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A FEW OBSERVATIONS ON LIBERALISM IN CHINA
IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the social phenomena in contemporary China can be at least partly explained by tracing them back to the intellectual movements in the era of the Republic of China (ROC), which laid the foundation for China's modernization drive, although this cultural legacy had been largely ignored in the years of Mao Zedong. The age of the ROC marked a period of transition in Chinese history that may be as important as the period of Qin Shihuang in the 3rd century BC.

This essay will mainly focus on internal and external factors in the early 20th century that made a specific school of thought, Chinese liberalism, unique and will discuss the causes of its later fall to Mao-edited Marxism in 1949. What was merely a major intellectual movement in the West (although this movement fundamentally reshaped Western character) changed in China into a full-scale social movement with too much political involvement. The avoidance of academic autonomy has been, to this day, an intrinsic feature of Chinese civilization, tracing its origins back to

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the famous saying in *The Analects*: “A man with academic capabilities should become a politician.”¹

The deep connections between Chinese intellectuals and politics were developed to an extreme in the Republic of China. Although many intellectuals maintained their independent status as scholars and writers, various Chinese intellectual movements, including the spread of liberalism, were nevertheless caught up in the omnipresent revolutionary theme of the age. In this essay, the term “Chinese Revolution” basically refers to the full-scale social transition in China, starting from the Xinhai Revolution, and ending in the victory of the communist rebellion in 1949. The intertwined relationship between culture and politics pushed the intellectual society onto the track of radicalism. Although intellectual liberation started from the worship of central liberal ideals such as democracy and the dignity of the individual, the iconoclastic nature of the social revolution prevented the establishment or preservation of those traditions. It was not long before both liberalism and Confucianism were ravaged under Mao’s “permanent revolution,” which brought the Chinese Revolution to its ultimate tragic peak.

And yet China was not the only country to exhibit radicalism. In a century full of anti-tradition sentiments, some people in the world celebrated and exhausted themselves with the deadly enticing idea of large-scale social experiment and innovation. Communism, fascism, anarchism, and neo-liberalism all found their followers in the 20th century. When American sociologist Edward Shils (1910–1995) published his essay on tradition, he discovered that contemporary social studies failed to address the concept of the word. Although there were a number of books on so-called “traditional society,” none analyzed the specific characteristics of traditionalism.² In 1972, political scientist Carl Friedrich (1901–1984) discovered that the definition of “tradition” was not included in the new edition of the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. Friedrich suggested that this was because “tradition” had been tainted with negative implications in the 20th century, as having opposite values from those of “science,” “progress,” and

“modernity.”³ The long-held belief in democracy and individualism was put under scrutiny in countries with the longest democratic histories. So it came as no surprise that China, with virtually no understanding of liberal ideals, was further bewildered by the chaotic global political and intellectual picture and ultimately followed the USSR and East Europe onto the track of totalitarianism.

The words of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) might give us a good explanation of why the most radical revolution often leads to the revival of the most ancient political traditions, which are not similar to the aims of the revolution in the remotest sense. In the following, Tocqueville explains how the French Revolution, which aimed to liberate the French people from the tyranny of the King, finally created a central government much more powerful than the Bourbon monarchy,

The objective of the French Revolution was not only the reform of the old government, but the eradication of the old social order. So it had to attack all existing powers simultaneously, destroying all recognized authorities, renewing customs and habits, and uprooting all thinking that might nurture respect and obedience from people’s minds. From this derives the unique anarchist characteristic of the French Revolution.

And yet shifting your sight away from these fragmented details, you will discover an enormous central authority. It absorbed and swallowed into its single entity all scattered powers and influences formerly dispersed throughout the entire society in numerous subordinate power structures, ranks, classes, occupations, families and individuals. Since the collapse of the Roman Empire, there had never existed a government similar to this one. The Revolution created this new authority, or in other words, this new authority automatically grew out of the ruins created by the Revolution. Indeed, the government created by the Revolution was more fragile, and yet it was a hundred times stronger than the government it had overthrown.⁴

The French Revolution, which gave birth to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, also resulted in the Reign of Terror in which about 17,000 people were executed.⁵ Radicalism had diverted the Revolution from its original path under the guidance of liberalism.

In China, Mao Zedong's romantic revolutionary zeal, which had claimed a goal to create an egalitarian communist society by destroying the old society at any price, ended up revitalizing certain peasant-based and unmistakably feudal political elements,⁶ as shown in the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution. In this sense, like Robespierre, Mao betrayed himself.

At present, one should sincerely hope that liberalism can gradually recover its strength and lead China in the direction of democratization and social progress. Such a process is referred to by some intellectuals on the mainland as "the Second Enlightenment," which will carry on the unaccomplished mission of "the First Enlightenment" in the age of the ROC and continue spreading democratic ideals. In the words of Mr. Fu Sinian (1896–1950), a renowned Chinese historian and social activist:

Peking University, in her 50 years of history, has created a new liberal spiritual foundation. In my opinion, although this foundation has not been supported by the current government, it would be more seriously devastated if communism were to succeed...I firmly believe that the rule of the Communist Party cannot last long and after the communists, a great "dynasty" will emerge, which can promote the spirit of liberalism which we have cultivated for 50 years.⁷

Fu Sinian made these remarks on December 17, 1948, on the 50th anniversary of Peking University, when the Nanking Government led by Chiang Kai-shek was on the verge of collapse. Two years later, Fu died in Taiwan when Mao had just secured his government in Beijing. At present, it would be unrealistic and irresponsible to expect the fall of the communist government, for such an event would definitely bring China into another round of political turmoil, but the eventual resurgence of liberalism in China through gradual social reforms is a beautiful dream that the younger generation should always adhere to.

A Story That Matters

December 1948, Beijing. Hu Shi (1891–1962) was packing for his departure, unsure if he would ever come back. A few days before, one of his favorite students, Wu Han (1909–1969),

who was a young and talented historian, came to his house and asked him not to leave. Wu was working for the communists and promised his teacher that he would be well treated by the new government. “Don’t believe the communists!” Hu replied coldly. At last, Hu told his student, “In Soviet Russia, there is bread but no freedom. In the U.S., there are both bread and freedom. Under *their* rule, there is neither bread nor freedom.”⁸

On December 14, 1948, Hu left for Nanking. Nine years later, on September 21, 1957, Hu’s youngest son Sidu (1921–1957) committed suicide in Tangshan after being identified as a “right-winger” (a synonym to the word “anti-revolutionary”) and “the evil son of the notorious reactionary and traitor Hu Shi.”⁹ Another 12 years later, when Hu had already died in Taiwan, Wu Han committed suicide in the height of the Cultural Revolution after being tortured for days by the “revolutionary masses.”¹⁰ Hu’s prophesy became the last echoes of liberals in China.

Chapter 1: Internal Changes: Waiting for an Intellectual Revolution The Confucian Background of Chinese Liberalism

The Chinese agrarian society reached its peak in the Tang Dynasty, after which social progress and innovation slowed down, leading to a gradual decline of the civilization.¹¹ This process was so gradual, however, that it took more than 1,000 years for the political structure of this society to collapse in the revolution in 1911, while the cultural and social structures of this society remained largely undamaged. It is essential to put the rise of liberalism in China into the context of a Confucian cultural background. Although any intellectual movement is deeply rooted in the country’s economic, political, and social circumstances, this essay will be confined to the discussions of intellectual history itself. Economic and political issues will only be mentioned when they directly triggered a basic change in Chinese intellectual ideas.

The Song Dynasty was probably the last dynasty in China that adhered to the ancient principle of a civilian government with government officials sharing substantial power with the emperor

and constantly reminding the Emperor to correct his mistakes. Cheng Yi (1033–1107), a famous Chinese philosopher in the Song Dynasty, once said, “The fate of the nation lies in the hands of *Zaixiang* [China’s top political advisor to the Emperor; similar to Mayor of the Palace in France in the Middle Ages].”¹² He was bold enough to point out that *Zaixiang* was, in some aspects, even more important than the emperor. Cheng further asserted, “How can all political affairs be handled by one person? The emperor has to find wise men in the nation and cooperate with them.”¹³ Here Cheng directly denied the legitimacy of an absolute monarchy, something totally unimaginable for intellectuals in later dynasties.

