Introduction

Why the Question of Freedom Is Unavoidable

A little more than three decades ago, China embarked upon a course of fundamental change in its economy and society, and we now have a tangible record, positive and negative, of what has transpired on these fronts. The trajectory of subjectivity – of moral life and life of the spirit – belongs to a rather different part of the larger story: more than thirty years after the winds of change started sweeping across the moral and spiritual landscape of China, the dust is still swirling around, and what has taken temporary shape is a veritable morass. All members of Chinese society, including myself, are part of this dust, this morass, and our understanding of our own situation is, for the most part, no less unsettled and confused.

One sign of this confusion is the way in which the question of political reform is typically approached and lack of progress and its consequences comprehended. It is a commonplace of both Chinese and Western analyses of the matter that political reform has lagged far behind economic reform and that political reform must catch up soon if China is to maintain its momentum of economic growth and prevent problems such as official corruption and social injustice from going completely out of control. While it contains a grain of truth, this piece of received wisdom only scratches the surface. Political reform is a value-laden process, and, as such, it can achieve a real breakthrough only if a corresponding breakthrough in values – even perhaps a revolution in values – takes place in Chinese society at the same time. What is the infrastructure of values that must exist if political reform is to make *moral* sense and command more than opportunistic support? What is it about the structure of Chinese society and its political system that stands in the way, not so much of political reform, as of the more fundamental transformation in values?

Deeper if more elusive questions such as these must be addressed if we are to understand the tortured process of political reform and what is necessary for its prospects to improve. But these questions are also worth pursuing in their own right – as questions about the state of morality, subjectivity, and life of the spirit in China today. Indeed, they must be pursued in their own right if we look for answers of adequate depth and scope.

In the book before you, I seek to provide such answers in their own right but also in the hope that the results can serve as the basis for a deeper understanding of the quandary of China's political reform, among other things, although I will not directly pursue this understanding myself. I will attempt, that is, to cut one path through the moral and spiritual morass of China's reform in search of a clear and steady if necessarily partial view of it from the inside. My point of entry is the *moral crisis* that has dogged China throughout the three decades of reform, while my diagnosis, including the route of escape from the crisis implicit in this diagnosis, has *freedom* as its central term of reference. Behind such problems as pervasive official corruption and gross social injustice is the moral crisis, according to my diagnosis, and behind the intractable question of political reform is the more fundamental question of freedom.

My choice of the moral crisis as the point of entry is, in the present context, entirely motivated by the search for understanding. There is, to be sure, much about the moral crisis to lament and indeed to condemn, and, as a member of the society whose crisis it is rather than as an outside observer, I cannot write about it without emotional or existential involvement. But what causes me to attach so much importance to the moral crisis is the realization that this crisis is a symptom of fissures in the deep structure of Chinese society and its body politic that we might not otherwise be led to investigate. The moral crisis is a mirror, if we look carefully, not only of failures but also of successes (as viewed within a commonsense frame of reference), not only of changes that have failed to materialize but also of transformations that add up to a different way of life, both outer and inner. And thus it is a mirror of the entire reform – most importantly of the tensions and contradictions that have given China today its distinctive shape and out of which the future of China will unfold.

If the moral crisis reveals one thing most *immediately* and consequentially, it must be that China today lacks a new moral subject, a kind of subject that is fit to act morally and meaningfully in the new society that the three decades of reform have brought into being – and fit to make

this a better society. The moral crisis reveals this immediately because this is what can be inferred from the very fact of a moral crisis: a moral crisis is nothing but a crisis of moral subjectivity. What it also reveals, by the same token, is that the old moral subject, of the Maoist mold, is defunct, or – what amounts to the same thing – that the conditions for the preservation of that kind of moral subject have largely disappeared. The new conditions of life, however we care to characterize them and whether we like them or not, call for a different kind of moral subject.

This new subject has no moral leader to follow, no moral exemplar to emulate, because it finds itself under conditions of life – economic, social, cultural, and otherwise – in which the very categories of moral leader and moral exemplar no longer make sense. It must assume responsibility for itself as a moral subject, a subject among equal subjects. Even if it still wants to defer to moral leaders or exemplars or indeed relies on such deference, if only unknowingly, it will insist on one condition, namely, that it defers only if it chooses to do so. It will not accept high-handed exhortation or open propaganda.

