

"Western Learning for Substance, Chinese Learning for Application' – Li Zehou's Thought on Tradition and Modernity"¹

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Li Zehou's article "Random Thoughts on 'Western Learning as Substance, Chinese Learning for Application'" (Manshuo 'Xiti zhongyong' 漫说“西体中用”), written 1986, is the last essay in his influential collection *On the History of Contemporary Chinese Thought* (*Zhongguo xiandai sixiangshi lun* 中国现代思想史论). Its title turns around the familiar slogan of the Self-Strengthening Movement which was popular in late 19th century China at the end of the Qing Dynasty: "Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for application" (*Zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong* 中学为体, 西学为用). As is well known, it is a quotation from Zhang Zhidong's 张之洞 (1837-1909) essay "Exhortation to Study" (*Quanxue pian* 劝学篇) which appeared in 1898. At this period in history, Zhang spoke for many Chinese scholars who believed that China should maintain its own Confucian style of learning as the basis ("substance" – 体 *ti*) of society, while at the same time using Western learning for "practical application" (用 *yong*) in developing China's infrastructure, military and economy.

The present paper addresses the following questions: In turning this relationship around, what is, for Li Zehou, substance and what is practical application? What does he consider to be a fruitful relationship between tradition and modernity in China. How does Li's thought fit in the context of his aesthetics as well as the various debates on Chinese culture from the late 19th century until today?

Viewing Li Zehou's thought in historical context, I will refer to four structurally different phases of dealing with tradition in China during the last 150 years which I will return to at the end of my paper:

1. Maintaining the Confucian tradition as basis:

This was the position of the "Self-Strengthening Movement" (*Yangwu yundong* 洋务运动: 1870s-1890s) – the period of attempted reforms, in particular by introducing Western technological know-know to China during the last decades of the 19th century, following a number of military defeats and concessions to foreign powers. Today, it is considered that the twofold goals of the movement – maintaining the Confucian basis of society while only allowing Western technology into China – failed with the defeat of China in the war against Japan (1894-95).

¹ This article is based on a German version: Karl-Heinz Pohl, "Zu Beiträgen Li Zehous in der Debatte um Tradition und Identität in den 80er Jahren in der Volksrepublik China" (On Li Zehou's contributions to the 1980s debate on tradition and identity in the People's Republic of China) in: Ralf Moritz (ed.), *Sinologische Traditionen im Spiegel neuer Forschung*, Leipzig 1993, pp 41-56. It has been substantially expanded and updated, also with reference to secondary literature.

2. Opening up of the tradition:

Following the defeat against Japan, during the "Hundred Days' Reform" of 1898 (*Wuxu bianfa* 戊戌变法), reformers around Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927) attempted institutional and educational reforms according to Western models but with explicit reference to the Confucian tradition, in fact by claiming that reforms were the original agenda of Confucius. The movement was ended after one hundred days by a *coup d'état* led by conservatives around the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧.²

3. Breaking with the tradition:

During the "May-Fourth-Movement" of 1919 (*Wusi yundong* 五四运动) – an anti-colonialist, patriotic but also anti-traditionalist and iconoclast movement lasting in fact roughly from 1915 to 1921 – Confucianism was seen as the main culprit for the problems of late imperial China. As it became a movement for a "new culture" (including a colloquial language and literature), the Western model advanced to a leading position in China, and "complete Westernization" (*quanpan xihua* 全盘西化) was demanded by its most radical proponents. During the further course of the movement, Marxism entered the stage, notably with the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. Li Zehou sees the "May-Fourth Movement" as a project comparable to the European Enlightenment but, according to his analysis, it could not succeed because the need of saving the nation against foreign imperialism decisively limited the goal of Enlightenment.³

4. Political instrumentalization of tradition:

A political instrumentalization of the tradition can be noticed in various fields of the Chinese recent history until today, such as in an early phase (1930s – 1940s) as the proposal of using "national forms" (*minzu xingshi* 民族形式: traditional forms of art and literature) for the purpose of propagating socialist ideas in the Communist held regions of China. From the 1980s on, there was a drive to use tradition to consolidate the power of the party, such as in the 1986 resolution of the Central Committee for the "Building up of a Socialist Spiritual Civilization" (*shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming jianshe* 社会主义精神文明建设) or, more recently, in appealing to Confucius and the Confucian tradition for the sake of strengthening national pride.

In attempting to grasp Li Zehou's contributions to the 150 year long debate I will deal below with the following two subparts: 1. Aesthetics in modern China – encounters with Western thought; 2. Tradition and modernity – Li Zehou's evaluation of China's tradition in the framework of its recent past. In a concluding section, Li Zehou's position will be viewed in historical context.

² Li Zehou dealt with the Self-Strengthening Movement as well as with the various protagonists of the Hundred Day's Reform extensively in his book *On the History of Modern Chinese Thought (Zhongguo jindai sixiangshi lun* 中国近代思想史论), Peking 1979.

³ See his article "Double Variation on Enlightenment and National Salvation" (*Qimeng yu jiuwang shuangchong bianzou* 启蒙与救亡的双重变奏) in his book, *On the History of Contemporary Chinese Thought (Zhongguo xiandai sixiangshi lun* 中国现代思想史论). For a different view on the complexity and the repercussions of the movement see Lin Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness. Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era*, Madison, Wis. 1979.

