

## CULTURAL CONTEXT OF ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS IN CHINA

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### ABSTRACT

*This research explores the relationship between Chinese Intellectuals' perceived roles and the social roles manifested in their practices from a cultural perspective. It ascribes their distinct characteristics in terms of social and political practices to deep structural elements of Chinese cultural traditions. It takes an 'emic' and philosophical approach with support from concrete examples of an organic intellectual Liang Qichao to examine China's organic intellectual culture, endeavoring to understand the function of them from the macro level and in a cultural context. In conclusion, I suggest that Chinese intellectuals are taking on a role defined by social hierarchy and Confucian traditions, and engaged in weaving and constructing the social consent.*

**Keywords:** organic intellectual, Confucianism, hierarchy, social consent.

### INTRODUCTION

In cultural and social institutions, intellectuals perform a mediatory function between the interests of power and the social groups who serve the interests of those in power. In order to sustain the social status quo, the state apparatuses can exert coercive power when necessary, but in most cases the apparatuses of a civil society will provoke spontaneous consent of the masses to sustain the desired direction imposed on a variety of aspects of social and cultural life by the economically dominant and fundamental group. In this situation, intellectuals in a society may exercise 'subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government' (Holub 1992, p. 165). Gramsci (1975) suggests that media take their place alongside other cultural institutions such as schools, universities, clubs and trade organizations, in manufacturing and sustaining social order. Therefore, producing consent is a much more effective way of social control than is coercion or force, and intellectuals such as teachers, journalists and writers play a key role in producing consent and sustaining the socioeconomic dominant groups' desired direction in society.

Holub (1992, p. 158) believes that rural petty-bourgeois intellectuals can play the role as mediators, producing and circulating a set of values to tie the peasant masses and the big landowners materially and ideally, in order to create social consent. This group of intellectuals are very important for the survival of the agrarian bloc. They are what Radhakrishnan (1996, p. 56) calls 'organic intellectuals', who variously oscillate between 'multiple positioning and multiple determinations and multiple alliances'. An organic intellectual provides specialist knowledge in his or her specific area and situation and concurrently fulfils the organizational demands of the socioeconomic dominant groups, thereby willing the consent of the masses for particular ideas and assumptions. In order to incorporate their specialist knowledge into political knowledge, organic intellectuals must have both technical knowledge and the willingness to participate in the establishment of hegemony, to be 'directive' as well as 'specialized' (Jones 2007, p. 85).

Fairbank and Goldman (2006, p. 160) remind us that Confucian scholars had no power base of their own except through loyalty to regimes or by joining organizations formed by 'like-minded intellectuals'. Today, most Chinese intellectuals are still deprived of a power base of their own and have to function more like the mouthpieces of elite groups. Barne and Davies (2003) have demonstrated how some Chinese intellectuals are able to work in tandem with the state only because of their usefulness in pointing out social problems and by providing ideas on how to improve governance. In fact, mediation has been the focus for Chinese intellectuals for thousands of years. The case study of Liang Qichao that I will introduce later, also suggests that Chinese cultural traditions regard intellectuals as not only enlighteners, but also mediators between government and people.

Thompson (1995) argues that language, media content, political platform, institutional messages are symbolic forms, and when they help to build and sustain unbalanced relations of power systematically, they become ideological. These symbolic forms act on our consciousness in terms of 'sense making', and reflect 'what the world appears to be', and 'how we perceive that world' (Lull 2000, p. 34). This system of 'sense making' continues to evolve into what Bourdieu (1990, p. 13) called 'habitus', 'a system of acquired dispositions' and an 'organizing principle of action'.

The government can saturate society with its preferred interpretations of common sense because it has the power over cultural institutions to disseminate such 'symbolic forms' of communication. The adaption of certain 'symbolic forms' is in accordance with government cultural pedagogy in how the authorities would want the public to proceed. In this process, the concept of *nation* becomes 'a time, a place, an identity and a lifestyle' (Mercer 1989, p. 15). Because media content in China is largely financed directly by the government or associated in the minds of people with administrative authority, its ideological styles and trajectories are comparatively easier to detect. Therefore, it provides us with a useful paradigm in exploring the formation of organic intellectuals.

