced by “the Weberian view” that Liu Dong critiques thus serve as a foil that casts Confucianism in an even stronger light as the “natural” language in which Chinese issues should be investigated (that is, against the “artificial” language of hastily translated and poorly understood ideas that he attributes to “the Weberian view”). Liu’s thesis in a nutshell would be: contemporary Chinese intellectuals reject Confucianism at their peril, for it is Confucianism alone that can invest Chinese modes of thinking with their cultural integrity and specificity. In the absence of this Confucian foundational ground, Liu argues, Chinese modernity can only ever aspire to be an inferior and superficial pastiche awkwardly derived from pre-existing Western forms of modernity. What he proposes instead is a form of inquiry that understands itself as the hybrid product of both foundational Confucian ideas and ideas of the modern derived from EuroAmerican sources.

While Liu does not make explicit reference in his essay to the axiomatic phrase coined by nineteenth-century Confucian scholar-official advocates of Westernization, “Chinese [ethical] knowledge as the foundation and Western [technological] knowledge for practical application” (*Zhong xue wei ti, Xi xue wei yong* 中学为体, 西学为用), nonetheless his thesis resonates with the sense of Chinese modernity encapsulated in this phrase as something to be organically developed out of Confucian learning yet empowered by “Western knowledge.” Liu’s defense of Confucianism in foundationalist terms as a kind of infallible or incorruptible ground upon which contemporary Chinese knowledge production could secure its own unique cultural identity in order then to evaluate properly the relevance of both indigenous and foreign ideas “for China’s needs,” is one that many contemporary mainland Chinese scholars now favour in their affirmation of “indigenized” (*bentuhua* 本土化) modes of knowing.⁵

The emergence of a “national studies fever” (*guoxue re* 国学热) within the Sinophone academy in the mid-1990s was facilitated to some extent by concerted efforts on the part of members of the Academy of Chinese Culture (*Zhongguo wenhua xueyuan* 中国文化学院) in Beijing at reviving public interest in Confucianism during the late 1980s through a series of well-subscribed seminars and lectures.⁶ That this renewed interest in Confucianism via the institutional agency of national studies also coincided with the authoritarian party-state’s interest in promoting Confucianism as an appropriate cultural-ideological bulwark for its ongoing implementation of market reforms in the 1990s has clearly helped to popularize Confucianism. But this popularization also had the unfortunate effect of rendering Confucianism into a caricature of obedience on the part of citizens to the will of the party-state.

Linked as it was, and is, with the Chinese party-state’s interest in melding its economic development agenda with the ready-made “Asian values” discourse that the Singapore government had skilfully extracted out of Confucianism in order to lend cultural legitimacy to its own equally authoritarian

brand of capitalism, state-approved popular understandings of Confucianism in mainland China became something of a poisoned chalice for mainland Chinese scholars of Confucianism. Their “expertise” on Confucian values was now sought by the party-state but only within the elusive yet palpable limits of the party-state’s political and ideological tolerance.

At this point, we should also remind ourselves that although it is convenient to refer to the party-state in the singular as a means of signalling the “unified” voice in which its representatives declare policies, initiatives and prohibitions, the party-state is clearly no monolithic entity. Indeed, it is precisely the orchestrated nature of the “unified” voice in which the party-state speaks (after oppositional individual voices within its machinery have been silenced) that has led prominent scholars of Confucianism such as the Peking University-based philosopher Tang Yijie 汤一介 to express concern over the dangers of what he calls the “politicization of academic research.” In other words, Tang suggests that if national studies in mainland China were to be indiscriminately promoted (by witting and unwitting advocates alike) as an ideological necessity, it may be wrested from scholarly inquiry into the metaphysical and cultural implications of Confucianism “to serve the [contrary] interests of cultural chauvinism and nationalism.”⁷

Similarly, Liu Dong is at pains to emphasize that the Confucianism he defends has little to do with the popular version of Confucianism that prevailed in the mid- to late 1990s, which was enthusiastically supported by advocates of rapid marketization within the academy and the party-state bureaucracy alike. Liu regards this ideologically-modified and “dumbed-down” version of Confucianism—a Confucianism fit for economic rationalism—as perverting the true value or “value-rationality” of the Confucian tradition that he affirms. In broadest terms, Liu’s vision of a contemporary form of Confucianism that would enhance the mainland Chinese life-world (that is, the lived social environment that Liu phrases in Habermasian terms) is one that would pay greatest heed to the cultivation of virtue, merit and proper speech in the context of market-driven socio-economic reform and the problems to which such reform have given rise.