Zhu Xi (1130–1200), one of the most important founders of neo-Confucianism—a school of thought that dominated China in the Ming and Qing Dynasties—criticized his Emperor Ning Zong to his face when the Emperor failed to listen to the advice of his ministers:

At present, your majesty has been seated for less than a month, and yet you made the important decisions all by yourself and ignored the remonstrances of your ministers. You made abrupt decisions dictatorially while the ministers and advisors failed to join the process. Even if all the decisions made solely by your majesty are appropriate, this is not the correct way of governing a country.¹⁴

These quotes clearly indicate that some kind of primitive “democracy” existed in the imperial court in the Song dynasty and this kind of “democracy” can be justified by the basic principle of Confucianism that a *junzi*, or a virtuous and knowledgeable man, should actively take part in politics and always be brave to point out the emperor’s mistakes. This anti-dictator component in Confucianism survived the suppression of the Chinese monarchy and actively connected itself to liberal ideas as soon as the latter started to spread in China.

But Song was not a long-lived and mighty dynasty. It first lost its northern territory to the nomad tribes in northern China and was later conquered by the Mongols in the late 13th century.¹⁵ The Mongols carried out a policy of racial discrimination that divided the subjects of the emperor into four categories,

with Han people at the bottom of the social ladder.¹⁶ Han intellectuals were no longer able to enjoy the political freedom that had already become the core of their social life for hundreds of years. Although the Mongols ruled for less than a century, when the Han people re-established their rule in 1368, everything was different. The first Emperor of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), abolished the *Zaixiang* system forever, therefore concentrating all political power to the Emperor himself.¹⁷ The late years of the Ming dynasty featured powerful eunuchs controlling the country and an intimidating secret police force always ready to persecute intellectuals who dared to speak out the truth.¹⁸ Fang Bao (1668–1749), a renowned writer and scholar in the early Qing dynasty, wrote a famous article about Zuo Guangdou (1575–1625), an intellectual who opposed the eunuchs. Zuo was tortured to death in jail. In the article, Fang recorded, “Zuo Guangdou...sat against a wall, face burnt and unrecognizable, flesh and bone on the left lower leg all disappeared.”¹⁹ Zuo was one among many Chinese intellectuals who lost their lives when they got too deeply involved in politics. The Ming Dynasty was not an age for them to serve their country.

Here is another example to illustrate the attitude of intellectuals in that period toward political affairs. Wang Yangming (1472–1529), the founder of *xinxue*, a branch of neo-Confucianism, concluded his basic theory this way: “The conscience in my heart is the same with the law of the heavens. Practicing my conscience and the law of the heavens on every existence will help me understand everything in this world.”²⁰ Wang’s theory went completely against traditional Confucianism, which stressed the importance of experience and action instead of simply discovering one’s “inner self.” Wang went so far as to give up the dream of assisting the emperor and devoted his later life instead to educating the people. (Wang still held several important positions in his later life but made education his main focus.²¹) Wang’s change of mind can actually be traced back to 1508 when he was sent into exile after offending a eunuch, Liu Jin. Before his exile, Wang suffered *zhangxing*, a kind of corporal punishment in which the victim was disrobed and beaten heavily with a stick. In 1520, Wang’s main

disciple Wang Xinzhai met Wang for the first time and tried to discuss politics with him. Wang said, “A *junzi* should care for nothing irrelevant to his status,” and quickly dropped the topic.²²

It can be concluded that Wang’s digression from traditional Confucianism was the inevitable result of the harsh political environment of that time. And Wang was not alone. His students and students’ students, such as Wang Xinzhai (1483–1541), He Xinyin (1517–1579) (who was later executed by Zhang Juzheng [1525–1582], a high-ranking government official²³), and Yan Shan-nong (birth and death unknown), promoted the ideas of *xinxue* and devoted their lives to mass education, leading to the thriving of *xuehui*, a kind of non-governmental academic organization.

The absolute dictatorship of the Ming emperors forced intellectuals to move their attention from the imperial court to the civil society. From then on, the ancient dream of Emperors working together with their ministers to realize *datong*, or the utopian society, became a fantasy. The Manchu rulers were even more brutal than their predecessors, and the gap between politics and the intellectual society was never healed. From a modern perspective, the development of a brutal absolute monarchy actually helped the formation of a group of somewhat independent and academic-focused intellectuals dedicated to the development of a better civil society, many of whom still cherished the primitive “democratic” legacy of Confucianism. This new trend in the late Ming Dynasty and throughout the whole Qing Dynasty had a remote and yet obvious influence on the survival of liberalism in China in the early 20th century.²⁴ Chinese intellectuals no longer viewed political participation as the only way to realize their social values. Teaching and independent research were considered viable and sometimes better options. The expansion of non-political realms set the keynote for the spread of liberalism, without which any intellectual movement in the modern sense would be impossible.

However, the separation of politics and intellectuals was never a complete one. Chinese elites were still supposed to fix their attention on political developments, always ready to serve their country when needed, or in the words of Fan Zhongyan

(989–1052), a celebrated statesman and writer in the Song dynasty, “(A *junzi* should) care for the well-being of the people when he was in the imperial court and worry for the well-being of the Emperor when he was in exile.”²⁵ Fan’s words influenced generations of Chinese intellectuals. His masterpiece, *The Yueyang Tower*, which included the sentence above, is still in Chinese textbooks today and is recited by millions of Chinese students. The primitive impetus of using research to directly reflect on the political realities of the nation and to justify certain political causes is a longstanding intellectual tradition in China that rejects the idea of pure and non-utilitarian academic efforts. Such a tradition actually foretold the tragic fate of liberalism—being swallowed up by the omniverous Chinese Revolution.

The Seed of Intellectual Revolution

There was another important trend among Confucian scholars in the early Qing Dynasty, which is referred to by many historians on the Chinese mainland as “progressive Confucian thinking.” The classic of this trend is *On the Emperor* written by Huang Zongxi (1610–1695), in which he says:

When the Emperor is still fighting for the throne, he kills thousands and forces the scattering of thousands of families just for him to become Emperor. How brutal...After he has ascended the throne, he sucks the marrow of his people, forces the scattering of thousands of families for his lewd and luxurious enjoyments and views all this evil as well-justified...So the biggest evil in the world is the Emperor.²⁶

Huang was a famous scholar in the transition period between the Ming and Qing Dynasties. He was loyal to the Ming emperor and once joined the rebel forces to fight against the Manchu invaders. However, this did not stop him from actively seeking the root causes of the fall of the Ming Empire. And the answer was clear. An absolute monarch who did not consider the benefits of his people was the source of all evil and chaos. Huang was not calling for the establishment of a republic, which he certainly had never heard of. Nor did he have any understanding of democracy. He was simply referring to the old dream of power sharing between

the Emperor and intellectuals and of an enlightened monarch who genuinely cared for his people. In his own words, “In the old times, people supported and loved their monarch and viewed him as their father, which was natural. At present, people hate their Emperor, view him as their enemy and name him ‘the Evil Dictator,’ which is also natural.”²⁷ Nevertheless, Huang was still regarded as the pioneer of Chinese democratic thinking. His works were used by Sun Yat-sen to encourage his comrades to fight for the abolition of the Chinese monarchy.

Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), a famous scholar from the same period said,

What is the difference between the demise of a dynasty and the demise of a nation? The answer is: the changing of the ruling family is the demise of a dynasty while the abandoning of Confucian ethics, the rule of tyrants and the spread of barbarism indicates the demise of a nation. So one must first know how to preserve a nation and then can he save a dynasty. Preserving a dynasty is the job of the Emperor and his servants. Preserving the nation is the obligation of every ordinary citizen.²⁸

The significance of this paragraph lies in the fact that Gu distinguished clearly between a dynasty and a nation—and declared the latter as far more important. His patriotism was no longer confined within the limits of serving a specific Emperor. It resembled the basic features of the patriotism of a modern citizen in a civil society. One might argue that Gu made these remarks in an era when there was simply no Emperor to serve (Gu never viewed the Manchu ruler as *his* Emperor), and he had to satisfy himself with the vague conception of the “nation.” But nonetheless, the invasion of the Manchu people forced many Han intellectuals to reexamine their relationship with their country and to choose the nation state as a substitute for the Emperor as their object of loyalty and devotion. And this reinforced conception of the *tianxia*, or the nation state, was a subtle yet serious blow to the emperor system.