### **The Establishment of Confucian Hegemony**

In order to understand organic intellectuals' practices in China, it is important to acquire a deep insight into relevant Chinese culture. An argument can be made that if, for example, people define themselves as Confucian and accept the principles of Confucianism, then they will behave, even if just in a superficial way, as Confucians — just as those who perceive themselves as Christians and accept some of the basic principles of Christianity are Christians — even though their behavior may deviate from the principles in some cases. Because Confucian thought occupies a prime and foremost place in traditional Chinese culture, if we want to free ourselves from a simplistic understanding of the interaction between traditional culture and the development of modern societies — and to form an accurate and reasonable explanation on the function and historical value of contemporary intellectual culture in China — we should first reflect on and reshape our basic understanding of Confucianism.

During the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), a systematic Confucian theology was established. In the earlier time of the Han Dynasty, the emperor used Shusun Tong and other Confucian scholars to establish rites and an educational system aimed at reinforcing the legitimacy of governance. In the year 134 BC, Dong Zhongshu proposed to 'dismiss the other schools of thought, revere the Confucian as the sole dominant ideology (罢黜百家，独尊儒术)', and it was accepted by the emperor. He invented the concept of *yin* and *yang*, the five elements, and incorporated it into Confucianism, which was adopted and amended by the late Qing reformer Kang Yu Wei (1858-1927) in order to justify his theories on gradual political reform, and to argue against radical revolution. Dong Zhongshu also extracted the concept of hierarchy and order from the Confucian classics, strengthened them, and constructed a

political, institutional form of Confucianism with ‘the universe does not change; the natural law also does not change (天不变; 道亦不变)’ maxim. I suggest that analogous maxims abound in Chinese culture and may have a deep impact on the mindset of Chinese people, making them reluctant to make changes to their tradition and lifestyle.

Compared with Confucius and Mencius’ Confucianism, the influential interpretation of Confucian thought by Dong Zhong Shu has made many significant modifications to the original ideas. Dong Zhong Shu’s version of Confucianism has abandoned or deliberately obscured most of the contents related to individualism in the classics of Confucius and Mencius, with the main focus shifting to the establishment of social hierarchy and maintenance of social order. This has greatly weakened the humanitarian aspect of classic Confucianism. The form of Dong Zhong Shu’s new Confucianism was beneficial in terms of strengthening central authority and in the establishment of a hierarchical system under an autocratic monarchy. Consequently, it gained favor from the rulers and was soon upheld as orthodox ideology throughout China’s imperial era.

There are three key points comprising this process we should note: firstly, if we adopt Hall’s (2008) argument that the societal and cultural superstructures correlate to different levels of production, and the forms of social life equivalent to it are also historically shaped and formed, then we should explore the basic question of the nature of the connection between the development of society and the ideological culture at the specific period of time, and may draw the conclusion that these dramatic changes in Confucianism were largely determined by the specific social and material structure at that time, which is, as Wright (1975, p. viii) notes, that...

...the literate elite . . . had entered into an alliance with monarchy. The monarch provided the symbols and the sinews of power: throne, police, army, the organs of social control. The literati provided the knowledge of precedent and statecraft that could legitimize power and make the state work. Both the monarch and the literati were committed to a two-class society based on agriculture.

The result is that Confucianism won out over the other schools of thought and Confucian scholars became indispensable advisers to the emperor and the hegemony of Confucianism emerged. It is worth noting that Confucianism constantly influences the Chinese leadership: according to Fairbank (2006, p. 277), Mao Zedong believed in German philosopher Friedrich Paulsen’s *System der Ethik*, which suggests that the behavior of the universe is ethical and so is that of the individual. This attribution of ethics to state development was particularly useful to Chinese intellectuals at that time who had wanted to ‘reconcile history and value’ the ethical teachings from Confucian traditions alongside the modern knowledge of science and technology. Fairbank (2006, p. 292) has also points out that Jiang Jieshi, Mao Zedong’s major competitor for state power, was also the inheritor of Confucian traditions, since ‘his moral leadership was couched in Confucian terms’. In another word, even warlords and dictators in Chinese history accept the principles of Confucianism, and are trying to use those principles to tie the masses and those in power materially and ideally, in order to create social consent.

Secondly, Dong Zhong Shu’s modification to Confucianism may still retain some elements supporting individualism and individual rights, but the main purpose was to construct a highly hierarchical and authoritarian society, with ‘differential treatment of individuals depending on rank and relationship to oneself’ (Ogden 2002, p. 45). Fairbank (2006) argues that the emphasis on the Real King’s virtues was meant to limit the power of authoritarian rulers. However, these humanistic factors soon surfaced as no more than lip-service, due to

the fatal absence of an effective monitoring and correcting system. As a tradition, Chinese people have a mindset of accepting social hierarchy as part of the social norm and are adjusting their social behaviour in accordance with their social position voluntarily.

