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**Li Zehou, Confucius,  
and Continuity with the Past  
in Contemporary China**

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# Introduction

If we only engage in building a socialist materialist civilisation and do not work hard to foster a socialist spiritual civilisation at the same time, people will be selfish, profit seeking and lacking in lofty ideals. In that case how will our mental outlook differ from that in capitalist societies.

Hu Qiaomu <sup>1</sup>

In the late seventies in the People's Republic of China there was a call by the new leader, Deng Xiaoping to, 'Emancipate the mind, seek truth from facts and unite as one looking to the future.'<sup>2</sup> This appeared to open up a much wider debate than was previously possible on a number of fundamental ideological issues. Had China made the transition from people's democracy to socialism? If not then what is impeding the process and what is the correct path to take? Could Marxism/Leninism/Mao Zedong thought and the ideas of historical materialism still provide a central role in the formation of the guiding ideology? Importantly, could the ideological legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, and hence its stability, be justified in the light of the new modernisation program introduced by Deng Xiaoping?<sup>3</sup> What defines Chinese culture? What aspects of the traditional culture are useful and what must be discarded? There was a feeling in the new guard, those formerly perceived as 'capitalist roaders' and 'right

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- <sup>1</sup> Hu Qiaomu, President of the Academy of Social Sciences, speaking in 1982, cited in Wang Gungwu, 'The Chinese Urge to Civilise: Reflections on Change.' in *Journal of Asian History*, vol.18, 1984, p.1.
  - <sup>2</sup> See Deng Xiaoping, *Selected works of Deng Xiaoping*, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1984, p.151.
  - <sup>3</sup> See Kate Hannan, 'Economic Reform, Legitimacy, Efficiency and Rationality' in Bill Brugger (ed.) *Chinese Marxism in Flux 1978-84*, London, Croom Helm, 1985, pp.119-142.

deviationists', that answers to these questions were fundamental to China's economic advancement and future modernisation.<sup>4</sup>

The 'feudal relics' debate, beginning in the late seventies, which argued that vestiges of feudal mentality deposited in the Chinese psyche were responsible for the continuing ills of the Chinese Communist Party (hence forward the C.C.P.) was obviously more conducive to maintaining the legitimacy of a Marxist regime.<sup>5</sup> Though still ideologically restricted by the Marxist framework, these new debates soon appeared to stretch the boundaries of that framework, at least of 'orthodox' Chinese Marxism.<sup>6</sup> Yet this seemed to merely reposition the 'privileged viewpoint' in history, away from class struggle and the relative importance of the superstructure (the relations of production) to reassert the primacy of the base (the mode of production) as ultimately responsible for the 'feudal' mentality. The newly emerging 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' looked suspiciously like the 'capitalist road'. Li Zehou's<sup>7</sup> reassessment of Confucius given in *Zhongguo Gudai Sixiang Shilun*<sup>8</sup> (Thought on the History of Ideas in Ancient China) discussed in this thesis, that Confucius was against the 'tide of history',<sup>9</sup> seems to justify Deng's new economic policies outlined in the critical Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee (Dec. 1978).<sup>10</sup> The

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4 See Stuart R.Schram, 'Economics in Command? Ideology and Policy Since the Third Plenum, 1978-84', *China Quarterly*, vol.97-100, No.99, September 1984, pp.417-435.

5 These 'ills', diagnosed by Deng, were 'bureaucratism' 'excessive concentration of power,' 'the patriarchal system' 'the system of life-long tenure of cadres in leadership posts,' and 'privileges of all sorts'. See Review Article by Tang Tsou, 'The Historic Change in Direction and Continuity with the Past', *China Quarterly*, no.98, June 1984, p.340.

6 See Michael Dutton, 'From "Facts" to Theory: The Emergence of the "Feudal Relics" Debate within Chinese Marxism', in *Synthesis Philosophica*, vol.4, fasc.1, 1989, pp.213-231.

7 Li Zehou is one of the leading contemporary intellectuals in mainland China.

8 Li Zehou, *Zhongguo Gudai Sixiang Shilun*, (Thoughts on the Intellectual History of Ancient China), Beijing, People's Publishing House, 1986.

9 *Ibid.*, p.15.

10 Stuart R.Schram, "'Economics in Command?" Ideology and Policy Since the Third Plenum, 1978-84', *China Quarterly*, vol.97-100 no.99, September 1984, p.417.

critical factor in Deng's new policies was to 'emancipate the mind' in order to overcome 'bureaucracy, which is a result of small scale production, [and] utterly incompatible with large scale production'<sup>11</sup> .