1. Aesthetics in modern China – encounters with Western thought

Arts and aesthetics form particularly significant parts of a culture. Apart from language, the cultural framework of myths, images, allusions as well as references to literature, art, religion and philosophy, in short, the symbolic and aesthetic orientation (shared literary or artistic sensibilities) form the basis of all cultural identity everywhere on the globe. Regarding China in the modern period, aesthetics assumed a special place in her grappling with Western thought: First, aesthetics constitutes a realm relatively free of politics. For this reason, it attracted Chinese scholars at the end of the 19th century to explore freely and without political restraint occidental thought. Second, philosophy of art as part of aesthetics is a field that offered Chinese intellectuals the possibility of linking up with their own traditional ideas. This was important because – unlike the mainstream of Chinese traditional social and political thought, particularly Confucianism – the Chinese aesthetic tradition had not been discredited by the reception of Western ideas and the radical anti-traditionalism of the May Fourth Movement around 1919. Quite the contrary, when the Chinese, at the beginning of the 20th century, began to define themselves in relationship to the West they understood their own culture as an essentially aesthetic one. Aesthetics is thus important for the understanding of all discussion on Chinese identity (“Chineseness”) until today.

The encounter with Western thought brought the Chinese, on the one hand, a wealth of fascinatingly new ideas. It allowed them, on the other, to look for familiar concepts which could be aligned with their own tradition. The president of the Peking University during the May Fourth period, Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培 1868-1940), was one of the first to formulate the cultural-aesthetic self-understanding of the Chinese. Through his studies in Germany he was familiar with occidental philosophy, particularly with Kant and Schiller. He regarded Westerners to be largely shaped by religion, whereas for China he held aesthetics (a combination of ritual, art and ethics) to be the functional “spiritual” equivalent to religion in the West. For this reason he demanded for modern China “aesthetic education in the place of religion” (*yi meiyu dai zongjiao* 以美育代宗教).⁴ As it was popular among culturally conservative intellectuals at this time to posit a Chinese “spiritual” against a Western “materialistic” culture⁵, the affirmation of “spiritual” aspects in Chinese aesthetics added to this understanding of Chinese culture.

The famous scholar Wang Guowei (王国维 1877-1927) represents the early encounter of Chinese with European ideas in the field of aesthetics. He coined basic aesthetic concepts for the 20th century such as *jingjie* 境界 (“aesthetic state of mind or consciousness”) or *yijing* 意境 (“aesthetic idea”)⁶ to denote a perfect aesthetic fusion of artistic idea (or feeling) with a

⁴ Liu Gangji, “Verbreitung und Einfluss der deutschen Ästhetik in China” (The spreading and influence of German aesthetics in China), K.-H. Pohl (ed.), *Trierer Beiträge. Aus Forschung und Lehre an der Universität Trier*, July 1996 (Special Issue #10), pp. 8-13.

⁵ Particularly influential was Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893-1988) and his book *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* (*Dong xi wenhua ji qi zhexue* 东西文化及其哲学), published in 1922.

⁶ Adele Rickett, *Wang Kuo-wei's Jen-chien T'zu-hua hua – A Study in Chinese Literary Criticism*, Hong Kong 1977, p. 23ff.

concrete scene. Wang first used the term *jingjie* only with regards to poetry and without any theoretical explanation; but this term soon gained a general aesthetic meaning, signifying both an aesthetic idea as well as a most sublime state of mind. Wang Guowei derived his concepts from Chinese tradition (using Buddhist vocabulary), but they are also imbued with meaning that he found in Kant and Schopenhauer (Kant's "aesthetic idea"); hence, they represent early intercultural exchanges of thought between China and the West.

In his article, "The Spreading and Influence of German Aesthetics in China",⁷ Liu Gangji (刘纲纪 *1933) showed that modern Chinese aesthetics has been largely formed by dealing with the German tradition of aesthetics, i.e German idealism. Because of the enormous problems of translation, this tradition of aesthetics – from Kant and Schiller to Marx and Heidegger – was received in China with a phase shift of about 100 years. Due to this background, it is not surprising that the discourse of Chinese aesthetics of the 20th century was largely shaped by the categories and questions of German philosophy of the 18th and 19th century. The rather rigid reception of Marxism only reinforced this tendency. This fixation also explains the Chinese translation of the Western term "aesthetics" as "study of beauty" or "beautology", if we want to re-translate the Chinese term *meixue* 美學 back into English. This translation (which originally came from Japan) is for China somewhat misleading, if not unfortunate, as the category of the "beautiful" – neither in the form of natural nor as artistic beauty – ever played a significant role in traditional China.⁸

The modern Chinese aestheticians frantic search for beauty in their own tradition thus appears in many ways like a voyage into the wrong direction which however, as is not unusual with such voyages, also let them to discover unknown and interesting territory, such as quite a few parallels between Chinese and Western aesthetics as well as a creative appropriation of Marxist aesthetics in China.

