

REFLECTIONS ON THE SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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David Bosch remarked in his *Transforming Mission* (p.6), that the “missionary debacle” in China was one of the major events triggering the contemporary crisis of mission. In the wake of the communist take-over of mainland China and the subsequent massive withdrawal of western missionaries, there was a great deal of soul-searching and reflection on the part of foreign missionaries and their home churches. The whole event contributed significantly to the transition from the missionary paradigm shaped by the Enlightenment to the “ecumenical missionary paradigm” as described by Bosch. In many ways, I would argue, the emerging new paradigm owes much to the missionary experience with the Chinese context of modern times.

After almost three decades of isolation of the Chinese Christian communities from the international missionary movement, the international missionary movement was finally able to reconnect with the churches in the mainland and to re-enter the Chinese context in the 1980s. Since then a large number of mission organizations have arrived on the Chinese scene in one way or another. Then a critical question arose: Shall we simply pick up what previous generations have left and follow their missionary thinking and approach? Or, shall we explore a new path? Given the fact that we are still in the midst of paradigm shift (see Bosch p.366), the answer to this question is no doubt very significant. In order to find the best answer, we have no choice but to better understand the social and cultural context of contemporary China. It is fair to say that the future of Christian mission and churches in the country very much depends on how well we understand the context. In my view, the thoughts and concerns of Chinese intellectuals are always one of the best indicators of social and cultural trends in Chinese society. That is why I will pay special attention to them in this presentation.

In essence the Chinese context today is almost like it was one hundred years ago. In other words, China’s great transition from a medieval empire to a modern nation-state, starting in the 1840s, has yet to be completed. Monumental changes were set in motion when the Qing Dynasty lost two Opium Wars to the Western powers and was forced to open the vast country to the outside world in the first half of the 19th century. As China’s national crisis deepened, exploring the roads to national salvation and modernization became the key

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theme and central issue of modern Chinese history. Since the 19th century the goals of China's reform or modernization have been to revitalize the nation in order to defend national sovereignty and independence. To reach these goals, there are two fundamental tasks involved. The first was national self-strengthening or saving China from foreign aggression by political, economic and military means; the second was enlightenment or the reconstructing of Chinese culture by learning new ideologies and values from the West.

From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century China's campaign for national revitalization and salvation was gradually radicalized, and thus step-by-step reforms were replaced by violent revolutions. In the meantime, traditional order was challenged on technological, political, and cultural fronts. Soon after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 the Confucianism-centered cultural system was under unprecedented attack by the so-called "New Cultural Movement." In those years the crisis of tradition in China was fundamental and wholesale. The early years of the 20th century witnessed the drastic collapse of the traditional social and intellectual order. The Confucian worldview and ethic were publicly and persistently questioned and rejected by most modern Chinese intellectuals. As a result, the religious, philosophical and spiritual foundations of the traditional social and political order crumbled, and Chinese society quickly descended to civil wars and disorder. Saving China from this wholesale crisis called for a comprehensive ideological system that could provide the population with a new set of beliefs as well as an agenda of social reconstruction. In the early 20th century three schools of thought emerged as the most likely candidates: Neo-Confucianism, Liberalism, and Marxism. History has proved that the last one was most successful for unifying the Chinese people under a lofty ideal, to mobilize them with revolutionary fervor, and to direct them with a radical social agenda. At least temporarily the communist ideology managed to fill the spiritual vacuum left by the collapse of Confucian authority, and the communist victory of 1949 appeared to succeed in solving the problem of national crisis.

The communist solution to the spiritual and cultural crisis in China was short-lived, however. As an ideology most successful in revolution, communism soon turned out to be inadequate in handling the task of building a modernized, industrialized country. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) communism as a system of value and social design repeated the fate of Confucianism, and lost its legitimacy in the eyes of many Chinese intellectuals and among some segments of the Chinese population. In the 1980s the Chinese Communist Party embarked on a free-market oriented economic reform in its drive toward modernization, and gradually adopted a more tolerant approach to ideology and culture. As a result, a new pluralism has emerged within the economic, social and political life of the country. The resurgence of religions, especially Christianity, occurred under such a favorable circumstance.

