

Continuity and Innovation in Qian Mu's Thought

Gad C. Isay

Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990), a twentieth century Chinese scholar and humanist, published his first book in 1918 and continued to write uninterruptedly till his death in 1990. Like many of his contemporaries, Qian Mu studied Western ideas, and once he absorbed such ideas he could no longer avoid acknowledging their impact on his understanding of the Chinese or Confucian tradition. The value of his voluminous work of more than 50 books can be attributed to his concern for Chinese culture and history, and his scholarly capacities together with his creativity in using Chinese categories of thought. One such category was balance (*zhonghe* 中和) that was for him a major criterion in practicing a scholarly dialogue and, essentially, in everything he did. In the following I discuss how he reconciled balance with a critical spirit while still creatively participating in dialogue both within Chinese culture and with foreign ideas.

In applying the criteria of balance in the dialogue between cultures Qian followed the pattern of self-cultivation or human attainment exemplified in the classical Confucian (Rujia 儒家) text of the *Daxue* (大學, The Great Learning). In the *Daxue* the process of self-cultivation involves eight levels beginning with the individual person and proceeding to the broader interpersonal frame of the family and on to the realms of the kingdom and the world.¹ Qian Mu reduced

1 The terminology used here draws heavily on Andrew Plaks' translation and his annotations in *Ta Hsüeh and Chung Yung. The Highest Order of Cultivation and On the Practice of the Mean* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), see esp. p58.

the levels to three and conceived of the framework of dialogue as consisting of: (1) the state of China's cultural past, (2) the Chinese intellectual scene, and (3) the culture of the West.² These do analogically replicate the relations between self, society and the state, and the world—also the concerns of the *Daxue*. The idea is that a certain degree of agreement needs to be reached among transmitters of the Way before their contribution extends within the intellectual scene and then further to the West and all over the world. The following discuss these levels in a reversed order.

According to Qian Mu, a major difference in the cultural orientations that developed in China and in the West can be traced to the tendency of the latter to dichotomize the two qualities of existence and the tendency of the former to avoid this dichotomization.³ These characterizations respectively correspond to the distinction between other-worldliness and this-worldliness. In many studies he acknowledged that the principal fallacy of the culture of the West is the dichotomization, he associated with monotheism, that is of God and man (and the world) and its corollary, the modern, striving for progress.⁴ Accordingly, in 1948, Qian Mu observed that Westerners go in for what he calls »the useless and meaningless road«, and mentioned the need to help out or rescue them.⁵ To him, both patterns, of monotheist religion and modern progress, alienate the person from the present and from reality and unsettle his or her mental state. The life that results from this alienation is altogether tragic.⁶

Increasingly, during the Chinese encounter with the West in the 19th century, an earlier balance that apparently existed in the Chinese world had been upset. In 1952 Qian Mu wrote that the problem in China as well as in the world, is not military, nor economic, neither political, or a question of foreign relations; but it is the problem of the culture of the world as a whole.⁷ Indeed, a cursory

2 Qian Mu's references to the culture of the West generally ignore its complexity. At the same time, as the following discussion indicates, he considered the reform of China a preliminary step in the reform of the world. The present study aims to strip his ideas from Qian's patriotic approach of 'us against the world', in order to access the philosophical contribution of his insights.

3 Gad C. Isay, »Qian Mu's Criticism of Monotheism and Alienation in Modern Life«, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* 6 (Jan 2010), 310–314.