The first great wave of Western thinking came after the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 and 1895 when China was decisively defeated by Japan, a country that many Chinese viewed as “a small island inhabited by barbarians.” The Treaty of Shimonoseki, which

was signed between the two parties shortly after the war, stipulated the cession of Taiwan, its surrounding islands, and the Liaodong Peninsula from China. China also had to pay 200 million *liang* (which approximately equals 10 million kilograms) of silver as war reparation.²⁹ The treaty was a fundamental blow not only to the prestige of the Qing government (in 1895, Sun Yat-sen launched his first military uprising against the Manchu government in Guangzhou), but also to the ideas of Chinese intellectuals who had considered Chinese political, cultural, and social systems the best on the planet. Now the experience of the Meijing Restoration, which featured a comprehensive study of Western culture (including some of its political theories and institutions), began to appeal to many of them. In 1895, Kang Youwei (1858–1927) organized the Strength and Knowledge Society in Beijing and started to call openly for comprehensive reforms. Kang published a number of articles promoting the idea of a constitutional monarchy, which is a Western political theory.³⁰ However, although Kang was actually upholding Western political thinking, he still considered himself a devout Confucian and tried to find a Confucian basis for his ideas. One of his most famous works is *Confucius as a Reformer*, in which he depicted the politically conservative great thinker as a strong supporter of reform and even democracy. Finally he boldly announced that democracy was in fact an important part of ancient Chinese political philosophy and that he and other reformers were merely rediscovering the legacy of their great ancestors rather than learning from the West.³¹

The ideas Kang Youwei promoted may not fit into the precise definition of liberalism, but they do contain a liberal element. More importantly, a conclusion can be drawn that the massive import of Western thinking did not happen, as some have suggested, as a revolt *against* Confucianism. Although some revolts did occur, the introduction of Western thinking rather based itself on certain elements of Confucianism, which shares a certain degree of similarity with Western political thinking. Therefore, instead of totally destroying the old cultural structure, the process actively connected itself with the traditional fabric that had persevered, against all kinds of hardship and challenges, for

more than 2,000 years. A common trait of the different schools of Western thinking spreading throughout China in the early 1900s, liberalism was no exception. Although the Confucian background did provide some convenience, Western thinking mingled with certain traditional elements turned out to be a compromise not so attractive between China's modernization advocates and the older forces who were simply too inveterate to be remolded and incorporated into the process. Liberalism, which is individualistic and thus the least similar with Confucianism compared to Communism and nationalism—which both contain a collective element—was eventually alienated from a China that was tearing itself apart between preserving its unique culture and historical pride and the desperate need to catch up with the global trend of modernization.

Chapter 2: The Development of Chinese Liberalism

The Definition of Chinese Liberalism

The definition of liberalism in the *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* is as follows:

A political and economic doctrine that emphasizes the rights and freedoms of the individual and the need to limit the powers of government. Liberalism originated as a defensive reaction to the horrors of the European wars of religion of the 16th century. Its basic ideas were given formal expression in works by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, both of whom argued that the power of the sovereign is ultimately justified by the consent of the governed, given in a hypothetical social contract rather than by divine right.³²

From this definition, liberalism is a concept that covers basically all of the fundamental principles of a democratic and civil society. Liberalism in the broad sense covers both the ideas of “liberals” and “conservatives” in contemporary politics and it is this broad definition of liberalism that is being used in this essay.

However, after examining the concept of liberalism in the Western world, one has to take into account the special circumstances of China. Is the concept of liberalism in China the same as that in the West? Below is the definition of liberalism in

Cihai, or *The Word Ocean*, which is one of the most prestigious encyclopedias in China:

1. A kind of political thinking of the capitalist class from the early 19th century to the early 20th century...The word “liberalism” was first created in the early 19th century, modifying and supplementing the slogans of “freedom” and “democracy” of the bourgeoisie in revolutionary ages according to the new needs after they had established political power. Liberalism advocates the complete freedoms of individual activities and development. It also promotes individual rights, unrestricted free competition of the entrepreneurs, election rights with property restrictions and the establishment of a bicameral parliament.

2. The wrong tendency of giving up intellectual struggle and supporting unprincipled peace in a revolutionary organization. Its basic features are unlimited freedom, lack of organization and discipline, indifference towards the sufferings of the masses, and taking a reconciliatory and compromising attitude instead of engaging in courageous struggle when an infringement upon the benefits of the people occurs.³³

This definition is obviously influenced by Marxist ideology, deviating from the internationally-recognized definition. And yet it does reveal a basic problem—that in traditional Chinese culture, liberalism is often considered an irresponsible approach towards life. Hu Shi, the leading liberal in the Republic of China, once wrote to his friend Wang Yunwu (1888–1979), then implementing scientific management in the Commercial Press, a leading Chinese publishing agency:

Mr. Yunwu,

I read the newspaper today. My previous joke has turned into a reality. You have become the “common enemy.” Great! Interesting!

I really hope you do not become obstinate because of this. When a reform is under way, there is always resistance. Maybe you can set a high standard first and then make compromises. You should always negotiate with the masses and make progress inch by inch. When your credit and authority has been established, the reforms will naturally become easier. This country is a most individualistic [here Hu Shi used English] country and it is easier to succeed through gradual means rather than radical means. Negotiations seem slow

and inefficient but are actually the most efficient. Maybe you should make compromises with those against you.

Hu Shi—21 January 1932³⁴

In this letter, it can be seen that even Hu, who was a devout liberal, failed to interpret individualism in its original sense. Hu, in this context, used individualism as a derogative word, mainly referring to a kind of self-centered egoist attitude. This can be explained by the strong influence of collective Confucian values and ingrained contempt towards individual rights in traditional Chinese culture.

Chinese liberalism did abide by the basic doctrines of liberalism, such as democracy and respect for human rights, but it also absorbed Confucian teachings. While both Western and Chinese liberalism stressed the importance of the rights of the individual, Chinese liberalism also emphasized the power of the group and the moral teachings of serving one's country. The reason for this not only lies in the fundamental influence of Oriental values, but also in the fact that China, as a semicolonized poverty-stricken country, was plagued by severe internal and external problems and many believed that only the collective wisdom of every Chinese citizen could save the nation from extermination. Hu Shi, for instance, summarizes his objectives as a scholar as such: "Work on specific issues, import Western ideas, sort out traditional Chinese culture and create a new civilization."³⁵ Hu made it clear that his ultimate goal was not, like that of most Western liberals, seeking the complete liberation of the individual but rather rejuvenating the Chinese civilization. The dream of saving China was shared by almost every school of intellectuals in the early 20th century and, as will be discussed later, it was precisely this dream that led to the final tragedy of liberalism in China.

After defining Chinese liberalism, there is another critical issue that has to be dealt with. What were the other schools of thinking in the Republic of China? Are they necessarily antiliberal? The answer is negative. In Europe and the United States, anti-liberal thinking almost always refers to fascism and other schools of thinking which prefer autocracy. But in China, the majority of intellectuals were strongly against the Manchu monarchy and

avidly supported democracy. So certain basic ideals of liberalism were shared by people across the intellectual spectrum, even communists, who believed in the establishment of a kind of “People’s Democratic Dictatorship.” The account of liberalism in China as an intellectual movement should include all promotions of liberal ideals, which certainly include Kang Youwei’s promotion of a constitutional monarchy in place of an absolute monarchy and Sun Yat-sen’s armed revolts against the Manchu dictatorship. This does not mean, however, that Kang and Sun were themselves liberals.

In order to make a clearer distinction between liberalism and the others, it is helpful to have a look at the words of Lu Xun, a celebrated left-wing Chinese writer:

Our toiling masses have always been the most brutally oppressed and exploited, even deprived of the right of literacy. The only thing they can do is to silently endure exploitation and extermination... The educated youngsters have realized their mission and cried out first. This battle hymn and the cries of rebellion of the masses themselves both horrified the rulers. The reactionary writers have started attacking, spreading rumors or even spying by themselves. And yet all of their actions are done in secret, anonymously, simply proving their evilness.³⁶

Lu Xun was definitely in support of democratic reform, but unlike a typical liberal, who focused on individual rights and human dignity in a narrow sense, Lu focused more on the broader context of social transition as a whole. Lu was in no way against the realization of individual liberty, but in contrast to liberals, who believed that one should first liberate oneself and then liberate his country, Lu tended to view the process the other way around, assuming that the existence of a huge social gap and the presence of Western imperialists would definitely hinder all individualist approaches of reform and only the collective power of the masses could form the social foundation of China’s progress.

