

## CHAPTER ONE

# “NEW PRINCIPLES”

## *Toward a New Framework of Chinese Social Ethics*

China overthrew its monarchy a hundred years ago and is now starting its second century as a republic. There has been much to be proud of over the last century: after decades of war and upheaval, in the last thirty years China has achieved astonishing progress both in its economy and as an international presence. The world has been stunned by China's economic rise. But those achievements do not seem to have generated solidarity and cohesion among China's citizens; they have not built up our confidence in ourselves or each other. We see polluted rivers, contaminated food, violent police, uncaring passers-by, greedy officials, and self-interested citizens. We see people seeming to celebrate violence and abuse; we see millionaires scrambling to leave the country. A startling number of officials seem to have already evacuated their families in anticipation of the day when they will flee abroad with their looted fortunes. Perhaps most shocking is what happens to children in our society: two-year-old Yueyue, run over by a car and ignored by dozens who saw her; whole groups of children killed and injured in kindergarten bus accidents.<sup>1</sup> Such problems and disasters are the shame of our society. They are China's tragedy.

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1. The “Little Yueyue” tragedy (广东小悦悦悲剧) refers to an October 2011 incident in Foshan, Guangdong Province, in which a two-year-old girl, Yueyue, was hit and run over by two separate vehicles on the street yet ignored by passers-by. She died a few days later. This incident aroused collective anguish among the Chinese public over the cold-

But I do not think that they represent China's "moral collapse," as some have argued. I still believe in humanity and in particular the humanity of the Chinese people. I believe what Mencius said: "Humans all have the feeling of compassion." Our fundamental sense of sympathy and community is real, but it is often weakened by a range of influences to the point that it no longer disciplines us and drives our conduct.

We need to discuss each specific problem, then work out its direct causes and find ways to neutralize them. But I am not advocating a stopgap approach alone: in the face of so many problems, that would likely have no effect. We need not just a patch to help us muddle through but also a permanent cure. So on the one hand, we have the urgent task of forestalling disaster and social disintegration; on the other hand, we have the more fundamental goal of searching for the keys to lasting peace and security in our society. Most of the past century was a transitional period, marked by extreme turbulence. An old society was completely destroyed in those convulsions. But today we still have not yet properly established new social and conceptual systems that offer us unity, confidence, and lasting stability. We have only just emerged from our convulsive transitional period, and though things seem peaceful now, we may still be in a transformational phase. We have not yet created a new society with mechanisms for long-term stability; we have to be constantly on guard against the return of turmoil. So there is an urgent need to work out and build a new type of society, and the first step in that process is to lay firm moral foundations, from ethical fundamentals to political justice. In other words, we need to explore and construct a full ethics for a republic, covering everything from institutional justice to individual duty.

But this is precisely the area where the soft power that we have to work with is far from up to the task. Old political ideologies have completely failed to keep up with changing social reality, with the result that people find themselves stuck with a public morality that does not reflect the way that they live. Empty rhetoric is everywhere, starkly divorced from real conduct. Our old ideology was born from a theory of conquest (in this case, revolution), not a theory of governance. It started as a foreign import, and in its early incarna-

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bloodedness of those who hit and ignored her and the absence of public ethics in society. The kindergarten school bus tragedies (幼儿园校车惨祸) refer to a continuing series of traffic accidents and deaths involving unregulated kindergarten school buses and operators in rural China. In these accidents, the school buses often were overloaded, poorly maintained, and operated by irresponsible drivers hired by private kindergartens. These tragedies ignited people's anger over the country's underfunded public education system and the greediness of the private kindergarten owners.

tions was much concerned with attacking China's cultural traditions. It never gave us the tools to build a lasting polity. Recent political ideals are an improvement: the "eight honors and eight disgraces," "harmonious society," and "scientific outlook on development" attempt to draw on the resources of ancient Chinese thought and combine them with a modern sensibility.<sup>2</sup> But slogans like "eight honors and eight disgraces" are hardly a complete, free-standing moral theory. And the phrase "harmonious society" is so vacuous and so obviously at odds with the reality of Chinese life that it has become little more than a punch line. Moreover, the interpretation of these slogans is always excessively ideological and fails to properly embrace China's millennia of distinctive cultural traditions. I believe that we should be embarking on many parallel projects to explore and exploit the rich seam of ethical resources that runs through China's history and culture and apply those resources to the modern world. Such projects could generate an ethical framework to underpin a new social morality.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in *New People* and other writings, Liang Qichao made an attempt to set out an ethic for a new society.<sup>3</sup> During Taiwan's "economic miracle" years, a debate erupted in Taiwan over

2. "The eight honors and eight disgraces" (八荣八耻), also known as the socialist core value system, are a set of moral concepts developed by Hu Jintao, the former Chinese president, during the Sixth Plenum Meeting of the 16th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee in late 2011. Extolling virtues such as patriotism, unity, hard work, and honesty, the concepts endeavor to promote Chinese social morality; they are integrated into the national education curriculum. The "harmonious society" (和谐社会) refers to a political doctrine laid out by Hu Jintao after the Sixth Plenum Meeting that calls for the creation of a "socialist harmonious society," further signaling a shift in the party's focus from promoting all-out economic growth to solving the resulting social tensions. "Scientific outlook on development" (科学发展观) refers to new theoretical guidance for the Chinese Communist Party that advocates comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development. It is one of former president Hu Jintao's signature theoretical innovations and political legacies, and it was written into the party's constitution after the 17th Party Congress in 2007.