It is worth noting that, even in the ideologically rather rigid period of the 1950s (between 1956 and 1962), aesthetics was a field that allowed for a relatively free debate in China – within the confines of a Marxist materialist approach to aesthetics.⁹ Apart from the concept of beauty, it was now also the Marxian idea of "practice" (*shjian* 实践) that was added to the discussion by Li Zehou (李泽厚 *1930), who first came to prominence in this period as one of the leading scholars in aesthetics.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), aesthetics ceased to exist as a topic of discussion. After the Cultural Revolution (in the 1980s), however, China experienced an unprecedented "aesthetics craze" (*meixue re* 美学热) mainly brought about by the writings of prominent aestheticians such as Zhu Guangqian (朱光潜 1897-1986), Zong Baihua (宗白华 1897-1986) and – most of all – Li Zehou. The latter was the towering figure of this period. Apart from

⁷ See note 4.

⁸ Karl-Heinz Pohl, "Chinese Aesthetics and Kant", in: Mazhar Hussain and Robert Wilkinson (eds.), *The Pursuit of Comparative Aesthetics – An Interface Between the East and the West*, Aldershot 2006, pp. 127-136. As for Li Zehou's view on beauty, see Li Zehou and Jane Cauvel, *Four Essays on Aesthetics. Toward a Global View*, Lanham 2006, pp. 47-79.

⁹ For a detailed account see the article by Gao Jianping, "The 'Aesthetics Craze' in China – Its Cause and Significance", *Dialogue and Universalism*, 3-4/1997, pp. 27-35.

"practice", he introduced other new concepts such as "subjectivity" (*zhuguanxing* 主观性) or, as his own coinage, "subjectality" (*zhutixing* 主体性)¹⁰. Taking his ideas as a fusion of Kantian and Marxian ideas¹¹ (i.e. the notion of "humanized nature" from the latter's "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844"), practice was for Li materially productive activity, such as making and employing tools.¹² Furthermore, he offered stimulating interpretations of the Chinese artistic tradition in his widely read *The Path of Beauty* (*Mei de licheng* 美的历程) which first appeared in 1981.

Li once made a difference between a narrow and broad explication of aesthetics¹³: A narrow exposition would only cover written documents dealing with aesthetics (literary or art criticism and such), whereas a broad explication would deal with all aspects of material culture (beginning with tool making and cave drawings). Seen from this clarification, his book *The Path of Beauty* is a broad explication of Chinese aesthetics.

Central to his theory of aesthetics, and thus also in this book, is the notion of "sedimentation" (*jidian* 积淀) as a fusion of the social with the individual in a historical process, resulting in a "cultural-psychological formation" (*wen hua xinli jiegou* 文化心理结构). Over a long period of time, rational concepts sediment into aesthetic-sensual emotions; content sediments into form i.e. art. Li's examples are taken from prehistoric art: He illustrates a development in the Neolithic period in China how early sketchy animal pictures (with concrete content, such as totem figures) turn into abstract lines and symbols on Yangshao and Majiayao pottery or Taotie bronze masks. Li explains:

The social consciousness – the passions, concepts, and psychology of primitive humans – crystallized and concentrated in these pictorial symbols invested them with a meaning and significance that was beyond pure graphic representation. Primitive humans perceived in them properties and values that transcended pure psychological responses. In other words, these natural forms were sedimented with social values and content, and man's perceptual power and sensibility had acquired a rational quality. This unquestionably was the beginning of an aesthetic awareness and artistic creation.¹⁴

Hence, beauty is not just beautiful form, but, with social content having sedimented into it, "significant form" (*you yiwei de xingshi* 有意味的形式), a term he took from the English art

¹⁰ Timothy Cheek (ed.), 'Subjectality': Li Zehou and his Critical Analysis of Chinese Thought. Special issue of *Philosophy East and West* 49.2 (April 1999), pp. 113–84.

¹¹ Liu Gangji, pp. 19-32. Particularly influential was Li Zehou's book on Kant: *A Critique of Critical Philosophy: A Review of Kant* (*Pipan zhexue de pipan: Kangde shuping* 批判哲学的批判: 康德述评), Peking 1979. See also Jane Cauvel, "The transformative Power of Art: Li Zehou's Aesthetic Theory", *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April, 1999), pp. 150-173; Woei Lien Chong, "Combining Marx with Kant: The Philosophical Anthropology of Li Zehou", *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April, 1999), pp. 120-149.

¹² For a detailed discussion see Liu Kang, *Aesthetics and Marxism. Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries*, Durham 2000, p. 167ff.

¹³ Li Zehou, "Concerning a few questions in the history of Chinese aesthetics" (Guanyu Zhongguo meixueshi de jigewenti 关于中国美学史的几个问题) in Li Zehou, *A Collection of Writings in Philosophy and Aesthetics of Li Zehou* (*Li Zehou zhexue meixue wenxuan* 李泽厚哲学美学文选), Taipei (no year), p. 472f.