The third point to make is that Dong Zhong Shu's new Confucianism played an important historical role in strengthening the central authority and maintaining stability of the society at that period of time. According to Shen (2001), before the establishment of the Han Dynasty, China had experienced a four-year civil war which killed millions of people. This is in the context of 3791 recorded wars in 4,500 years of Chinese history. Therefore, it is reasonable to attribute the major reason for the desperation of maintaining stability in Chinese societies to these historical factors. In other words, Chinese have always had the tradition of valuing order over freedom, and believe that the lack of regulation and order naturally leads to calamities and sabotage of a stable society.

### **The Position of Intellectuals in Confucian Hierarchy**

After the mid-Tang period (618-907), and in particular since the Song Dynasty (960-1279), thanks to the imperial civil-service examination system, large numbers of intellectuals from the lower social classes were able to enter the ruling class, therefore the distribution of power and wealth grew more equal with an increase in class mobility. At the same time, the levels of power and wealth originally enjoyed only by the aristocracy were then also accessible by many intellectuals from poor origins. Besides the royal families, magistrates and military officers, the ruling class extended to include elite intellectuals, who had obtained a respectable social status which I suggest to be comparable to contemporary priests in Western countries, because in the South Italy then, they were mostly middle-class landlords and often acted as a group of social oppression (Jones 2007).

However, it is too early to conclude that social hierarchy formed by the class division of the aristocracy and commoners was destroyed. The situation is the assignment of gentry status to those who passed the imperial civil-service examinations and held degrees, and a new social structure formed among the four classes of elite intellectuals (士), farmers (农), workers (工) and merchants (商), with the elite intellectuals, or in Fairbank's (2006, p. 95) words, 'scholar-official' or 'literati', at the top and merchants at the bottom. The literati class was constituted by Confucian trained men with a sense of responsibility to 'keep the world materially and morally in order' (ibid.). It is not unusual for a rich Chinese merchant to marry his daughter to a poor but promising Confucian scholar with the intention of elevating the social status of the whole family in the imperial era. It is worth noting that only Confucian literati were regarded as intellectuals in China's imperial times, but today, the classification of intellectuals includes teachers, professors, technocrats, journalists, and managers in China. However, it does not mean that most modern intellectuals' behaviour will deviate from Chinese Confucian traditions. As a matter of fact, many contemporary private entrepreneurs' preference to being referred to as 'Confucian entrepreneurs (儒商)' can be perceived as a mentality stemming from Confucian traditions.

The status of intellectuals should never be underestimated in Chinese societies. According to Fei (2007), it is commonplace to find a group of Chinese elite intellectuals sitting around, forming a discussion forum similar to Habermas's notion of a 'public sphere' in Western countries. More precisely, it could be called an 'intellectual sphere', where participants self-consciously reflect on who they are and on their role in shaping China's values, thoughts and the country's future. As a matter of fact, in dynasties like the Song, elite intellectuals were in such a high position that military generals had to take orders from them and they 'looked down upon men of violence, who by their recourse to force (武) showed themselves

lacking in cultivation (文)’ (Fairbank 2006, p. 111). This is unimaginable in many other countries.

It is a tradition of Chinese Confucian intellectuals to have a primary interest in governance and to be pragmatic in state affairs. Most of those in China who trained in the humanities, social sciences or even literature would have liked to have been part of the powerful state intellectual elite, and would have hoped to have served as advisers to the leadership — until now. In China’s imperial times, the greatest desire by Chinese Confucian intellectuals was to act as the emperor’s teacher, which is a supreme position in a ‘patriarchal society’ (Fei, 2007), due to the Confucian maxim of ‘for one day as my teacher, forever as my father (一日为师终生为父)’.