3. Liang Qichao (梁启超, 1873–1929), a native of Xinhui, Guangdong Province, was a Chinese scholar, journalist, philosopher, and reformist during the late Qing Dynasty. Advocating constitutional monarchy, he played an active role, together with Kang Youwei, in the famous Hundred Days' Reform. *New People* (新民说) is a collection of articles that Liang Qichao published from 1902 to the end of 1903 in his biweekly journal *New Citizen* (新民丛报). Introducing Western political thought and comparing it with traditional Chinese thinking, Liang argued that China's traditional value system might have to be torn down to make way for a new system.

adding a new, sixth relationship to the five relationships recognized as ethically important in traditional Confucianism.<sup>4</sup> While the Confucian relationships are mainly between those who know each other well, the sixth relationship, citizenship, would link strangers. In 1940, during the war against Japan, He Lin published an article in the third issue of *Strategies of a Warring State* entitled “A New Discussion of the Five Relationships,” in which he wrote:

For thousands of years, the five Confucian relationships have endured as one of the most powerful traditional concepts shaping the moral lives of Chinese people. These relationships lie at the core of our ethical code; they constitute the regulatory framework for the Chinese ethnicity. It is our goal to discover the most current spirit of modernity through an interrogation of these old traditions. This approach, of finding the new within the old, exemplifies our adaptive acceptance of our heritage.<sup>5</sup>

Near the end of the article, he repeats the point: “The question today is: how do we locate a permanent, indestructible foundation among the broken shards of the old ethical code? And, on this foundation, how do we assemble ideals and standards of behavior for modern lives and modern society?” Other writers, such as Ch’ien Mu in his *Outline of Chinese History* and Feng Youlan in *Six Books of Continuity and Renewal*, have also tried to revive our traditions and restore respect to them through a process of renewal and adaptation.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the “enlightenment” represented by the May Fourth Movement has had an enormous impact, but it also has its blind spots and

4. “The five constant relationships” (五伦) refers to the five fundamental relationships in Confucian philosophy: those between ruler and subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend. The five relationships constitute the basic hierarchical structure of Confucian society.

5. He Lin (贺麟, 1902–92), a native of Jintang, Sichuan Province, was a Chinese scholar and philosopher who was regarded as the leader in “neo-idealism.” He studied Western philosophy in the United States and Germany and taught in the philosophy departments of leading Chinese universities, including Peking University. He was a fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1955–92, specializing in Western philosophy.

6. Ch’ien Mu (Qian Mu) (钱穆, 1895–1990), a native of Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, was a preeminent Chinese historian, educator, and philosopher in the twentieth century. During the 1930s, Ch’ien taught at top Chinese universities, including Peking University and Tsinghua University. He left mainland China for Hong Kong in 1949 and later moved to Taiwan in 1966. Unlike other scholars influenced by the New Culture Movement during this era, Ch’ien was a defender of traditional Confucian values. Feng Youlan (冯友兰,

abuses.<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps time to shine a light on enlightenment itself—that is, to locate the abuses inherent within it.

The most important task is to develop a set of fundamental moral principles—*gangchang* (纲常), or “three guidelines and five constants” (*san gang wu chang*, 三纲五常)—to anchor our ethical system. For many, “moral principles” means nothing more than prescriptions and restrictions, but we do not have to see them in that way. The old principles of Confucianism are the “three guidelines and five constants.” The “three guidelines” are those that the ruler sets for the subject; the husband sets for the wife; and the father sets for the son. The “five constants” can mean either the “five constant relationships” or “the five constant virtues.” The relationships are those between ruler and subject; father and son; husband and wife; elder brother and younger brother; and friend and friend. With the exception of the last, they are all obedience relationships. The five constant virtues are benevolence, rightness, ritual, wisdom, and faithfulness. The three guidelines and five constants have been given a bad name for nearly a century. They have been seen as an enemy to overcome, so much so that today many Chinese people think of the guidelines and constants as the biggest obstacle to progress. It has become commonplace to say “The old rules kill the human spirit” or “Prescriptive labels eat our humanity.” But that view is wrong. Chinese civilization exists only because Confucian guidelines and constants maintained it over so many centuries. And if we are today attempting to construct a new, more rational system of social ethics, then our purpose is the same as that of Confucius: to build a space for people to live in freedom.

Aside from this misunderstanding of our own history, another objection to fixed moral principles comes from the modern world. In modern societies, relativism—and sometimes nihilism—are commonplace. Relativism disputes and rejects universal moral principles. But if we take a hard look at our own

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1895–1990), was an influential and leading Chinese philosopher in the modern era. A native of Nanyang, Henan Province, Feng graduated from Columbia University with a Ph.D. in philosophy in 1923 and went on to teach at leading Chinese universities such as Tsinghua University. Throughout his life, he worked on reconciling traditional Chinese thought with the methods and concerns of modern Western philosophy.

7. The May Fourth Movement (五四运动) was an anti-imperialist demonstration initiated by students in Beijing on May 4, 1919, as a direct result of China’s diplomatic failure at the Paris Peace Conference to prevent Japan from taking over Shandong. The movement soon ignited national anger against imperialism and marked the upsurge of Chinese nationalism. Due to its dynamic intellectual and cultural discourse, this “Chinese Renaissance” was seen as the first enlightenment movement in China’s modern history.

psychology and the realities of history, we do indeed find certain natural moral principles. We find that there are certain acts—the indiscriminate harming of members of our own species or the killing of innocents—that can never be justified and against which our very psychology rebels. Take another example: there is a fairly universal intuition that humanity must have a basic social order, because without it we have no way to reduce our exposure to danger. In every civilization, every religion, and every legal code we find these shared intuitions and rules. Of course, they represent very limited, very primitive principles—and that is precisely what we need for our ethical foundations.

I believe that what we now need to locate is precisely this kind of eternal, solid moral foundation. We need the moral principles behind the old moral principles—their distilled moral principles. Once we find them, we can give new meaning to these distilled principles by applying them to modern times, expanding and interpreting them for our changed society. In fact, beneath the rules of the old moral code we do see more basic, more eternal elements. For example, lying within the old code is an endorsement of a basic political and social order that helps to protect human life. It is this element that preserves human society and the existence of the group. This seems to have been what Zhu Xi meant when he wrote, “The guidelines and constants will not be destroyed in a million years.”<sup>8</sup> Preservation of the species and socialization: these have been always intuitively recognized as natural principles.

