

Three Approaches to Spiritual Values

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To assess the moral/spiritual development of Chinese young and middle adults today, it is helpful to distinguish three generations. In the center are persons approximately 35-50 years old, "the Pan Xiao generation." The younger cohort has been labeled the 1970 generation, signifying the decade of their birth. The third grouping we can call the 1949 generation for they were born before or during that fateful time for China.

The Pan Xiao Generation

In 1980, a letter from "Pan Xiao" was published in the China Youth magazine. "What is the purpose of life? Should I live for myself or for other people?" These questions, raised at a turning point in contemporary Chinese history, immediately evoked heated discussion about *renshengguan* (philosophy of life). Hundreds of thousands of young people engaged in local forums, small group debates, and personal conversations about the questions raised in the original statement and subsequently published letters.

The Pan Xiao discussion was quickly followed by the 'fever of existentialism' in which the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre was prominent; the 'fever of humanism' which challenged reductionist materialism; the 'pillar of fire' discussion which debated the respective roles of money, fame, and self-realization in human flourishing; and the 'fever of Freudian psychoanalysis' which opened a public discussion of sex. The intellectual ferment and rival enthusiasms of the 1980s profoundly affected all those who participated. Many members of this generation were—and still are—spiritual seekers.

The 1970 Generation

This younger generation has come of age in the years of economic market experimentation. Without suffering the hardships of the Cultural Revolution and lacking

the revolutionary idealism that characterized their parents, these young adults seem to be 'naturally' realistic, materialistic, and individualistic. In the late 1990s some emerged as writers of popular fiction. These writers as well as their critics commonly describe this generation as self-indulgent, interested in bars, rock and roll, and sex. They display little concern for noble ideals or sacred subjects. If the life of the Pan Xiao generation is unbearably heavy, the life of the 70s generation seems unbearably light.

The 1949 Generation

This designation includes people who were born before and during the founding years of the People's Republic of China. If staunch Marxist-Maoists are still to be found in China, they are likely to be members of this generation who came of age during the inspirational heyday of the Communist party. These people tend to be sympathetic toward tradition, whether their allegiance is to the Chinese communist tradition or a more ancient Chinese tradition.

A representative of this generation is Yu Qiuyu. Born in 1946, Yu was president of the Shanghai College of Drama. In the 1990s he embarked on a 'bitter journey of culture' (*wenhua kulü*) and published a series of prose essays affirming the values of Chinese traditional culture. Yu Qiuyu's beautifully written essays became very popular, appealing to people's emotions if not their rationality. The more reasoned articulation of traditional culture and its modern significance comes from neo-Confucian scholars, such as Tu Wei-ming at Harvard University (himself born in 1940). But the appeal of neo-Confucianism among the young and middle-aged people in mainland China remains limited.

China is vast and changing fast; thus any generalization risks being one-sided and already out-of-date. Nevertheless, I believe that various religions and spiritual movements will revive and flourish in China in the coming years. The older generation of revolutionaries is aging and retiring from the social stage. The Pan Xiao generation continues to be filled with spiritual seekers, and the 1970 and younger generations are generally open to new ideas and interested in novel experiences. As governmental control over spiritual affairs continues to relax, the religious market place in China becomes more lively and diverse. This is a great era for religious enterprises and spiritual entrepreneurs. ■

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