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Wei Yuan and the Chinese Totalistic Iconoclasm
The Demise of Confucianism in Matter and in Form

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the historical origins of the "totalistic iconoclasm" that was characteristic of Chinese intellectual history in the twentieth century. By examining Wei Yuan's historical writings, the paper argues that the conceptual connection between the civilization of the majority Han ethnicity ("the Chinese tradition") and the idea of a political entity of China had already broken down by mid-nineteenth century. The Qing Empire's political adoption and control of Confucianism suffocated its intellectual creativity and thus Confucianism only existed as custom and in form. As an intellectual reaction to these political manipulations, the essentialist thoughts of the late Ming gradually gave way to the pragmatist thoughts of late Qing. This separation of cultural and political entities in the minds of the Chinese intellectual elite as a response to the Qing Empire's manipulation of Confucianism set up the condition for the total cultural iconoclasm in twentieth century China.

Introduction

One of the most distinctive phenomena of twentieth-century Chinese history was the deeply influential and widespread mentality and practice of "antitraditionalism." This strong tide against the Chinese tradition has been described by scholars of Chinese history as "totalistic iconoclasm."[1] This intellectual trend had a profound influence on the trajectory Chinese history took in the twentieth century. Many scholars of the May Fourth movement identify the May Fourth period (approximately between 1917 and 1924) as the heyday of this antitraditionalism, and some scholars have even proposed to view the entire history of 20th century China in the shadow of this theme of antitraditionalism.[2]

Compared to historians of China who simply describe or take for granted this phenomenon of antitraditionalism, fewer ask the question of why. Many scholars of Chinese intellectual history have studied intellectual figures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pointing out the anti-traditional elements in these intellectual figures during their encounter with western modernity.[3] However, not many have tried to

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[1] Lin Yu-Sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

[2] For example, Rana Mitter's recent book on modern China holds such a view. See Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). This book has been unofficially endorsed by institutions such as the University of Oxford as the standard textbook on modern China.

[3] The early pioneering study in the West on China's anti-traditional intellectual trajectory is Benjamin Schwartz's *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1964), analyzing Yan Fu's adaptation and upholding of western learning in the late 1890s. After the publication of this book, many other historians followed Schwartz and studied the period between 1890 and 1930 elaborating on the phenomenon of antitraditionalism. In the early 1970s, Hao Chang and Philip C. C. Huang wrote about the late Qing and early Republican figure Liang Qichao (Hao Chang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China, 1890-1907*, London: Oxford University Press, 1971 and Philip C. C. Huang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1972). Hao Chang's *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning, 1890-1911* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) also focuses on the late Qing and early Republican period. Other important works on the intellectual history of 19th to 20th century China, such as those by D. W. Y. Kwok (*Scientism in Chinese thought, 1900–1950*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), Lin Yu-Sheng (*The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*), and Jerome B. Grieder (*Hu Shih and the Chinese Renaissance:*

explore the reason for such elements, and seem to take this phenomenon of antitraditionalism as natural. Yet if we put this phenomenon into a comparative perspective, we can clearly see its uniqueness in world history. Not only is this phenomenon unique (or even counterintuitive, some might say) when compared to modern European states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is a distinctive direction even compared to other non-Western political and cultural entities (colonial India and the Japanese Empire, for example).[4] This almost antagonistic relationship between cultural tradition and political survival in the modern Chinese mind urges us to look back in time and explore its possible explanations.

The modern method of historical periodization creates a problem in the continuity of historical inquiry in the field of sixteenth-to-twentieth-century China, which in effect discourages the study of the social and intellectual origin of the antitraditionalism of twentieth century China. The study of Chinese history in (especially western) academic institutions is commonly separated into "imperial China" (221 BCE to 1911 CE, but many stop at around 1800 or 1840) and "modern China" (most commonly dated 1840 till after 1989, but the starting point remains in dispute).[5] Specialists in the two fields often

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Liberalism in the Chinese Revolution, 1917-1937. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.) all wrote on the Republican period. One of the latest important books on the intellectual history of the late Qing to the Republican period is Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space and the NationaIist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), which also does not go beyond the upper boundary of 1890.

