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Faust and the Birth of a Research Agenda

ENCOUNTERING FAUST

Based on a real person, Dr. Faustus, who lived in Europe in the early sixteenth century, several artistic works combined to build the legend of Faust and the *Faustian Bargain*. Accordingly, Faust came to be known as a man who sought forbidden knowledge and made a bargain with the Devil. In exchange for his immortal soul, Faust would be given the power to know. The two best-known and most acclaimed renditions of the Faust tale were created by English playwright Christopher Marlowe and German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Marlowe dramatized the irrevocable nature of a pact signed in blood with the Devil, the frivolous and unsatisfying end to which the knowledge was put, and, finally, the passionate and desperate damnation that lay at the end of Faust's search for "illegitimate power through learning."[1] Goethe in his mid-nineteenth-century *geist* modified the bargain and made it contingent on Faust's having a moment of contentment. Goethe allowed the angels to rescue Faust because his search and aspiration never ceased. Faust triumphed in the end. Although these two literary works differ in their emphasis and form, they both kept the Faustian Bargain as the crux of their artistic vision.

Surprisingly, Goethe's *Faust* was also translated, along with other important Western works, into Chinese, and therefore it served as an inspiration for a New Cultural Movement in China during the early twentieth century.[2] My late mother remembered seeing the book as a middle-school girl in the 1930s in her school's library in a rural Chinese town where only a few privileged children could attend school. She did dare to open this book with a strange title, but her desire to read further was put to rest for good because she could understand nothing.

Later, in the 1970s, the first group of Chinese students emerging from the farm labor of Mao Zedong's reeducation program,[3] after ten years of closed schools and condemnation of education, entered college. We woke up from a deep slumber and were shocked to find that China had been left behind. "Economically destitute and culturally barren" (一穷二白) was the general sentiment. The indescribable sorrow that befell everyone was that the Mainland Chinese thought that they had it right, fighting a noble cause to correct a great social wrong, pursuing relentlessly equality, equity, and emancipation from their millennia-long cultural yoke toward some undefined ultimate bliss. But we were wrong (even evil in the world's eye); what was even harder to bear was that we were more pathetic than Don Quixote tilting at windmills mistaken for giants. A hitherto unknown sense of collective shame and anger toward our leadership erupted. A quick reaction was, rightfully, to restore education. All of a sudden, schools were reopened and knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, prized.

Backed up ten years, millions of students waiting their turn for higher education, still dispersed in the countryside, were urged to hurry to review their book knowledge in order to partake in the first college entrance exam. Many simply gave up because after high school they had trashed or burned their books to display their anti-bourgeoisie resolution, or else they packed their books away, never to touch them again. But many rose to the occasion and gave it their best shot. I was lucky to pass the exam, and the reported ratio of college admissions was 4.7 percent from those who took the exam.[4] Although we were not given much choice of schools and subjects of study (there were few to begin with), most students desired schools and programs that had a reputation of Western disciplines such as natural sciences and technology. However, the most desired subject of study was, perhaps, European languages, with English ranking at the top and French and German next. These languages were especially sought by those who felt not less desirous, but less prepared, to pursue scientific studies. At that time, it was true that few Chinese were fluent in these languages. The Chinese government and people alike had known, since the end of the imperial system at the turn of the twentieth century, that for them to have any chance of making it in the modern world, they had to increase their population's proficiency in Western languages. After all, foreign language is, as Marx asserted, a tool in human struggle – a slogan that every schoolchild could recite, if not comprehend. Studying foreign (really Western) languages became an ever-greater aspiration even when Marx's glow grew dimmer.

The idea that one could be lifted out of the ruins of a collapsed state and learn new things from the advanced human world was analogous to a

drowning person holding onto a thread of air. Not only did those who passed the exam harbor the utmost hopes for their own lives, but their government also regarded them as its only hope and epoch-defining fresh blood. These students went to college with all tuition and all study-related fees waived. Moreover, they were not expected to engage in energy-draining work-study to earn extra money. In other words, they were made worry-free, all for one purpose: to devote their time and energy to study, to master what China had lamentably neglected for ten years.