4 Ibid., 318–324.

5 Qian Mu, *Hushang xiansilu* 湖上閒思錄 [Quiet Thoughts at the Lake; 1948/60] (Taipei: Lantai chubanshe, 2001), 8.

6 Isay, »Qian Mu's Criticism...«, 317–318; Qian Mu, *Hushang xiansilu*, 11.

7 Qian Mu, *Wenbuxue dayi* 文化學大義 [The Meaning of Culture Studies] (Taipei: Zhengzhong

reading of Qian Mu's writings, starting in the 1950s, reveals that he ascribes the fall of the imperial order to several interdependent developments, all of which are related to the intensification of China's meeting with the West. However, although he observed a shift in balance his optimistic faith in the future of Chinese culture remained unshaken. Qian's perception of modern Chinese history consists in seeing a break with the past, a deterioration in the present, and yet he has confidence in the future.⁸ This distinction corresponds to his understanding of China's modern history in terms of a transition that began in the late nineteenth century and continues to this day, thus he sees Chinese history as moving from a state of self affirmation to self denial and expects a return to self affirmation via the study of Chinese history and culture.⁹ In the terms that were mentioned above, self-denial corresponds to yielding this-worldliness and hence being unable to preserve the balance. Self affirmation refers to reinstating this-worldliness and regaining the balance. According to Qian, the negative effects of the cultural encounter are visible in approaches taken by leading participants in the Chinese intellectual scene.

His contemporaries, Qian complained, lost the true spirit of their tradition. Shallowness, which to him is synonymous with the quest for material benefit, has already spread far and wide. According to him, contemporary Chinese intellectuals radically and uncritically adopt foreign patterns. »Modern Chinese«, he wrote, »chase the false magic of superficial knowledge, they hurry to compete, and are fond of utility.«¹⁰ On the one hand, he blames the uncritical followers of foreign philosophical trends, such as dialectical materialism.¹¹ On the other, he

shuju, Nov. 1952), in *Qian Mu xiansheng xueshu nianpu* 錢穆先生學術年譜 [A Chronological Record of Qian Mu's Writings], 6 vols., comp. by Han Fuzhi 韓復智 (Taipei: Wunan tushu chubun gongsi, 2005; hereafter *Nianpu*), 4: 2105. The earlier *Zhongguo wenhua shi daolun* 中國文化史導論 [An Introduction of the History of Chinese Culture] was published in 1947.

8 Isay, »A Religious Cultural Nationalist: Qian Mu and his Exile Scholarship«, in *Transcending Boundaries: Exile in Chinese Thought after 1949*, ed. by Thomas M. Fröhlich and Brigit Knüsel (forthcoming).

9 Ibid.—Compare with Yu Ying-shih's recent call for »Chinese historians to begin to design and develop their own concepts and methods uniquely suited to coping with the particular shapes of Chinese historical experience independent of, but not in isolation from, theories and practices of history in other parts of the world including the West«, See his »Clio's New Cultural Turn and the Rediscovery of Tradition in Asia«, *Dao. A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 6,1 (Spring 2007), 49–50.

10 Qian Mu, *Hushang xiansilu*, 147.

11 Ibid., 54–55.

refers to intellectuals who use foreign terms to discuss Chinese thought. His contemporaries' weakness is further obvious in their inclination to imitate the West: »This is exactly the weak point of contemporary Chinese culture. [...] the Chinese flatter utility and seek to imitate the West«¹² Imitation, though, will never equal the original, he concludes.¹³

Qian indicated a shift of balance, that is, imbalance, not only in mental orientation but also in content. In 1980 he wrote that late 19th century and early 20th century scholars like the reformers Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), and the 'conservative revolutionary' Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936), still searched for the means to effect national and cultural change within the nation's body. But leaders of the May Fourth movement like Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942), and their followers, sought the means of change outside the nation's body. According to Qian Mu, both still discussed Chinese problems within the national context, but their approaches became increasingly radicalized.¹⁴ To be sure, Hu Shi, following John Dewey (1859–1952), in principle acknowledged the significance of tradition to the cause of progress, yet he did not have a programme. In several influential writings during that period, he and other May Fourth protagonists, such as Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) directed their attacks against the whole framework of Confucian society and the Chinese character itself.¹⁵ According to Qian Mu, Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu extolled everything foreign in order to reconstruct China. Thereafter, foreign imports were used to construct a new China.¹⁶ Hence the break with the past is unmistakable.