Throughout the 1980s the decline of the Chinese version of Marxism was testified to by the rise of the so-called "New Enlightenment" movement. By and large, this movement

represented a wide range of intellectuals who were disillusioned with official communist ideology. Rather critical of the Chinese version of Marxism and socialism, they turned to Western liberalism for inspiration. Philosophically they stressed individuality over against collectivity. Economically they supported a capitalistic type of economic experiment over against the old state-planned system. Politically they advocated human rights, freedom of speech, and democracy over against the communist dictatorship. Culturally they embraced the modern scientific and humanistic spirit over against traditional Confucian values. For them the democratic and industrialized civilization in the West was without doubt the best model for China. Moreover, their dominant influence in the non-governmental intellectual community was evident through the general public's newly found openness toward the outside world and its eagerness to learn from the West. In some scholars' words, the mood of the Chinese public in these years was basically "pro-West."

After the June 4th event of 1989 the communist authorities were able to quickly stabilize society and achieve impressive economic growth. So the general public became less supportive of a purely Western model of modernity. By the late 1990s the Chinese public's view of the West, especially of the United States, had turned significantly negative, and the public mood began to incline to nationalism. The influence and strength of nationalism were powerfully demonstrated by the outbreak of the anti-American rage in China in the wake of the NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999. Since then a "conspiracy theory" - the US and its Western allies are doing everything to demonize China and thus prevent it from becoming a rival - has caught the ear of many Chinese people. Under such a circumstance the "New Enlightenment" movement became hopelessly divided into two factions: liberals and neo-conservatives. Since the late 1990s a hot debate has been raging between the two factions in regard to the current and future reform and related issues.

By and large, the liberal camp inherits most of the positions of the "New Enlightenment" of the 1980s. Typically they dislike governmental intervention and champion individual freedoms and rights. Acknowledging rampant social problems such as corruption, poverty and inequality, they insist that the solutions to these problems lies in bolder economic and political reforms, and any attempt of restricting economic and political freedom can only lead the country to a dead-end. In their minds the advantages and benefits of the capitalist system definitely outweigh its defects. The democratic and free market model of modernization that originated in the West is universally valid, and China's only hope lies in joining the world shaped by that model. Not surprisingly they embrace the trend of globalization and endorse China's entry into the WTO (The World Trade Organization).

In opposition to what they perceive as a narrow-minded and irrational nationalism, they promote an open-minded, tolerant, and peace-loving nationalism. For them national sovereignty cannot be absolutized at the cost of human rights and freedom. Generally speaking they were critical of the outburst of the anti-American fanaticism in 1999. Under

their pens their debating partners - the neo-conservatives - are often painted as nothing less than the running dogs or accomplices of the communist regime in suppressing liberty and prolonging the life of the political dictatorship.

Neo-conservatism refers to a broad alliance of groups ranging from democratic socialists to neo-Confucians. What unites them is their strong reservations about the Western model of modernization and a common desire to explore a uniquely Chinese way of reform. More specifically what characterizes neo-conservatism are the following points:

First, the believers of neo-conservatism like to point out that the capitalistic or free-market economic system usually favors the principle of individual freedom over social justice, and thus has contributed to widespread corruption, ruthless exploitation of working classes, and the widening gap between the rich and poor. That is precisely the negative social consequence produced by the two-decades old reform of China. As a solution to these social problems, they advocate the so-called “economic democracy (or equality),” and firmly support strong governmental intervention to keep the negative effects of a free market economy in check, to safeguard social equality, and to protect the interests of labor. In debate they tend to label their liberal counterparts as the representatives or mouthpieces of special interests or emerging big businesses and the capitalist class in China. In their eyes globalization is overall a negative trend, for it is bound to worsen social injustice and harm China’s sovereignty and interests.