[4] For more information on the situation in India compared to China, see Chao Ren, "Revisiting Tagore's Visit to China: Nation, Tradition, and Modernity in China and India in the Early Twentieth Century," in *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Spring 2011).

[5] There are two most widely accepted starting points in the periodization of "modern China." The first one sets the starting point at around 1840. This periodization method is accepted by official historiography in mainland China, and is also widely accepted by Marxist historians in the West. This method emphasizes foreign imperialist aggression in China (as a stage of global capitalism) and the Chinese resistance to it starting with the Opium War. For intellectual history, this method recognizes the change in the Chinese intellectual world from a more tradition-oriented way of thinking to a more anti-tradition-dominated one. However, since this method set the upper boundary at year 1840, it fails to address sufficiently the issue of intellectual continuity and the rather slow and complicated process of

do not communicate much with each other (for example, the historian of modern China at a very prestigious institution in the UK never attends any talks or events on pre-modern or imperial China). This historical periodization and the lack of communication among specialists of different periods pose a big problem for the students of intellectual history: not much scholarship has made the attempt to associate the new intellectual developments of the late Qing (1840 to 1911) with the intellectual history of late imperial China (circa. 900 to 1800).

This essay aspires to bridge this gap. By examining the historical writings of Wei Yuan and other sources from late Qing, I would like to argue for a two-stage decline of the Confucian tradition in late imperial China: first, the decline of the original intellectual creativity of the Confucian tradition, brought about by the Manchu official adoption of Confucianism in its attempt to legitimize the regime; second, the decline of the form and custom of the Confucian tradition at the fall of the imperial order in 1911. This two-stage decline of the Confucian tradition, especially the first stage, was an important reason that led to the separation of the political and cultural entities in late Qing Chinese thought. This separation paved the way for the strong anti-tradition sentiment in an era of national political crisis, which ended up in the form of the totalistic iconoclasm of twentieth-century China.

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intellectual changes. The other periodization method marks dates the beginning of "modern China" back to the time before the Manchu conquest of China Proper around 1600 to 1644. Many modernization historians in the West prefer this method over the previous one and often present a teleological narrative of China embracing the modern (western) world (the most famous example is, of course, Jonathan D. Spence's widely used textbook, *The Search for Modern China*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999). This method puts more emphasis on the teleological political narrative and also fails to provide a satisfactory account of the process of the intellectual changes.

In order to explore the intellectual origin of the anti-tradition sentiment in late Qing China, I turned to the pioneer figure Wei Yuan (1794-1857). I chose him because of his special status in the intellectual history of late imperial China: Wei Yuan has been most widely recognized as the first person to actively introduce the knowledge of the West into China and the first Chinese to pay any serious attention to the West in the Qing Dynasty. His many writings were influential not only in retrospect but also contemporarily as well. Therefore, I hope to bring the question of totalistic iconoclasm eighty years backward and interrogate its possible origins and explanations in Wei Yuan's writings.

Wei Yuan: the man and his work

Wei Yuan has been almost consensually and universally regarded by historians as one of the earliest great figures in the intellectual history of modern China, starting with the crisis of the Opium War. Wei Yuan was born in 1794 in Shaoyang County of Hunan Province in South Central China. He was well educated in the *lixue* ("learning of the principle") Neo-Confucianism very early on in his life. In 1822, he passed the second stage of the three-stage Civil Service Examinations, and in preparation for the final "Court Examination," he settled down in the imperial capital of Beijing. During his stay, he was seriously influenced by his cohorts and his personal reading and became one of the key members of the "New Text" school of Confucian classicism, which recognized the value of the Confucian classics because of their practical value as guidance to

political governance, as opposed to the *lixue* masters who valued the classics because of their metaphysical philosophical sophistication.[6] He joined the group of influential classicists who were also pragmatic reformers in politics because of their exegetic background. Because of his personal connections, he was soon promoted to be the secretary of a provincial chief in Jiangsu Province.

