

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

BY DONGHAI IDAO

With intellectual integrity at a premium under an autocratic system, modern Chinese intellectuals have to fight harder to live up to the ancient ideal that “. . . the gentleman gives a dissenting response, and the sage shows how the opposite is true.”

Partocracy¹ is the most despicable and nefarious form of government known to man. Like the “usurpatory government” described by Benjamin Constant,² partocracy lacks all legitimacy. It can lay claim neither to the tradition and “mandate of heaven” on which slave states and absolute monarchies were based, nor to the majority consent on which modern democracy is founded. Partocratic rule is established entirely through brute force and deception. While traditional forms of government enslave and oppress people physically, partocracy takes oppression a step further by distorting and tormenting the human spirit and robbing people of their dignity.

One-party dictatorship severely restricts open discussion and public opinion and makes a taboo of free thought and speaking the truth. It is unprecedented in its obliteration of the human spirit, morality and natural talent. The shallowness and baseness of “intellectuals” under one-party dictatorship is also unprecedented. Such intellectuals are like chameleons that have collectively discarded their natural instincts; they are spineless dogs. Contemporary Chinese intellectuals are not only beneath comparison with Western intellectuals, but are likewise spiritually far inferior to the intellectuals (scholars)³ of imperial China.

Criticizing reality and society was always a tradition among Chinese intellectuals (scholars). During the golden intellectual age of the Spring and Autumn (777–476 B.C.) and Warring States (475–221 B.C.) periods, various schools of thinkers took different stands, but all exclaimed, “Once more, sage sovereigns cease to arise, and the princes of the States give the reins to their lusts. Unemployed scholars indulge in unreasonable discussions.”⁴

The distinctive characteristic of the various schools was that they exposed and criticized: Confucius (551–478 B.C.) appraised and passed judgment on the Spring and Autumn

period, Mencius (c. 372–289 B.C.) upbraided the dukes and princes of his time, Mozi (479–438 B.C.) criticized princes and nobles, Han Fei (3rd. cent. B.C.) excoriated the cynicism of the world and its ways, and Lao Zi (the founder of Daoism), wrote, “the sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs.”⁵

After the Han Dynasty, when Confucianism gained precedence over other schools of thought, autocratic monarchy became ever harsher, and the scholarly tradition of frankly denouncing the evils of the day gradually waned. But learning was passed from master to student, and as each generation possessed men of talent and integrity, there was always a shimmer of light in the darkness. Wang Longxi (1498–1583), a disciple of Wang Yangming (1472–1529) and an exponent of the philosophy of the mind (*xinxue*)⁶ during the Ming Dynasty, wrote these words, which still resound like thunder: “The ordinary man agrees, the gentleman⁷ gives a dissenting response, and the sage shows how the opposite is true.”

Put in modern language, this means that an ordinary man will go along with a statement, a gentleman will object, and a sage will argue the opposite view. This is well put. Intellectuals ought to be like the honorable men and sages of old and assume their responsibility to monitor the government, criticize society and speak cautionary words in times of trouble as well as in times of prosperity. Those who live in dictatorships ought to express their opposition, and those who live in democracies ought to express unconventional opinions and disagreement. Even when the government is run by good officials who perform exemplary deeds, there is a need for people who will “give a dissenting response” and “show how the opposite is true.” Good officials who perform exemplary deeds are not afraid of criticism and supervision. The more the truth is spoken, the clearer it becomes. Moreover, because truth tends to be limited by time, constant monitoring and challenge is necessary in order for it to gradually develop and take wing. Otherwise it can wither, fossilize, stagnate and be transformed into error and falsehood. Truth is not afraid of disagreement and dissent. Even when a dissenting view is erroneous it can ultimately serve the truth.