¹⁴ Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty, A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, Gong Lizeng, transl., Oxford, 1994, p. 9. Cf. also the German translation: *Der Weg des Schönen*, Karl-Heinz Pohl and Gudrun Wacker (eds.), Freiburg 1992.

critic Clive Bell (1881-1964).¹⁵ Sedimentation is thus a culturally specific and sensually perceptible formation process of social and historical reality. In the afterword to *The Path of Beauty*, while musing about the timelessness of art, he addresses these issues which condense in his notion of "cultural-psychological formation" and even "human nature":

What is the key to understanding the mystery of the eternal nature of art? (...) Why is it that the aesthetic value and artistic style of works of long ago still accord with the sentiments and interests of people of our time? Why do they still evoke such intimate feelings in us? Is it that the sentiments accumulated and condensed in them are related to and act upon the psychological structure of people today? Is the human psychological structure a product of the accumulation and condensation of historical experience? If so, the secret of the eternal nature of art may reside therein. Or, it may be the other way round – that is, the universal human psychology resides in and is promoted by the eternal nature of art. (...) Psychological structure is a product of the sedimentation of human history and civilization; art is the psychology that reveals the soul of the times. Maybe this can explain "human nature" (*renxing* 人性) as related to art.¹⁶

The image of sedimentation is particularly descriptive. It suggests a tectonic structure of different deposits – that is: of history – where the deep layers, though not directly visible, are still formative in terms of giving structure for the layers above and are still accessible by excavation or drilling, i.e. through education.

But "sedimentation" and "psychological formation" have to be seen in a broader context: If sedimentation can be understood as a fusion of the social with the individual in a historical process, that is, as historical content sedimenting into cultural or national forms and identity (including human behavioural and thought patterns, emotional attitudes as well as art), "psychological formation" can also be understood as "human nature" – as a result of long lasting processes (thousands of years) of sedimentation. The latter term "human nature", though of Confucian origin, thus gains here a universal significance.

One may understand that such considerations, drawn up at the beginning of the 1980s, apart from the comprehensive presentation of a great Chinese civilization manifested in tangible forms of traditional art, succeeded in giving the debate over a Chinese tradition and identity, taking place during this decade, decisive if not even triggering impulses.

This brief overview of modern Chinese aesthetics as well as Li's specific contribution to it¹⁷ may suffice in order to place and evaluate it later in a broader context.

¹⁵ Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty*, p. 20. p. The notion of "significant form" was developed by Bell in his influential book *Art* of 1914. See also Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, London 1953, p. 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235f.

¹⁷ In 1989 another overview of Chinese aesthetics appeared by Li Zehou: *Huaxia meixue* 华夏美学 (Chinese aesthetics) which was translated into English by Maija Bell Samei and published as *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Honolulu 2010. Concerning Li Zehou's aesthetics, see also John Zijiang Ding, "Li Zehou: Chinese Aesthetics from a Post-Marxist and Confucian Perspective" in Chung-Ying Cheng and Nicholas Bunning (eds.), *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, Malden 2002, pp. 246-259, as well as Wang, Ban, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

2. Tradition and Modernity

Concerning the topic of tradition and modernity, let us first answer the question: What was thought of being “tradition” in the late 19th century? Interestingly, the current word for 'tradition', *chuantong* 传统, was apparently not used in the Chinese vocabulary at that time. The most common modern Chinese dictionary, the *Cihai* 辞海 (Sea of Words), did not have an entry of *chuantong*, neither in the 1938 nor 1965 edition; it first appeared in the editions of the 1970s. As a loanword from Japanese, like many others at this time, the word seems to have come into Chinese usage at the beginning of the 20th century. Its literal meaning is: “Passing on” (*chuan*) the “united” teachings (*tong*); here *tong* must be understood in the sense of *daotong* 道统 or *zhengtong* 正统 – i.e. the orthodox interpretation of the *Dao*, as transmitted by the Neo-Confucians of the Song Dynasty.

Today *chuantong* is explained similarly as 'tradition' in Western dictionaries (as behaviour passed on within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past, conveying a sense of identity), such as on the Chinese Wikipedia site.¹⁸ At the end of the 19th century, however, 'tradition' was nothing but the well-known phrase “Chinese learning” (*Zhong xue* 中学), and this in contrast to “Western learning” (*Xi xue* 西学).

Although the slogan “Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for Application” (*Zhongti xiyong* 中体西用) was coined in this form by Zhang Zhidong during the "Hundred Day's Reform" in 1898, its content was widespread among intellectuals since the 1860s.¹⁹ Using a well-known thought pattern of Neo-Confucian metaphysics, *ti-yong* 体用: substance – function, Zhang Zhidong's purpose was to criticize reformers like Kang Youwei from a conservative point of view. His stance was that it was necessary to maintain the orthodox Confucian basis of society, and if Western thought was to be accepted then only in order to strengthen the material basis of society, particularly military equipment in view of the European encroachment in China since the first Opium War (1839-42).

Zhang Zhidong's usage of the established and well-known *ti-yong* formula was by no means orthodox in a Confucian philosophical way but rather creatively clever. Li Zehou's turn-around is, likewise, quite ingenious. In the 1980s, it caused quite a stir in the intellectual circles. Some critics held, however, that it was basically the old formula, only in a new cloak.²⁰

In particular, Li Zehou argues with reference to Marx's distinction of “base and superstructure” (*jingji jichu* 经济基础 / *shangceng jianzhu* 上层建筑). For Zhang Zhidong, Confucian thought was the substance (base) – which for Li, however, in Marxist terms is

¹⁸ “传统指历史沿传而来的思想、道德、风俗、艺术、制度等。”

¹⁹ Such as in Feng Guifen's 冯桂芬 (1809-1874) "Protest from the Jiaobin Studio" (Jiaobinlu kangyi 校邠庐抗议). See Immanuel Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, Oxford 1990, p. 276f.