During his lifetime, Wei Yuan was most famous for his serving as the principal editor of the 1826 *Compendium of Writings on Statecraft from the Present Imperial Dynasty* (*Huangchao jingshi wenbian*). This collection of essays was topically arranged and covered almost every aspect of social organization and policy. The *Compendium* was very widely circulated and, as historian William T. Rowe describes, "served as the bible of statecraft reformists for decades afterward and spawned many sequels throughout the remainder of the empire."[7]

However, the *Compendium* was not his most famous work of all. He was most famous in posterity for his book *Illustrated Gazetteer on the Maritime States* (*Haiguo tuzhi*), a compilation of geographical and cultural information about the countries of the world first finished in 1844 (and updated multiple times in the next fifteen years or so). This book received little attention in China until later in the century when the book was introduced into Japan and served as an eye-opener for the Japanese before the Meiji Restoration. In academic monographs and articles both in Chinese and in English, the

[6] Li Hu, *Wei Yuan yanjiu* (Studies on Wei Yuan) (Beijing: Zhaohua chuban she, 2002), 21-22.

[7] William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 161.

Gazetteer is also the most studied among all of Wei Yuan's works.[8] The most famous line of all time by Wei Yuan was, in his preface to the *Gazetteer* when he talked about his intentions, that he wrote the book in order "to learn from the foreigners in order to contain the foreigners" (*shi yi chang ji yi zhi yi*).[9]

It is worth noting that Wei Yuan put the foreigners in a position to be learned from, a position of being a teacher (the teacher-student relationship was an important hierarchy in society according to the Confucian teaching). Traditionally speaking, for a Chinese scholar, the difference between the Chinese (*hua*) and the "foreigners" or "barbarians" (*yi*) was irreconcilable.[10] There was even an idiomatic term for this distinction. "Barbarians," especially "barbarians" from the geographical peripheries of the Chinese world, were considered uncivilized, harmful, and sometimes inhuman. The northern "barbarians" were the most dangerous, because they are the nomadic people from the areas of harsh climate, always threatening to invade the fertile agrarian fields of North China. Battles of the Chinese against the northern barbarians had existed since the very early days of the Chinese empire during the Qin times (221-207 BCE), marked by a geographical landmark, the Great Wall. Such wars were considered a protection not only of the geographical areas of China proper, but more importantly, human civilization. According to this line of thought, the distinction between the Chinese and the barbarians was

[8] The most comprehensive study of Wei Yuan in the English language is Jane Kate Leonard, *Wei Yüan and China's Rediscovery of the Maritime World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984). This book discusses the influence Wei Yuan had on the military policies but ignores the intellectual implications of Wei Yuan's thought, especially in relation to a larger picture of intellectual history in late imperial China.

[9] Wei Yuan, *Haiguo tuzhi yuan xu* (Original preface to the *Illustrated Gazetteer on the Maritime States*), in *Wei Yuan quanji* (Complete works of Wei Yuan) (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2004), vol. 4, 1.

[10] For convenience, this essay uses the word "Chinese" to refer to the Han Chinese ethnicity. This usage of the word "Chinese" may potentially cause some confusion, but it was more historically accurate in the worldview of the traditional Chinese civilization, or the Sinospheric world.

essentially about the preservation of human civilization. By making such a statement as to learn from the foreigners or barbarians, Wei Yuan challenged the very idea of human civilization: how could human civilization benefit in learning from the uncivilized barbarians?

Wei Yuan and a historiography of "barbarian" dynasties

If we can argue that the word "foreigners" or "barbarians" in Wei Yuan's famous quote was referring to the British and other western powers and not to the traditional concept of "barbarian" peoples of the north, his other works definitely bring our attention to the latter. Apart from the two aforementioned works, the two other lengthy works most highly regarded by Wei Yuan himself were two histories of the only two dynasties in imperial China founded by "barbarian" peoples: the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368, by the Mongols) and the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912, by the Manchus). In 1842, the year in which the famous *Treaty of Nanking* between the Qing Empire and the United Kingdom was signed, Wei Yuan finished his fourteen-book *Military History of the Glorious Dynasty* (*Sheng wu ji*), a history of military conquests of the Qing Dynasty, during which Wei Yuan lived. He wrote this military history hoping to establish an example for the current imperial court, policy makers, and all scholar officials regarding military issues. If these people followed the precedent examples, Wei Yuan said, "why would we worry

about the barbarians on the four edges of the world, and why would we worry about the humiliations!"[11]