In democratic societies, intellectuals oppose policies, not the government; they oppose the government, not the system. Theirs is a loyal opposition: they disagree over details but agree

with the main goals. In dictatorial societies, on the other hand, intellectuals oppose dictatorship. Although they oppose the main goals of the government, they seek agreement regarding specific policies. Their agreement or disagreement depends on specific circumstances and issues. They naturally support good government policies, such as reform, the opening-up policy, the fight against corruption and the abolishment of the pernicious custody and repatriation system.⁸

In democratic societies, intellectuals only express different opinions and dissent with respect to government policies about which they have expertise. In dictatorial societies, intellectuals must possess an extraordinary spirit, intellectual capacity and courage, and be prepared to lose their friends, sabotage their own futures and endure solitude and all manner of attacks and persecution. They must even be prepared to be imprisoned at any time. Benjamin Constant wrote that when a whole nation is constrained, silence and degradation prevail and everything degenerates. To have the capacity and courage to stand tall, to resist and to be considered a hostile dissenting force by those in power is a great honor. Those who resist deserve to be called gentlemen and even sages.

The ugly and reactionary nature of dictatorship is obvious to all. But given its brutality, only a tiny minority of people have the courage to express dissent and hold fast to the truth. As Wang Longxi observed, the vast majority of people will simply agree with whatever the ruling party says. Most people are like shadows without a spine, mind or spirit of their own. The Ming Dynasty scholar Wu Congxian (fl. 1620–1644) wrote that the Northern Liang was a shadow state, that is to say a vassal state, of the Northern Wei, and that all subordinate people were shadow people.⁹

To be sure, when Wang Longxi wrote that “the gentleman gives a dissenting response, and the sage shows how the opposite is true,” he was only talking about scholarship. Given the limitations of his era, not only politically but even more in the broad cultural sense, Wang could not escape the conventions of the Confucian tradition and disagree with the “ancient sage” (Confucius) or the “modern sage” (the emperor). But Wang was still a cut above today’s intellectuals, who invariably bow to the Communist Party in matters of culture, thought and politics, and parrot the Party line in unison.

Wei Jingsheng¹⁰ once boasted that people around the world considered him a “sage.” He has been widely derided for this, but in my opinion his fame is a reflection of genuine achievement, and he owes no one an apology. In today’s China, where jackals and wolves hold sway, and the government is unsurpassed in its cruelty, only those who dare to disagree with the Communist Party and express their dissent are genuine intellectuals. Only they can accept the title of “modern sage” with clear conscience.

Translated by Paul Frank

The Chinese version of this article is linked to this translation on HRIC’s Web site.

TRANSLATOR’S AND EDITOR’S NOTES:

1. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition, 1989) defines partocracy as “Government or rule by a single political party without opposition; totalitarianism.”
2. Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) published numerous pamphlets attacking Napoleon. In *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation* (1814) Constant wrote that for Napoleon, “It was necessary to stifle inside the country all intellectual life: he banished discussion and proscribed the freedom of the press.” Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans., Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 162.
3. The author here and subsequently uses both terms, *zhishifenzi* (intellectual) followed in parentheses by *shi* (scholar).
4. James Legge trans., *The Works of Mencius, The Chinese Classics*, vol. 2 (1895; rpt, Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1994), p. 188.
5. “Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs; the sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs.” D.C. Lau, trans., *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, Penguin Classics, 1963, p. 61.
6. *Xinxue*, or heart-mind learning, was a school of Confucianism founded by the scholar and philosopher Chen Xianzhang during the Ming Dynasty. It presented innate “knowledge of the mind” as a preferable alternative to “knowledge of information” or the officially endorsed “school of objective reason” (*lixue*).
7. The Chinese term *junzi*, typically translated as “gentleman,” carries in this context the connotation of “a man of honor.”
8. China’s Custody & Repatriation system was used for many years for the detention of migrants, petitioners, drifters and others who failed to produce documentation authorizing their presence in a city where they were not legally registered. Chinese authorities announced they would close down C&R camps following public controversy over the death in custody of a young professional, Sun Zhigang, in March 2003. However, there are indications that the system continues to operate at some level.
9. The Toba Turkish tribesmen of the Northern Wei conquered the Northern Liang Dynasty in A.D. 439 and reunited northern China after 141 years of disunity under the Sixteen States.
10. Wei Jingsheng spent the years 1979–1997 in prison for his role in the 1979 Democracy Wall movement.