

INTRODUCTION

by Robert A. Kapp

The four articles published here were originally presented as public lectures at Rice University in October, 1972. The purpose of "Four Views of China," as this series of addresses was called, was to bring to the University and to the Houston community a number of eminent and eloquent China scholars, and to offer to a general audience a set of stimulating and informative talks on significant aspects of Chinese civilization. For a variety of reasons, most of them relating to the type of address sought by the series's organizers and to the organizers' determination to avoid the temptations of one more "China in the 1970s" format, no single theme was adopted for the series as a whole. Instead, the four invited guests were asked to present, to a general audience, the ideas and problems to which their own scholarly work had taken them.

As a lecture series, "Four Views of China" was highly successful: audiences were uniformly large and enthusiastic, and, as the articles that follow show, the quality of the addresses was very high. The series served as a fine example of what articulate and able scholars, even in relatively esoteric fields, can contribute to the public understanding of complex and alien problems.

As Professor Frederick Mote has told us, the goal of examining specific aspects of China's civilization and the Chinese past is to sharpen our "understanding of China"—a grandiose goal to be sure, but nonetheless a worthy one. In discussing China with a non-specialist audience, the pursuit of this goal is not easy. The specialist must convey to his hearers valid meaningful arguments while avoiding the dual pitfalls of becoming too concerned with minute data on the one hand and of doing excessive violence to the inevitable complexities of his subject on the other. He must provide the necessary concreteness for his audience to grasp his point, at the risk of paying little attention to broader and more profound problems which his points may illustrate but which he cannot take the time to develop.

This Introduction will not attempt to develop and elaborate an imaginary central theme running through the essays it prefaces. It will, however, try

Mr. Kapp was Assistant Professor of History at Rice University, 1970-1972.

to point out a few of the larger implications of the essays, and to discuss some of the relationships (complementary and contradictory) between two or more of them. In discussing these thematic and interpretive problems it is well to bear in mind the unresolved questions of how and to what degree scholarly discussions can serve to improve the non-specialist's "understanding of China."

We may start with Professor Arthur Wright's and Professor Jonathan Spence's remarks, since both are devoted to aspects of Chinese political behavior, historical and more recent. Professor Wright's remarks, like those of Professor Spence, explicitly raise the broad issue of form and content, of continuity and change, which so much of the quest for understanding has suggested. By pursuing his theme with temporally disparate examples, Professor Wright underscores the value of perceiving historical continuities in the present. Though he does not dwell upon it, he suggests the outlines of a characteristic relationship between culture and government in China, the attitudinal bases of which seem today remarkably similar to those of a Confucian statesman a century or even a millennium ago. The assumption of the moral perfectibility of man, the axiom that government is inseparable from the moral condition of the governors and the governed, runs through Confucian literature as it does through the Thought of Mao Tse-tung. Working from the specific case of propaganda and persuasion in imperial and communist China, Professor Wright uses the past—even the remote past, by western standards—to make the Chinese present more comprehensible. The ignorant but all too widespread assumption that "Chinese culture," however that is defined, was destroyed with the arrival of communist power, crumbles in the face of Professor Wright's arguments for continuity in the use of moral suasion as a means of political control.

Yet the insight that historical awareness provides here can be developed further; Professor Wright's provocative interpretation gives rise to further questions. Reference to the "traditional susceptibility" of the Chinese "as a people" to certain forms of psychological manipulation and psycho-political persuasion opens the door to the subject of national character, or of a uniquely Chinese "political culture," analysis of which promises to yield highly sophisticated interpretations of Chinese political behavior. The two most important investigations of this tempting concept as it relates to China have been misleading but fortunately not persuasive,¹ and the full usefulness of responsible generalization about Chinese political culture, if it can indeed be identified, awaits later realization.