For a deeper insight into the shocking social inequalities in China, here are a few quotes from Edgar Snow, an American journalist who spent decades in the Republic of China:

Have you ever seen a man—a good, honest man who has worked hard, a “law-abiding citizen,” doing no serious harm to anyone—when he

has had no food for more than a month? It is a most agonizing sight. His dying flesh hangs from him in wrinkled folds; you can clearly see every bone in his body; his eyes stare out unseeing; and even if he is a youth of twenty he moves like an ancient crone, dragging himself from spot to spot. If he has been lucky he has long ago sold his wife and daughters. He has also sold everything he owns—the timber of his house itself, and most of his clothes. Sometimes he has indeed even sold his last rag of decency, and he sways there in the scorching sun, his testicles dabbling from him like withered olive seeds—the last grim jest to remind you that this was once a man.³⁷

Snow quoted from Dr. A. Stampar, a health expert sent by the League of Nations as advisor to the Nanking Government:

In the famine of 1930, twenty acres of land could be purchased for three days' food supply. Making use of this opportunity, the wealthy classes of the province [Shensi] built up large estates, and the number of owner-cultivators diminished.³⁸

In Shensi it is considered a mark of honor to pay no land tax, and wealthy landowners are therefore as a rule exempted...A practice which is particularly undesirable is to claim arrears of taxes, for the period during which they were absent, from the farmers who abandoned their land during famines, the farmers being forbidden to resume possession until their arrears are paid.³⁹

And note what Dr. Stampar said about the tax system:

The revenues of Kansu have during the last five years averaged over eight million...heavier than taxation in Chekiang, one of the richest and most heavily taxed provinces in China. It will have been also that this revenue, especially in Kansu, is not drawn from one or two major sources, but from a multitude of taxes each yielding a small sum, scarcely any commodity or productive or commercial activity going untaxed.⁴⁰

Kansu was the province where the famines occurred, taking the lives of hundreds of thousands.⁴¹ And the wealthy classes were obviously not among the taxpayers.

China was a country ravenous for justice. Considering that Adolf Hitler rose in a period when social inequality in the Weimar Republic became unbearable and that Khomeini gained prominence when life for the poor deteriorated under the rule of Shah Pahlavi, one can arrive at the iron law of history that *social*

injustice is always the hotbed of extremism. Due process was something of virtually zero importance in the Republic of China where rampant corruption infiltrated into almost every government organ,⁴² while more than 400 million ordinary citizens lacked access to the basic necessities of life. And while virtually all Chinese elites cherished the fundamental values of liberalism—namely life, liberty, and property—many of them dismissed the lawful means of achieving these goals. Means and end, which are never considered separately in Western liberalism, were savagely severed in China. Mao Zedong, for instance, articulated in 1958:

Law is something we must have, and yet we have our way of doing things...We cannot rely on the rule of law to govern the majority. There are too many clauses in the civil law and criminal law. Who can remember all those?...I took part in drafting the constitution and I forget its contents. We basically don't rely on those stuff. We rely on resolutions and meetings.⁴³

Mao's era started with the redistribution of land in which more than 300 million peasants who had had no land or little land got a piece of land through confiscating by force the land of the landlords.⁴⁴ Mao advanced in a big way the protection of property rights of the peasants at the expense of property rights of the gentry. Ironically, Mao used to be a student of Hu Shi.⁴⁵

In sharp contrast with Mao's land redistribution program, which is still regarded by the Communist Party as one of the most glorious chapters in the history of the PRC, Hu's emphasis on due process earned him far more blame than credit. In 1924, when Pu Yi, the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty, was driven out of the Imperial Palace after a military coup,⁴⁶ Hu said indignantly:

I am against the preserving of the title of Emperor. But the privileges enjoyed by the Manchu monarchy are a kind of international promise, similar to that in a treaty. Treaties can be revised and even annulled. But the fact that our REPUBLIC has made ill use of a person's misfortune and violated his rights by force is really the most degrading stigma in the Republic's history.⁴⁷

Hu was referring to the Regulation on the Privileges of the Manchu Monarchy in 1912, which stipulated that if Pu Yi would give up his throne voluntarily, saving the country from a possible civil

war, he should be granted the right to live in the Imperial Palace and retain his title as Emperor.⁴⁸ In Hu's opinion, since Pu Yi had fulfilled his obligations, he should be treated in accordance with the Regulation. However, once again, it turned out that most Chinese democrats ignored the issue of due process. Hu was labeled, as he would be many more times in his life, a reactionary in support of backward conservatism, acting against the trend of history. After all, for a country as poor as the ROC, which was in desperate need of survival, development, and equality, mob justice like that in the age of Mao Zedong was, in many cases, an inevitable outcome.

Liberalism and the Revolution

The import of liberalism happened in a period when China was facing fierce economic and political challenges and, as it did in many other underdeveloped countries in the height of global Western expansion, Western thinking appealed to most Chinese intellectuals as *the* right path to lead China out of the survival crisis and to reach the ultimate goal of surpassing the West as the most prosperous country on the planet. The direct reasons for the spread of liberalism in China in the age of the ROC can be found in the general pattern of modernization of all underdeveloped nations in the first half of the 20th century, nations that generally regarded learning from the developed world as an indispensable component. But the picture was complicated by the question as to what kind of Western thinking to adopt and how to adopt it. This part of the essay will be devoted to examining the interactions between liberalism and the Chinese Revolution, which largely determined the fate of this school of political thought.

Liberalism and Nationalism

Although liberalism was one of the most influential schools of thinking in the ROC, there was only one man among all master thinkers in the period who could be considered a lifelong devout follower of the theory, Mr. Hu Shi (the reason for this strange phenomenon will be discussed later). So we will mainly use his

experiences as a sample to study the development of Chinese liberalism.

Hu's solution to China's problems was basically one of a mild reformist rather than a radical revolutionist. He believed that a responsible and well-educated citizen was the foundation of a modernized China and he referred to this as "sound individualism." He repeatedly appealed to Chinese youngsters in his works, with such charges as: "Improve your personality to save your country. Make yourself a real man!"⁴⁹ Hu's attitude towards nationalism can further be represented by the following:

In the age of overwhelming nationalism, we have to point out earnestly that Ibsen's "real individualism" was the only road that links to nationalism. Save yourself first! Then save your country!⁵⁰

Here Hu might have drawn inspiration from the experience of industrialized powers. The first European nation states were formed in the later period of the Renaissance when humanism had already liberated the individual from the shackles of dogmatic Christianity. But China in 1935 was in no way similar to Europe in the 15th century.

The response of Chinese young people is best represented by a dramatic event in 1935. In that year, massive protests broke out in Beijing against Japanese aggression in North China, which had encroached on large areas of territory in Cha Ha'er and Hebei.⁵¹ Hu had always been against students' engagement in political movements, believing that their top priority was studying. He wrote to his students:

Social progress happens one step at a time. The strength of the nation relies on the strength of individuals. The real preparation for serving your country is the assiduous improvements in your knowledge and capabilities.⁵²

Even if students took part in protests, these activities should be organized in a way that would in the first place benefit the students themselves rather than benefit the nation. Here Hu emphasized once again the significance of individualism: "The basic unit of the group is, after all, sound character of the individual. Student

strikes must develop the independent and law-abiding character of the individual.”⁵³

At the critical juncture in Chinese history when China was falling under Japanese aggression, it was no surprise that Hu’s remarks triggered a wave of criticism and railing against him. Hu was labeled by the press as an unpatriotic traitor. Even his students at Peking University, who had long regarded him as the leader of the Chinese intellectual movement, turned against him. One student wrote in a letter to him:

Under such urgent circumstances, any young man who is passionate and patriotic will feel more sorrow than losing his parents! A painful cry based on patriotic passion to urge the awakening of our school-mates, can you call this unjust...If you consider this as unjust, then you are simply lunatic! A stupid damned scoundrel in the educational circles! Today you tore the notice in the first faculty off yourself... Mr. Hu, we have really understood your personality! Your character is even less noble than that of a beadle porter! You only deserve to be treated with savage means! Fuck your mother! Can you still possibly be dean of the liberal arts faculty after North China is sold to Japan? Now I warn you: if you dare to tear off any patriotic notices in the future, I will certainly break your leg and make you a limp dog!