Of course, depending on our subjective attitudes and our moral efforts, those principles can be more or less fully realized; they go through periods of flourishing and decay. But our core moral principles have never changed, never in the history of China's countless dynasties. Even under the “tyrannical Qin”—the object of severe criticism by Zhu Xi—our foundational moral principles were not lost. That is why we identify morality as independent of politics to some extent and more permanent than any specific political system or ideology. And if we turn from Chinese historical comparisons to comparisons across the world, we find that all religions, cultures, and nations share certain fundamental moral prescriptions, though their details and forms vary with respect to historical and ethnic particulars.

8. Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200), a native of Wuyuan, Jiangxi Province, was a preeminent scholar and philosopher during the Song Dynasty (960–1628). Zhu created “neo-Confucianism” by selecting and recompiling Confucian classics with his own commentary. His commentary restored Confucianism's original focus on moral cultivation after the more bureaucratic stance of the preceding dynasties, and neo-Confucianism was regarded as the orthodoxy of Confucianism for the imperial exams until they were abolished in 1905.

In Chinese history, the Confucians who have dominated our politics have of course given much attention to the moral foundations of our polity. But that concern is not unique to the Confucians. The *Guanzi*, a compilation of philosophical writings often seen as the ancestor of the legalist school, includes an essay on “the four cardinal virtues,” which it defines as ritual, rightness, integrity, and the sense of shame.<sup>9</sup> “The state has four cardinal virtues,” it states. “If one is eliminated, the state will totter. If two, it will be in danger. If three, it will be overthrown. If all four are eliminated, it will be totally destroyed.” Of course, if one cardinal virtue totters, it can be set straight. A state can pull itself out of danger. Even a state that has been “overthrown” can “rise” again. But if all four virtues are destroyed—if ritual, rightness, good faith, and the sense of shame are all lost—then the state will be destroyed, and “what has been totally destroyed can never be restored.”

The last century has rained blow after blow on those virtues. Many times, all four have been weakened to the point of near collapse. China’s glorious millennia of history are also a burden, and onto the weight of those centuries has been added humiliation and turmoil, followed by a century of violence and war. Now, suddenly, we are returning from the margins to a position in the spotlight on world affairs. Responsibilities are piling up; we face many questions. China has seen a massive resurgence in its economy and its strength as a state, but its culture and ethics seem to have lagged behind and in some aspects even to have regressed. As a result, social and moral reconstruction seem ever more vital and urgent. In the face of so many questions, we must start to triage and focus on the most important. However limited our time is, quick fixes will not do; we must try to find a model that will stand the test of time. Here I attempt to describe one conception of a new Chinese social ethics for a modern society.

### *The New Chinese Social Ethics*

The reason for calling my proposal a “new” ethics (*xin gangchang*, 新纲常) is that we are marking a shift from the traditional to the modern. Though I call them “Chinese,” it is important to specify which China is referred to: in this case, my focus is the cultural tradition, not the present polity of mainland

9. *Guanzi* (《管子》) is a collection of philosophical essays by Guan Zhong (管仲, 725–645 BC), an ancient Chinese philosopher and counselor to Duke Huan of Qi during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC). These essays are about effective government and superior statecraft, combining both Confucian ritual and legalist order.

China. We must, for example, consider “greater China”: the lives and experiences of other ethnic Chinese, though the primary point of reference will, of course, be mainland China. If we want mainland China to be a leader in the future development of Chinese culture—and certainly if we wish to bring closer the day of Chinese unification—then we must not be limited by simplistic divisions of state or political entities. In particular, we must not be bound in our discussion by an overly narrow political ideology.

Commentators on Confucius have observed that in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, he already treats as Chinese those barbarians who have been assimilated into Chinese culture and as barbarian those ethnic Chinese who have become barbarians. Confucius himself says in the *Analects*, “If the rituals are lost, then seek them among the people” and “The *dao* does not prevail! I shall set out over the sea on a raft.” These words express his inclusiveness, his interest in the populace, in culture, and in the universal values that culture expresses. It would befit us to learn from his example. Morality draws its lifeblood from the community. Morality must grow naturally, but it also needs institutional protection and support from society.

An ethical system can be understood as having two parts: normative principles and value-based beliefs. Of those, the principles are more important. The Chinese word for ethics can be deconstructed into “human relations” and “reasoning,” so we should proceed as with all reasoning: by proposing and arguing for principles that will underpin the ethical system. In modern society, in particular, we must first give our attention to principles governing conduct, institutions, and policies. So we must start with a set of basic moral or ethical principles, and I shall frame them using the traditional language: I shall propose a set of new guidelines and constants. In Chinese, *gang*, the term for “guideline,” signals to us that these rules will be in the form of moral principles and that they are deep, fundamental principles. *Chang*, the term for “constant,” has a dual meaning: that these rules are both eternal and in continual operation.

### THE THREE NEW GUIDELINES

First are the three new guidelines. The three old guidelines state that “the ruler sets guidelines for the subject; the husband sets guidelines for the wife; the father sets guidelines for the son.” While retaining the framework of control and subordination, we can abandon the hierarchical relationships that these rules establish between individuals and avoid conflating familial relations with social and political institutions. So I tentatively propose three new



principles: “The people set guidelines for the government; rightness sets guidelines for human beings; the living set guidelines for all things.”

THE PEOPLE SET GUIDELINES FOR THE GOVERNMENT (民为政纲). “Government” here refers to all aspects of the administration of our polity. “The people” refers not simply to a collection of individuals; the term’s meaning can be extended to express the fundamental value that government must respect and the primary moral principle that government must obey: that the people are the source, owner, and subject of government.