²⁰ Fang Keli 方克立, "Ping 'Zhongti Xiyong' he 'Xiti Zhongyong'" 评'中体西用'和'西体中用' (A critique of 'Chinese learning as Substance, Western learning for application' and of 'Western learning for substance, Chinese learning for application') in Zhang Liwen 张立文 et al. (eds), *Chuantong wenhua yu xiandaihua* 传统文化与现代化 (Traditional culture and modernization), Peking 1987, p. 326-340.

"superstructure". Following Marx's example of turning Hegel's dialectics (standing upside down) right side up, Li Zehou turns Zhang Zhidong's formula (standing upside down) right side up in stressing that only the real life of the people, the production mode and economics can be considered as the "base" (substance).

Learning (*xue*), no matter if Chinese or Western, Chinese learning of Confucius or Western learning of Karl Marx – cannot (...) be substance (*ti*), at least not substance in the ultimate sense. Such "learning" is only psychological substance (*xinli bentu* 心理本体) (...), that is, a kind of theory or system of thought. In the strict sense, substance should be the final reality (*benti*) of social existence, the real daily life. This is the root, the basis and the point of departure.²¹

But what exactly is "Western Learning as substance"? For Zhang Zhidong it was the "Four Modernizations" of the 19th century (technology for warships and railroads etc.); for Li Zehou it is also modern Western natural sciences and technology but includes the political, social and economic thought which enabled the development of the technological know-how. This comprises also the thought tradition of the Enlightenment and French Revolution (of which Karl Marx is an integral part). "Western Learning as Substance" thus stands for modernization (according to the Western model) of social existence, i.e. of the reality of daily life which is determined by the mode of production.

Against this backdrop of "Western Learning as Substance", "Chinese Learning for Application" means: giving the modernized life conditions a specific Chinese form. But form is not something purely external or superficial but, according to Li's aesthetics, something which is moulded by content – content sedimented into form, hence a fusion of form and content.

Moreover, in contrast to Zhang Zhidong for whom *ti* (base/substance) and *yong* (function/application) seem to mark two distinct realms, Li Zehou adheres to the traditional (Neo-Confucian) significance of *ti* and *yong*: i.e., they are *not* two different entities/modes but two aspects of the same issue (*ti yong bu er* 体用不二)²² – they cannot be separated into two, which means in his context: modernization is sinification!

The question is, however, how to "apply" "Western Learning" in a Chinese way? Here Li refers to his idea of the "cultural-psychological formation". For him, this is a somewhat ambivalent notion – it can have negative and positive contents. He deals with these issues also in his article "A New Evaluation of Confucius". For China, Li Zehou considers Confucianism with its "pragmatic reason" (*shiyong lixing* 实用理性)²³ to be most influential.

²¹ Li Zehou, "Random Thoughts on 'Western Learning for Substance, Chinese Learning for Application' (Manshuo 'Xi ti Zhong yong' 漫说 "西体中用") in Li Zehou, *On the History of Contemporary Chinese Thought (Zhongguo xiandai sixiangshi lun* 中国现代思想史论), Hefei 1991, p. 333.

²² Ibid, p. 337.

²³ For "pragmatic reason" he uses the terms *shijian lixing* 实践理性, but also *shiyong lixing* 实用理性 and even *shijian (yong) lixing* 实践(用)理性. In fact, the term *shijian lixing* 实践理性 is the standard Chinese translation of Immanuel Kant's "Practical Reason" as in the title of his second Critique. For Li Zehou's usage of the term in this context, see Li Zehou, "A New Evaluation of Confucius" (Kongzi zai pingjia 孔子再评价) in *On the History of Ancient Chinese Thought (Zhongguo gudai sixiangshi lun* 中国古代思想史论), Peking 1986, p. 29. See also

Confucianism sees man's behaviour and acting as geared to the goal of a harmonious interrelationship of people within society. According to Li, this pragmatic reason as well as the Confucian humanistic tradition have formed China more than anything else and have contributed to the long and uninterrupted civilization of China.²⁴

According to Li, the face of Confucius did not remain the same through the periods of history: People of later centuries picked those attributes which they found suitable for their purposes. Hence, the Confucius who was ditched during the May-Fourth-Movement had largely been the product of the Neo-Confucian philosophy of the Song Period with its ascetism, nepotism and conservatism. Li also considers the narrow-minded conservative mentality of "Ah Q" (the main figure in Lu Xun's 鲁迅, 1881-1936, famous novel), based on a pre-modern small-scale rural economy, to be a late result of the Song philosophy.

In the process of adaption, i.e. "Chinese Learning for Application" (sinification), it is important not to let such negative factors destroy the positive ones. As a prime example for a negative sinification of "Western learning" he deals extensively with the Taiping Rebellion in the 19th century which can be seen, in parts, as a heretic Christian group, but also as a proto-communist peasant militia based on the Western value of "equality". Also Maoism and the Cultural Revolution are for Li examples of how Chinese Marxism was shaped by such negative factors.