In line with this thinking, Li argues that the persistence of small scale production is due to a 'psychological cultural construct', a national character deeply imprinted in the Chinese psyche. The nature of this character as characterised by Lu Xun is, 'a kind of apathy', 'closed and self-watching', 'obsequious', 'slavish', 'conservative', a character that transcends class barriers.<sup>12</sup> Li claims this is an historical legacy of Confucius' desire to protect and restore the Zhou rites.<sup>13</sup>

This analysis has its merits and faults that will be discussed, however I maintain that Li Zehou glosses over a central issue in his analysis. This problem is that Chinese historical analysis is intimately tied to the political process, so that in the Chinese Marxist regime intellectuals are expected to justify Marxist ideological preconceptions. This is further complicated, in that within this process, various power groups and cliques have claimed the 'orthodox' Marxist position to gain political, intellectual and moral legitimacy over others. The overall result of these power plays and the new modernisation program has been to strip away the 'veil' from the social reality.<sup>14</sup> The Party striving to uphold its place as the symbolic upholder of peasant and worker rights, must contend with the return of the powerful traditional symbols enshrined in Confucianism.

Tu Wei-ming (Du Weiming), a contemporary New-Confucianist, states that, 'It is certainly false to identify Confucianism with the uniqueness

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<sup>11</sup> Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (1975-82)*, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1984, p.161.

<sup>12</sup> Li Zehou, p.37.

<sup>13</sup> Li Zehou, pp.7-8.

<sup>14</sup> J.K.Merquior, *The Veil and the Mask*, London, Routledge and Kegan, 1979, p.35-6.

of Chinese culture.<sup>15</sup>The New Confucianists believe it is still their 'historical duty' to restore Confucianism to its rightful place as the core of cultural and political life in China and also to promote its universal insights.<sup>16</sup> Crucial here is that Marxist and Neo-Confucianists accede in their role as Chinese intellectuals, as they both share a common concern with the formation of a universally valid ethical system to underpin the society.<sup>17</sup> The New Confucianists and the mainland intellectuals seem to be playing the same 'game' of vying for the traditional position as guardians of the 'True Way' and mirror Confucius' concerns, that 'if the Way prevailed in the world (that is, simply of itself, without the need for conscientious effort on man's part), I would not be trying to change things.'<sup>18</sup> Intellectuals who occupy a traditionally elite position close to the centre of power, and who claim their knowledge gives them a privileged vantage point to direct the political process (at least indirectly), must be perceived as part (if not central) to the problem of changing the hierarchical, paternal, authoritarian elements in Chinese society.<sup>19</sup>

In discussing these issues, and as a background to Li Zehou's intellectual status, I will first give a brief outline of the role of both the traditional and contemporary Chinese intellectual. Next I will look at the historical debates on Confucius in mainland China since the May the

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<sup>15</sup> Tu Wei-ming, *Humanity and Self Cultivation*, Berkely, Asian Humanities Press, 1979, p.280.

<sup>16</sup> See Carsun Chang, Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, Tang Junyi, 'A Manifesto for a Re-appraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture' in Carson Chang, *The Development of Neo Confucian Thought, Volume Two*, New York, Bookman Associates, 1962, pp.455-485.

<sup>17</sup> See Li Zehou, pp.29-30 and pp.39-40.

<sup>18</sup> *Analects* 18:6 Translation by Wm. Theodore de Bary, in *The Touble with Confucianism*, London, Harvard University Press, 1991, p.8. All subsequent translations of the *Analects*, unless otherwise stated, will be from D.C. Lau, *Confucius The Analects*, Penquin Books, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> See Thomas A. Metzger, 'Continuities between Modern and Premodern China: Some Neglected Methodological and Substantive Issues', Paul A. Cohen and Merle Goldman (eds.), *Ideas Across Cultures*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990.

Fourth Movement. Then I will trace the development of New Confucianism inside China prior to 1949 and its subsequent shift abroad. Finally, in the context of the above, I will discuss Li Zehou's reassessment of Confucius in his book, *Thoughts on the Intellectual History of Ancient China*, and juxtapose his outlook on the future possibilities of Confucianism in Chinese and world society with those of some contemporary western scholars. First just a brief background to Li Zehou.

Li Zehou was born in 1930 in Changsha, Hunan Province and majored in philosophy at Beijing University. He published his first book, *A Study of The Thought of Kang Youwei and Tan Sitong*, in 1958. Though often sent 'down to the countryside' during the Cultural Revolution, he escaped major 'criticism.' During the eighties Li Zehou has travelled the middle path between the 'radicals' desire for complete change, and the 'Hardliners' desire to maintain strict controls. Currently he is a senior research fellow in the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Social Sciences. By placing Li Zehou within an historical and social context I hope to be able to expose some of the continuing concerns and assumptions of Chinese intellectuals and also to touch on what is unique and useful in Li Zehou's approach to his assessment of Confucius.