As to the relationship between the regimes and intellectuals, it is not the case that intellectuals cannot influence those above, but they have to show their deference and compliance and attribute success to their superior, and be accepted as a member of the faction in power. Though overt opposition to the faction in power has not been the style of Chinese intellectuals, it does not mean that they lack influence over the course of social policies in China. To the contrary, they have played a pivotal role throughout Chinese history as advisors to regimes. For instance, some of the prominent Confucian intellectuals like Dong Zhongshu, Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming all had official careers in governance (Fairbank 2006). Moreover, Ogden (2002, p. 53) has pointed out that elite intellectuals in China did not develop political thought towards democracy because they ‘benefited too much from the system of state power and patronage to want to challenge it’. Mercer (1989, p. 12) also argues that one limitation of intellectuals is that they have been ‘too happy to point out to the imagined hapless consumers of culture that they are being hypodermically injected with false representations’. In fact, the overwhelming majority of intellectuals prefer to continue with the traditional hierarchical system which granted them the highest political status in China.

With such a prior interest in politics, it is understandable why many of China’s public intellectuals have not only participated in the discussion over China’s policies and problem, but also have become activists in social movements such as protecting the rights of migrant workers, sustaining the natural environment, promoting women’s rights and defending the rights of gays and lesbians. However, their ‘reforming zeal — the dynamics of their creed — aimed to reaffirm and conserve the traditional polity, not to change its fundamental premises’ (Fairbank 2006, p. 53). Therefore, the collaborating tradition of regimes and intellectuals explains why the Party, to a certain extent, allows journalists to expose certain societal problems, to report misconducts of lower ranking government officials, and to offer commentaries on the degradation of social morality.

After analyzing their positions in shaping China’s history, values, and beliefs, we can draw a conclusion that intellectuals play an important role in Chinese societies. This is the reason why Chinese rulers, from imperial times until today, have been concerned about what intellectuals say and have managed to control them. The case study of a prominent Chinese organic intellectual Liang Qichao that I will analyze in the next part would demonstrate how Chinese intellectuals function as mediators between government and people, helping to create social consent and maintain social order in Chinese history.

### **Liang Qichao: A Case Study**

A notable role model in China’s history of organic intellectuals is the reformer Kang Youwei (1858-1927), primarily a Confucian scholar. He began to use modern newspaper as a vehicle to promote his ideas of gradual reform and became the prime advisor to the Qing emperor.

Clearly inspired by his success, more and more newspaper writers from families which had supplied imperial officials for generations started to choose journalism as their career, and journalism became the ideal career for patriotic intellectuals at that period of time.

The first and arguably most influential Chinese journalist could be Kang Youwei's student, Liang Qichao (1873-1929), who received a formal Confucian education in his childhood and was regarded as one of a few 'most active and influential leaders among the Chinese intelligentsia' at the beginning of 20th century because of his journalistic practices (Chang 1971, p. 132). By 1904, Liang was publishing newspapers and had a clear vision of what the press was for. He believed that newspapers existed to perform nine functions: 'remonstrance or a forceful approach, guidance, encouragement, repetition, taking a broader view, concentrating on key themes, propagating knowledge and penetrating society' (Nathan 1985, p. 133). In other words, Liang believed that the media should perform a supervisory and guiding function in society and also reflect public opinion to try to influence government, an idea which originated from Confucianism and has regained its popularity today.

According to Levenson (1953), Liang confirmed the position of journalism by viewing the press as a replacement for Confucian scholar-officials and teachers in the reproduction of cultural values. Liang claimed that journalists should not see their writings merely as disseminating information but as a major means of transforming old thoughts and forming new ideas. Liang was constantly pondering what could be done to establish a social system which could perform the all-important function of educating people and strengthening China at that time, and he suggested that intellectuals should use the media as an instrument for these purposes.

As to his ideology system, Liang saw China as having the potential to save the world by contributing to a synthesis of the East and West, and in 1917 stated his objective 'to utilize Western Civilization to expand our civilization, and to utilize Chinese civilization to supplement Western civilization, so that they would create a new civilization' (Liang 2006, p. 35). He also told his readers that Western scholars count on China to be the savior of the West which was in a state of moral bankruptcy (ibid., p. 15). Therefore, although he urged Chinese to study the West, he 'strongly enjoined that Confucius's teachings be the base' (Levenson 1953, p. 87). The eulogy of Chinese civilization has a profound emotional influence in Chinese societies and media culture.