Infiltration of dichotomist views from outside, however unlikely, resonated with internal, traditional sources. Inasmuch as Qian criticized those who adop-

¹² *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁴ Qian Mu's ideas generally anticipate Yu Yingshi's recent hypothesis about the radicalization of Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century. See Yu Ying-shih, »The Radicalization of China in the Twentieth Century', in *China in Transformation*, ed. by Tu Wei-ming (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 125–157.

¹⁵ Chow Tse-tung, »The Anti-Confucian Movement in Early Republican China«, in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. by Arthur F. Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1960), 288–312.

¹⁶ Qian Mu, »Weixin yu shoujiu: Minguo qishi nian lai xueshu sixiang zhi xueshu« 維新與守舊：民國七十年來學術思想之間述 [Reform and Conservatism: An Outline of Chinese Scholarship in the Past Seventy Years; Dec 30, 1980], in *Zhongguo xueshu sixiangshi luncong* 中國學術思想史論叢 no 9 (Taipei: Sushulou wenjiao jijinhui, 2000), 34.

ted Western ideas and patterns of thought, his criticism of the ideas of those who still found value in the Chinese tradition was no less significant. In the late 1940s the terms that later refer to the New Confucians were as yet not in use,¹⁷ although those who later became associated with this name were already active. Qian was critical of those contemporary transmitters of the Way who espoused the ideas of Mencius (371–289 BCE), according to the interpretations of Lu Xiangshan 陆象山 (1139–1192) and Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472–1529), whose interpretations, especially in the eyes of later followers, tended to emphasize the mind at the expense of scholarship.¹⁸ Cheng Chung-ying 成中英 recently observed that Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968) »started by developing Confucianism as an ontology and cosmology of ultimate reality which had its unity in ontology and cosmology, but he ended by describing the state of discovery of the *benxin* (本心 ‘original mind’) as the ultimate reality in oneself«. ¹⁹ I may add that overemphasis on the mind and its capacities, such as innate knowledge of the good (*liangzhi* 良知), may lead the scholar to depict a quality of existence that is other than the present. A radical emphasis on the mind creates a distinction between subjectivity and objectivity that is too sharp to maintain and incompatible with this-worldliness. Qian Mu’s criticism of the notion of an original mind can be specifically traced to Xiong Shili’s ‘New Confucian’ writings.²⁰

During the 1940s up to the 1960s, scholars who were prominent among Qian’s contemporary promoters of Confucian ideas made a sharp division between the Cheng-Zhu and the Lu-Wang transmissions, and applied Western categories to the study of Chinese thought.²¹ Major studies presented Zhu Xi as a scholar of principle (*lixue* 理學) rather than a scholar of mind (*xinxue* 心學). Qian, on the other hand, argued that although Zhu Xi identified human nature

17 John Makeham, »The Retrospective Creation of New Confucianism«, in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. by John Makeham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 25.

18 According to Yu Ying-shih, the New Confucians overemphasized the mind on account of scholarship. See his »Qian Mu yu Xinrujia« 錢穆與新儒家 [Qian Mu and the New Confucians], *Youji Fengchui Shuishanglin: Qian Mu yu Xiandai Zhongguo Xueshu* 猶記風吹水上鱗：錢穆與現代中國學術 [Like Recording the Wind Blowing the Water on the Unicorn: Qian Mu and Modern Chinese Scholarship] (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1991), 31–98.

19 Cheng Chung-ying, »Confucianism: Twentieth Century«, in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. by Antonio S. Cua (New York: Routledge, 2003), 164.

