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CONFUCIUS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NEW CULTURAL REVOLUTION TODAY

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the final decline of the Chinese society and state as signaled by the infamous Opium War (1840–1842), Confucius (551–479 B.C.) and Confucianism (the latter understood as the ideas of the former and the elaborations and interpretations made throughout the centuries) have become the foci around which the Chinese make their soul-searching reflection in an attempt to discover the causes of and the solutions to the multi-dimensional problems that China has faced for little more than a century. After the two failures of the T’ung-Chih Restoration (1862–1874) and K’ang Yu-wei’s Hundred-Day Reform (1898), most of the activist Chinese intellectuals not only began to turn their backs on their Confucian heritage but also resolutely declared a total war against it. This rebellious movement, consisting of all types of Chinese ‘Westernizers’, culminated in the May Fourth Movement in 1919.1 For the first time since the middle of the second century B.C., when Confucianism was made the official cult, Confucius became the target of assault and was held responsible for all the ills and evils then existing in China, no matter what Confucius had stood for and what the true Confucian spirit had been. Nonetheless, it was not until a little more than half a century after the May Fourth Movement – with the upsurge of the ‘New Cultural Revolution’, heralded by Premier Chou En-lai’s Political Report to the 10th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (referred to hereafter as CPC) held during August 24 to 28, 1973 – that the nation was mobilized for repudiating Confucius and Confucianism.

More daring is, however, the official praise for legalism and for the First Emperor of Ch’in (who reigned as Emperor of China 221–209 B.C., after having been the ruling prince of the Ch’in state for twenty-six years) who had appointed Li Ssu, a legalist politician, as Premier to consolidate his newly unified China, because both legalism and the First Emperor of the Ch’in dynasty have jointly symbolized Machiavellism, tyranny,
cruelty, and totalitarianism from the downfall of the Ch'in dynasty in 206 B.C. to the present day. The specific praise is for exactly what the nation had abhorred. The fact is that upon the recommendation of Li Ssu, that the Emperor's political critics be rooted out, the First Emperor of Ch'in had buried alive somewhat more than four hundred and sixty scholars – most of them Confucianists – and had all books burned, with the sole exception of the history of the former feudal Ch'in state and those on technical subjects, such as agriculture and medicine. Violation of the orders was subject to mutilation of the body, if not the death penalty. Both actions – repudiation of Confucius and Confucianism and praise for legalism and the First Emperor of Ch'in – are unprecedented in more than two thousand years of Chinese history.

It is a truism that in a Communist country any social-political campaign is always preceded or accompanied by an intensive ideological struggle. It is even more so in the Chinese Communist movement under the leadership of Chairman Mao Tse-tung. The first well-orchestrated and all-embracing campaign Mao engineered was the Rectification Campaign (1942–1944) which shocked the Chinese world in both the Communist-dominated and the government-controlled areas; the second history-making campaign Mao directed was the Great Prolearian Cultural Revolution (1966–1969) which stunned the world; and the present day ongoing nation-wide/campaign Mao personally initiated is the New Cultural Revolution which has the world worried as to the direction that China is heading. The ideological underpinnings of the Rectification Campaign were the criticisms against subjectivism and empiricism (both together are different manifestations of idealism), whereas the political significance of it was the intent to remove from influential party positions those elements whose ascendancy in the party hierarchy was due to their education in the Soviet Union and to the endorsement by their foreign mentors – they are usually referred to as the twenty-eight Chinese Bolsheviks, headed by Wang Ming who just passed away in March of this year. It was also intended to remove others who had built up their power in the Communist areas, independently of Mao, after the first CPC-Nationalist split in 1927, because they were allegedly committed to the error of empiricism. The ideological underpinnings of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution were aimed at sweeping out the Four Olds: the old thought, the old culture, the old customs, and the old habits; whereas the political significance was