What he leaves out, for reasons of political caution, is how such cultivation of virtue, merit and proper speech might be substantially pursued in the context of ongoing ideological policing and political censorship in the People’s Republic. That mainland-based academics must resort to an elliptical mode of discourse in order to signal their relative lack of intellectual freedom poses a significant impediment for the further development of their critical inquiry. For instance, Liu is unable to examine in any substantive way how intellectual freedom might find articulation in Confucian terms, with specific reference to political constraints imposed on the development of such freedom in present-day mainland China. He can merely suggest that Confucianism *ought* to deal with the idea of freedom, and that a “turning-point is at hand” in relation to this idea. As he cannot directly address the question of how Confucianism might provide freedom from the political interference that he

⁷ See Tang Yijie, “Some reflections on New Confucianism in mainland Chinese culture of the 1990s,” in Gloria Davies, *Voicing concerns*, p.130.

experiences in his own lived environment, he writes instead that, “it has the potential to provide an alternative stance from which reflection on Western modernity as well as on the nature of freedom can begin anew.”

In this regard, Liu also reads “freedom” as the possibility of release from the imposition of Western modernity as the blueprint and ultimate goal of Chinese attempts at modernization. He expressly affirms Confucianism as his *Weltanschauung* in the form of an indigenous rationality that he believes to have organically developed out of socio-cultural experiences articulated in the Chinese language. He supports the promotion of Confucian ideas within public culture, not as some ready-to-hand “substitute” for a waning Marxist-Leninist national ideology, but as the kind of natural attitude that not just contemporary Chinese intellectuals but ordinary Chinese citizens ought to have in order to make proper sense of the world they inhabit. In Liu’s essay, an implicit distinction is drawn between “intellectuals,” as disseminators of moral-ethical values, and “ordinary citizens,” who are assumed to be the object-recipients of such values. This is where his essay is also charged with a distinctly prescriptive tone, one that can frequently be detected in the critical discourse of mainland-based academics and social commentators.

Liu Dong’s critical survey of the changing tenor of “the Weberian view” in mainland China is focused on the asymmetrical relationship between “Western” and “Chinese” ideas within the context of modernization goals defined by Chinese academics and party-state bureaucrats alike. He writes ironically of the “evangelical” mode in which Weber’s writings found dissemination in 1980s mainland China and then proceeds to explore why such evangelical faith in ideas drawn from Weber is incapable of delivering on the promise of economic wealth and freedom for the majority of mainland China’s citizens. For Liu Dong, Weber occupies the position of a “great layperson” whose projections of difference onto the “otherness” that China represents are the effect of his natural subscription to Western cultural and religious values, the specificity of which, Liu argues, Weber has forgotten and has thus rendered universally applicable.

According to Liu, that Weber’s account continues to provide the lens through which many Chinese scholars and Western sinologists view both historical and contemporary issues in China indicates that the authority of Western ideas remains unchallenged, despite the best intentions of those such as Paul Cohen who would seek to forge China-centered readings out of such ideas. In this regard, Liu has ably identified the dominance of Weber’s socio-historical paradigm in historical scholarship within Anglophone Chinese studies. Yet, it is important to note that Liu’s critique of the unquestioned authority accorded to the Weberian paradigm does not lead him to valorise open-ended possibilities of interpretation as an alternative and more productive intellectual approach. Liu clearly marks his own speaking position as Confucian-informed and located within the conditions of knowledge production in the elite intellectual environment that Peking University represents. From this position, Liu calls for a definitive account of what “Chinese intellectuals” or “the Chinese” might be able usefully to extract from Weber’s ideas.

