

Social Ethics in China

Introduction

In 1996, The 1990 Institute and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences jointly sponsored an essay contest in China on the current status of social ethics in China. The three essays in this Issue Paper are translations of the first three prize winners of that contest.

The Essay Contest

The idea of the contest arose from a widely shared concern, in both China and abroad, that although economic reform since 1979 has brought about unprecedented economic growth and prosperity to China, it has also been associated with widespread social disintegration and a rapid deterioration of the traditional cultural values. It has been observed, by many Chinese and foreigners alike, that the only goal of human pursuit in China is money-making and personal material comfort, and that so long as the goal can be attained, whatever means used is acceptable. A disturbing spiritual void exists, according to these observers, in this most populous country in the world.

What is going on in this society? What is happening to its culture? What do the people in that society think about their cultural heritage and social ethics? Are they concerned? And if so, what can be done about the situation? These were some of the questions posed in the essay contest.

The 1990 Institute was fortunate to have the Shanghai Academy as a co-sponsor for the project. Under the able leadership of its Executive Vice President, Mr. Yao Xitang, the Academy organized and administered the contest. In April 1996, it sent an announcement to 245 top universities and colleges, academies of social sciences, and government agencies in China. By early September over 100 submissions were received.

The Shanghai Academy conducted the selection with exemplary fairness according to the criteria established by the co-sponsors prior to the contest. It set up a committee of six scholars to select the 25 semifinalists and a second committee of another six scholars to select the 10 finalists. During the entire selection process, the authors' names and affiliations were not known to members of the selection committee, and each essay was identified only by a number. The Academy then sent the 98 qualifying submissions, including the 10 finalist essays, to the Institute. In its turn, the Institute organized a review committee of seven scholars in the United States to determine the three top-prize winners.

In December 1996, a conference was held at the Shanghai Academy to announce the contest results. The 25 semifinalists were invited to attend the conference, and the 10 finalists presented their essays. Each essay was discussed by a prominent scholar. At the end of the conference, the identities of the three top-prize winners were revealed and awards were given to the semifinalists, the finalists, and the three top-prize winners.

The spirit of the contest was best reflected in a letter to the Institute from one of the top-prize winners, who wrote: "I am an ordinary college teacher, with neither background nor connection. That someone like me could win a top prize in this Culture and Social Ethics essay contest, jointly sponsored by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and The 1990 Institute of the United States, indicates the fairness of the essay judges and the contest organizers - which is precisely what is most lacking in contemporary China." (Italics added.)

Our Comments

The essay contest was a valuable learning experience for many reasons.

First, we were encouraged by the authorities' readiness to permit the contest to take place, which allowed the essayists to speak out openly on a subject of obvious political sensitivity. The experience confirmed our belief that the concerns over China's cultural heritage and social ethics run deep and wide in China, and that both the people and the authorities are eager to explore the issues and find solutions.

Second, the diverse geographic locations of the essayists enhanced the credibility of the contest. The finalists and semifinalists together cover virtually every region in China. The authors of the three top-prize essays are from Wuhan, Shanghai, and Hebei - in central, eastern, and northern China, respectively. What we have here, therefore, is an interesting sample of contemporary intellectual thinking in China on issues of the nation's cultural heritage and social ethics.

Third, the three essayists, as well as the authors of the other essays, all pointed to widespread official corruption and unethical business practices as the most worrisome issue in China's social ethics. They applauded the economic reform since 1979 that accelerated China's output growth and improved its standard of living, but deplored the concomitant widening of the income gap between the rich and the poor, and the apparent collapse of social morals. There was little nostalgia about the old order, but emphasis was placed on the need for a new order that would maintain the economic dynamism and restore social order and ethical behavior among the populace.

Fourth, their recommendations covered a wide spectrum, but most of them revolved around institution building, clean government, and better education. By "institution building," they meant the development and strengthening of institutions essential for the orderly function of a market economy and the simultaneous promotion of social ethics. In addition, they all emphasized the prime importance of the rule of law.

Fifth, virtually none had any praise for China's cultural heritage. In the three top-prize winning essays, either there was no mention of this or it was lambasted as being outdated ("a product of an agrarian economy"), unsuitable for a market economy ("rule by man" rather than "rule of law"), and responsible for China's social and economic backwardness today. This attitude contrasts with some Western scholars' profound interest in, and respect for, China's cultural heritage. Some political leaders and eminent scholars in Southeast Asia have called for a revival of Confucianism.