Such was the ethos under which I began my college career. We were an elite group, but not by birth or socioeconomic status; there was no birth class or difference in socioeconomic status. We passed the exam and were chosen; that was the commonality. Before the exam, all exam takers had to declare three schools and three subjects for each school as their preferences. I named English as my first choice of study, followed by French and German, for all three schools. I was admitted into my second-choice college, one of the best schools for foreign languages in the country. The college admissions officer later told me that the reason he placed only me in the German group from all the province's applicants was that I was the only student qualifying for English but also willing to study German. Without any regret and with only gratitude, I welcomed the placement and plunged into my German studies.

To maximize these students' success, the Chinese government contracted with West Germany to send teachers from gymnasiums and universities. As a result, my four years of college were mostly taught, quite unusually, by West German instructors with a curriculum much tuned to their pedagogical theory and design. Although we also had Chinese professors who taught some German classes and other subjects such as history, Chinese literature, economics, and English, German teachers were mostly responsible for what we studied. As far as I can tell, students of my class had a good taste of liberal arts education from the West, understandably with a German bent (the same was true in the French and English departments based on their respective instructors from abroad).

Students exhibited high energy and motivation for learning by any standard. We all got up early in the morning and read our texts aloud. All tried to memorize their vocabulary sheets and related texts. All went to the library to study, and all read into the night in their tent-like mosquito nets until lights went out. No one missed a class unless one was too ill or had an emergency. We did sports and extracurricular activities, but the sight of everyone holding a book in their hand reading, and of a very crowded library, was a daily occurrence. My husband, European American

by origin, taught at the same college and to this date attests that he had never – and has never since – seen such a sight on any of the campuses of some twelve American colleges and universities where he has taught. He still could not believe the level of these Chinese students' dedication to their learning.

German is not an easy language for any non-Germanic Westerner, but it was notoriously harder for the Chinese, whose native language does not have conjugations for anything, let alone the three articles, four cases, and endless combinatorial variations. But we absorbed all those mechanical difficulties of the language. We mastered the pronunciation, sentences, comprehension, grammar, even some medieval words and usages. We studied German history and read Goethe, Schiller, Heinrich Heine, Georg Büchner, Gerhart Hauptmann, Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, and the writers after World War II. We listened to Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mahler, even Wagner. I loved learning about this important European culture. As this learning deepened, Chinese culture became more and more a distant and vanishing memory. Anything Chinese was scorned. We did not even speak much Chinese on campus because we were busy practicing our German. We also frequently dismissed our German teachers' curiosity about Chinese culture and told them that it was not worth their while because it was the Chinese culture (mistakenly, in hindsight) that brought our country to ashes.

But then came Goethe's *Faust*, a monument of German literature. By then, the knowledge-thirsty students had gained some perspective and had cooled down from the embracing zeal they had cultivated in the revolutionary time. Print materials that revealed unheard-of things were "smuggled in" from Hong Kong, and some classmate even got connected to a Buddhist monk who sent her hand-printed material about Buddhism. We read these things with a flashlight in bed. This exposure and gradual change prepared the students for what might be called a questioning spell. We began questioning everything, not necessarily in open forums but certainly in chats with peers, leisurely strolls, and romantic interactions. We contemplated our existence, our *sein*, our experiences, our society, German culture and people, America, life, death, love, virtually every subject. It was like a mini-renaissance where free spirits roamed outside classrooms. I remember a poem that I wrote in Chinese to share with my peers:

> Progress and Regress
> The train is dashing through the Yellow Plateau, and I am counting the tombs of ancient emperors. . . .