Hence, Li Zehou argues for neither a whole sale discarding nor a whole sale inheritance of "Chinese learning" (tradition) but for a selection and transformation of the tradition on the basis of a new consciousness, shaped by a modernized social existence. The positive elements of the tradition should be brought into this process which he calls "changing the hereditary factors" (*yichuan jiyin de gaihuan* 遗传基因的改换)²⁵. In practice this means: In a time in which the way of life and values are shaped and are endangered by commerce and high-technology, the autochthonous Chinese ethical "pragmatic reason" should bear fruit.²⁶ Moreover, Chinese morality giving priority to common and communal values, in contrast to private interests, should be maintained. Hence, elements of the tradition are to be understood as correctives of the excesses of modern life. According to Li, even Western capitalist societies possess elements of tradition as correctives of pure materialism, such as Christian virtues like care.²⁷

Other positive elements of the Chinese past are to be found in the rich tradition of Chinese aesthetics.²⁸ Using Wang Guowei's influential term "*jingjie*" (state of mind), Li Zehou and Liu Gangji, had already stressed elsewhere that the most important characteristic of traditional

his later explanation in "Notes on 'Pragmatic Reason'" (Guanyu "shiyong lixing" 关于"实用理性"), *Ershyi shiji* 二十一世纪 (Twenty-first Century), 21 (spring 1994), pp. 98-103.

²⁴ Li Zehou "Kongzi zai pingjia", p. 29.

²⁵ Li Zehou, "Manshuo 'Xi ti Zhong yong'", p. 337.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 320f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Chinese aesthetics is the idea that an “aesthetic state of mind” (*shenmei jingjie* 审美境界) was regarded as the “highest and noblest state of mind to be attained in life”.²⁹

A further idea, which he elaborates on in the article "Some thoughts on Chinese wisdom", is the traditional notion of “Unity of Heaven/Nature and Man” (*tianren heyi* 天人合一): In view of impending ecological catastrophes (climate change etc.) Li offers a new interpretation of “Unity of Heaven and Man” in an ecological sense as harmonious relationship between human beings and nature. This way, a traditional maxim of Chinese thought could not only gain a contemporary corrective function but assume also a global or universal significance.³⁰

Summing up, “Western Learning as Substance, Chinese Learning for application” means to introduce a modern way of life to China and to adapt it with reference to Chinese traditional culture, i.e. giving this modern way of life a Chinese form. Liu Kang interprets Li's position in a broader context:

Li claims that what constitutes *ti* in modern times is nothing less than a subjectivity that is well conceived and articulated, if not completely realized, by modern Western enlightenment. Li's plea is to create a modern Chinese subjectivity by revitalizing the Chinese classic rationality of the "unity of man (*sic*) and heaven" based on the Marxian notion of a humanized nature.³¹

What was the reception of Li Zehou's thought in the 1980s and 1990s? Li's thesis of “Western Substance, Chinese Application” drew strong criticism, both by radically liberal intellectuals as well as by orthodox Marxists. For radically liberals, Li holds on to the dichotomy of Chinese and Western, popular among Chinese intellectuals, which for them only leads back to the content and purpose of the old formula: modernization for the strengthening of the Chinese nation. They also accuse him of mixing up his ideas with Mao Zedong's directive of “critical inheritance” (of Chinese and Western traditions). Hence, Li's thesis would be leading back to Chinese tradition, to a renaissance of Confucian thought, i.e. "Unity of Heaven and Man" (*tianre heyi* 天人合一), which in light of the need of Chinese modernization would only be a hindrance.

A representative voice of the radically liberal critics is Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 (*1955), the meanwhile incarcerated Nobel Peace Prize laureate of 2010. As an *enfant terrible* in the intellectual scene of the late 1980s and in the pose of an "existential hero"³², with much reference to the thought of Nietzsche as well as Sartre and Camus, Liu Xiaobo particularly took on Li Zehou as a target of his criticism. "Explicitly placing himself in the tradition of those Chinese modernizers who advocated 'total Westernization'", Liu "accused Li Zehou of

²⁹ See also Li Zehou and Liu Gangji 李泽厚, 刘纲纪, *History of Chinese Aesthetics (Zhongguo meixueshi* 中国美学史), Vol. I, Peking 1984, p. 33.

³⁰ Li Zehou, "On the wisdom of China" (Shitan Zhongguo de zhihui 试探中国的智慧), in *Zhongguo gudai sixiangshi lun*, p. 37f.

³¹ Liu Kang, p. 177.