The other more lengthy history of the "barbarian" dynasty was the gigantic, multi-volume *Newly Compiled History of the Yuan Dynasty*, finished around 1853. After writing the *Military History* and the *Illustrated Gazetteer*, Wei Yuan turned back chronologically to another historical topic for an answer to the crisis the Chinese empire was facing. He sought the key to might and power in the historical experience of the Mongol Empire, which conquered the entire China proper in 1279, established the Yuan Dynasty, and maintained power for almost a hundred years. The Yuan Dynasty was famous for its size: the western boundary of the empire for the first time reached the entire Tibetan Plateau, and the northern boundary extended as far as the climate allowed human activity (some maps have argued that the Yuan northern boundary actually extended all the way up to the Arctic Ocean).[12] Wei Yuan considered the Yuan as a great example of military power and conquest in the frontiers from which the later generations could learn. He wrote in the preface to the book:

> Yuan possessed all that was under the sky: the vastness of its area, the abundance of its logistics, the greatness of its military power, exceeded Han and Tang. … internally it did not have political chaos caused by the court or the eunuchs, while externally it did not have the need to worry about exacting the frontier people to fight the barbarian enemies. … A precedent is the teacher of the posterity. Yuan started outside of the Wall and gained the

[11] Wei Yuan, *Sheng wu ji xu* (Preface to the *Military History of the Glorious Dynasty*), in *Wei Yuan quanji* (Complete works of Wei Yuan) (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2004), vol. 3, 1.

[12] "*Yuan shiqi quantu*" (Complete map of the Yuan period), in Tan Qixiang, ed., *Zhongguo lishi ditu ji* (Collected historical maps of China), vol. 7: Yuan and Ming (Beijing: Zhongguo ditu chubanshe, 1996), 10-11.

> central plains, … its historical experiences should be the guiding mirror for hundreds of generations.[13]

"Han" and "Tang" were commonly considered the two greatest and most economically, militarily, and culturally prosperous empires in Chinese history established by the Chinese themselves. Here Wei Yuan made a comparison between the great Chinese empires and the great barbarian empire of Yuan, praising the latter over the former. Wei Yuan wrote this multi-volume history hoping to remind people of the past glory of the Yuan Dynasty, wishing to revive the glory of the vast empire amidst the crisis-bound Qing Empire, in the aftermath of a disappointing war (the Opium War) and in the middle of domestic turmoil (the Taiping Rebellion).

Apart from these histories of the two "barbarian" empires, Wei Yuan also wrote a history of the Liao Empire (907-1125), a powerful empire on the north of China proper founded by the Khitan people. The Liao Empire was also famous for its military power and its constant threat to the northern boundary of the Chinese empire of Song in China proper. Again, the book had very high praises for the "barbarian" dynasty, especially its first emperor.[14] However, the manuscript of this history of the Liao Empire was burnt and destroyed by the "local rebellious people" (likely members of the Taiping Rebellion) in

[13] Wei Yuan, *Ni jincheng Yuan shi xinbian biao* (Preface to the planned submission of the *Newly Compiled History of the Yuan Dynasty*), in *Wei Yuan quanji* (Complete works of Wei Yuan) (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2004), vol. 8, 4-6. It should be pointed out here that the word "submission" in the title was not a submission to the imperial court. At this time, Wei Yuan was a local municipal official in Gaoyou, Jiangsu Province. He did not have the access to submit directly to the imperial court. Instead, this "submission," if it really happened, might be directed towards the provincial level official of Jiangsu or other provinces. See *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 20, 779.

[14] Wei Yuan, *Shu Liao taizu shi* (On the first emperor of Liao), in *Wei Yuan quanji* (Complete works of Wei Yuan) (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2004), vol. 12, 215-217.

his home province of Hunan in 1852 and did not survive, apart from a few passages on the first emperor.[15]

It was surprising that Wei Yuan sought the solutions for the crisis of China in these "barbarian" dynasties, given the brutality related to the "barbarian" conquests in the public memories. When the Mongols conquered China proper and established the Yuan Dynasty in Beijing, the Yuan government established a four-caste system in the empire, with the Mongols at the top, "Semu" peoples (various non-Chinese northern nomadic people) as the second, "*hanren*" ("Han Chinese people" in North China, formerly under the control of the Jurchen Empire of Jin), and "*nanren*" ("Southern people," the Han Chinese in South China formerly under the control of the Chinese Empire of Song).[16] The Chinese people in China proper were placed in the two lowest castes of the society. Many political devices were designed to enforce local control of the Chinese area. During the Yuan Dynasty and known to later generations, the Chinese people were severely oppressed by the Mongols.