20 Qian Mu, *Hushang xiansilu* ch. 9, 38–42.

21 Western categories, such as the ‘psychological’, the ‘religious’, the ‘metaphysical’, the ‘epistemological’, and Western patterns such as the ‘idealist–materialist’ dichotomy.

with principle, he made the mind the center of his learning. Rather than being merely a representative of the school of principle, he was just as much concerned with the mind. According to Qian, the novelty of Zhu Xi's learning rests in the balance it advocates between the cultivation of the mind and critical learning, while Lu Xiangshan and then Wang Yangming and his followers neglected to preserve this balance. They shifted toward an uncritical, and individually construed, world of mind. Qian Mu's Zhu Xi assigned a priority to the culture of society rather than the culture of the individual. He acted to reconcile mind and learning, on the one hand, and collective and individual, on the other.

Qian's association of the scholarship of Zhu Xi with balance may shed light on one of the most controversial issues associated with his name. Recently, scholars debated the relationships of Qian Mu to the New Confucians. Methodologically, the scholars are concerned with his entire scholarship and particularly his approach to the Manifesto for a Re-appraisal of Sinology and the Reconstruction of Chinese Culture of 1958. My approach is somewhat different, and I prefer to examine Qian Mu's position in specific texts. The *Hushang xiansilu* (1948) favors Confucian thought over Daoist, Buddhist and Western thought, and Zhu Xi's ideas are specified as the correct transmission. In chapter 14 of the *Hushang xiansilu* Qian Mu observes how in ancient China Confucians, unlike Mohists and Daoists, avoided radical forms of existence of a life of leisure and utilitarianism and represented the middle way in Chinese society, that is, life without extremes. According to him this authentic Chinese course should not be abandoned due to Buddhist and Western challenges. In chapter 8 of the *Hushang xiansilu*, Qian Mu criticizes the tendency inherent in the Wang Yangming School to seek an original substance deep in the mind and to subordinate reality to it. At the same time he praises Zhu Xi's attention to the person's need to cultivate the mind by means of learning. Qian labels the Wang Yangming School as elementary education and the Zhu Xi School as advanced education.

Qian Mu's idea of balance in dialogue emphasizes his understandings of the following three intellectual guidelines: First, he used the criteria of this and other worldliness to distinguish the parties participating in the dialogue, both outside and within the Chinese intellectual scene. Second, he applied the *Daxue* model as an organizing design for the discussion of dialogical relations. And finally, applied too was what I call 'The wisdom of the similar and the convergent'.²² What follows is a preliminary discussion of these three intellectual guidelines.

22 In using the term 'the similar and the convergent', I follow Professor Richard Shek in his translation of Qian Mu: Ch'ien Mu, »Historical Perspective on Chu Hsi's Learning«, in *Chu Hsi*

First, Qian's idea of balance in culture rested on a differentiation between the non-dichotomized versus the dichotomized or, respectively, this-worldly and other-worldly, view of life and the world. As observed above, this was the basis of his distinction between the cultures of China and the West. Relations between schools of thought and across cultures always stimulate a culture to foster its identity. A possible source for Qian's position may be traced to Chinese or Confucian responses during the encounter with Jesuits since the late 16th century or to much earlier encounters with Buddhists, if not to even earlier disputes among schools of thought. In his writings he supported a major Chinese view that is characterized by the dynamics of complementary opposites. No *yin* without *yang*, no *yang* without *yin*, no *ti* without *yong* and so forth. Rather than conceiving of existence as consisting of two distinct qualities, different in kind, such as creator and created, Qian argued that Chinese thinkers envision the world, the universe, and all there is, as a non-dichotomized, one quality of existence, and consisting of two parts, that is complementary opposites. Existence is a correlative process with no beginning, and not an effect caused by some 'external' intervention. Therefore the unity of this world is stressed, its durability, and its being complete in itself.²³ To Qian Mu, dichotomizations such as 'world and God', 'individual and society', and 'body and mind', subject the person to a path that is confined between polarities. This path undermines one's sense of balance and alienates one from the reality of life. Accordingly, authentic living cannot contain polarities that are not interdependent and, equally, the non-dichotomized view that cancels possible polarities supports the prospects of authentic—that is, balanced—living. This observation analogically applies both to persons and to collectives.