The signature at the end of this letter was “the man who will kill you.”⁵⁴

Although Hu absorbed certain collective elements from Confucianism into his doctrine, the individualistic nature of liberalism still could not satisfy the majority of Chinese intellectuals who were eagerly questing for China’s survival and rebirth. Hu’s idea of gradually improving the individual first and then reforming China was a method too slow for a country on the verge of being conquered by Japan. And it came as no wonder that as the crisis deepened, radical nationalism featuring collective strength became more attractive to elites in China.

It has been suggested by some scholars that Chinese intellectuals, especially overseas students, due to their lack of understanding of democracy, were more willing to accept doctrines more similar to the collective tradition of Chinese politics. And this partly explains why nationalism and communism turned out to

be more appealing than liberalism, though the latter was actually the mainstream and the cornerstone of democracy.⁵⁵ Liberalism was further put at a disadvantage by the fact that its gradualist nature and its emphasis on due process could not readily provide China with a shortcut to restore its strength and regain its status as a major world power. Although the shortcut provided by Mao-edited Marxism turned out to be a disaster, liberalism, under the pincer attacks from traditional thinking and an ever-worsening national crisis, was basically doomed—just as Hu himself confessed in 1936 in a conversation with Muro Fuse Koshin:

It has been 20 years since we started instructing young people. During this period, Chinese young people have changed several times. Although I am a liberal, liberals like me are becoming the minority. Recently, nationalism has gained an overwhelming advantage. “Nation” has become the top priority and there is nothing in China that can stop this trend.”⁵⁶

From a global perspective, Hu’s remarks should come as no surprise, for although liberalism has steadily been the mainstream in developed countries, nationalism was rapidly on the rise in the early 20th century, eventually triggering two world wars. The import of Western nationalism and liberalism in China occurred at the same time, and as happened in other underdeveloped countries, most Chinese intellectuals found the Western ideal of individual liberty rather hypocritical when it was precisely the West that was bringing infinite suffering to innocent people around the world. Equality of all nations and equality of all citizens in a specific nation were viewed by a large portion of Chinese intellectuals as two conflicting values that could not be put into the same global political picture. They were forced, in the height of Japanese aggression, to choose a single priority from the two.

Withering Under Pressure

Liberalism in the Republic of China not only aroused intense debate within the intellectual world, but also faced huge pressure from the Nanking Government. Hu Shi, an ardent admirer of American democracy, was openly against Chiang Kai-shek’s military dictatorship. In 1929 in Shanghai, he wrote:

Anyone who is labeled “reactionary,” “evil gentry,” “antirevolutionary,” or “suspected communist,” etc., will have no guarantee of human rights. Their bodies can be tortured. Their freedom can be completely deprived. Their properties can be exploited. And all of these actions aren’t “illegal.” Any newspaper or magazine that falls into the category of “reactionary publications” will be banned and such actions are not considered an infringement upon liberty. Any school established by foreigners that is considered a “cultural invasion” and any school established by the Chinese that is considered a “school-tyrant” and an “antirevolutionary force” will be closed and their properties will be confiscated. These actions are also not recognized as illegal infringement.

In these aspects, what do we have as our protection?⁵⁷

At present, we need a provisional constitution, one that, according to Mr. Sun Yat-sen, “stipulates the rights of the people and the ruling power of the revolutionary government.” We want a provisional constitution to put restrictions on the rights of the government and making any actions exceeding these restrictions “illegal actions.” We want a provisional constitution to protect the “life, liberty, and property” of the people and anyone who infringes upon legitimate human rights, whether he is a company commander of the 125th brigade or chairman of the national government, can be indicted by the people and has to be punished by the law.

Our slogans are:

Establish a provisional constitution as soon as possible to form the rule of law!

Establish a provisional constitution as soon as possible to protect human rights!⁵⁸

Chiang was definitely not going to tolerate Hu’s scathing criticism. On 25 September 1929, the ministry of education issued a warning for Hu Shi in which Hu was labeled “antirevolutionary,” “old-fashioned,” and “ridiculous.” He was said to have misinterpreted the Party’s ideology and Sun Yat-sen’s thought and was further criticized for being “arrogant,” “ill-intentioned,” and “superstitious about Western democracy.” Finally, he was accused of sabotaging the Party center and national unity.⁵⁹ In 1930, many leading figures in the Kuo Mintang, including Hu’s good friends Wu Zhihui and Hu Hanmin, openly criticized Hu in the press.⁶⁰ Even as late as 1931, on 17 March, Chiang told students from

Tsinghua University that Hu was against the KMT and could not become headmaster of Tsinghua.⁶¹

Shortly after the publishing of this and other articles denouncing the KMT's dictatorial behavior, Hu decided to resign from the post of principal of the National University. In November 1930, he decided to leave Shanghai for Beijing.⁶² But Hu was never going to surrender to the despotic power of Chiang Kai-shek. In Beijing, he taught at Peking University, the center of liberal movements in North China, and actively took part in activities of the Human Rights Group (HGR), an organization that publicly criticized Chiang's human rights abuses on political dissidents.⁶³ Hu's ally Luo Longji, another acknowledged leader of the HRG, was far more audacious in declaring that "the bankruptcy of human rights is a fact that cannot be covered up in China today."⁶⁴ He accused the government of arbitrary arrests, imprisonments without trial, and secret executions—actions that were not confined to individual corrupt and cruel officials but were symptomatic of a bad system of government, for which the leadership should be held responsible.⁶⁵ Luo passionately proclaimed, "If there is no absolute freedom, there is absolutely no freedom."⁶⁶

Luo Longji's attacks on the government landed him in trouble with the authorities. On 4 November 1930, he was arrested in Wusong after a house search and taken to Shanghai, where he was charged with expressing "reactionary" views and "insulting" Sun Yat-sen, which made him a communist suspect. He was freed immediately after a powerful figure within the KMT intervened and bailed him out.⁶⁷ A few months later, the HRG disbanded. *The Crescent*, a magazine that had published many articles by KMT members, was forced out of business that summer after the police raided its office, made a few arrests, and confiscated a thousand copies of the July issue of the magazine.⁶⁸

Hu and his allies were regarded as a nuisance by the government. Although Hu, due to his unparalleled influence in America, had served as ambassador to the United States during the anti-Japanese war and made tremendous contributions to China's final victory, throughout his life, he was never trusted by

the Nationalists.⁶⁹ But Chinese liberals faced much more serious challenges than Chiang's oppression, for their camp was quickly disintegrating. Before 1931, many of Hu's friends who had an American or European educational background believed in liberalism. But after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, many started to believe that "a new kind of autocracy," which could unite China together under one single leader and mobilize the vast resources and manpower efficiently against the invaders, was a shortcut to save China from the crisis.⁷⁰ Ding Wenjiang, for instance, firmly announced:

At present in China, if a new kind of autocracy is possible, maybe we can still maintain our independence. Otherwise we'll have to commit suicide or become obedient subjects of the Japanese Empire. I'd rather be a technician under a dictatorship than become an obedient subject of Japan!

Mr. Hu Shi said the recent serious crisis in the U.S. enabled Congress to empower the president to exercise a kind of new autocracy. The national crisis in China is ten times as serious as that in the U.S. Apart from establishing a dictatorship, what is the way out for China?⁷¹

Ding even enthusiastically designed his new autocracy:

First, the autocrat has to consider the interests of the nation as his top priority. Second, the autocrat must thoroughly understand the nature of a modernized nation. Third, the autocrat must be capable of mobilizing specialized talent in the country. Fourth, the autocrat has to utilize the current crisis to call on the passion and wisdom of all men qualified for politics in the country and unite them under one flag. Just like what I've mentioned, it would be impossible for China at the present stage to create this kind of autocracy. But we should strive to create a possibility in the shortest period of time. And giving up the promotion of democracy is the first step of this endeavor.⁷²

With a brief examining, one would find that Adolf Hitler, not surprisingly, fit more than well into all of the four standards above.