He has little interest in affirming the agency of a poststructuralist or deconstructive reading aimed at demonstrating the constructed nature of truths as truth-effects. To the contrary, it would appear that, for Liu Dong, Confucianism is akin to an organically-grounded truth within the Chinese language and the values that have historically found expression in the Chinese language. He contends that knowledge and critical thinking produced in the Chinese language of the present-day have been less than effective precisely because they have been significantly deprived of historically produced Confucian idioms and the culturally-grounded truths that have found expression in these idioms.

In this regard, Liu's historicization of the dissemination and uses of Weber's ideas in mainland Chinese scholarship of the last two decades provides him with a way of illustrating how mainland Chinese scholarship has, as it were, lost its way through its inadequate grounding in Confucianism. This also allows him to assume the role of an informed observer who has gained perspicacious insight into "events" that have yet to be properly evaluated. His evaluation, structured in the form of three different temporal "phases" in the recent reception of Weber's ideas, anticipates a certain dialectical development of "the Weberian view" towards productive synthesis with the Confucianism that he affirms and seeks to promote. Here, one detects a resonance with the New Enlightenment goals much favoured by participants in the "Culture Fever" of 1980s' mainland China; an intellectual-cultural movement based mainly in Beijing in which Liu Dong played a relatively significant role.⁸

As noted earlier, historicization has served as a ready strategy for avoiding official censorship, not just in contemporary Chinese critical thinking but in much of modern Chinese scholarship since the late-Qing 清 era (1890s onwards). Historicization has also traditionally provided Chinese authors across the centuries of imperial rule and Confucian orthodoxy with their most effective strategy for legitimating their own ideas and explanations as authoritative (historically "proven") knowledge. Read in this context, Liu's historicization of "the Weberian view" in relation to Confucianism also implicitly hypostatizes history as History, an ineluctable force or spirit to which the Chinese scholar must devote sustained attention in order to intuit and to recognize its overall magisterial pattern.

In engaging with Liu's account, one must also note that its language extends beyond the standardized and institutionally approved modes of expression in which academic writing is normally published. Liu's essay combines the pointed and intimate register of the *feuilleton* (*zawen* 杂文) with the professional tone of an annotated scholarly account. His language is at times expressly affective, especially in those moments when he recalls the mainland Chinese intellectual climate of the 1980s or when he laments the ineffectiveness and inappropriateness of contemporary Chinese engagement with Weber. At other times, he adopts an impersonal register to critique the limitations of "the Weberian view" for the study of Chinese issues. The shifts in Liu's essay between these different modes of expression are representative of the general style of critical inquiry in contemporary Sinophone

⁸ The idea of "New Enlightenment" or *xin qimeng* 新启蒙 was widely promoted by activist Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s as a resumption and further development of the May Fourth project of intellectual and cultural enlightenment that took place between the late 1910s and early 1920s. Wang Hui's polemical essay "Contemporary Chinese thought and the question of modernity," translated by Rebecca E. Karl in *Intellectual politics in post-Tiananmen China: a special issue of Social Text* 55, 16.2 (Summer 1998): 9–44, provides a sustained critique of New Enlightenment thinking in 1980s mainland China as a flawed ideology of modernization.

⁹ For an incisive account of such moral-evaluative discourse, see Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: on contemporary Chinese culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.316-63.

scholarship. Unlike the emphasis on theoretical substance and analytical rigour in Anglophone critical inquiry, which places an effective constraint on moral-evaluative pronouncements on the part of an individual author, the self-perception of the Chinese scholar as one who shoulders the social responsibility of making moral-evaluative statements continues to find ready affirmation in contemporary Sinophone critical discourse.⁹

In this regard, the following translation of Liu Dong's essay provides its Anglophone interlocutors with the opportunity of substantially engaging with the difference posed by Sinophone critical inquiry and its self-assured declarations. It would appear that, for Liu Dong, such declarations are necessary and, indeed, in keeping with a certain prescriptive tenor in traditional Confucian scholarship. What he calls for is nothing less than the proper legitimation and elevation of Confucianism as a mode of reasoning and a foundational set of ethical-moral values for contemporary Chinese intellectual praxis. The moral-evaluative language in which Liu defends Confucianism also provides for a different representation of Weber, one that sees Weber being "rescued" from "the Weberian view" and re-cast in the role of an exemplar of intellectual independence.

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