This is no prescription but what is made necessary by the collapse of the old communist-style, totally organized way of life and its replacement, in the course of the reform, by an increasing and by now deeply entrenched individualization of everyday life. Choice and responsibility, by and for individuals qua individuals, pervade this new form of life in place of the obedience and overt conformism that served in the old one. The one thing that is lacking is what can bring separate acts of choice and responsibility together into some semblance of moral and volitional unity: a new moral subject appropriately individuated and made fit for the radically new form of life that made its initial appearance in China as if by a surprise attack and has since conquered most of it by stealth. Until this new moral subject takes shape, we shall remain in the grip of the moral crisis. The moral crisis is a constant reminder that, barring the extremely improbable restoration of the collective form of life with its communist telos, there is no avoiding the need to create a new moral subject.

This new moral subject is defined, above all, by freedom. For responsibility for oneself as a moral subject, even when it takes the form of deciding to defer to others, presupposes freedom. And the freedom thus presupposed is not just actual or de facto freedom, of which there is plenty in China already, but a conscious, valorized entitlement to freedom as commensurate with one's responsibility, and hence freedom raised to the level of a value. Thus understood, freedom is the sum total of conditions, moral and political, that allow one to make choices for oneself and assume

responsibility for oneself in all relevant domains of life and, above all, to become the kind of self that is capable of doing so, with its concomitant dignity and worthiness of respect. Since the need to make choices for oneself and assume responsibility for oneself is already a fact of life in China today, the call for freedom is simply a demand to make possible what is already necessary. A moral crisis is nothing but the disjunction of the necessary and the possible.

Thus freedom is unavoidable as a presupposition of a certain kind of moral subject, and this moral subject in turn is necessary because a new way of life has sprung up around us and is here to stay. Must we accept or acquiesce in this new way of life, such as it is, in the first place? We need not, and I myself do not find the balance sheet of the three decades of reform readily endorsable – given, on the negative side, the unchecked corruption and collusion between power and capital, the runaway inequality inexcusable in a society still with so much poverty, the environmental degradation, and, most pervasive and immensurable, the near-destruction of the moral and spiritual ecology of an entire people. Nor is freedom a simple and innocuous concept or practice (what kind of freedom? whose freedom? freedom for what?), and that is why I have been careful to say about freedom only what strictly needs to be said as a presupposition of a kind of moral subject that has to be significantly more individuated than its counterpart in Mao's China. While I have deep reservations about what I have roughly called the new form of life in China, I do not see, and do not want to see, a return to the old communist-style, totally organized form of life. The latter form of life may have been necessary once, and, if one is to wax normative about it, even to some extent desirable in its time. But it is no longer, as a whole, necessary and desirable. Whatever alternative to this life we find attractive and feasible, I for one believe that a radically more individuated moral subject must figure in it and so, correspondingly, must a kind of freedom that makes such a moral subject possible. Only this kind of moral subject can give us any hope of making the best of the new form of life in China today and, if necessary, transcending it through critique and struggle from within.

This is not to accept the new realities of China as we find them; nor to take on board the vision of the bourgeois atomistic, possessive, and increasingly consumerist individual along with its ideologically defined and restricted freedoms; nor to accentuate, in the Chinese context and as a corrective, individual freedom at the expense of values and practices of solidarity. On the contrary, only by becoming clear about the need

for greater individuation and greater freedom and by confronting the questions posed by this need can we hope to raise apposite warnings against the prospect of the conception and codification of freedom being overwhelmingly shaped by the dominant power of capital and against the pitting of the lonely and alienated individual against forms of solidarity and community essential for good human life.