On the other hand, when the Manchus conquered China proper in 1644, the Manchu rulers enforced a rule to change the hairstyle of all Chinese males to the Manchu hairstyle of queues in order to show their submission and loyalty to the Manchu overlord. Hair-cutting was a big taboo in the Confucian tradition, in which a man's hair was believed to be given by the parents and hair-cutting was believed to be a violation of filial

[15] "Wei Yuan dashi nianbiao" (Chronicle of Wei Yuan's major life activities), in *Wei Yuan quanji* (Complete works of Wei Yuan) (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2004), vol. 20, 776-777.

[16] Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1998), 33.

piety, the utmost good in Confucianism.[17] The rule at the time was phrased as "keep your head or keep your hair," which fostered large-scale local resistance movements in the Yangtze River Delta area. Atrocious massacres upon the Chinese resistance took place in towns of Yangzhou, Jiading, and Jiangyin. An account written by an eyewitness of the Yangzhou massacre, Wang Xiuchu's *A Record of Ten Days at Yangzhou* (*Yangzhou shiri ji*), circulated for centuries underground since its first appearance in 1645. The book was a narrative of the massacre and a catalogue of the atrocities committed by the Manchus on the Chinese at the time of the conquest, which remained vivid in the popular cultural memories of the Chinese in the following centuries.[18]

With these brutalities in the popular memory of "barbarian" conquests and rule of China, it was surprising how Wei Yuan, as a Chinese himself with a queue behind his head, was actively seeking a road to prosperity for China almost exclusively from the histories of the "barbarian" empires. What made him take this leap out of his own ethnic and cultural experience and learn from his very own oppressors?

Another interesting aspect in Wei Yuan's historiography worthy of our attention was his idea on the use of history. In the early traditions of Chinese historical writing, history was used to record past events as well as provide metahistorical moral instructions.[19] Later, after the institutionalization of historical writing in the form of "Historiographical Offices" (*shi guan*) in the Tang Dynasty, the writing of history

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[17] "Our bodies - to every hair and bit of skin - are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety." *Xiaojing* (The Classic on Filial Piety) ch. 1, trans. James Legge. Online source: http://ctext.org/xiao-jing/zh?en=on.

[18] Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, 23-24.

[19] P. van der Loon, "The Ancient Chinese Chronicles and the Growth of Historical Ideals," in W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 24-25.

became increasingly a tool for the purpose of providing legitimacy for the current regime.[20] Each dynasty produced a history of the previous dynasty and established its own legitimacy as the successor of the "Mandate of Heaven" in the narrative and moral judgments in the histories. For Wei Yuan, however, history had more practical uses: history served as a *technical* teacher for the later generations. What was to be learned from history was not, according to Wei Yuan, the moral teachings and judgments, but the technical experiences of human life across different cultures and different ethnicities. Both the classical notion of history and Wei Yuan's concept of history embodied universalism, but the two had different interpretations of this universal experience (morality and technical experiences.)

The separation of cultural and political entities in late imperial Chinese thought

How should we explain Wei Yuan's choice of technical experience over cultural and ethnic considerations in historical writings? His case was not exceptional: many scholar-reformers of the period of the "statecraft" school (*jingshi*) embraced this pragmatic attitude in cultural and intellectual discourses. Why did these people, both in and out of the imperial bureaucracy, choose to take such a position when China was facing a huge crisis both internally and externally?

[20] For the Tang institutionalization of historical writing, see Denis Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3-55.