To put the problem another way, once historical continuities are perceived, the meaning of those continuities remains to be explored. The use of moral suasion for political control may have very long roots in China, but it can hardly be said that political ideology in the People's Republic of China merely continues the political thinking of the imperial era as a whole (or even of

the late imperial period alone). The profound conservatism of Confucian social and political ideology, to which both Professors Wright and Mote allude, contrasts sharply with the despairing iconoclasm of early twentieth-century intellectuals, and starkly with such staple Maoist injunctions as "Dare to Rebel," which echoed round the world during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Professor Spence's address, which also points out the persistent significance of certain social and political problems over several centuries of Chinese history, speaks to the problem of continuity and change, of familiar form and unfamiliar content, that Professor Wright has raised. The long history of the spread of Chinese cultural forms from early centers in Northern China to the edges of Tibet and Siberia and the South China coast, and the geographical characteristics of China's border lands, have left a legacy of tension along Chinese frontiers that most rulers of China in turn have had to confront. This has been particularly true in Inner Asia: the K'ang-hsi Emperor was not the first Chinese monarch to face opposition in Tibet, nor the first emperor to feel the pressure of non-Chinese expansion in the north-eastern area that was lately called Manchuria. For example, the ancestors of the Manchu peoples themselves swept into China in the twelfth century and forced the reigning Sung court to flee south to the Yangtze Valley and below (thus hastening the process of southward Chinese migration that eventually put the island of Taiwan within reach of Chinese settlement).

Similarly, the dilemma of an enormously powerful, energetic, even original leader who stands at the apex of a highly ritualized, bureaucratized, and frequently corrupt political apparatus has persisted throughout much of China's imperial and postimperial history. Without going into the interesting personal detail which Professor Spence brings to his discussion of the K'ang-hsi Emperor in the seventeenth century and Mao Tse-tung in the twentieth, Joseph Levenson years ago expanded on the endless tension between the monarch and his dependent-yet-potentially-fractious bureaucratic officials.² It is worth remembering, in contemplating Mao Tse-tung's style of leadership and his seemingly antibureaucratic inclinations, that China has enjoyed (or suffered) a highly sophisticated and unique form of bureaucratic administration for two thousand years, far longer than any comparable system has existed in the west. Despite major alterations in the relationship of principal leader to officialdom from imperial times to the People's Republic of China, Mao's frustrations with "bureaucratism," "commandism," and "mountain strongholdism" all represent, at least to some degree, a modern-day working out of the traditional tension between Chinese rulers and their government's administrative personnel.

Once again, however, the fact of perceptible continuity, while revealing, must not stand alone. The meaning of historical inheritance depends on interpretation, and interpretation usually leads in the direction of complexity

and paradox. Consider the Chinese chauvinism of the K'ang-hsi emperor, for example; the grand confidence in what Professor Spence calls "China's greatness," that K'ang-hsi, as a vigorous and great Chinese emperor, naturally displayed (even though he was himself not Chinese and was highly conscious of his un-Chineseness). Then consider the proud revolutionary nationalism of Mao Tse-tung, who has led his country out of the shadow of international humiliation while rejecting the traditional political and social order that had once sustained the K'ang-hsi emperor's position and view of the world. Here are two powerful leaders, both proud of their China and determined to increase its strength. Was the K'ang-hsi emperor a "nationalist," then? Hardly, since the very idea of nationhood was unknown to him and would have been intensely repugnant to him if he had known of it. Perhaps, as is often said, Mao is just another "imperial" ruler demonstrating the same assumptions of China's cultural centrality that rulers of the Middle Kingdom demonstrated centuries before. But this interpretation too is invalid for many reasons, one of which is the prominence of implicitly anti-imperial nationalist ideas in Mao's own intellectual development and political ideology.

Thus the notion of continuity, which adds much to our vision of modern Chinese institutions and culture, must be accompanied first by recognition of the changes in content which are found within the continuities of form in modern China, and second by a recognition that visible continuities in a single strand of Chinese cultural or political behavior may not prove the corresponding existence of much broader continuities. If a foreigner who visited China around the year 1700 could somehow return there today, he would recognize instantly that he was once again in China, but he would soon realize as well that the China to which he returned had been transformed since his last visit by its revolutionary history.