In this light, what I call freedom is nothing more and nothing less than the room we need, as individuals and as members of communities, to be meaningfully and responsibly human under modern conditions of life. As dwellers in the modern world, we should have no trouble or qualm endorsing this room as such. What precise form, ethical and institutional, this room takes is another matter, subject to political contestation and especially the quieter, less visible struggles to shape the social imaginary. I will not join such contestation or struggle, for the most part, in the present book. I am concerned with the prior task of showing, mainly for the Chinese context but with resonance beyond it, that the question of freedom is unavoidable, that it is unavoidable because it is internal to Chinese society as we now find it, and that it is internal in that the lack of freedom (in the sense I have described) lies at the root of the prolonged moral crisis in post-Mao China, just as enhanced freedom offers the only promise of escape from this crisis.

It is one thing, however, to make the case that freedom is necessary in China today, in the sense and for the reasons I have set out, and something else altogether to show how freedom thus understood is to be achieved, or, harder still, to prove that it will be achieved. That freedom is a necessary condition for overcoming the moral crisis does not tell us whether it will materialize. Indeed, a special feature of the moral crisis in post-Mao China, and an important reason for its staying power, is precisely the existence of durable political forces with a vested interest in preventing the materialization of the necessary. The Chinese political structure as it has evolved in the past six decades or more has been consistently devoid of internal incentives to promote or allow incremental growth in those virtues and capacities associated with freedom and self-government, and this remains largely true today. It should therefore come as no surprise if initial increases in freedom, if and when central control slackens in one way or another, are accompanied by displays of confusion, crude egoism, sheer irresponsibility, and even new forms of corruption and lawlessness. Nor should it be surprising, in such an event, if the immediate consequences of increased freedom are taken to show that freedom is what China can ill afford. So I do not think for a moment

that our path to freedom will be straight and easy: we have been lurching toward freedom, and we know not exactly what it is. I have tried only to show that it is necessary, in the hope that knowledge of this necessity combined with awareness of the difficulties and dangers of acting on this necessity will produce in us both the moral motivation to strive for freedom and the political prudence to go about it in the right way. The test of freedom is one we will have to pass sooner or later if we are to extricate ourselves from the moral crisis that signals our entrapment in the thwarted transition from the old to the new. Only then will we have moved properly – that is, as modern subjects – into the modern world, with its fair share of problems and fair chance to cope with them.

The line of thinking just sketched is one that informs, in one way or another, all the chapters of this book. This does not mean, however, that these chapters are neatly constructed to give substance and cogency to this line of thinking and do nothing else. If the chapters hang together around the twin themes of moral crisis and escape through freedom, most of them take up other issues along the way. These other issues invariably bear to one degree or another on the main thematic thread. Even when they appear to do so less directly, they belong to the larger picture of the moral, political, and spiritual landscape of the reform, which, as I have said, I am also concerned to capture, especially as refracted by the mirror of the moral crisis. As a result, each chapter, although animated and shaped by the overarching themes of moral crisis and freedom, is nevertheless largely independent and freestanding, treating a set of problems with a self-contained subject matter and logic of its own.

In Chapter 1, I provide a reasonably comprehensive, if somewhat schematic, account of the moral crisis. In this account I touch on many other things, both conceptual and substantive, than is directly relevant to the theme of freedom because it is only in the context of some such richer account that the theme of freedom can naturally and accurately emerge. If this chapter provides an anatomy of the moral crisis itself and is in this sense a treatment of the purely *moral* dimension of the crisis, Chapter 2, also devoted entirely to the moral crisis, probes its political dimension and gives a glimpse of how the moral vacuum, as the moral crisis is sometimes called, is to a large degree politically created. In these first two chapters, the idea that a new kind of moral subject is needed to fill the moral vacuum makes its initial appearance, as does the related idea that this new moral subject in turn needs greatly expanded opportunities for choice and responsibility. The stage is thus set for the theme of freedom to come to the fore, and so it does in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 has what I intend to be a very deliberate title, for we have come to a point in China, as the moral crisis tells us, where we must confront the question of freedom, but it is, first and foremost, as a question that we must consider it. Freedom is an ideologically loaded concept – as much an indispensable value under modern conditions of life as it is a highly plastic notion that lends itself to all kinds of questionable conceptions and uses. There is no ready-made notion of freedom, in either moral or institutional terms, that we can simply pick up and, as it were, apply to Chinese society. It is in this spirit that I approach the question of freedom in Chapter 3, both conceptually and substantively, and if there is one thing central to this approach, it is the realization that freedom must be understood and appraised within the larger framework of agency.