“The people” should include every person, so government should in principle serve all people. But we know that government is fundamentally unlike other institutions, or ungoverned systems, in that it must involve power—specifically the power to compel. There is a necessary relationship of command and compliance. So in the theory of government we can—and must—draw a distinction between rulers, enforcers, political leaders, officials, and other holders of power and those people who do not hold that kind of authority. The latter are citizens, in the sense of “John Q. Citizen”; they have no government authority, and they, the governed, vastly outnumber the governors. This distinction is of vital importance, because it prevents us from mistaking rule by the few (or even the one) for rule by “the people” or “the nation.” It precludes the claim “*L’État, c’est moi*”—“The state, it is me.”

When this rule is properly applied, the interests and opinions of citizens should be the primary point of reference for those who govern. Naturally, the identities of the two groups are not set in stone. There can be traffic between them and vertical mobility: officials can become citizens; citizens can become officials. When designing political systems, we should make all efforts to promote vertical mobility between the two groups, and we should counter both open and covert heredity of social status. Also, to a certain extent, those in the official group are still citizens. Whatever position they hold, they must still retain their identities as citizens. In this sense, citizenship is a universal value, not just a status. Citizenship encompasses every person. So when we say “The people are the source of government” or “The people set guidelines for the government,” it means that power does not serve the few who are in government, nor in fact does it serve the majority. It serves the entire citizenry, every member of society.

But as we just noted, to prevent excessive concentration and abuse of power in the name of “the people,” we must still clearly distinguish between those who wield power as a part of their day-to-day duties and those who do not. Looking at present-day and historical evidence, we find that every society

seems to include these two groups of people: there is always a group of those who govern, and they are always relatively few in number. We do not need an overly romantic conception of democracy—one that imagines that the entire populace can engage directly in every aspect of daily governance. That would easily give a few ambitious individuals the excuse to create a tyranny in the name of “the people.” It is better to honestly admit that the power to govern is always assigned to some group and that doing so is necessary for the efficient administration of government. However, we must rigorously monitor and limit this power. Therefore, given this necessary division, we still need to affirm that the people set guidelines for the government or the rulers. Those in power must accept the rule of the governed, of the citizenry, and must answer to them.

Of course, this relationship can be worked out at basic or higher levels. The basic level simply affirms that the people are fundamental: “The people are the root of a country; if the root is firm, the country is tranquil.” Those who govern should concern themselves with standards of living and should be responsive to the will of the people. To put it in more modern terms, we should have “government for the people,” or, in the words of Hu Jintao, “we must exercise power for the people, identify ourselves with them, and work for their interests.” (These formulations also assume a distinction between those who govern and the people.) This defines the basic level of the governed-governor relationship. In recognition of the dominant trend in modern society, we should also reduce the distance felt between the people and the governors. If we fully commit to a structure in which power is wielded for the people and recognize that the ultimate foundation for political legitimacy lies in public consent, then we will move toward democracy—rule-of-law democracy, constitutional democracy. This kind of democracy is the higher-level realization of the principle that the people set guidelines for the government. In a rule-of-law, constitutional democracy, the people can fully exercise their political rights, effectively monitor and check those who govern, and peacefully select and replace them. Of course, even in a democratic system, the “demos” (the people) and the “kratia” (the power) are never completely merged. There will always be a distinct group that governs, day to day; there will always be differences in power and status. So even in a democracy, the principle that the people set guidelines for the government, that the people govern the governors, must be upheld and reinforced.

RIGHTNESS SETS GUIDELINES FOR HUMAN BEINGS (义为人纲). The principle that the people set guidelines for the government imposes duties on those who hold power by virtue of their roles in government. It applies pri-

marily to institutional justice and the ethical responsibilities of the minority with power. Institutional justice can, of course, be seen as one part of a broader set of ethical responsibilities applying to all people. So we also need to suggest a universal system of duty that applies equally to every person and at the same time includes the specific duties of the political ethic discussed above. Specific duties arise as a result of one's occupation; universal duties arise simply as a function of being a person. And if we look at these duties as arising simply from being a person, simply from being a member of society, then we find that they must have certain other features, which are worth discussing separately.

We noted that there will always be differences in political power, so the relationships between people and agents of government are never relationships of total equality. Everyone cannot be treated the same. But fair mechanisms of vertical mobility and participation allow us to say that there is equality of political opportunity and participation. The requirement that government be subject to the guidelines of the people is a way of generating another sort of equality. Government agents therefore should concede that their authority comes from the people and should accept more duties and responsibilities. But when we talk about duties that should be accepted by everyone, by every member of society, these are universal, equal duties that allow no distinction between persons and no ordering or ranking. This equality is constituted in persons, and its referent is persons. That means that the basic requirement of "what is right" is equal treatment, in at least a few fundamental aspects. The ethical "golden rule"—and the Confucian formulation of it—is ultimately about equality in the way you treat yourself and others. From this, we can derive the directive to treat people as people and from that the most common ethical strictures: do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, do no sexual violence.

So all people should follow the basic strictures of what is right; what is right should determine the fundamental rules of conduct for all people. That is not to say that there are no differences between people or that there should be no differences between people. Rather, it is to say that there are some basic rules of behavior that should be equally observed by and demanded of all persons. If we want to say that this duty arises from a kind of difference, the relevant difference is not among persons but rather between people and other animals. In ancient China, it was held that the difference between men and beasts lay in virtue—in a sense of right and wrong, a sense of morality. As Mencius says, if a man has no virtue in his heart and his conduct is not right, then "what is there to choose between him and a brute?" In the modern

West, philosophers from Kant to Rawls tell us that the distinctive features of humans are our reason and our sense of justice. Reason allows us to order our own lives; our sense of what is right allows us to order a society in which we can live together.

When the thinkers of ancient China spoke of what is right, it included a right to life that was equal and fully developed for all. But it did not require absolute equality in terms of institutional authority or even equality before the law. But our modern conception of what is right is an autonomous, equal, and independent form of justice. This modern conception brooks no distinctions between persons in their fundamental rights, though it may still allow inequality in the distribution of power, money, and status. All people are absolutely equal before the law, and all people have an equal right to political participation. They also must accept the duties that are concomitant with their rights. In addition to their duties as citizens, people should also accept their natural duties and professional ethical duties. The ethics of government can be seen as one specific kind of professional ethics, but it is worth discussing separately, as above, because of the unique importance of government, which impinges on the life of every person.