Here Chiang's craving for unlimited power and the intellectuals' concern for the nation's fate converged. Hu discovered in 1932 that many of his friends, such as Ding Wengjiang and Jiang Tingfu, who had all previously been steadfast liberals,⁷³ had given up their original faith. And it is precisely in this sense that Hu was regarded as probably the only master thinker in the Republic of

China to adhere to the principle of liberalism all his life. Readers may not be satisfied that this essay cites from few thinkers apart from Hu Shi, but since Hu is the one and only Chinese scholar who can truly represent the ideals of liberalism, the limits of citation are inevitable. And this limitation can in some ways show the weakness of Chinese liberalism. Unlike communism, which quickly spread to the grassroots level under the leadership of Mao Zedong, liberalism was always a theory of a few elites. After 1931, Chinese liberalism, with Hu Shi as the only spokesman, was tragically on the decline. Chiang's intolerance and the Utopian dream for a shortcut that had never and will never exist was a pressure too big for Hu and the few remaining liberals in China to endure.

Communism and Liberalism

In 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution shocked the whole world. In the next year, three years before the creation of the Chinese Communist Party, Li Dazhao, one of the first Marxists in China, articulated, "The bell for humanism is ringing! The dawn of freedom is approaching! The planet in the future will be overwhelmed by a sea of red flags!"⁷⁴ Li Dazhao was at least partly correct in his statement. Although the world revolution envisioned by Trotsky and Li never came, Chinese communists did survive the massacre by forces of Chiang Kai-shek in 1927⁷⁵ and spread their ideology like wildfire on a prairie.

It is important to note here that Li was a staunch supporter of liberal ideals. He said in another article:

The victory over German militarism is not a victory of the Allies. Nor is it the victory of the warlords in China who used the war as an excuse to take part in internal conflicts or those crafty statesmen who were best at rhetoric. It is instead the triumph of humanism, of peace, of justice, of liberty, of democracy and of socialism. It is the triumph of Bolshevism, of the Red Flag, of the working classes around the world, of the new trend of the 20th century.⁷⁶

In this paragraph Li reiterated his faith in liberalism. However, Li viewed traditional Western liberalism as corrupt and only serving the interests of the capitalist class and he embraced Bolshevism as a

more “advanced” substitute that would emancipate the proletariats globally. And yet Li—who was executed by Zhang Zuolin, a Chinese warlord, in 1927⁷⁷— would definitely have not anticipated that this “advanced” liberalism would nurture the most unforgivable crimes against humanity in China and abroad and cause the split in the world for half a century in a global political and military standoff called the Cold War.

The “advanced” liberalism advocated by communists was from the beginning intolerant towards “class enemies,” the definition of which fell into the hands of political leaders. Democracy and human rights could only be enjoyed by “friends of the proletariat,” the definition of which also fell into the hands of political leaders. In 1927, when asked by a foreign worker about why there was no freedom of the press in the Soviet Union, Stalin answered:

What kind of press freedom are you talking about?...Freedom of the proletariat? Or freedom of the bourgeoisie?...All things that are necessary for freedom of the press of the proletariat are completely in the hands of the proletariat and the laborers. Here we call it press freedom of the working class.⁷⁸

But political practice in the USSR has shown that only those who qualified for Stalin’s standard of the proletariat could enjoy this freedom. Without universally applicable standards, “freedom of a certain class” is no more than the synonym for cancelling freedom once and for all.

The exclusive nature of this branch of “liberalism” sanctioned the exercising of a new kind of autocracy based on mob rule that severely deviated from the deontological values of equality and liberty, which happened to be supported by most communists at that time, who viewed the proletariat revolution as the extermination of a capitalist dictatorship that hindered the realization of these values. And yet the “class struggle” theory of Karl Marx, which bears an intrinsic intolerant element and a natural violent tendency, provided the most solid excuse for revolutionaries to take extreme measures when the regime they established was threatened by those they considered as “class enemies.”

The paradoxical theory of communism aroused intense debate even within the communists themselves. Rosa Luxemburg, for instance, fiercely criticized the totalitarian practices in Soviet Russia shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution:

Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of the press and freedom of assembly, without the free exchange of different opinions, the life of any public institutions will diminish and become soulless, with bureaucrats as the only living factor within. Public life will gradually become silent... This is a dictatorship, but not a dictatorship of the proletariat, but the dictatorship of a small cluster of politicians... This kind of situation will definitely foster barbarism in public life, including assassinations, the shooting of hostages, etc. This is a regular pattern so powerful that no party can evade it.⁷⁹

It remains unclear whether Rosa had realized the paradoxes within Marxism itself. But it turned out that the marriage between liberalism and communism was short-lived. The harsh dictatorship implemented by the Bolsheviks, who succeeded in creating the first socialist country in human history, was worshipped by communists around the world and the minor criticism by Rosa Luxemburg was thrown into the dustbin of history. It was not long before communists and traditional liberals in China diverged.

In December 1925, in a letter to Chen Duxiu, the first secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Shi wrote:

I know that people like you who believe in the dictatorship of one class no longer have faith in liberty. I also know that you might laugh at my discussing liberty with you today. But I want you to understand that the faith in liberty is fundamental for me.⁸⁰

Those who claim to be the most progressive are actually the most unbearable. In recent years, I suffered constant attacks and slandering. During my leave from Beijing in the last two months, I was overwhelmed by the eye-opening vilifying from the youths in your party. I will not retreat in the face of such abuses, but I am really a little pessimistic. I am afraid that this intolerant climate will make the society more brutal and inhuman. Liberals like us who love freedom and struggle for freedom will have no place in our communities.⁸¹

Hu's letter was written as a reply after Chen had asked for his opinion on the burning of a newspaper office in Beijing by young communists. Chen had been Hu's closest ally in the New Culture

Movement, which advocated science and democracy against Confucian ethics.⁸² Initially a humanist, Chen quickly converted to communism and rejected his former liberal beliefs as obsolete. Chen viewed the burning of a reactionary press as just, while Hu stuck to his principle of indiscriminating freedom for all and opposed the action. Unfortunately, Hu's remarks in the last sentence of the paragraph, like those he gave to Wu Han, became a reality in China in less than 30 years.

By the time communism started to thrive in the 1930s in the wake of the most serious national crisis in Chinese history—the massive protests in 1935 that broke out in Beijing and quickly spread to universities all over China, organized by the Chinese Communist Party⁸³—traditional liberalism was already on the decline. So the influence communism exerted on the camp of liberals was mainly an indirect one. Communism and liberalism were never direct competitors in the intellectual arena. Communists first absorbed nutrients from liberalism and when they had gained enough strength, focused on seeking the support of the masses rather than engaging in philosophical debate with a bunch of scholars who basically had no influence on the general public.

Liberalism, to a certain extent, actually alienated itself from the masses. Regarding themselves as “prophets” and “path makers,” leading Westernized intellectuals did not hesitate to show their contempt of the general public. A good example would be the New Literature Movement in the 1920s in which many Westernized writers like Hu Shi preached the superiority of European and American literature and condemned traditional Chinese literature, especially Chinese fiction, as ostentatious, corrupt, and inhuman. When they found out that traditional Chinese fiction had a much larger audience than that of new literature, they distanced themselves from ordinary readers. Zhou Zuoren, a professor at Peking University and an illustrious humanist writer who enthusiastically boasted the beauty of human nature and the need of a “democratic literature,” believed the new literature was neither *about* the common people, *by* the common people, or even *for* the common people. Zhou argued that the purpose

of democratic literature was “not to depress in every possible way the thinking and taste of mankind so as to bring them down to the level of common people but to uplift the latter to a suitable degree.”⁸⁴ Li Pingfeng from Johns Hopkins University observed:

As Westernized intellectuals celebrated freedom, spontaneity, and human nature in opposition to the formal and moral restraints of Chinese tradition, they at the same time turned their own ideals into normative measures to establish a new hierarchy. With their newfound beliefs, they imposed a new distinction between good and evil, high and low. In so doing, they intensified the contradiction in their own discourse between their antiestablishment rebellion and their elitism.⁸⁵

The tendency towards elitism can also be found by reviewing the political articles of Hu Shi. Hu was vague in the aspect of the broadest sense of equality, which would definitely include the largely illiterate masses. Hu focused on democracy, meritocracy, and even “expert-ocracy” and yet seldom mentioned the livelihoods and rights of ordinary people. While Hu actively voiced his sympathy for political dissidents, he seemed to ignore the hunger and poverty that ordinary people suffered on a daily basis. The majority of Chinese liberals were born into wealthy and well-educated families and had had little experience with the sufferings of the masses. Therefore their indifference towards the pains and needs of the majority was natural. But whatever the causes were, the distanced posture of liberal elites was in sharp contrast with that of the Communist Party, who always advocated the greatest good for the greatest number.