Like Professor Wright's and Professor Spence's remarks, Professor Mote's discussion of urbanization and urban life in China over a millennium clearly underscores the importance of perceiving historical continuities in "understanding China." But Professor Mote introduces another major theme as well, that of the equivalence or comparability of related phenomena in Chinese and Western experience. As the example of Chinese urbanization shows, the dimensions of broad fields of human experience sometimes far exceed those of the observer's own culture. As a scholar with especially deep ties to China as well as a keen vision of his own society, Professor Mote inquires with particular insight into China's historical experience in the management of social affairs, organization of government, or the conduct of urban life. One should not have to be a sinologue, much less a sinophile, to see the value of this. For one thing, learning about the forms which shared human experience takes in a sophisticated alien culture can break the artificial boundaries of one's own awareness. This is clearly the case with the recent western

“discovery” of Chinese traditional medicine, most notably the techniques of acupuncture; the common human problem of health care and medicine takes on a new dimension with the realization that a whole sphere of effective medical practice has lain beyond the range of vision of the western medical profession. For another thing, in cases where examination of a broad common concern produces only very remotely applicable insights, or insights that seem to have no applicability at all to the observer’s problems, the observer can still learn more about himself by perceiving what he is not, and what his milieu is not.

In the process, many an observer, confident in his cosmopolitanism, will awake to the narrowness and the limitations of his awareness. Just as the Chinese, assured for centuries of their supreme cosmopolitanism in a world entirely ruled by the Chinese emperor, awoke to discover their own provincialism in a nineteenth-century international world that they had had no part in making, so many people in the western world, and particularly the United States, have to discover the provincialism of their own world view, even in the industrial and technological world that the west until recently has largely made for itself. This is particularly true in the realm of “modernization,” a vaguely defined but alluring term which increasingly applies to China as well as to the West. The prospect of a truly Chinese modernization, not merely a superficial transplantation of certain western modes to the surface of Chinese life, should shake our assurance that the road to modernity was discovered in Europe or made in the United States, and that the path to modernization is somehow immutable. The problem of modernization’s relationship to westernization is one of the most significant offshoots of the question of equivalence and comparability that Professor Mote’s essay raises.

In his remarks on the city in China in general and on Soochow in particular, Professor Mote offers many profound and fascinating insights, not only into the form and history of Chinese cities, but into Chinese assumptions about the dimensions and properties of historic time and the embodiment of meaning in chosen forms of cultural artifacts, especially the written word. Professor Wright, too, spoke of the peculiar significance of the written word in traditional China, and as I shall note below, Professor Loehr speaks indirectly to that point as well. Another point that Professor Mote argues persuasively, here and in another essay, is that in China city and countryside have long enjoyed a complementary relationship which is unfamiliar to the West. The existence of a rural-urban continuum, reinforced by the prevalence of a rural, almost pastoral ideal, contrasts sharply with the dichotomous, even hostile, relationship between urban and rural areas in the West. Recognition of this vastly different relationship perhaps impels us to reevaluate our own notions of the meaning of urbanization, and to recognize, as Professor Mote explicitly points out, that the western experience of urbanization is not really representative of the world’s experience of the growth and life of cities.

At the same time, pointing out this unfamiliar pattern of rural-urban relationships in China poses once again real questions of emphasis between historical accuracy and meaningful generalization. For while the broad outline sketched by Professor Mote is both meaningful and valid, it is nonetheless true that with the passage of time the nature of Chinese cities and the relationship between urban and rural areas in China changed significantly. The dramatic similarity in plan and layout between twelfth-century and twentieth-century Soochow speaks to the essential continuities in Chinese urban experience. Yet it must still be admitted that particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Chinese cities became increasingly isolated, culturally and economically, from their agrarian hinterlands. Treaty ports, where foreigners were permitted to live and do business under the protection of foreign-imposed treaties, became centers of modern industrial and financial organization, while their nearby and distant hinterlands remained nearly unaffected. Smaller cities, even the walled county capitals in many regions, seem to have become havens for formerly rural-dwelling Chinese landowners, who clustered in the cities and towns to escape the growing disorder of the countryside and lived on the fruits of their absentee landlordism. In the process of moving to the cities, these landowning gentry families lost contact with rural society and with the social and economic problems of rural life. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century China saw the growing alienation of the city from the countryside, the disruption of the urban-rural continuum of which Professor Mote speaks, and (in the view of some scholars) the draining of the resources of rural China to support the westernized, alien, often profligate lifestyles of a parasitic urban population.