In response to this question I just raised above, a more self-reflective further question would be: what were the other possible historical options or alternatives? If we look back to the late Ming period, we can see a very different kind of attitude toward foreign knowledge and foreign learning: In late Ming, the intellectual world's response to the influx of western learning was more defensive and essentialist. When the Jesuit missionaries of the West brought to China with them western knowledge of geography (especially maps) and astronomy in the 1500s, this knowledge had a very strong appeal to the Chinese intellectuals, who were surprised by its accuracy (especially in predicting eclipses and reporting earthquakes). The knowledge of western science soon posed a huge challenge to the worldview and cosmology of the Chinese intellectuals: the very foundation of the traditional moral and political ideal was shaken by the observational science from the West. In response to this, some Ming intellectuals proposed a re-establishment of Confucianism as a state religion to ensure the essence of the Chinese civilization, although meanwhile they also enjoyed entertaining their minds with western technology.[21] To these Chinese intellectuals, the philosophical and spiritual essence of Confucianism was at the center of the survival of the civilization.

When the Ming Dynasty fell and the Manchus came to rule China proper in the 1640s, Chinese intellectuals had a very radical response. No other Chinese dynasty had produced so many loyalists after its fall. As I mentioned above, the traditional distinction between the Chinese and the foreigners was considered one between civilization and non-civilization. Therefore, when the Manchu empire took over its predecessor, many

[21] Ge Zhaoguang, *Zhongguo sixiang shi, di'er juan: qi shiji zhi shijiu shiji Zhongguo de zhishi, sixiang yu xinyang* (An intellectual history of China, vol. 2: Chinese knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs from the 7th to the 19th centuries) Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe (Fudan University Press), 2004, 383.

Chinese intellectuals made a distinction between "the fall of the regime/dynasty" (*wang guo*) and "the fall of the civilization" (*wang tianxia*).[22] This distinction separated the political entity of regime or dynasty, which was technical in its nature and in a certain degree value-neutral, and the cultural entity of civilization, which carried heavy moral values. Many Chinese intellectuals during this period believed the Manchu conquest was not merely a dynastic change but more significantly the decline and fall of the (universal) civilization. As loyalists, they were loyal to the civilization, embodied in the Confucian tradition. The anti-Manchu sentiment in the first few decades of the Qing Dynasty was an expression of cultural essentialism and an effort to protect the intellectual heritage of the Chinese civilization. This distinction made by the Ming loyalists was the first major attempt to conceptually distinguish the political and cultural entities of China.

The culturally essentialist responses of the late Ming intellectuals to both the western knowledge and the Manchu conquest of China proper presented a historical alternative to the issue of cultural and technical considerations. As the Ming fell, Chinese loyalist intellectuals held firm to the "civilization" in order to save the nation. In the 19th century, however, Wei Yuan and other reformist intellectuals put national salvation in front of the missions to preserve the "civilization" (even though he himself was educated early in his life as a Neo-Confucian scholar). This consolidation of the separation of political and cultural entities and the triumph of one over the other could only be explained by the historical process that happened between these two points of time: the Qing governance of China and its control of the Confucian tradition.

[22] Ibid., 384-385.

The Qing Empire and Confucianism: adoption, control, and the Chinese reaction

The Qing Empire's attitude toward the Confucian tradition was an ambivalent one: on one hand, the imperial court wanted to use the Confucian tradition as a tool to legitimize itself and make itself more culturally acceptable as a ruling regime in China proper; on the other hand, the imperial court tried very hard to suppress and censor original intellectual creativity of the Confucian tradition which might develop into a justification for the idea of a Chinese "civilization" or a reinforcement of the distinction between the Chinese and the "barbarian." These two aspects combined facilitated (though not consciously intended to) the separation of political and cultural entities in the Chinese mind in late imperial China.

The Qing imperial court actively adopted Confucianism as a cultural label in order to provide legitimacy for itself to rule China proper. After militarily conquering the entire area of the empire, the Manchu regime recognized the importance of establishing its legitimacy to rule. In more than one way, the Manchu rulers tried to establish this legitimacy in action and in ideology throughout a period of more than a hundred years. For example, one of the most visible and costly means of legitimization was the multiple imperial tourings of the Qianlong Emperor in the 18th century to the economically and culturally prosperous Yangtze River Delta area, the region most heavily affected by the

atrocities of conquest and still haunted by the anti-Manchu sentiment. The rituals and symbolism involved in these imperial tourings were a declaration of Qing legitimacy and also a "negotiation" between the Manchu ruler and the Chinese.[23]