As Li Pingfeng observed:

Without the socio-moral as well as financial support from a substantial audience, the May Fourth ideal of spontaneous lyricism could no longer carry on by itself. It was partially for this reason that many Westernized writers, in the search for a social significance for their literature, came under the influence of the rising Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁸⁶

The CCP, on the other hand, was much better at associating itself with the masses. In the 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum,” Mao Zedong officially sanctioned national forms against Westernized literature and promoted what he called “revolutionary literature of the proletariat.” But as a highly disciplined revolutionary organization,

the CCP was definitely not willing to grant writers who had joined their camp in hope of a bigger social influence too much academic freedom. And so writers who sided with the communists, including some former liberals, discovered that politics and literature had different agendas; thus they found themselves in constant conflict with the Party in order to recover their freedom.⁸⁷

The experience of these former liberals was indeed not satisfying. Although the communists always defended liberal ideals in public, what really happened from the beginning of the anti-Japanese War in *bianqu*, or the areas controlled by the communists, was quite another story. According to Gao Hua, an expert on contemporary Chinese history at Nanjing University, Mao launched the Yan'an Rectification Movement of Literature and Art in 1941 in which he successfully cleaned out all remnants of liberalism from the party and erected himself as the sole intellectual leader of the communists.⁸⁸ Wang Shiwei, a young writer who criticized certain signs of inequality in the communist bureaucracy in 1942, was purged, captured, and in 1947 beheaded.⁸⁹ According to the research of Wang Keming, an independent scholar, the number of articles published in Yan'an dropped from more than 3,000 during 1936–1942 to 1,979 during 1943–1947. Nearly all magazines on arts and literature vanished during the Rectification Movement.⁹⁰

The spread of communism was indeed the final and most devastating blow on Chinese liberalism in that it diverted China from the track of democratization, and sent China into an age of radicalism and internal violence whose aftershocks can still be felt today. The politicization of almost all aspects of social life and the concept of ubiquitous class struggle in Maoism were but a few of the many features of a totalitarian regime,⁹¹ marking the complete bankruptcy of Chinese liberalism. Mei Yiqi, former president of Tsinghua University, once said, “If I stay on the mainland, there are only two possible destinies for me. I would either become a figurehead or an antirevolutionary. Because I wish to become neither, I have to leave.”⁹² Mei had protected pro-communist students from the oppression of the Nanking Government, and yet he was still suspicious of the ideological frenzy of the CCP,⁹³ which, as it turned out, devastated the academic independence

of Tsinghua,⁹⁴ an institution Mei had cherished all his life. In the winter of 1948, Mei left Beijing.⁹⁵

The most interesting and ironic point of the Chinese communist movement is that, at first, it even appealed to liberals such as Hu Shi. Hu visited Moscow in 1926. In *A Letter during a Trip in Europe*, he wrote:

Today I talked for a long time with Merriam (a professor at the University of Chicago); his judgments are quite evenhanded...Although the USSR is a dictatorship, the people there are genuinely trying to establish a new kind of education and a new socialist era. If they earnestly follow this trend, they can transform Russia from a dictatorship to a socialist democracy.⁹⁶

In 1933, he made a speech at the University of Chicago, in which he praised the Soviet Union and viewed it as further realization and supplementation of Western democracy.⁹⁷ It was not until 8 July 1941, when he lectured on *Conflicting Ideologies* at the University of Michigan, that he put socialist dictatorship into the same category with the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy and viewed it as the enemy of liberty and democracy.⁹⁸

There have been suggestions that during World War II, Hu got access to materials on Stalin's atrocities, which helped him change his mind.⁹⁹ But no matter what were the respective causes of Hu's initial praising of and later criticisms of communism, it was certain that the outstanding capability of Soviet officials in cheating foreigners and the amazing achievements of Russia's industrialization program combined in making Hu Shi consider communism a practical option for China's development. Agnes Smedley recalled in *Battle Hymn of China* that, once in a conversation, a Chinese friend told her that communists should be given a province to experiment with their ideas and if they were feasible, other provinces could follow the experience.¹⁰⁰ And according to Luo Ergang, Hu's student and friend, this Chinese friend was Hu Shi.¹⁰¹

The charm of communism proved so great that it could even attract the most faithful liberal in China. But one must also pay attention to the other side of the story. Communists in China,

long after they had abandoned liberal practices, still promoted liberal ideas in the height of the civil war, when they were engaging in a fierce power struggle with the KMT:

In the areas under one party rule of the KMT, the freedoms of lecturing, teaching and publishing are brutally devastated. Restoration of ancient ways has become the fashion and independent thinking has become guilty. In all schools, spying, bribing, persecution and even armed threatening are everywhere. The dignity of education and scholarship has been totally destroyed...In the past decades, the Chinese fascists have been instilling the evil teachings of “one leader, one party, one doctrine” to innocent young people. Anyone who refused to accept the models produced by the fascists are considered heretics and deserve death. Politics and the so-called “culture” of Chinese fascists are simply pointing guns at the heads of the Chinese people.¹⁰²

Any civilized country will never take pride in its state-owned publications. Instead, it should always take pride in the flourishing of non-state publications, in the good quality, numerous types and large numbers of non-state publications. Real legislations on publishing are the guarantee of the freedom of press. Their mission is to protect the freedom of private publishing, making it a cause for liberty, an agency for people’s freedom and the cradle of civilization.¹⁰³

Although liberalism as an independent school of thinking had already lost its significance in the 1940s, certain liberal elements such as free speech were still widely accepted by Chinese intellectuals as the norms of a civilized society. Chinese communists made good use of propaganda and deceived most intellectuals into believing that they were actually striving for democracy against the oppression of the dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek.

Chiang’s anti-communist attitude reinforced the popular notion that communism was on the opposite side of autocracy and was a kind of democratic thinking that could rejuvenate China. However, this by no means indicates that Communists had purposely created the false impression that their interests merged with those of the liberals. As early as 1931, CCP leader Qu Quibai attacked the HRG’s “ulterior motives” and accused it of attempting to use Western bourgeois ideas as a weapon to counter the communist movement. The HRG, Qu went on, was actually working for the

KMT because its real motives were to eliminate communism and to promote the interests of the bourgeoisie and the landlords at the expense of the peasantry and the laboring classes.¹⁰⁴ Here, once again, a clear line was drawn between traditional liberalism and the more “advanced” Bolshevik liberalism.

Many observers would argue that the transition from liberalism to communism was a natural result of Chinese intellectual history. Communism is, to a certain extent, liberalism mixed with extremism, although it was extremism that had taken the upper hand. The general trend of radicalism manifested itself within intellectual movements. Jiang Menglin, president of Peking University, recalled in his autobiography that students tried to bomb the congress, which was then called the Home of Corruption, to cancel a few proposals on education.¹⁰⁵ Massive student protests and strikes were dominant features of Chinese society throughout the reign of Chiang Kai-shek. While most of the protests focused on human rights and political issues, increasingly extreme and violent protests did constitute a major disruptive factor for the normal teaching order and, sometimes, protests changed into a farce for private gains. Jiang recalled:

After they [PKU students] have had a taste of power, their appetites will be bigger and more difficult to satisfy.¹⁰⁶

Students have actually replaced the school administration and taken up the power of employing and dismissing teachers! If their requests are not satisfied, they would go on strikes and make troubles. If teachers gave them a hard test or imposed strict discipline during tests, students would go on strikes to oppose them. They ask for subsidies on travelling in spring holiday and on their maintenance and ask for free textbooks. In short, they want the school to follow their orders yet never consider their obligations as students. They indulge themselves in the pleasure of power and have become extremely selfish. Whenever somebody mentions school rules, they glower at him and grimace as if they were ready to fight.¹⁰⁷

Here, Jiang’s account coincided with Hu Shi’s observation in 1935:

Going on strikes is the action that will do the least good. More than a decade ago, students’ going on strikes for patriotic causes can arouse the sympathy of people all over the country. But after the May 4th Movement, going on strikes has become an indiscriminately used

weapon, which not only fails to arouse further sympathy, but also triggers contempt and disgust.¹⁰⁸

After 15 years of struggle, Jiang finally decided in 1945 that “PKU is hopeless”¹⁰⁹ and left PKU to become a government official. Two years later, PKU, the birthplace of the New Culture Movement and the New Literature Movement and once the beacon of Chinese liberalism, became the center of pro-communist protests in the civil war. It can be said that liberalism was destroyed not only by unfavorable outside conditions, but by radicalism that grew from within. Here, once again, the omnipresent and omnipotent Revolution, which dragged intellectuals onto its galloping carriage, became the all-powerful decider.