Who says that tombs
Symbolize only death?
I'd say they symbolize immortality and eternity
Who says that the running train
Is progress in our time?
I'd say it's blind curiosity
Like children
Who have to tear into pieces the mushroom
To see what's hidden inside
People on the train are fooled by it
Modernization is not visible in the far end
But tombs are visible right here with us
As if they are reminding us
To contrast, to reason, and to reflect
The train lures us
To follow, to dash, and to blunder

However, despite this vibrant learning, we remained quite "uninterested" in our own culture.

Faust, especially the first parts where the Faustian Bargain took place, was read slowly and discussed line by line. Although the poetic form was no longer daunting, we had difficulty with all the religious tradition and allegories. I remember thinking to myself, tossing ideas to my friends, and hearing their echoes back: Why does Faust have to lose his soul, his life, for wanting to know more? Ignorance was precisely what the Chinese suffered. What's wrong with Faust wanting to be more knowledgeable and wanting to have full human experience? Why did Goethe, the literary giant, write an epic in such a way that seeking knowledge is like committing a crime somehow? Even more, aren't we this guy? Here we are devoting ourselves with all our might and passion, seeking knowledge, resembling in some way Faust's spirit, if not his full scope. We were puzzled. But neither my peers nor I actually raised these questions to our German teacher in fear that we might make fools of ourselves, questioning Goethe. At least for me, I could not abandon these questions until I found their satisfactory answers. But before that happened, I had to come to America to endure more bewilderment and soul searching.

SHOCK IN AMERICA

A few years after college, I gave up my position teaching German and immigrated to America. My first desire was to make myself useful to my

newly married life: finding a job. But my English was abysmally poor. This self-assessment was actually not an incidence of the well-known "Asian" self-effacement. My English was abysmal; I had spent all my time perfecting my German. I simply did not spend enough time mastering English. Truth be told, I did not even like English very much because it did not have the complicated articles and cases, or the elegance of the logical combinations of sentence variations. I managed to learn to read and write English at some grade level. But speaking and listening proved to be out of reach. Coming to America was not planned, but I fell in love with a European American. Although I lucked out with this marriage, *Gott sei Dank*, at the time I experienced a profound displacement when I found myself in the United States instead of Germany.

I registered, with my husband's help, as a substitute teacher for German in Burlington, Vermont, where I first landed after immigration. The reason was simple: That was the only thing I could do, short of being a Chinese restaurant kitchen aide. This job did not require a teacher's certificate, and for a while I thought that I could at least teach the fun German language to American students.

Unfortunately, my first teaching assignment at the local high school was English rather than German, which, as confessed previously, I could hardly speak, let alone teach. I had to admit it to the caller just in case she made a mistake. But despite my honesty and insistence that I lacked any qualification for teaching English, I was told that the school needed me, and I had to be there. So I went, in a cold sweat, too scared to face something like an English equivalent of *Faust* – Shakespeare or anything vaguely literary! I wanted to disappear into the ground.

Someone ushered me into the office, trying to calm me down, saying that it would be an easy job, and that the only thing I needed to do was to follow the lesson plan made by the called-in-sick teacher and "to keep the kids out of trouble." "What trouble?" I said to myself, gazing around. I had never seen, not even in my dreams, such a school, with all the brightly lit classrooms, hallways, and all the books in the library. The students were undoubtedly well nourished and well clothed, projecting more self-confidence and happiness than I or any student I had seen back home. This is a learning paradise! What trouble could there be for such blessed lives?

To my shock, those students did not seem to care about maintaining a good learning environment: They chatted freely and giggled and threw things at each other as if I, the teacher, did not exist. What struck me most was that they were not the least bit interested in learning the content of the already minimal English tasks. But my surprise did not lead me to blame

the students. Instead, I blamed myself and my poor English. It was then that I vowed to learn English well enough not to let this disappointing situation happen again in my substitute classroom.

As my English and self-confidence improved, sadly, I saw a recurrent, actually more severe, scenario in Pennsylvania. I became, on a *blitz* track, a supervisor for student teaching at the University of Pittsburgh only a year later. I thought that it was strange to bestow such responsibility on me given how little I knew about American education. It was even more bizarre for me to supervise student teachers while struggling through my own student teaching (in German finally) at a high school in a remote town where I provided the only ethnic diversity. Perhaps this was the university's way to kill two birds with one stone. In any event, I was forced to function like a two-headed creature, or else a split personality, while still struggling to improve my English.