The Qing imperial court's adoption of Confucianism as the imperial ideology was one such method of legitimization. The Qing imperial court made an effort to educate the princes in the Chinese language (alongside the Manchu language) and Confucian classics. Starting from the second emperor of the Qing Dynasty in China proper (Emperor Kangxi), the Manchu emperors were all well-versed in the Confucian classics. The court deliberately promoted the emperors' images as Manchu rulers with Chinese learning. In the early 1700s, the Qing emperor had already gained the monopolizing right to moral truth. In the 1730s, Emperor Yongzheng was confident enough to make a judgment about the Confucian learning, saying that "the Confucian learning has been not pure for generations; true learning and fake learning are mixed together confusing people's minds."[24] Statements like this declared the strong relationship and close connection between the Qing imperial court and the Confucian tradition, which had previously been recognized as the imperial ideology starting from before 100 BCE. In embracing the Confucian discourses and the knowledge of the classics, the Qing emperors connected themselves with the "Mandate of Heaven" which was the most important criterion for the legitimacy of a universal ruler in the sinosphere that was supposed to have permeated all cyclical dynastic changes in Chinese history.

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[23] For a detailed study of the imperial tourings as a tool to establish legitimacy, see Michael G. Chang, *A Court on Horseback: Imperial Touring and the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680-1785* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007).

[24] Ge Zhaoguang, *Zhongguo sixiang shi* (An intellectual history of China), vol. 2, 392.

This close tie between the Qing imperial court and the Confucian tradition alienated the loyalist intellectuals from enthusiastic engagement with Confucian discourses. Those loyalists who maintained hope after the fall of the Ming Dynasty and wanted to re-establish the world order according to Confucian ideals moved away from Confucianism because of its association with their enemy: the Qing court. The retreat of the Chinese intellectuals from Confucian discourses gave the Qing court more space to monopolize the right to interpret the Confucian tradition. Also, the Qing court's advocacy of Confucian moral values left no room for the loyalists to voice any real opposition, since doing so would be inviting the accusation of being immoral. The loyalists either conformed to the Qing authority or kept silent on the issue of court-adopted Confucian tradition.

The other aspect of the relationship between the Qing imperial court and the Confucian tradition was the court effort to censor all aspects of writing and suppress original intellectual creativity, especially among the Chinese. This literary inquisition reached its highest point in the heyday of the Qing Empire. According to historian Liu Yizheng, "The intensity of the sufferings of literary people [from inquisition] in the previous dynasties had never been as severe as it was in the Qing Dynasty. Therefore, since the time of Yongzheng and Qianlong [1722-1796], literary gentlemen with aspiration and integrity had been nowhere to be found. … Any slight carelessness might bring unexpected disasters."[25] The breadth and depth of the literary inquisition in the

[25] Liu Yizheng, *Zhongguo wenhua shi, xia ce* (A cultural history of China, vol. 2) (Shanghai: Zhonguo da baike quanshu chuban she, 1988), 731.

Qing was the most serious of all imperial dynasties. Several famous cases took place and many people were involved throughout the society.

The literary inquisition was originally used to prevent the Chinese from making any move towards the formation and spreading of anti-Manchu sentiments, but because of its prevalence, in effect it suffocated intellectual creativity and scared people away from active intellectual conversations. The inquisition specifically kept people away from the philosophical discussions of Neo-Confucianism. In the *lixue* school of Neo-Confucianism, philosophical enquiries were the foundation of moral and political orders of the world. Therefore, even metaphysical discussions might have a strong political implication. The censorship and literary inquisition of the Qing Dynasty significantly discouraged philosophical discussions. Partially in response to this oppression in the intellectual realm, Chinese intellectuals turned away from active philosophical engagements and turned toward "evidentiary scholarship": the philological examinations of the Confucian classics. These studies were not politically dangerous so they survived the censorship of the Qing authorities. Meanwhile, with a strong emphasis put on the technical rather than philosophical aspect of Confucian classics, the intellectual creativity within the Confucian tradition went into decline. Throughout the eighteenth century, Confucian scholarship made great achievements in textual criticism of the classics, but had almost no breakthrough in philosophical sophistication.[26]