³² Woei Lien Chong, "Philosophy in an Age of Crisis. Three Thinkers in Post-Cultural Revolution China: Li Zehou, Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xiaofeng", in Woei Lien Cong (ed.), *China's Great Cultural Revolution. Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives*, Lanham 2002, p. 230. In her article, Woei Lien Chong gives a detailed account of Liu Xiaobo's attack on Li Zehou.

trying to revive the 'rationalistic' and 'despotic' Chinese tradition"³³ as Woei Lien Chong explains. Jing Wang summarizes Liu Xiaobo's position in the 1980s like this:

Liu Xiaobo condemned Li Zehou because of the latter's advocacy of Confucian ethics and the aesthetics of *tianren heyi*. For Liu, beauty resides not in harmony but in conflicts. The cultivation and endorsement of aesthetic and moral equilibrium leads to eclecticism and reveals a premodern state of mind that can only be characterized as 'the extreme condition of slavery'. To reconstruct Chinese national character, Liu insists that we negate thoroughly the three primary theoretical paradigms underlying traditional culture: the Confucian democratic model of *minben* (for the people), the model personality of Confucius and Yanhui, and the concept of *tianren heyi*.³⁴

Orthodox Marxists, on the other hand, saw it this way: As Li Zehou's "Western Substance" includes Western bourgeois thought, his thesis is nothing but the demand for a "total Westernization" and introduction of capitalism in China. This criticism increased considerably in the repressive period after the crackdown of June 4, 1989.³⁵

Hence, Li Zehou holds an in-between position: For radical Western oriented liberals (Liu Xiaobo and others) he is a traditionalist or even a conservative reactionary. For hard-line Marxists, he is an advocate of "total Westernization". In fact, although not an orthodox Marxist (he explicitly rejects the ideas of revolution and class-struggle) Li's stance has much in common with some of the orthodox Marxists when he stresses the significance of the tradition for a cultural identity (aesthetics). Also his notion of "critical inheritance" is similar to that of Mao Tse-tung. Finally, Li maintains a basically Marxist line of argumentation, although he orients himself almost exclusively on the young Marx of the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844". His way of writing and terminology/vocabulary, however, is very much Marxian (according to a critic, it belongs to the 1950s and 60s...³⁶).

But Li Zehou also has much in common with the liberals: He supported the politics of reform by Zhao Ziyang (赵紫阳 1919-2005). He defended the TV series "Elegy on the Yellow River" (*Heshang* 河殇) against hard-liner critics (who see in it support of "nihilism"). According to Li, however, the criticism of *Heshang* was not directed against the Chinese tradition as such but was a critique of political social reality of the time, determined by conservative narrow-mindedness, i.e. the negative factors of tradition: the so-called "yellow" tradition of *Heshang*. Like the authors of *Heshang*, Li argues for the necessity of an economic modernization which

³³ Ibid., p. 223.

³⁴ Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, Berkeley 1996, p. 321. See Liu Xiaobo, *A Critique of Choice. A Dialogue with the Ideological Leader Li Zehou* (*Xuanze de pipan: Yu sixiang lingxiu Li Zehou duihua*, 刘晓波, 选择的批判: 与思想领袖李泽厚对话), Taipei 1989. See also Geremie Barmé, "Confession, Redemption and Death: Liu Xiaobo and the Protest Movement of 1989" in George Hicks (ed.), *The Broken Mirror: China After Tiananmen*, Harlow 1990, p. 52-99.

³⁵ For the campaign by orthodox critics against Li Zehou, see the number 3/1990 of the journal *Dangdai Sikao* 当代思考 (Contemporary Reflections) in which there are four articles attacking Li Zehou.

³⁶ He Xin 何新, "Li Zehou yu dangdai Zhongguo sichao" 李泽厚与当代中国思潮 (Li Zehou and the present trend in Chinese thought) in *Guangming ribao* 光明日报, May 16, 1988.

includes liberalization of thought (Enlightenment thought, humanism as well as freedom and fraternity, not only equality).

In contrast to cultural functionaries, advocating a reevaluation of the tradition for the sake of strengthening cultural identity and the nation, Li sees tradition not as something that can be instrumentalized (*yong* 用 – in its literal sense). On the contrary, Li's interpretation of *yong* as "application of tradition", on the one hand, is in a Chinese Confucian philosophical way – as a Chinese form which cannot be separated from its content of modernized ways of life (*ti yong bu er* 体用不二). His interpretation of *ti* 体 (substance) as modernized modes of production and living, on the other, is in a Marxist way. He thus not only subtly undermines the position of orthodox Marxists with his own application of Marxist theory, he also ingenuously ties Marxist and Confucian notions together in his interpretation of the *ti-yong* formula.

Let us finally turn to Li Zehou's idea of "cultural-psychological formation". For him it is a structure of cultural and social sedimentations over a long period of history which also addresses the question of cultural identity. On the one hand, this formation has to be inherited in a process of education: People of today have to become conscious of the forces of history that have shaped their present. On the other hand, this formation has to be constantly formed anew as it is not determined by the sedimentations. Much rather, it can be changed (in the sense of "changing the hereditary factors") both by positive elements of the Chinese as well as the Western tradition. In fact, Li asks for a fusion of the best elements of both traditions which might result in a new kind of Chinese identity and might even make a contribution to a world-civilization (human future).

In his recent book *Reading the Analects Today*, Li gives the following explanation of his controversial thesis – which can be read, written almost thirty years later, as an authoritative interpretation:

Interestingly, when I advocated "Western substance, Chinese application", I stood in opposition to the traditional and present position of "Chinese substance, Western application". But, considering that "substance" is both science and technology as well as productivity and its methods, when those who argue for "Chinese substance, Western application" allow and push for "Western application", then their "Chinese substance", necessarily, will not be able to persist and it will gradually be transformed, no matter if their proponents are conscious of it or not, no matter if they want it or not. (...)