THE LIVING SET GUIDELINES FOR ALL THINGS (生为物纲). If “The people set guidelines for the government” is the moral principle for the realm of government, and “Rightness sets guidelines for human beings” is the moral principle for the broader realm of society, then “The living set guidelines for all things” is the principle with the very broadest scope: it applies to everything in the natural universe. Within their respective principles, the terms “government” and “people” define both the scope of application and the ethical subjects on whom those principles are binding. In this last principle, the term “all things” is different: it represents a scope of application that encompasses all physical things, all of existence. But the ethical subject that is bound by this principle is humanity. Of course, humans are a part of the world. But we are different from every other animal and thing, because only humankind has consciousness and reason. Therefore humans must accept the role of moral agents. So only humans, the “paragon of animals,” are the ethical subjects of this moral duty; only we are obliged to steward all other “things.”

So what is this duty? What is the fundamental moral principle governing what we do with the things around us? It can be expressed as “survival” or perhaps “coexistence.” This principle seems to have been well understood in the ancient literature on The Way (Dao). The *Book of Changes* says “Production and reproduction is what is called change. . . . The great attribute of heaven and earth is the giving and maintaining of life.” Laozi wrote, “The

Way conforms to its own nature.”<sup>10</sup> There were also specific rules of conduct: “Fine nets are not allowed to enter the pools and ponds . . . the axes and bills enter the hills and forests only at the proper time.” Today we have more than fifty years of experience of systematic environmental ethics and experiments in ecological practice to draw on. But there has been no change in the prime directive or governing framework: now, as then, it is “coexistence.”

#### THE FIVE NEW CONSTANTS

This section is in two parts. The first part discusses the five constant relationships—five social relations that we frequently have to navigate. The second part discusses the five constant virtues—five eternal virtues that we should possess.

**THE FIVE CONSTANT RELATIONSHIPS.** The five relationships in classical philosophy are between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brothers, and friends. Those were the relationships that ancient society regarded as vital. But enormous changes have occurred, both within Chinese society and around it, so from the perspective of modern social ethics, I believe that the following five key relationships can be discerned:

1. *Humankind and nature*: the relationship between people and the natural world.
2. *Group relationships*: the relationships between people in groups. On the international level, these occur primarily as relations between nation-states. Within one country, they are primarily the relationships between ethnic groups, though of course other examples exist: relations between regions or between social groups and so forth.

10. The *Book of Changes* (《周易》), also known as *Zhouyi*, *I-Ching*, or the *Classic of Changes*, is an ancient Chinese text on the dynamic balance of opposites, often used for divination. The *Book of Changes* is believed to have been written by the mythical prehistoric emperor of China, Fu Xi (伏羲, 3000–2000 BC) and perfected by King Wen of Zhou (周文王, 1152–1056 BC) during the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BC). Both Confucianism and Taoism take their philosophical roots from the *Book of Changes*, making it still politically and philosophically influential in modern China as well as other Confucian societies in East Asia. Laozi (老子, ca. 571–471 BC) was an ancient Chinese thinker and philosopher during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC) of Chinese history. As the author of *Daodejing* (*Tao-te Ching*) and the founder of Taoism, Laozi promulgated the virtues of “naturalness” (自然, *ziran*) and “nonaction” (无为, *wuwei*). Laozi has also been transformed into a religious figure as the founder of Taoism (also romanized as “Daoism”).

3. *Social relationships* (narrowly understood): the institutional relationship of individuals with the state: relations between individuals and institutions and between individuals and the national government.

4. *Individual relationships*: relationships between individuals and specific other individuals, in particular, relationships between strangers.

5. *Personal relationships*: relationships including parental, spousal, fraternal, and all other family relationships and relationships between friends.

Corresponding to each of these five relationships are five virtues or ethical expectations, which I summarize as harmony with nature; peace between groups; fairness in society; individuals doing right by each other; and closeness in personal relationships.

1. *Harmony with nature*: This ethical expectation means that the relationship between humankind and nature should be one of harmony and coexistence, not of victory and defeat, conqueror and conquered. Nor should it be purely the relationship of exploiter to exploited. Here, harmony with nature is not the individual, spiritual experience of oneness with nature (though that spiritual experience is a precious resource for our treatment of the natural world); rather, harmony with nature is a rule for societies. It states that human beings should see themselves and nature as part of an indivisible whole and, accordingly, should pursue harmony in their relationship with nature. While the natural world can exist without humanity, humanity cannot exist without nature. It is therefore incumbent on us to make harmony and coexistence our goal and to make great efforts to achieve it. Nature is not going to bend to accommodate humankind; humankind must accommodate itself to nature. Thus a reasonable relationship between humankind and nature is not for humanity to try to conquer and defeat nature; it is to hold nature close and treat it kindly. Only by doing so can we maintain any form of sustainable development. If humanity only exploits and abuses nature, then nature will inevitably punish us; humanity will ultimately find itself abandoned by nature.

2. *Peace between groups*: First, this expectation means that relations between nation-states should be calm and peaceful. States must make great efforts to avoid the use of force, to avoid war, and to pursue cooperation for mutual gain. Second, ethnic groups within a state must pursue peaceful and harmonious relations so that they can unite and cooperate.

3. *Fairness in society*: This expectation means that humanity must follow the ancient principle "all under heaven for the public good": a society's institutional arrangements and policies should embody the principle of justice and

should treat every person equally. Society and government should protect the rights of every citizen, and individuals should carry out their duties as citizens.

4. *Individuals doing right by each other*: This expectation means that in their relations with other individuals, people should follow general principles of morality and courtesy and should perform their natural duties. These include the golden rule, formulated in the classical literature as “do not do to others what you would not have done to yourself” and interpreted in modern times as “tolerance.” In a modern society, we must take special care when interacting with strangers to treat them as equals and to act reasonably and do right by them.