This enforcement of literary inquisition and censorship caused a big turn in the trajectory of intellectual development in late imperial China. Chinese intellectuals

[26] Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 5-6.

retreated from active participation in Confucian philosophical discussions, and left a vacuum for the imperial power to fill. The official adoption and use of Confucianism as imperial ideology also alienated many Chinese intellectuals, who were initially more inclined towards the loyalists' side but later found the Confucian tradition increasingly less appealing because of its association with the imperial rule and the imperial bureaucracy (in its institutionalized form of Civil Service Examinations). Therefore, though unintended, the Qing policies on Confucianism caused the detachment of Chinese intellectuals from the tradition.

To the late Ming loyalists, the Confucian tradition represented the universal civilization of human beings, which had the great power of preserving this civilization even though the political form of this civilization fell; to the 19th-century Qing reformers, the Confucian tradition represented the intellectually static and unchanging imperial bureaucracy, which repeated the ideological cliché in all aspects of social life. In the mid-eighteenth century, novelist Wu Jingzi wrote a satirical novel named *The Scholars* (*Rulin waishi*), making fun of the adult students for the Civil Service Examinations and mocking the lack of intellectual creativity of this era.[27] This novel became widely read in the generations after him, who all shared a strong feeling of criticism of this intellectual inactivity.

The Manchu conquest and rule of China, including its policies adopting and controlling the Confucian tradition, had a big impact on the intellectual world of Chinese thinkers which alienated Chinese intellectuals from the Confucian tradition. In the mid-

[27] Wu Jingzi, *Rulin waishi* (translated as *The Scholars*). Beijing: Renmin wenxue chuban she, 2002.

nineteenth century, there was already a clear separation of political and cultural entities in the mind of reformist thinkers such as Wei Yuan. In the light of the two hundred years of Manchu rule, it is easier for us to understand the historical origins of this unique intellectual phenomenon in China, which made Wei Yuan feel comfortable offering examples of "barbarian" history for the betterment of the Chinese nation. Yet Wei Yuan was only the beginning of a long list of thinkers and writers (Wang Tao, Feng Guifen, Yan Fu, etc.), who followed him in distinguishing the cultural and the political entities of China and offered technical, pragmatic advice to China for the purpose of national salvation, disregarding its cultural source of inspiration.

The two-stage demise of Confucianism in matter and in form

In Lin Yu-Sheng's famous study of the Chinese totalistic iconoclasm, he provides two reasons for the anti-tradition sentiments of the May Fourth period: first, the fall of traditional imperial order in 1912; second, the abuse of tradition by the reactionary political activities of Yuan Shikai and Zhang Xun in the 1910s. However, this explanation fails to address the issue of anti-tradition sentiments in the late Qing period before the fall of the imperial order. According to my explanation, what Lin Yu-Sheng talks about in his book was only the second stage of the two-stage demise of Confucianism: its demise in form. The first stage of the demise, or arguably the true decline and fall of the Confucian tradition, happened long before the 1911 Revolution in

the early decades of the Qing Dynasty. With the background of minority conquest and rule, the Qing imperial policy to adopt and control the Confucian tradition alienated the Chinese intellectuals from it, although this consequence might have been completely unintended.

This two-stage demise of Confucianism paved the way for the "totalistic iconoclasm" of twentieth century China. The loss of original intellectual creativity in the Confucian tradition was the most important criterion of the demise of Confucianism in matter and in essence. This demise in matter enabled thinkers and writers such as Wei Yuan to make a distinction in their mind between the cultural and civilizational body of China and the political body of China. The Confucian tradition had lost its internal intellectual life and only lived by custom or in form. Because of this demise in matter and in essence, late Qing thinkers such as Yan Fu were intellectually ready to reject the Confucian tradition and embrace western learning as an alternative in order to save China from its political crisis. In 1912, when the last emperor stepped down, the last symbol to maintain the custom of the Confucian tradition was removed. The Confucian tradition saw its final demise in form, and became no longer a living tradition afterwards. The tide of totalistic iconoclasm followed later in the decade, "prepared" by the historical process of several hundred years and ushering in the final birth of the modern Chinese mind.

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