But gradual transformation (improvement rather than revolution) is exactly what the position "Western substance, Chinese application" stands for. Thus, "Western substance, Chinese application" can actually go through "Chinese substance, Western application" and in this way finally realize itself. Isn't it paradoxical, isn't it just what

Hegel called “cunning of history”³⁷ – a hide and seek game of history which we can lament about or rejoice in?

This also means that “Western substance, Chinese application” will realize itself by going through the ways and theoretical frame-work of “Chinese substance, Western application”. The components and stages in the course of “Chinese application”, i.e. when “Chinese substance, Western application” turns into “Western substance, Chinese application”, are part of the windingly progressing realization process of history, and this is not what was initially expected. But the course of history does not stop here; “Chinese application” can continue to creatively adapt itself to a finer and newer form of “Western substance” (the material life of modernization which has since more than 100 years been brought from the West to China).³⁸

Conclusion: Li Zehou’s Position in Historical Context

Let us briefly resume the historical context of Li's thesis. There has been an identity crisis in China for the last 150 years, after the impact of the West in China and beginning with the Opium Wars. In its early phase, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, it manifested in a heated discussion about “Chinese Learning” (Confucianism) as the ideological basis of society. A first group wanted to maintain this “Chinese Learning”. A second wanted to open it up. A third group wanted to completely reject it.

In the 1980s and 90s there followed a new debate about tradition and cultural identity in China. This was, however, also a discussion – on another level and undercover – about the legitimacy of the new tradition, the new “Chinese Learning”: Chinese Marxism as the ideological basis of society.

It is interesting to note that the structures of the two debates are almost identical: Only the content of “Chinese Learning” as Confucianism has been replaced by Marxism – in fact, and ironically, a special branch of “Western Learning”. The initiating factor for the new debate was similar to that of the 19th century: a new encounter with “Western Learning” after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Again there were three groups: Orthodox, radically liberals and moderates. The orthodox group is comparable to proponents of the "Self-Strengthening Movement": They insisted on Marxism as the ideological basis of the society (replacing new “Western Learning”, i.e. Marxism, as “Chinese Learning”) and only wanted the “Four Modernizations” as “Western learning for application”. Their relationship to the Chinese cultural tradition can be described as instrumentalization: They did appeal to the cultural heritage but only in limited doses and mainly for the sake of maintaining the power of their Marxist ideology.

³⁷ According to my knowledge, Hegel did not speak of "cunning of history" but "cunning of reason" (List der Vernunft) in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Kant and Marx, however, seem to have used the phrase "cunning of history" (List der Geschichte).

³⁸ Li Zehou, *Reading the Analects today (Lunyu jindu 论语今读)*, Peking 2004, p. 531f. (20.1).

Radically liberals had a position similar to the radicals of the May-Fourth-Movement, rejecting the tradition – both the old (Confucianism) as well as the new tradition (Marxism), demanding "complete Westernization", in a new guise.

Moderates are comparable to the reformers of the Hundred Days' Reform of 1898 – or figures such as Cai Yuanpei: They wanted to open up the new tradition (Marxism) and sought for a harmony between the Chinese cultural tradition and new "Western Learning".

Li Zehou's position belongs to the latter camp. And it might not be too far-fetched to draw a further analogy: Kang Youwei, at his time, introduced Western thought as reform, but camouflaged it as the agenda of Confucius, arguing that Confucius' originally reformist ideas were forged after his death in the "Old Text" classics (in his works *Study of the Reforms of Confucius*, *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制攷, and *A Study of the 'New Text' Forgeries*, *Xinxue weijing kao* 新学伪经考). Li's approach is somewhat similar to that of the Hundred Days' reformers in that he introduces new thought but displays it as Marxist theory. Maintaining the framework of Marxist theory he still attempts to open up the Marxist position. One could say that, comparable to Kang Youwei who aimed at showing Confucius to be a reformer, Li Zehou presents Karl Marx as reformer. Be that as it may, Li tries to bridge the two traditions by seeking a "Combination of Marx and Confucius" – by combining aesthetics (basis of cultural identity) and socio-political thought in a unique way, also through his creative interpretation of *ti* and *yong*.

In his article "Human Nature and Human Future: A Combination of Marx and Confucius" of 1999, he summarized his controversial thesis "Western Learning as substance, Chinese Learning for Application" in the following way: "One material civilization, multiple spiritual cultures".³⁹ It is a message which, on the one hand, reiterates his view that the material welfare must be "basis" of all considerations concerning "Chinese" or "Western learning". But, on the other, it is, and probably not accidentally, in accordance with traditional Neo-Confucian thought which is: "The principle is one, its manifestations are many" (理一分殊 *li yi fen shu*).⁴⁰

³⁹ Li Zehou, "Human Nature and Human Future: A Combination of Marx and Confucius", in Karl-Heinz Pohl (ed.), *Chinese Thought in a Global Context. A Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, Leiden 1999, p. 129-144.

⁴⁰ See Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton 1963, p. 499f.