As to Liang's practices both as a journalist and a political activist, Liang managed to publish the famous *Journal of Disinterested Criticism* at Yokohama in 1898, and introduced the notion of 'people' — a new concept in Chinese history. After this journal ceased publication in 1901, Liang managed to publish the *New Citizen Journal* and *New Novel* in 1902. The tremendous popularity of these journals in Chinese societies around the world made Liang the leading character amongst the Chinese intelligentsia during the early 1900s. Through the forums presented by these journals, Liang commented on national affairs and took upon himself the task of enlightening the populace by introducing new ideas from the West. His roles as both a journalist and political activist are, to an extent, analogous to Italian journalists, because they have 'traditionally been portrayed as advocates, linked to political parties, and very close to being active politicians themselves' (Mancini 2000, p. 266).

Chang (1971, p. 220) notes that as a central figure amongst Chinese intellectuals, Liang had to decide which side to support when the Chinese intelligentsia was then dividing into revolutionists and reformists. Liang had claimed that he was aiming at a 'moral revolution' by criticizing the Confucian moral tradition, but he never want to interrogate many Confucian commandments on personal behaviour and relationships. As a matter of fact, when they were facing the collapse of the traditional social order and structure, the spirit of patriotism was so

strong that the majority of Chinese intellectuals were devoted to ‘saving China’ .

In conclusion, Liang considered the newspaper mainly as an mediating channel to enhance intellectual communication between different parts of the society. As a result, the media from that era to now were regarded as a means to promote national solidarity. Nathan (1985, pp. 57-58) has also pointed out that Liang did not consider the conflicts of interest between people and state and how they might be reconciled, and in this he is not different from other Confucian intellectuals, because they all followed a traditional Chinese way of thinking. Chinese intellectuals have been trying to design social and political systems where conflicts are avoided or neglected to the utmost degree, while western philosophers believe that social and political conflicts are bound to arise despite one's best efforts. From Liang's social practice, it is evident that Chinese intellectuals are taking on a role defined by their social position and Confucian traditions, engaged in constructing the social consent, and helping to sustain social order and hierarchy.

## CONCLUSION

Liang has influenced modern Chinese intellectuals as a role model, and his affirmation of the social function of journalism has had a deep impact on Chinese journalists' psychology and behaviour. As a Confucian intellectual and an early, pioneering journalist, Liang believed that journalists should actively take part in social reform and even become mentors or leaders in guiding public opinion (Levenson 1953). Following such a tradition, many Chinese journalists have had a prior interest in politics until today. Intellectuals in China have a very strong belief in their role of shaping the trajectories of national history, which stems from Confucianism. However, in the real world, their efforts have been overlooked by illiterate people in the past, and continue to be by ‘attitudely illiterate’ people today.

Researcher believes that the kernel of Chinese organic intellectuals is the constitution of the belief of harmony (和). In China, according to Yao (2000, p. 188), the emphasis on harmony (和) was frequently used to maintain a hierarchical order and nurturing tolerance, within both family and state. In Confucianism, a ‘harmonious’ system depends on self-examination to solve problems of power abuse, rather than supervising and monitoring (ibid. p. 180). In another word, this ‘harmonious’ system is built upon hierarchical consent, in which individual freedom and willingness are constrained to the maximum extent, except for the head of family or state, who normally considers the whole family or state to be their own property.

The dynastic power established by warfare in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) was guaranteed by the claim of a need for unity under one unchallengeable ruler, and that this unity in turn was guaranteed by the need for order. Fairbank (2006, p. 154) attributes the basis of government in imperial China to the ‘proper performance of ceremonies at all levels of society’ and the social order depended upon this performance. Bell (2010) has also points out that Confucianism is not a philosophy aimed at achieving substantive equality, and it does not focus on ‘rights’, but on ‘rites’, which tries to maintain a peaceful and prosperous society through the ‘proper performance’ of rulers. I cannot help but notice a resemblance to the status quo in China. Until now, reporters have to publish news and intellectuals have to publish articles related to government policies and political agenda in China, because they must be recorded as historical documents celebrating China's development in various areas. In my opinion, journalistic practices evident in mainstream media in today's China, such as protocol news on economic development and political conferences, can be perceived as a kind of performance of ‘rites’ .

The argument in this article may be problematic as it is related to invoking an impression of the unenlightened public living their lives as a delusion, or at least as a result of uncritical thinking. Yet, under certain conditions, many Chinese, young and old, do live within the traditional norms. One should speculate on public consciousness and consider that it is necessary to put a question mark on basic assumptions of the public sphere, because people may even choose to limit their capabilities of knowing and thinking for the fear of being excluded. It is widely accepted that knowledge is power in modern societies, but ignorance, too, can be powerful in a sense — as we can observe from numerous human-caused calamities in our history.



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