Secondly, most of the neo-conservatives never question the universal value of political democracy. Just as their liberal counterparts, they cherish or pay lip-service to the principles of human rights and liberty. But they tend to be more realistic and cautious about how to implement them in China. For them democracy and human rights are valid in contemporary China only as long-term goals or ideals for Chinese people, instead of as a feasible political design, policy and strategy at the current stage of reform. Learning hard lessons from painful and sometimes chaotic social transitions in Russia and the East Europe, they are convinced that any immediate and drastic political reform at this point would hurt the economic prosperity and reform effort, and trigger serious social unrest, ethnic conflicts, and eventually the disintegration of the country. In order to guarantee the success of economic reform, they argue, a strong, effective and even authoritarian government is needed in China. In their minds China’s top priority for now is economic reform and growth, not political overhaul, and economic prosperity would eventually lay a solid foundation for future political changes. In addition, any attempt of political democratization that would hurt China’s national interests is irresponsible. Therefore, never totally ruling out the prospect of political reform, they strongly favor postponing such a move. In response to Western criticism of the Chinese government’s reluctance to protect human rights and to democratize society, they insist that China has every right to choose its own path and the timing of democratization. Even when the political reform is started in the future, they usually favor a gradual, least costly, and least painful transition over the so-called “shock

therapy” conducted in Eastern Europe.

Thirdly, unsatisfied with both the socialistic and capitalistic models, some members of the neo-conservative camp are eager to explore a third way of development for China. Emphasizing the uniqueness of China’s cultural background and national character, they view the popular capitalistic and democratic model as something grown out of the Western culture and thus not necessarily fitting in with the needs and conditions of China. The successful experience of the so-called “four mini dragons” has proved very attractive to them. They like to point to the “East Asian Model” as a real alternative for China. In this model some of them see the value and vitality of the Confucian tradition in the contemporary world, and further envision a revival of Confucianism in mainland China. For this reason they are also referred to as neo-Confucians.

Fourthly, a main theme of the neo-conservatives is nationalism. It is perhaps unfair to identify most neo-conservatives as fanatical or extreme nationalists. However, in contrast to liberals, they certainly try to take a more balanced and realistic approach to individual freedoms and national interests. In fact, it is national sovereignty and interests, rather than individual citizens’ rights that often come first on their domestic and foreign agendas. For them, the liberals’ internationalism and optimism about globalization appear too naive and idealistic. They are especially concerned with American power and dominance in global affairs, and worried about the potential threats that the US and its allies could pose to China’s independence and interests. It is not surprising that one can easily detect an ever-present anti-America and anti-West overtone in their words. In such incidents as the NATO’s bombing of Chinese embassy they usually sided with the anti-US demonstrators and embraced the “conspiracy theory.” In sometimes very emotional debate they do not hesitate to accuse their liberal counterparts of betraying their motherland.

Indeed, the differences between the liberal and conservative camps in China today are real and fundamental. The theoretical outlook and ethos of the former tends to be internationalistic and individualistic, and that of the latter nationalistic and collectivistic. In terms of vision the former perceives the hope of China in its integration with the globalization process, and the latter perceives hope in a uniquely Chinese path of modernization. On the other hand, they also have a lot in common. Most importantly they share the same long-term goal: China’s revitalization, the same goal also pursued by previous generations of Chinese reformers. In other words, they all dream about a prosperous and democratic China. Therefore, at least parts of their vision for China overlap. And most of the key differences between them have to do with the path or strategy of modernization, rather than with the ideal or vision.

Although the current debate between liberals and neo-conservatives is largely carried out within Chinese academia, its significance extends far beyond a purely scholarly exchange of opinions. It can tell us much about the successes and failures of China’s reform and modernization campaign, about the common concerns ordinary Chinese citizens have,

and about the possible directions the country may take in the near future. In their battle to win the hearts of Chinese people, the neo-conservative camp has apparently gained upper hand in recent years. The key elements of the neo-conservative agenda seem to enjoy greater influence on the Chinese population in the mainland as well as in the diaspora. This fact once again illustrates the relatively conservative nature of public opinion in China in recent decades.