5. *Closeness in personal relationships*: This expectation is slightly different from “doing right”: it is a closer and friendlier relationship. Through marriage and friendship, certain people who were once strangers enter into a personal relationship. Compared with the total number of people in our community, only very few people are included in any one individual’s personal relationships—necessarily, otherwise they could not be so close. Personal relationships form a fundamental social cell, and though these cells are small, they are extremely important to the happiness of their members. There are rich philosophical resources in the ancient literature concerning these relationships. The “five relationships” appear in some of China’s very earliest books, the *Book of Documents* and the *Historical Records* (“Annals of the Five Emperors”): “Fathers became just, mothers loving, elder brothers sociable, younger ones respectful, and children filial.”<sup>11</sup> Mencius adds: “between friends, fidelity.” Family love and friendship are still highly prized among Chinese people, though they have changed: the ideas of rank and obedience are much criticized today, and a clearer distinction is drawn between family and nonfamily relationships. But there is certainly good reason to keep them on our list of fundamental social “moral principles.”

THE FIVE CONSTANT VIRTUES. Here I borrow the five virtues that were identified in the ancient classics: benevolence (仁, *ren*), rightness (义, *yi*), rit-

11. The *Book of Documents* (《尚书》), also known as *Shujing*, refers to one of the Five Classics of Confucianism. It comprises fifty-eight chapters describing the sages of ancient China, including the legendary kings Yao and Shun. The *Book of Documents* is often considered the first narrative history of ancient China. “Annals of the Five Emperors” (《五帝本纪》) is the first chapter of the 130-chapter *Historical Records* (《史记》), written by Sima Qian (135–86 BC) during the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 9). It lists the records of five prehistoric legendary Chinese emperors: Huang Di (the Yellow Emperor), Emperor Zhuan Xu, Emperor Di Ku, Emperor Rao, and Emperor Shun.

ual (禮, *li*), wisdom (智, *zhi*) and faithfulness (信, *xin*). These five concepts, with all their connotations, still have great force today, though we can and should apply new meanings and new interpretations to them. The five virtues can be understood as institutional virtues, but here I am looking at them primarily as personal qualities. I interpret them using the formulation of Mencius, who identifies each of the first four as having its origin in one of four affective attitudes. Mencius, who uses these founts of morality to start his discussion of the virtues, believes that all people possess these four “sources of goodness.” They provide the motivation for morality and give us reason to believe that morality will prevail. At the same time, bearing in mind the performative nature of virtues, I also reference the cardinal virtues of ancient Greece: temperance, courage, prudence, and justice.

1. *Benevolence*: Mencius says: “The feeling of compassion is the origin of benevolence.” Compassion is a softness of heart, sympathy, or pity. In ancient China, benevolence was believed to be the “master virtue,” so compassion is not just the origin of benevolence; it is the most important of the four attitudes, and it can be seen as the source of all morality. Looked at in performative terms, “benevolence is the characteristic element of humanity”; it is “treating people as people,” or acting toward other people with humanity.

2. *Rightness*: Mencius says: “The feeling of shame and dislike is the origin of rightness.” In this tenet, Mencius highlights both the fundamental nature of this sense—that is, the sense of what is right is first and foremost a prohibition on evil; it is a sense of shame and distaste for evil. If compassion is a positive motivator for virtuous conduct, then shame and dislike are negative motivators, and for some people, negative motivations may even outweigh positive spurs to action. Among the Greek virtues, it is not only justice that corresponds to Mencian rightness; courage also fits in this category. For Mencius, courage is not physical bravado but a determination to do one’s duty, whatever the obstacles: “I will go forward against thousands and tens of thousands.”

3. *Ritual*: Ritual is both a social institution and a personal commitment to courtesy. Here we address ritual mainly as a personal virtue: courtesy and propriety. Mencius says: “The feeling of modesty and the desire to accommodate is the origin of ritual. . . . Ritual is an attitude of honor and respect.” Accommodating others implies controlling and restricting ourselves: self-restraint is a prerequisite for proper ritual. And self-restraint means limiting our desires, particularly our material desires. The virtue of ritual can therefore be viewed as closest to the ancient Greek virtue of temperance. Combining ritual and temperance, we get manners. From the etiquette of public



spaces to the urbane warmth of the cultured individual, good manners maintain a kind of balance with the courageous impulse to do one's duty as described in the preceding paragraph.

4. *Wisdom*: Mencius says: "A heart that distinguishes right from wrong is the origin of wisdom." Right and wrong here refers to moral rightness, to what is proper and what is improper. Mencius has attributed the first three virtues to moral feelings or will; here what we see is the rational capacity to make moral judgments. Wisdom is the ability to recognize what is right, but it is not simply the knowledge of moral rules. It includes the ability to weigh and consider: the will and the wisdom to make moral judgments or choices, including the wisdom to find a balance and to seek a middle way. This understanding of wisdom is compatible with the ancient Greek concept, though the Mencian version is more narrowly focused on moral reasoning and moral choice.

5. *Faithfulness* (also called sincerity or trustworthiness): Good faith should suffuse all of the virtues listed above: all the virtues require both subjective honesty and objective reliability. Each person should demonstrate sincerity in his or her words and actions in order to generate trust between persons and good faith in the public sphere. Within our own society, we can see this lesson very clearly: for government action to be effective, there must be basic public credibility. And to launch a harmonious society, there must be a basic level of trust between people. So good faith can be seen as pervasive; it can also be seen as an objective. It is both a personal virtue and a social condition to which we aspire.

### *The First and the Ultimate (Beliefs and First Steps)*

The moral principles discussed in the previous section are moral rules and principles. For the value-based beliefs that should inform our new Chinese social ethics, we can adapt and update the set of five characters often found on display in traditional homes: *tian, di, jun, qin, shi*: heaven, earth, ruler, family, teacher. Hung on the walls of living rooms or next to the household shrine, these words were objects of reverence in the popular Chinese tradition, particularly during the long centuries of stability during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Even after the republic replaced the Qing Empire, many people kept the five; the only change was to substitute "country" for "ruler." With the correct interpretation, I believe that these five—heaven, earth, country, family, teacher—still represent a system of beliefs that can command widespread acceptance. Here I attempt to give a new interpretation for each of them.

