INTRODUCTION: THE “TROJAN HORSE” OF TRADITION

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At first glance, this Theme Issue looks very much like many of our previous ones wherein we have grouped a series of essays around a specific idea or topic. But the context surrounding this particular issue makes it unique. In October 2011, in Beijing, History and Theory, Wesleyan University, Social Sciences in China Press, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences held a scholarly exchange forum on the topic of “Tradition.” The event was designed to foster interaction and discussion between “Western” and Chinese scholars on the chosen topic and to encourage greater international cooperation among all of the participants.1 To this extent, the event was a great success; the second iteration of the scholarly exchange will take place this coming May at Wesleyan University on the topic of “Comparative Enlightenments.” But something interesting occurred during the time between the initial planning of the conference and the actual event. The exchange was first conceived at a time when there was much talk of the “great opening” of China, and the Chinese delegates who came to Middletown, Connecticut spoke frankly about their desire to increase and improve the instruction and production of works on historical theory. To this end, it was decided that a focus on “tradition” might allow the scholars invited by the Social Sciences in China Press and those invited by History and Theory to each reflect upon the role and place of “tradition” as a theme but also in terms of their respective methods and approaches. For many of us, certainly for me, the exchange was an invitation to introduce historical interpretations and methodologies explicitly critical of orthodox Marxist theories of history into an educational discourse that is explicitly governed by that theory (at least officially).

By the time of the event, however, the intellectual climate in China had changed. The rise of the micro-blog (such as Weibo) and other social media led to a growing concern at the Party level that the general public, the “netizens,” were now shaping and forming a competing, or perhaps simply independent, understanding of what “Chinese culture” is. The Communist Party Central Committee Plenum, held one week before our scholar exchange, officially concluded that there was a greater need to assert top-down control in the realm of cultural production to combat this cultural drift.2 Thus the final planning and organization

1. I recognize that the division of scholars into “Western” and “Chinese” is highly problematic, but this was the logistical division presented by our Chinese partners rather than naming the origin and training of each of the participants invited by History and Theory.

The scholarly exchange took place at a moment when the Chinese Communist Party was increasingly active in promoting its view of the lasting importance of Chinese traditional culture and history through traveling exhibits and specifically the connection of China’s Confucian past to its Marxist/Maoist present.

The shift manifested itself in several ways. To begin, when I attempted to set up a live Twitter feed to “tweet” portions of the scholars’ exchanges in Beijing, I found that both Twitter and Google+ chat were inoperable. Ultimately, I was able to set up and provide live reports using a VPN network, but even then there were regular internet disruptions that I was told were designed to disconnect such feeds and discourage micro-blogging and web-based communication. But the more obvious place where the changing emphasis seemed apparent was in many of the papers presented by the Chinese scholars who participated in the forum. One theme that held purchase among a number of the Chinese papers was the danger of decadence and immorality in a rapidly modernizing world and the need to return to “traditional Chinese values” to counter this decline. The subtext here was the influence and rise of capitalism and thus of “Western” values in China; the solution offered was a fusion of “Chinese” and Marxist values. The most predominant theme, however, was that of the continuity between the Confucian past and the Maoist present. There was almost no discussion of “revolution” or of the previous Maoist narrative that depicted Confucianism as indicative of bourgeois decadence. Perhaps most striking, though I suppose not unexpected, there was no discussion of the destruction of tradition. The language in these papers emphasized the need for slow and deliberate change over time and of the way that Chinese culture has always embodied and subscribed to their current set of values though in an unenlightened form. To me most interesting was the way that Chinese culture was described as a body that should not become too hot or agitated looking for change, as if it had a fever, but instead should maintain a regulated and even temperature. The disconnect between the approach of the “Western” papers and the majority of the Chinese papers gave us pause; looking at the collection of papers as a whole, I began to wonder whether we had received a “Trojan horse” where the topic of tradition was filled with scholarship entirely in line with the current Communist Party emphasis on the continuity and greatness of Chinese culture.

To be sure, in private conversations we were able to press into some of the more problematic aspects of these assertions to greater or lesser degrees. But the problem with these papers, at least to the minds of the editors of *History and Theory*, was not one of scholarship but that these papers as written lacked a critical edge or any sort of self-awareness in their presentation as to the problems they raised in terms of form and content or in terms of the underlying assumptions of their Marxist/Maoist view of historical materialism and determinism. In short, as a result of the absence of theoretical reflection, these were not papers that we would publish in *History and Theory*. Of course it was also the case that a good number of the papers presented by the “Western” scholars fell outside the band of what *History and Theory* publishes, but this seemed to be more an issue of disciplinary focus. Therefore, the essays published in this theme issue are not representative of the majority of papers presented at the exchange but are those
The issue begins with Georgia Warnke’s “Solidarity and Tradition in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” where Warnke argues against the view that Hans-Georg Gadamer’s shift from his focus on tradition in *Truth and Method* to his focus on solidarity in his later work suggests that the latter signals a move away from ontological toward ethical and political concerns. Instead, Warnke demonstrates that rather than signaling a new direction for Gadamer, both his politics of solidarity and his concern with otherness highlight important features already present in his earlier account of tradition. By paying attention to this earlier account, Warnke discloses a political dimension to Gadamer’s thought that is more sophisticated than his remarks on solidarity.