The *Daxue* model introduces a structure that avoids the dichotomist view and other-worldliness and it thus affirms this-worldliness, non-dichotomy, and non-polarity. Qian's second intellectual guideline involves both the hierarchical

and *Neo-Confucianism*, ed. by Chan Wing-tsit (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 32–42.. Professor Shek, in a personal communication, acknowledged that he no longer has Qian's original version and thus cannot retrieve the terms. But after that I read Qian Mu's article from 1983 on Chinese philosophy where he characterized Chinese thought by using the following three terms: *gongtong* 共同 ('similarity, all-encompassing, common, together'), *yiguan* 一貫 ('consistency, one-threaded'), and *hehe* 和合 ('harmony and agreement'). This characterization agrees with the teaching of the *Zhongyong*.—»Lüelun Zhongguo zhexue« 略論中國哲學 [Discussing Chinese Philosophy], ch. in *Xiandai Zhongguo xueshu lunheng* 現代中國學術論衡 [Evaluative Studies of Chinese Scholarship] (Taipei: Sushulou wenjiao jijinhui, 2000), 22–29.

23 Qian Mu, *Hushang xiansilu*, 37.

order suggested in the classical text (self, society/kingdom/state, world) and its elementary sense of direction (from the internal to the external). The relations between the cultivation of the self and realization of world peace, or, more abstractly, between the internal and the external are correlative in the sense that none assumes complete independence from the other. Thus polarities are avoided. At the same time, these and similar relations such as between roots and branches, promote a hierarchical order that assign priority to roots, that is, the former precedes the latter. These relations exemplify the coexistence of correlativity and priority. The priority assigned to the self, in the *Daxue* model or, in the case of the present discussion, to the Chinese cultural past, accords with a principled preference for the near over the distant, for the familiar over the foreign, and so forth.

Considering the *Daxue* model, we may as well associate the relations involved not with linear progression but rather with concentric circles. Given that the structure as a whole is arranged around a center, the closer to the centre the stronger the authority. From this perspective, the preference involved here does not exclude the distant and the foreign but rather assumes openness toward them. In other words—reflecting on the model of the tribute system with its center and four concentric zones—the priority assigned to the central is justified on practical grounds such as closeness, familiarity, and so forth. This priority is performed for the sake of the whole and with a vision of extending the central sphere by virtue, not by force. The central sphere draws its stimulation to extend, from the outer spheres just as it draws this stimulation from inside. Accordingly, what stands out in Qian's dialogue with the West is a priority order that assumes self-confidence with regard to the significance of the Chinese cultural past and at the same time anticipates the contribution of foreign ideas.

For the third intellectual guideline we turn to the question: if dialogue should accord with the criteria of balance, can it be reconciled with creativity? To clarify this point it is important to introduce an intellectual guideline that imbued Qian Mu's thought. I call it 'the wisdom of the similar and the convergent'. The phrase is used to indicate the wisdom of seeking in all encounters, relatedness rather than otherness, the positive rather than the negative, the common rather than the different. In the area of human relations, the terms, the similar and the convergent, refer to a sense of seeking relatedness, closeness, intimacy and a harmony with others. In the area of learning, these terms refer to avoiding factions and rather seeking agreement and direct continuity between past and present. In comparative studies of different cultures this wisdom would encourage us to find possible agreements, rather than disagreements between ideas in these cultures. By way of contrast it is in order to point to the scientific

search of knowledge for its own sake. The terms, the similar and the convergent thus convey the sense of intimate relations between the source and its outgrowth, between person and experience.