With this break in historical continuity in mind, how are we to assess the pronounced antiurban strain in Chinese communism and particularly in the thought and policies of Mao Tse-tung himself? Mao has shown a strong determination to prevent the further growth of mutually exclusive rural and urban societies in China. He refuses to tolerate the isolation of urban dwellers, particularly officeholders, administrators, and students, from the realities of peasant life. He looks with horror, as Professor Spence has pointed out, on the development of educated elites and entrenched bureaucracies that have lost touch with the economic and social struggles of the vast majority of China's population, the peasantry. Moreover, under Mao's leadership China is making vast efforts to spread the development of China's new high culture—the culture of proletarianism and industrialism—throughout rural society, instead of permitting it to dwell and flourish in isolated urban islands of modernization. There are innumerable signs of these efforts, the most conspicuous of which have been the decentralization of industrial production and the distribution of small, labor-intensive industrial facilities among the rural communes all over China.

This determination to break down the barriers between urban and rural

sectors that had arisen in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is intriguing, to say the least. Should we detect in it a touch of the old ruralism, despite Mao's vigorous rejection of the Confucian ideology that undergirded ruralism in the past, and despite the Chinese communists' wholehearted adoption of the goal of industrialization, itself a product and a cause of modern urbanization in western societies?

The remarks of Professors Wright and Spence have spoken to the importance of recognizing continuities between the distant and recent past and even the present in China, while Professor Mote, in addition to pointing this out again, has also raised the question of comparability and equivalence as a factor in any attempt to "understand China." My comments on Professor Max Loehr's stimulating paper will be limited to a single issue, not because the work does not merit longer comments but because full comprehension of his field requires greater specialization than is mine. The issue on which I will comment is one where Professor Loehr's interpretation seemingly diverges from those of Professors Mote and Wright.

In their comments, both Professor Mote and Professor Wright had occasion to point out the unique significance that the written word held in traditional China. In a society where literacy was highly limited and where literacy was the passkey to the refined moral and social wisdom of China's high culture, the written word came to have an almost mystic significance; it became the repository of truth and value. Yet Professor Loehr suggests that there was in China another explicitly nonverbal embodiment of truth and value, namely painting, especially landscape painting.

Two possible explanations of this apparent divergence raise once again the issue of the uses and pitfalls of generalization in the pursuit of understanding about China. One explanation would be that in the imperial China of which all three scholars speak, there were more kinds of truth than simply the moral and categorical truths enunciated in Confucian classics and repeated or elaborated in endless examples of Confucian literature over two millennia. That is to say, perhaps there were un-Confucian truths—perhaps Taoist truths—more susceptible to embodiment and expression in painting than to exposition in literature. Or perhaps Chinese landscape painting, which was, after all, among the most highly prized activities of the Confucian elite itself, proves that even Confucian "truth" and "value" had more dimensions than could be encompassed by literature and the written word alone.

Both of these points are elementary, and both are valid. Social and metaphysical values in China were not *unidimensional*; the assumption that they were has helped to undermine one of the unsuccessful attempts to define China's "political culture" that I mentioned before. Not only did Confucianism fail to stand alone as the fountain of value and truth in traditional Chinese society over two thousand years, but the content and implications of Confucianism itself changed with time, for example taking on new metaphysical

overtones in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Professor Loehr's discussion of the content of Chinese landscape painting complements and serves to fill out the images of Chinese society and politics which Professors Wright, Mote, and Spence help to construct.

Having discussed some ramifications of the essays published herein, we can return to the question: is it reasonable to speak of "understanding China" to a general audience? The answer is cautious but affirmative. If by "understanding" we mean humane toleration and the reduction of doctrinaire inflexibility, then with care progress can be made. Progress depends on the use of intelligent generalization, on the illumination of historical continuity, for example, and on paying attention to the comparability between Chinese experience and the observer's own. It also depends on the humble (and cheerful) recognition that generalizations usually can be qualified; that the search for reality deepens with the investigator's expertise; that differing interpretations inevitably attend the examination of complex phenomena. Within this framework, we hope that "Four Views of China" stands as a good example of what can be done.

NOTES

1. Lucian W. Pye, *The Spirit of Chinese Politics: a psychocultural study of the authority crisis in political development* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1969); and Richard H. Solomon, *Mao's Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

2. Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, Vol. II: *The Problem of Monarchical Decay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958-65).