1. *Heaven*: Though the same character in Chinese can represent both “nature” and “heaven,” the two concepts are distinct. Here we speak of heaven as a spiritual concept. Reverence for heaven refers to a spiritual belief in what is highest, most transcendental. This reverence may take many forms. It may be a particular, highly elaborated religion, or it may be a simple, primitive faith. But without exception, it must include an element of the transcendental and an element of piety or awe.

2. *Earth*: Traditionally, “heaven and earth” have often been yoked together as an inseparable pair. Here we split them up. I take “earth” to refer to nature, in particular to the Earth that supports us: the land upon which we crawl; this broad plain across which we and our families scurry in such numbers; the home where we grew up. Our home is a specific, immediate presence, and we cannot but feel a sense of closeness to and appreciation of it.

3. *Country*: This is, of course, our state, the polity into which we are born and which we generally leave only on our death. But a country is not just a system of institutions. It is also our nation, in the sense of being the home of our culture. It is our motherland, because our families have been here for many generations. We might leave it and travel all over the world, but it is a permanent part of our psyche. We want the best for it; we want to make a contribution to it ourselves. And the further away we are, the more we seem to yearn for it.

4. *Family*: Family can in theory refer to any relative. But as a belief, “family” concerns the love, respect, and duty that we feel toward those higher up the family tree than ourselves, particularly our direct ancestors. This is one of China’s most persistent and potent traditions. Our duty toward those who came before us does not end with their death; knowing our roots means respecting and loving our origins.

5. *Teacher*: This is another characteristic feature of the Chinese tradition: the high status accorded to culture and education and the respect for those who do its work. But as Confucius said, “If three people walk past, one of them will be a teacher for me.” The respect for teachers can be extended to anyone who can teach us or who sets us an example. It can be extended to a respect for knowledge and for practical wisdom and to appreciation and esteem for artists and scientists.

These five values can be summarized as follows: “Revere Heaven; embrace the Earth; cherish one’s country; honor one’s family; respect teachers.” These value-based beliefs vary from person to person in their expression and in the ways that they combine. Their status or rank varies; in some people, not all of these beliefs are present. But I think that these five elements, while being

highly flexible, encapsulate the key features of the Chinese cultural tradition. They are a blend of the emotional, the rational, experience, and beliefs. They do not tell us specifically what we should or should not do; they do not give direct instructions or proscriptions concerning our conduct. But they can serve us as a foundation. They can provide belief to back up our social ethics and thereby supplement our sense of ethical duty with stronger support, authority, and sanctions.

In discussing the first steps to be taken to promote these new Chinese social ethics, I again adapt language from the classics. When Confucius's student Zilu asks where governments should start, the master replies: "They must rectify names!" Zilu thinks that this is rather roundabout, but Confucius reprimands him: "If names are not correct, then language will not make sense; if language does not make sense then plans will not succeed." If names are not correct, then "the people will not know what to do. . . . So when a good ruler names a thing, it must be a name he can use in discussion; when he discusses a thing, he must be able to act on it."

However, in our society today, we can see many obvious examples of names that seem divorced from reality and conduct that fails to live up to our rhetoric. There is a disconnect between our ideology and social practice; between the superstructure above and its economic foundations; between the government and the private sphere. These disconnects are interfering with social trust, particularly with trust between the top and bottom, between the authorities and the public. They have provoked a credibility crisis. Because of these disconnects, we are constantly faced with insincerity; we are habituated to it. This sincerity gap is the underlying obstacle to building trust in our society. When there is no good faith in the language of our most fundamental social practices, when they are filled with empty rhetoric, how can we expect to find sincerity anywhere else?

If we want to be sure that our words match our deeds, that names match reality, then we need to make adjustments. Those adjustments will take time and may perhaps flow in both directions. On the one hand, we need to eliminate unjustifiable names and create more realistic ones; on the other hand, when a name has been validated by history, we should also adapt our reality to conform to that name. So which of these processes will dominate? Adapting language to match reality, or adapting reality to fit our language? If we maintain the principle of "seeking truth from facts," then it is likely to be the former. We still have many unrealistic names, much specious phrasing, particularly in formal settings. Often, even those speaking do not believe the rhetoric that they use. But I will not discuss specific examples here. Rather I

want to paraphrase what Confucius said on the “rectification of names.” I would like to propose a new rectification of names, adapted to the needs of modern life: “Let officials be officials, let citizens be citizens, let people be people, and let things be things.”

*Let officials be officials.* First of all, officials should be like officials. It is no good to simply redesignate officials as “public servants.” The term “public servant” is itself an example of disconnection between name and reality, a distortion that generates more confusion. In order to fulfill their political functions, officials must be granted a certain level of power. The problem is that this power must be strictly defined and balanced with concomitant responsibilities. As has been said, to rule a country, one must first control its functionaries; to improve the citizenry, one must first improve the officials. China has always been blighted by officials using their authority as the ultimate currency, but the modern incarnation of the problem seems especially severe. Officials are lionized everywhere, but that is coupled with unprecedented public anger and hatred toward the same officials. That indicates two things: that officials have control over vast resources of power, money, and fame and that there is a huge gap between the expectations of the public and the ethical conduct of officials. So the most urgent need today is to establish standards of accountability and ethics for officials and to foster proper political commitment among them. Of course, doing so will require corresponding changes in our state structures. Ultimately, a full solution to the problem will probably emerge only from greater rule of law and democracy: unbundling the precious commodities of political power, economic resources, and public fame and allowing broader access to all of them.