Conclusion

The final fate of liberalism in China was actually decided by the outcomes of the civil war starting in 1946. In an underdeveloped country with no soil of democracy, intellectuals could seldom decide their own fate and, in most cases, just drifted along with the trend of the revolution. Most of them decided to stay on the mainland to serve a new government that promised them real independence from imperialists, prosperity, and democracy. A small portion followed Chiang Kai-shek to Taiwan or went abroad. Most of them never came back to their motherland. It is reasonable to suggest that among the three groups of intellectuals, those who went abroad were the least politically biased and generally stood for the only remaining elites not contaminated by the partisan struggle between the KMT and the CCP. Among them was Hu Shi (Hu later returned to Taiwan). And yet it was precisely this group that was violently criticized by both the Communists and the Nationalists. In the eyes of both parties, these intellectuals were traitors and reactionaries. Bai Chongxi, a major Nationalist general who followed Chiang Kai-shek to Taiwan, said in a letter to Chiang:

A few years ago, some overseas Chinese organized “the Third Force”; I couldn’t disagree more with them. At that time, I severely criticized

them on Chinese and foreign media. There were only two forces in China, anti-Communists and the Communist bandits...¹¹⁰

Bai's views represented the mainstream on both sides of the Taiwan Strait in the 1950s. In an age of revolution, the independence of thinking and academic research, another essential value of liberalism, was often neglected and even viewed as harmful to revolutionary causes.

Chinese liberalism was incompatible with the need to establish an independent and prosperous China in the short period of a few decades. The fantasy of shortcuts for social reform was a tragic trait of human society in the 20th century. Due process and the dignity of the individual were often sacrificed in the pursuit of a utopian society, not only in China, but also in the Soviet Union, in Cuba, in Turkey, and in many other underdeveloped countries, communist or not.

On 24 February 1962, at six o'clock in the evening, Hu made his life's final remarks at a party of Academia Sinica in Taiwan:

I spoke for twenty-five minutes last year, causing attacks against me. Never mind that. That was nothing, nothing. I was criticized for over forty years and I was never angry. I welcome that, for it symbolizes free speech and free thinking in China.¹¹¹

At half past six, Hu suddenly fell. He died almost instantly of a sudden heart attack.¹¹² At that time, intellectuals on the mainland had just experienced the Anti-right Movement in which more than 550,000 intellectuals were labeled right-wingers and persecuted.¹¹³ They would not expect that only a few years later, another round of persecution, perhaps the most violent and brutal in Chinese history, would erupt in the name of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The 20th century was simply not a century for liberalism globally. Mr. Gao Xingjian, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, summarized 20th century politics this way:

In the century after Nietzsche, man-made disasters left the blackest records in the history of humankind. Supermen of all types called leaders of the people, heads of the nation and commanders of the race did not balk at resorting to various violent means in perpetrat-

ing crimes that in no way resemble the ravings of a very egotistic philosopher.¹¹⁴

In the century of Hitler, of Mussolini, of Stalin, and of the most catastrophic economic crisis in history, even liberalism had to take the form of the New Deal, which digressed considerably from the classic ideals of individualism and the free market and substantially strengthened the power of the state.

It seemed back then that liberalism was fading away into the darkness of history, but time has proved that human conscience and will always prevail. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, marking the resurgence of liberalism in Russia and its former satellite states. Joshua Rubenstein notes in his biography of Leon Trotsky:

Nearly a century after the Bolshevik Revolution and decades after his death, Leon Trotsky and the ideas that animated his life and career seem increasingly remote. The revolution he did so much to engineer collapsed under the weight of its historic legacy. We are left with the compelling image of a ruthless revolutionary, a brilliant journalist, an eloquent historian and pamphleteer, who never softened his faith in dogmatic Marxism, never questioned the need to use violent coercion as an instrument of historical progress, never wondered whether his dream of a proletarian dictatorship could really be the answer to every political, economic and social failing.¹¹⁵

Dogmatism has always been the biggest vice of every political thinker, whether communist or liberal. Hu Shi may have never asked himself whether it was realistic to achieve the goals outlined by liberalism in a country immersed in the tradition of dictatorship and the pains of survival and transition. The fact that China from 1911 to 1949 had to liberate and develop itself at the same time meant that only the most violent and radical means could be applied. Tribute should be paid to the student who wanted to break Hu's leg and to the first generation of Chinese communists who strove, like the most pious missionaries and martyrs one can imagine, towards a visionary destiny that would mark the liberation of China. If it were not for their courage and zeal, China might well have subsided and drowned in the torrent of modernization. History needs imperfect explorers.

And although liberalism failed to achieve its goals in the first half of the 20th century, its influence has not totally disappeared. A new round of intellectual movement took place in the first 11 years of the Reform and opening up process and this time, liberals became the overwhelming majority. The Tian'anmen tragedy was only a temporary pause instead of a stop in China's democratization process and one has reason to believe, from the democratic elements in Confucianism, from the successful transition of Eastern Europe, and from the strength of one's own conscience, that liberalism will eventually overcome authoritarianism. There are already signs of change. The most obvious example is the slogan of the 2008 Olympic Games, "One World, One Dream." For some, this might be a hint that after 30 years of reform, the Communist Party is finally embracing the idea of universal values, or in other words, "returning to the right track of human civilization."

Epilogue

The writing of this essay has been a most challenging and enjoyable process for me. I have long been interested in intellectual history in the period of the ROC, and I find the things I have learned in history classes unsatisfying. I am not trying to write a sensational anti-government essay to please certain outside observers (in fact, I find the radical words and actions of many Chinese political dissidents particularly frustrating), but I did encounter restrictions on citations, for materials on Chinese liberalism are scarce on the mainland due to the political sensitivity of the subject. And it was precisely the difficulty that made the writing process extremely exciting. I had the feeling that I was actually doing things that perhaps no Chinese high school student had ever done before!

I realize that I voice some opinions in the essay that might displease the authorities. But once again, I have to state here that I have written this article purely for academic purposes. As an ordinary high school student, I do not wish to please anyone or annoy anyone. I am simply articulating my own opinions. My ideas may run counter to the long-held political views of many of

my peers, who have unfortunately become victims of the thought control and enslaved education on the mainland. I cannot ensure the correctness of my arguments in this essay, but I do sincerely hope that one day the majority of Chinese students will be able to think independently and that there will be more voices in China apart from the official propaganda.

Personally, I am completely against the Communist doctrine. And yet I do recognize the numerous achievements the CCP have made in the past 64 years. So if anyone believes that I am using this essay to deny the legitimacy of the Chinese government, he is totally mistaken.

I have tried to avoid citing too many secondary sources and have based most of my assumptions directly on the works of Hu Shi and other thinkers. However, because I could not get access to English translations of their works, I had to do the translations myself. Mistakes and inaccuracies are inevitable.

Any intellectual movement has its own historical background. Although I tried to be concise, background information still makes up a considerable portion of this essay. Most of the background information I include, such as Chiang's massacre of communists, is general knowledge for most Chinese students. So in a Chinese sense, references are not needed. But since Western readers may be unfamiliar with these facts, I decided to use *Cihai* (*Word Ocean*) as my main source of reference in the background part and when dealing with the major experiences of relevant thinkers. This is why *Cihai* appears many times in the references. *Cihai* is the most prestigious Chinese encyclopedia and although it is sometimes influenced by Marxism, the historical information it offers is generally reliable.

Last, I wish to give my sincere thanks to Mr. David Scott Lewis, my teacher and counselor, who has given me lots of valuable suggestions. I would also like to thank my two friends, Jiang Songlin and Zhang Shuce, who offered many valuable ideas and proofread the essay for me. Thank you all. I love you.

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