By agency I mean the distinctively human way of acting and acquiring subjectivity in and through acting, including the values that make such action and subjectivity possible. Thus understood, agency is a common denominator of all forms of human life as *human* life, whether or not the value of freedom has a place in them. To think about freedom in the larger and deeper terms of agency is not to deny the pivotal role of freedom as a set of values and institutional forms in which agency must find expression under modern conditions of life but precisely to understand freedom as such. Adoption of this broader approach also allows us to examine within the same conceptual framework a very different configuration of agency, which I call identification, as it figures in both traditional China and Mao's China. Thus, in Chapter 5, I give a comparative account of freedom and identification as two major, alternative configurations of agency. Although it is perhaps only natural that in this account I associate freedom with the modern West, for the most part, and identification with traditional and Mao's China, the most important comparison I am pursuing is typological. There is no reason why freedom cannot present itself as a question in the context of Chinese moral and political culture and become part of that culture. Thus, while the cross-cultural dimension of the comparison is not without its interest, my deeper aim is to outline the two paradigms of agency – freedom and identification – in terms of which we can more precisely understand not only the kind of moral subject that is called for by the new realities of Chinese society (as discussed in Chapter 3) but also the old Maoist moral subject it is meant to replace. In this, Chapter 5 serves as a necessary complement to Chapter 3.

This approach to freedom is quite far removed from the prevailing one, so I devote a part of Chapter 4 to showing why it is to be preferred. I do so in the form of a commentary on Thomas Metzger's account of

freedom, both because this account is representative of the prevailing view and because Metzger addresses the question of freedom in a comparative context involving China. In this regard, my polemic against Metzger is intended to serve as a natural bridge to Chapter 5. But there is an even more important reason to subject Metzger's account of freedom to critical discussion, for Metzger takes with uncommon seriousness what one may call the epistemological conditions of freedom and, to my knowledge, his is the only extensive treatment of such conditions that places the Chinese and Western traditions and current realities in a comparative context. Thus, I can think of no better way to take up this important dimension of the question of freedom than through an engagement with Metzger, and the bulk of Chapter 4 serves this purpose.

In some ways Chapter 6 brings together the treatment of the moral crisis in Chapters 1 and 2 and the examination of freedom and identification and agency in Chapters 3 to 5, but with a Freudian slant. In this chapter I draw on Freud's ideas of the superego and group psychology, among other things, to provide an analysis of the moral crisis that is less comprehensive than that found in Chapter 1 but that goes deeper into the structure of the crisis. In the process of doing so, I find it useful to work with a distinction between what I call the leader-centered and the superego-centered morality, based on devotion and introjection, respectively, which match quite well the two paradigms of agency called freedom and identification. The result is a reinforcement and enrichment of the earlier analyses, linking the moral crisis with the two kinds of agency and of moral subjectivity in one unified frame of reference and, unlike in Chapter 5, doing so entirely within the Chinese context. It is worth emphasizing here, as I do in the chapter itself, that my Freudian or Freud-inspired reflections on China's moral crisis and on the two kinds of morality and moral subjectivity are meant to be judged on their cogency and explanatory power and not on their accuracy as an interpretation of Freud.

On the face of it, Chapter 7, an analysis of poverty in terms of agency, has little to do with either the theme of moral crisis or the theme of freedom, except that it shares with my treatment of these themes a theoretical underpinning in the concept of agency. But closer inspection will reveal that it actually stands in a significant relation to both, quite apart from the fact that the issue of poverty in China today is worth examining in its own right. There is a sense in which the alarming gap between the rich and the poor that has opened up in the course of the reform and shows no signs of narrowing is both an outcome of the moral crisis and one of its

aggravating conditions: an outcome in that the unchecked and ill-regulated scramble for wealth is a mirror of the soullessness and meaninglessness of the human condition in China; and an aggravating condition because the resentment of the poor against the rich, so often for good reason given the extent of social injustice but with no effective outlet, adds limitless fuel to the burning down of trust and law-abidingness that is part of the moral crisis. There is also a sense in which the lack of freedom for other things – above all, for the emergence of a new, self-governing moral subject – is what lies behind the desperate concentration of energy on the quest for wealth as an escape from the otherwise empty and meaningless condition of life. The gap between rich and poor in China today, with its devastating effect on the social and moral fabric of Chinese society, is thus part of a larger picture in which poverty, moral crisis, and lack of freedom stand in a mutually causal relationship with one another.