The idea is that to understand the root will lead to understanding the changes. Modern historians call this 'genetic history', that is, following an event to its source. Unlike processes that can be reduced to causation, emphasis here is on processes that are correlative—they are complicated to the degree where causal relations are indeterminate. We are not dealing with two different events (root and change) but with extensions and manifestations of the root. The formula 'principle is one and it appears in many forms' (*liyi fenshu* 理一分殊) that was prominent for both Song Buddhists and Confucians, conveys the same message. To seek the similar and the convergent is to stay close to the center of the stream (tree) that flows (grows) from the root (source). Wisdom lies in apprehending both the root and its changes without dichotomizing.

Two further questions with regard to the nature of creativity call for our critical attention. One question is: is it valuable and is it at all possible to create something totally new? This seems highly unlikely. We cannot create something that is totally new, because the root is always inherent in the product. Another question then is: what are the correct relations between the source and its later developments? In other words and in the terms of the present discussion: is it possible to specify the point where similarity ends and becomes difference or where convergence ends and turns into divergence? The criteria should be the extent to which consistency with the source is preserved and that is the measure of balance. The similar and the convergent are earlier in time, while the different and the divergent arise later. In the beginning, the similar and the convergent dominate the scene. Later, the different and the divergent challenge that which was previously established. The different and the divergent establish a departure from the original quality of the source. Balance is measured according to the extent to which consistency with the source is preserved. The different and the divergent do complement the similar and the different, and are necessary factors for creativity to proceed. But the criteria should be the degree to which the latter serves the former and not vice versa. As long as one maintains the priority of the former one avoids digressing to polar states and dichotomies.

Recently, G.E.R. Lloyd and Nathan Sivin observed that the

Chinese preferred on the whole to cascade levels of meanings and build the richest feasible explanations rather than seek a single cause that ruled out all others. For that reason, doctrinal divergences seldom inspired debate. [And further the] principal (though

not the sole) Chinese approach was to find and explore correspondences, resonances, interconnections. Such an approach favored the formation of syntheses unifying widely divergent fields of inquiry. Conversely, it inspired a reluctance to confront established positions with radical alternatives.²⁴

They attributed this characteristic of Chinese tradition to political and social circumstances in the history of China. I would suggest that Lloyd's and Sivin's views and those of other like-minded scholars accord with my interpretation of Qian Mu's understandings of Confucian ideas about balance in dialogue.

Some Final Thoughts

Qian Mu's understanding of the function of dialogue has its roots in China's cultural past and continues in the present Chinese intellectual scene. The notion that it spreads to the West and all over the world closely corresponds to the *Daxue* model that introduces the boundaries of the individual person as roots and then proceeds to the broader interpersonal frame of the family and on to the realms of the kingdom and the world. Dialogue is practiced on all three levels and throughout them as a whole. The levels and the whole require balance to endure for dialogue to be rewarding. Balance should accord with a non-dichotomist approach, this-worldliness rather than a dichotomist approach and other-worldliness. The measure for balance is its agreement with the similar and the convergent and the wisdom of the similar and the convergent is the wisdom of preserving balance in dialogue.

My discussion has suggested that Qian Mu considered life and the world as structured in concentric circles that assign priority to the center and at the same time the center is conditioned by and attentive to the other spheres. To maintain balance requires the participants' concern to remain within the limits of this-worldliness and to follow the similar and the convergent. In this way, the practitioners guarantee proximity to the privileged position of centrality. Indeed, thus conceived, the balanced dialogue avoids prejudice and one-sidedness.

The wisdom associated with the idea of the similar and the convergent cannot be overstated. In learning and in daily life, the person who walks this road (or Way) of avoiding factions and seeking the similar and the convergent, maintains a direct link with everyone and everything in the past and in the

24 G. E. R. Lloyd and Nathan Sivin, *The Way and the Word: Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 248 and 250.

present. By virtue of one's positive agreement one joins value and continuity and transcends time and space. With this meaning in mind it is in order to state that if we assumed a 'similar and convergent' approach in all our encounters with everything and everyone, this would lead to the practical realization of the traditional Chinese idea of the unity of heaven and man.

Tel-Hai College, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Israel