We take no position in this ongoing debate between the Neo-Confucianists and, what for lack of a better term may be called, "modernists." The debate is in an area in which we have no expertise. Nevertheless, from our reading of history we believe that the social institutions of each nation are rooted in its cultural heritage, and that unless a nation is totally annihilated by an invader, no revolution from within, however violent, can ever destroy its cultural heritage. Its own people may reject it, denounce it, and suppress it, but the nation's cultural heritage is still present in the people's personal habits, behavior, and in their social institutions. Once active suppression is eased, cultural heritage resurfaces with full force, often with a vengeance, as happened after the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and also the Chinese Revolutions of 1911 and 1949. Instantaneous and total rejection is illusory. An evolutionary approach to ethics reform, with dispassionate understanding of the strength and weaknesses of the society's heritage, is more likely to succeed, we believe.

Sixth, except for the three presented here, the majority of the essayists seemed to have a superficial and distorted understanding of Western culture. In general, the essays cluster around two extremes: either admiring Western culture to the point of explicitly or implicitly endorsing it as a working model for China, or

rejecting it as being characterized by selfish and ruthless individualism in blind pursuit of money, power, and self-gratification. The over-simplification of viewpoints showed a lack of understanding of the contemporary Western mind among Chinese intellectuals which could be attributed to a lack of contact and exposure. For example, there was little evidence of their awareness of the self-criticism in the 20th century Western philosophy which casts doubt on the dependability of rationality, science and technology for solving the problems of society. They also seemed ignorant of the religious faiths that form the basis of much of Western culture and are reflected in the common courtesy, neighborliness, generosity, and voluntarism of the ordinary people in Western societies.

Seventh, the cultural dilemma and social ethical problems facing China today are, indeed, serious but are by no means unique to China. Similar dilemma and problems also confront virtually all the transitional and developing countries in the world. The cry of the Chinese intellectuals in the three essays presented here is the same one heard in countries ranging from Russia, the Czech Republic, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Brazil, to Egypt, Algeria, and Congo. It is the cry of the thinking public in societies that are still struggling to "modernize" but find their efforts hindered by their societies' conventions and institutions deeply rooted in cultural heritage. It is the cry of people whose cultural roots have been eroded and weakened by progress and modernization, by the powerfully allure of science and technology, that are now sweeping over the entire world.

In a sense, and to a very different degree, it is also the cry of the thinking public in the West. As stated, there have been a great deal of profound self-examination and disaffection in Western societies as well. The rise of science and humanism since the 17th century, followed by technological and industrial revolution, has transformed Western society and altered the Western mind in a way that is not entirely consistent with their cultural heritage. The industrialized countries are finding that science, technology, rationalism, humanism, and the market system - in short, modernity - cannot solve all the personal and societal problems, as they once thought possible in the 18th and 19th centuries. Many pathological social problems have surfaced, especially in the last quarter of this century, to alert even the general public to question the future direction of their societies.

We hope the readers will read these three essays, translated from Chinese, not simply because of their interest in China, but also to realize that the problems described in these papers are, to different degrees, shared by societies around the world.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, especially Mr. Yao Xitang, for its steadfast support and cooperation as our partner in this joint project; to Stephen Lee, a 1990 Institute director, who originated the idea of an essay contest on China's cultural heritage and social ethics; to the Sung-Kwok Foundation and another Institute director, William M.S. Lee, and Mrs. Lucille Lee for funding this project; to Ted Chiao, an Institute volunteer, who spent innumerable hours to translate these three articles into English; and to Matilda Young, another Institute director, who edited the translations as well as this introduction. Lastly, we dedicate this Issue Paper to the thoughtful individuals in China and elsewhere who continue to struggle and wrestle with the problems of cultural heritage and social ethics that have arisen in their societies' confrontation with modernity.

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Hang-Sheng Cheng, President

C.B. Sung, Chairman

The 1990 Institute

First Prize: ["The Development of Professional Ethics during China's Progress toward a Market Economy."](#) by Li Min

Second Prize: ["Civilization Based on Ethics and Morality or Based on Law?"](#) by Jiang Dehai

Third Prize: ["An Ethics Based on Property Rights"](#) by Liu Min