Next, in Chapter 8, as another kind of complement to Chapter 3, I take up the question of democracy. As in my account of freedom, I see and present democracy as a problem that is entirely internal to the condition and dynamic of Chinese society. Whereas the title of the chapter refers only to democracy, the actual treatment of the subject cannot but give almost equal weight to the question of freedom: democracy is understood in terms of agency, just as freedom is, and the two are inextricably linked in that uneasy combination known as liberal democracy. In this chapter, as in almost all the chapters preceding it, what emerges above all is a sense of the new realities of Chinese society and of what it takes to respond adequately at the level of moral and political culture to such realities. As I make clear in this chapter, and this applies equally elsewhere in the book, I do not affirm these new realities or, by the same token, any specific vision of what China should be like in its moral and political culture, let alone in the institutional realization of any such vision, given such realities. But two things I do believe: namely, that these new realities must be confronted at the level of moral and political culture; and that, whatever one may think about such realities in their specific, contingent form in China today, we, as inhabitants of the modern world, have no choice but to embrace (the need for) much greater freedom than we have been accustomed to in Mao's China and since and to accept, wherever they may lead, the challenges and risks of this new freedom.

In the specific context of China today, these challenges and risks resist any comfortable expectations of freedom as a ready solution to our problems. For freedom is above all a question, and to speak of it as a solution, as I have frequently done in this book, is actually to think of it as an

especially necessary question. How we approach and answer this question will help determine whether we will be able to come up with what can reasonably qualify as a solution, and, if so, what that solution is like. Chapter 9, much briefer than all the others, serves as a reminder of the status of freedom as a question. And it does so by showing, in general terms, that modern liberty raises deeper issues than the mainstream, liberal democratic conception of freedom is able or concerned to address, and, in the specific context of post-communist China, that one essential task, and hence test, of freedom is as an adequate response to the moral crisis and to the need for a new kind of moral subject.

Finally, in Chapter 10, I attempt to provide a tentative answer to the questions of freedom raised in Chapter 9 and indeed throughout the book – or rather a tentative framework or line of approach for thinking about potential answers. To this end, and in order to set the normative quest for the most apposite freedom on a reasonably solid footing, I seek to combine a rough sketch of the normative contours of the modern world and of China as part of it with a brief consideration of the relevant political and cultural realities in China today. The result is a relatively comprehensive, if necessarily schematic, view of what I call the space of moral possibilities in the foreseeable future of China. If one thing stands out in this space as both needful and realistic in principle, however difficult in practice, it is the prospect of finding a symbiotic relation between freedom and the good. If this is too much to hope for, as yet, I hope at least to have shown the point of embarking on the quest.

As this glimpse of its individual chapters makes clear, the book is essentially about China. It may therefore come as a surprise that, here and there, fairly long stretches of text are devoted to theoretical issues, such as the structure and configurations of human agency, with no immediate mention of China. This is true, for example, of Chapters 3, 5, and especially 7 and 10. In most cases of this kind, I allow myself a certain leeway in pursuing theoretical issues because this seems to me the best way of shedding light on the problems of China under discussion.

While relevance to these problems supplies the motivation and the necessary discipline, as well as a test of effectiveness, it would not be far wrong to say, of the more philosophical parts of my undertaking, that I have also intended this book as a work of theory (especially of moral psychology and political philosophy) – theory developed in response to China's problems and thus a kind of explicitly situated theory. As I conceive of my undertaking, while the immediate and main object under discussion is freedom in China, this is also an occasion for reflecting on