My regular visits to five schools across four districts and my daily work in the classroom gave me a pretty good chance to encounter students' lack of interest in learning. This time I could not hold myself responsible because I mostly did not teach. Where I actually taught, I did succeed in boosting their morale for learning from moment to moment, but it often felt like a drop in the ocean of disinterest. In fact, it was this very difficulty that discouraged me once and for all from pursuing my certificate to teach high school in America. Nevertheless, in hindsight, I must say that these Pennsylvanian students were angels. No one really had any "trouble," at least not the type I was aware of: dropping out, drugs, teenage pregnancy, and violence, barring perhaps smoking and other petty offenses. By and large, these students showed up at school on time, remained through the day, and did their assigned work. Not everyone made the best effort, the kind I would have liked to see – certainly not the one that would resemble the by-now already archaic fantasy in my head, the effort worthy of the Faustian spirit. But compared to what I later saw in urban places, these students were any teacher's dream.

Massachusetts students were not better, not even in the supposedly better towns, away from the really troubled inner city. The same lack of enthusiasm in learning continued to shock me as I again endeavored to work more in schools. Of course, the education reform, along with the weekly news reports, drumming up the meager academic performance of American students gave me a clear sense that what I observed was not an isolated phenomenon. My perplexity deepened; the idea of the richest nation on earth inhabited by so many students not wanting to learn really threw me for a loop.

FISH DISCOVERING WATER

At the University of Pittsburgh, I took several courses in educational psychology and child development as required for my teacher certification. The most thrilling course ever was on how to develop children's creativity. I had never studied or even fancied that creativity could be studied, let alone taught. Contemporary Chinese people inherited a long-held (more than a century) belief that their age-old Confucian tradition was the root of all their political, social, and economical ills. Confucianism was even called a culture that "ate people" by radical thinkers such as Lu Xun (1881–1936).[5] In education, the most condemned were children lacking creativity – the sentiment holding strong to the present day. Now, to Chinese people's horror, not only did Marx's dogma and audacious experiment fail to emancipate people into freedom and creativity, but it managed to suck the last breath of human vitality out of their children. Part of my motivation to continue my graduate studies in America was to find ways to help rectify Chinese education problems (another part had to do with my lost confidence that I could ever teach in an American high school). Learning about the teachability of creativity raised hope for me again.

When I inquired where I could study creativity for a PhD, my professors recommended Harvard Graduate School of Education,[6] where Howard Gardner was attracting many students. They gave me his book, *Frames of Mind*, to read, and reading that book made me decide that I wanted to study not just creativity but the whole human potential. I lucked out again with the admissions and began a marathon of doctoral training in human development and psychology. But my single desire to figure out human creativity and potential could not be fulfilled without also studying other important processes that influence child development. Finally and inevitably, I encountered *culture* as a developmental concept. As I delved deeper into my studies, I realized – this time, to my personal astonishment – that I had been blind to culture. I was the fish who was the last to discover water.

Once discovered, I could not see the world without water. Culture soon became the looking glass that was impossible for me to put down, even after all those years of unawareness on my part. Culture, as the largest human-created system (as opposed to our biology), penetrates so profoundly into all spheres of human life that it alters human cognition, emotion, and behavior, setting us apart from the next smartest creatures in the animal kingdom.[7] Culture is like the air we breathe; we are completely dependent on it. Together with our biology, culture produces us, but we also alter culture

continuously. This interactive process is the inescapable force underlying child development.