*Let citizens be citizens.* Second, the people need to act like citizens, specifically citizens of a modern state. Unlike the hazy concept of “the people,” citizenship entails a distinct set of rights and duties that inheres in each individual. So the populace needs to build its capacity to act as a citizenry. Every citizen must uphold his or her own rights boldly and effectively; at the same time, citizens must also actively accept the obligations that come with citizenship. All people must accept their responsibilities as members of society and improve themselves and their capacity for citizenship. That improvement will require more than the introduction of new ideas. It requires a long process of habituation to a world in which citizens organize themselves spontaneously and on a voluntary basis.

*Let people be people.* People must be treated as persons: every individual must be treated in a human and humane way. No person is to be subject to discrimination or humiliation. All people are to be enabled to live a life of

dignity as befits their status as a person. To achieve this, there must, of course, be special concern for the disadvantaged, but we must also encourage excellence, achievement, and innovation, so that each person uses his or her capacities to the fullest.

*Let things be things.* Things must be treated as the objects that they are, neither exaggerated nor diminished. Zhuangzi wrote: “Treat things as things, and do not be enslaved to them.”<sup>12</sup> This means that people should temper their interactions with material things; they should properly handle their material desires. No one should become a servant to things or allow his or her desire for things to escalate. Uncontrolled escalation of material desires inevitably damages the ecosystem, deranging the existing material order. To allow things to exist in their natural form, we need to control human material desires, make efficient use of the things that we need, and stop wasting natural resources, damaging the environment, and polluting our ecosystem.

Of course, there are many other names in need of rectification. The ethics of various professions offer many examples: whatever occupation a person has, that person should properly carry out all of the duties associated with that occupation. A society should do its best to provide a good job for each person, and each person should contribute as much as his or her abilities allow.

### *Comparison of the Old and New Ethics*

Table 1-1, which provides a summary of the preceding sections, reveals four notable differences between the old ethics and my new Chinese social ethics.

—The new ethics sharpens the distinction between government and the people, between the public and the private spheres. There is less prescription in the private sphere: family relations have been removed from the three guidelines, and while private connections occupy four of the old five relationships, they occupy only one of the new.

—In contrast, the environment figures much more prominently in the new ethics. There are many more principles governing the relationship between humanity and nature. This is in line with modern practice, and it is also part of our duty to the world. It is an expansion of elements already present in traditional Chinese thought, and it seeks a path of sustainable development for China as the country completes its dramatic economic ascent.

12. Zhuangzi (莊子, ca. 369–286 BC) was a representative of Taoism during the Warring States period (403–221 BC). Zhuangzi further developed Taoism after Laozi in the eponymous book *Zhuangzi*, which described Dao (The Way) as universal and the origin of everything in the universe.

—The new ethics represents a move toward equality between people, particularly in relationships within the private sphere. However, the belief system retains the element of “respect.”

—The primary axis of state institutions has been turned. The emphasis is no longer on those of low status meeting their obligations to those of high status—on subjects doing their duty to the ruler. Now those of high status must do their duty to those of low status: those who govern are answerable to the citizens. In fact, “citizen” has been raised to the level of a universal value, and citizens now represent much broader principles than rulers. But at the same time, the new ethics accepts the numerical realities: that there will always be a few who do the work of government and who thus have power. However, those who are politicians or who take part in governance must accept the people as their fundamental and ultimate master.

That shift is perhaps the largest difference between the old and new ethics. It reflects the biggest institutional change of the last century: from a monarchy to a century of republicanism. But the path from our current state to a republic that embodies democracy and rule of law will be long and hard. “The ruler sets guidelines for the subjects” was the most important rule in all of the old ethics. That rule effectively excluded the people from participation in government, however much ancient thinkers might have written of the people being the “root of the country.” Ancient China had no other models with which to compare its state institutions, and we can see in the traditional ethics how specific institutional arrangements are mistaken for fundamental principles. The division between “ruler” and “subject” is presented as a fundamental, eternal distinction, but in reality it was just a reflection of the ancient writers’ belief in what they considered fundamental principles of government. The Confucian writers supported this system because their moral principles demanded peace, continuity, and the protection of life above all else.

Of course, the guidelines and constants set out above are just the beginning of a moral theory. The details of the theory remain to be worked out, and there is a need for much more interpretation. But this is true of any set of ethical principles. To a certain extent, any set of moral principles can only be a framework. It is precisely their incompleteness that gives them their universality and allows for flexibility in interpretation and judgment. In addition to the guidelines and constants, I have sketched out values, beliefs, and practical first steps. Beliefs are the ultimate ideals; the guidelines and constants are the inviolable core; and rectifying names is our urgent duty.

Table 1-1. *Comparison of the Old and New Ethics*

<i>Teachings</i>	<i>Old ethics</i>	<i>New ethics</i>
Guidelines	Ruler sets guidelines for subjects. Husband sets guidelines for wife. Father sets guidelines for son.	People set guidelines for government. Rightness sets guidelines for human beings. The living set guidelines for all things.
Five constant relationships	Ruler–subject Father–son Husband–wife Older brother–younger brother Friend–friend	Humankind and nature Group relationships Social relationships Individual relationships Personal relationships
Five constant virtues	Benevolence Rightness Ritual Wisdom Faithfulness	Same five, with new interpretations
Beliefs	Heaven Earth Ruler Family Teacher	Heaven Earth Country Family Teacher
Rectification of names	Let rulers be rulers. Let subjects be subjects. Let fathers be fathers. Let sons be sons.	Let officials be officials. Let citizens be citizens. Let people be people. Let things be things.

These questions have been turning over in my mind for many years, but only recently have certain events prompted me to commit them to writing. Naturally, this is a very preliminary exploration of these issues. I have only proposed an outline; I could not possibly flesh it out or offer full arguments here. I only hope that those who have thought more deeply than I will offer their criticisms and comments and that we can labor together to build anew our shared morality. The last century brought many changes; the passage of a century demands that we rebuild. The last century brought much destruction; in the new century, we rise again. That is what we hope for.