An interesting fact is that, since the early 1980s, a Christian voice has been part of the ongoing debate, even though this voice is never very strong. For theological and practical reasons the Chinese churches are not involved in the debate. The church voice is raised mainly by some intellectuals who are mostly associated with the liberal camp. Except for a small group who have accepted Christian faith, most of these intellectuals are either just sympathetic or favorable to Christianity. Lacking any church affiliation, they are often referred to as the “cultural Christians.” Overall they tend to go beyond the politics and economy-centered narrow horizon of liberal intellectuals, and take a wholistic approach to reform. In other words, they pay greater attention to the cultural and spiritual dimensions of reform, and see the significance of Christian thinking in this regard. In their view, modern notions of liberty, human rights and democracy and the entire democratic system have been inspired and nurtured by the Christian tradition in the West, and Christian faith and doctrine have served as the spiritual foundation and theoretical framework for the entire modern civilization. If Chinese people wish to adopt modern democracy and civilization, they cannot ignore the spiritual sources and Christian values behind them. And they must realize that a thorough cultural transformation is the necessary precondition for the construction of a democratic society. It is precisely in the cultural transformation of China that Christianity can play a unique and significant role. It is evident that Christianity is here treated mainly as a cultural phenomenon tied with Western civilization. This kind of approach presupposes a positive view of the relationship between the gospel and culture.

The fact that Christianity is one of only two religious traditions that can have a significant voice in the current debate about the future of the country points to the historical opportunity Christianity is facing in China nowadays. It has been said that the Chinese word for “crisis” means “danger” as well as “opportunity.” When the Confucian worldview and social order slid into fatal crisis in the 19th and early 20th century, Christian forces seized the opportunity to take root in Chinese soil. When the communist system was in serious crisis half a century later, a “Christian fervor” swept across the country like wild fire. As mentioned before, the nature of China’s crisis has always been social and political as well as spiritual and cultural. This is as true today as one hundred years ago. It is no wonder that one hears many contemporary Chinese intellectuals asking such questions: Are the notions of democracy and liberty adequate to answer all the fundamental questions confronting China today? Should we address the issues of ultimate concerns in our efforts to build a modernized and industrialized society? How can we integrate seemingly conflicting values

in a pluralistic society? The raising of these questions also explains Chinese academia's growing and persistent interest in religion in recent decades. In such a circumstance, we have every reason to believe that Christian faith holds the answers to the question of values and meaning. However, it would be futile and risky to ask of the Christian tradition a roadmap to democracy and free-market economy, as we in China are often tempted to do in order to prove the relevance of Christianity in China's modernization campaign. On the other hand, given the dominant social and political theme of social movements in modern China, the relevance and significance of Christian social consciousness and of a prophetic role in the Chinese context have to be recognized. It would be tragic and fatal for Chinese Christians and churches to keep aloof from the Chinese people's century-long quest for national revitalization. For one thing, as the tension between individual freedoms and social justice is growing in China, the Christian tradition does have something to say about the issue. And the sense of social responsibility of the new missionary paradigm, illustrated by Bosch (pp.400-408), is no doubt very crucial in the Chinese context.

Finally, as we can see, the cultural and intellectual scene in China is much more pluralist today than three decades ago. Unlike the foreign missionaries and Chinese believers of previous generations who had no choice but to deal with a single dominant tradition such as Confucianism in China's cultural life, Christians in contemporary China often find themselves interacting with multiple counterparts other than a small number of supreme ideologies. It is even fair to say that the main forces shaping contemporary Chinese intellectual and cultural life are no longer just Confucianism, but also a variety of secular ideologies largely imported from the West. As a result, the primary interests, approach and even vocabularies of contemporary Chinese culture are to a great extent globalized. The kinds of issues debated in China sound more or less familiar around the globe. Furthermore, since the issues concerning China's public opinion makers are predominantly economic and political, Bosch's distinction of indigenization and socio-economic models of contextualization (p.421) is very illuminating and important. Without denying the necessity of cultural indigenization, I believe that the gospel's social engagement in China deserves special attention. To continue to consider cultural dialogue with the Confucian tradition as the primary task of contextualization has no point in China today.