For me, however, the awakening was not about human culture as a whole, but a particular culture, my own culture. Yes, what about my culture? Because I was born into a preexisting world, did my own culture imprint me in any specific way? If so, in what way? I lived my own culture as any anthropologist would attest, but why was I unaware of it for so long? Did Marxism push my culture out of me, or perhaps it buried my culture and pushed something else into me? My questions were endless, and this process was not fun. My peers from China seemed to have gone through a similarly painful process. We shared our identity crises, confusions, and reflections. One friend was already writing her dissertation and introduced me to the writings of Professor Tu Wei-ming (杜維明), an authoritative scholar on Confucianism at Harvard Yenching. I went to the Yenching Library and borrowed his books. He led me to other related books. Now, for the first time, rather late in life, I read, word for word for myself, Confucius's *Analects*, *Mencius*, and other original works. I experienced an intense process similar to when I first peeked into Western cultures through the German gate opened in college, but this time I was gazing into my own soul.

I could not believe the words and passages I was reading from these books. What we as children growing up in China were told[8] (but not allowed to read directly) about Confucius and his ideas and the actual words by Confucius and Mencius were like day and night. I knew that if we had no reason to believe that Chinese people's intelligence is no less than that of any other people on this planet, something must have gone terribly wrong. Why did the Chinese admire Confucius for 2,500 years? Why was he called a sage and an "exemplary teacher for all ages" (萬世師表) even by the powerful (for example, emperors) and smart people (i.e. scholars), and why was his *Analects* required reading of all schoolchildren for millennia?[9] Were all the Chinese who lived before me wrong – stupid even? These questions greatly disturbed me.

Further reading and contemplation led to the realization that the Chinese had gone through a century-long tormented soul searching because they could not defend themselves against the surging Western powers. China was in an all-around steady decline until its eventual defeat and the subsequent chaos, suffering unprecedented humiliation and loss of self-confidence. Intellectuals were the first to turn inward to self-examine, and they came to a devastating verdict: The root cause was the Confucian ideology all ruling dynasties had adopted.[10] It relied on the personal moral cultivation of the

ruler to bestow mercy onto his subjects. If a ruler succeeded in cultivating himself, he attracted good and able ministers to manage his dynasty, and people enjoyed peace and prosperity as a result. But if a ruler was ruthless and tyrannical, such as the Qin Emperor who built the Great Wall but caused great suffering to people, then people revolted against the empire, sometimes successfully but oftentimes not. Whenever such a peasant uprising prevailed, another ruler arose and reinstated the same old system with the same old Confucian ideology.[11] Although China was blessed with some good rulers, the bad and incompetent ones outnumbered the more virtuous and able ones.

This cycle of the political process and dynastic ruling lasted for millennia, but its vitality was exhausted when Western powers pounded open China's door.[12] What defeated the Chinese system at the turn of the twentieth century, as intellectuals and politicians agreed, was really not Western troops but their science, which the Confucian ideology clearly lacked. Western science was most admired because it produced "solid ships and effective cannons" (船堅炮利), while the Chinese were still relying on spears, swords, and even martial arts to fight on land and sea. This conclusion led to a whole series of new education policies and political reform. Waves of Chinese students were sent to the West to study science and technology. Moreover, many leaders and scholars attributed Western power to their better democratic governmental systems. China, along with other East Asian nations that suffered a similar fate, began a protracted endeavor of learning from the West (a process that has not yet reached its peak), despite a period of interruption immediately after the communist takeover. I must admit that I myself was also a small element of this massive cross-cultural learning process.

CHINESE CULTURE AND FAUST AGAIN

This grasp of the general historical perspective eased my distress to some extent, but it did not persuade me that Confucius and his ideas were the root cause of, and therefore were to be blamed for, all Chinese political, social, and economic ills. Confucius lived 2,500 years ago and did not have any noted political power. He was a thinker, philosopher, and, most of all, teacher. Students came to him and sought his teaching of their own volition. It would be groundless to blame him or even his ideas for China's later problems. If anyone were to be blamed, it would be those who, under the name of Confucianism, waged unjust wars, conquered land, and established illegitimate dynasties, not to mention those who buried alive Confucian scholars