In “The Pragmatic Confucian Approach to Tradition in Modernizing China,” Sor-Hoon Tan explores the Confucian veneration of the past and its commitment to transmitting the tradition of the sages by placing it in the context of the historical trajectory from the May Fourth attacks on Confucianism to similar approaches to China’s modernization in later decades, through the market reforms that launched China into global capitalism, and finally to the revival of Confucianism in recent years. Tan’s article stands in contrast to several papers presented at the exchange by looking to the influence of John Dewey, Hu Shih, and Pragmatism. Despite a tension between the progress-oriented historical consciousness that Dewey inherited from the Enlightenment (a consciousness that some consider as characteristic of modern Western historiography) and the historical consciousness underlying Chinese historiographical tradition (one that views the past as a didactic “mirror”), Tan argues that it is possible to reconcile the Pragmatic reconstruction of tradition with the Confucian veneration of the past.

Jörn Rüsen’s “Tradition: A Principle of Historical Sense-Generation and its Logic and Effect in Historical Culture” presents “Historical Sense-Generation” to argue against a constructivist understanding of history in which the past itself has no impact on the creation of history’s meaning. Instead, Rüsen asserts that before historians construct the past they themselves are already constructed by the present outcome of past developments in the world. In this sense, tradition is always at work in historical thinking before the past is thematized as history.

Philip Pomper’s “The Evolution of the Russian Tradition of State Power” is a provocative study of state power’s traditions. This evolutionary study of the persistence of the autocratic/oligarchic variety of personal rule in Russia is presented in three parts. Pomper first presents a historical overview, followed by Edward Keenan’s hypothesis of Russian long-term adaptation to a demanding environment, and then Richard Hellie’s theory of service-class revolutions and a cyclical pattern based on the methods of Russian elites for overcoming relative backwardness. In the second part, Pomper examines neo-Darwinian evolutionary approaches, and in the third part he applies such an approach to the tradition of Russian state power. Pomper shows how group projects operate as evolutionary forces in a variety of modern power systems; the Russian tradition is highlighted in this evolutionary context.
John Makeham’s “Disciplining Tradition in Modern China: Two Case Studies” highlights the influential role played by epistemological nativism in the disciplining of tradition in modern China and could be read as a cipher to decode the events of our cultural exchange. In the article, Makeham looks to the two case studies of Chinese philosophy and guoxue or National Studies. In the case of the discipline of Chinese philosophy, the role of epistemological nativism is evident in widespread calls to return Chinese philosophy to some pristine form, predating its encounter with “Western” philosophy, and in the continued refusal to acknowledge and engage the intellectual diversity of the traditions that contribute to Chinese philosophy’s composite identity. The second case study examines National Studies’ connection with various traditions of premodern learning and concludes that this revived discipline is premised on the romantic conceit that these traditions of premodern learning somehow constituted a holistic, even organic, body of learning. These case studies also provide an opportunity for Makeham to reflect on the implications of epistemological nativism for tradition’s place in Chinese modernity.

Hangsheng Zheng’s article explores the ways that “tradition” has changed under the conditions of modernity. “On Modernity’s Changes to ‘Tradition’” engages with the history and current state of traditions among Chinese ethnicities to reveal the dynamic but stable, essential relationship among old traditions and new traditions, and the reconstruction and neo-construction of tradition. Zheng argues that whereas both the historical nihilism that completely repudiates tradition and the historical conservatism that completely affirms it are one-sided and untrue, his analysis indicates that the modern development of a Chinese nationality is, in some sense, the history of the growth of the modern and the invention of tradition.

Finally, in my article “Back to Where We’ve Never Been: Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida on Tradition and History,” I address the topic of “tradition” by exploring the ways that Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida each returned to traditional texts in order to overcome a perceived crisis or delimiting fault in the contemporary thought of their respective presents. For Heidegger, this meant a return to the pre-Socratics of “early Greek thinking.” For Levinas, it entailed a return to the sacred Jewish texts of the Talmud. For Derrida, it was the return to texts that embodied the “Western metaphysical tradition,” be it by Plato, Descartes, Rousseau, or Marx. I then ask whether these reflections can be turned so as to shed light on three resilient trends in the practice of history that I label positivist, speculative or teleological, and constructivist. By correlating the ways that Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida utilize and employ “tradition” with these three historical trends, I hope to produce an engagement between theorists whose concerns involve history even though they may not be explicitly historical, and historians who may not realize the ways that their work coincides with the claims of these theorists.

Thus the issue on “Tradition and History” deviates from our initial goal of an issue with an equal distribution of essays provided by Chinese and Western contributors reflecting on the topic of “Tradition.” Nevertheless it does reflect a vital component of the exchange forum based of those papers that pertain directly to
the interests of History and Theory and, not coincidentally, papers that generated heated and intense discussion among the participants. What’s more, the issue stands on its own as a series of independent reflections on the topic of “tradition.” The interested reader has much to gain from consideration of each of these articles on its own terms but also in the context of the shifting intellectual and political grounds in which they were formed.

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