

Reading Isaiah Berlin in China¹

A year before his death in 1997, Isaiah Berlin was invited by a Chinese scholar named Ouyang Kang to write a summary of his thought for the Chinese reading public. Berlin, as Dr Henry Hardy recalls, much valued this new readership, and therefore wrote his last essay, 'My Intellectual Path'. It was first published in English in the *New York Review of Books*, and then included in *The Power of Ideas*, an anthologies edited by Hardy.² Eight years later, this piece finally received its Chinese translation. According to Ouyang Kang, his incentive is to edit a book composed of intellectual self-portraits by several distinguished Anglophone philosophers as a way to introduce contemporary Anglophone philosophy to common readers in China. Ironically, when Ouyang's volume was published, many of Berlin's writings had already been translated and his thought been made accessible to the general public.³

Unlike his Oxford colleague, the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, Isaiah Berlin never went to China; nor did he write anything directly related to it. Although he sometimes mentioned China in passing, he seemed not to have known much about either its history or its status quo, and he probably viewed it, along with India and Japan, as an old, mysterious and exotic civilisation. Among his interlocutors, Joseph Alsop had served in the 'Flying Tigers' commanded by C.L. Chennault in fighting the Japanese. After the Communist Party took power by defeating Chiang Kai-shek's army in 1949, thus ending a civil war lasted for three years, China became a Communist regime, which borrowed its totalitarian system entirely from the Soviet Union. However, what happened in China during Mao's age did not draw Berlin's attention particularly, if compared to other Communist states. The Great Famine was not widely reported in the West then, whereas the Cultural Revolution, which inspired many demagogic left-wing French intellectuals in the 1960s, did not have the same effect on him. He saw virtually no differences between Mao and Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot, all of whom seemed to him, at best, believers in fanatic credos, and at worst, tyrants who were responsible for 'oppression, torture, [and] murder'.⁴

Only in the 1980s, after thirty years of China's self-imposed cultural insulation, did Berlin's name gradually came to be known among Chinese intellectuals. The first piece translated into Chinese was 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' in 1985;⁵ and Berlin's more influential *Four Essays on Liberty* was then published in Taiwan in 1986.⁶ In 1987, Bryan Magee's *Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary Philosophy*, based on his dialogues with Berlin and other well-established philosophers on BBC,

¹ I would like to thank Professor Timothy Garton Ash for reading and commenting on an early draft of this essay.

² Isaiah Berlin, 'My Intellectual Path', *New York Review of Books*, 14 May 1998; later incorporated into Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, London: Pimlico, 2001. It should be noted that all the surnames of the Chinese are given ahead of their given names in this essay.

³ Ouyang Kang (欧阳康), *The Academic Self-Statements of Contemporary British and American Distinguished Philosophers* (《当代英美著名哲学家学术自述》), Beijing: The People's Press (人民出版社), 2005.

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, 'A Message to the 21st Century', *New York Review of Books*, 23 October 2014.

⁵ AiSaiya Bolin (艾赛亚·柏林), 'Zhengzhi Lilun Hai Cunzai Ma?' (《政治理论还存在吗?》), *Xiandai Zhengzhi Sixiang* (《现代政治思想》), Beijing: The Commercial Press (商务印书馆), 1985.

⁶ Bolin (柏林), *Ziyou Silun* (《自由四論》), trans. Chen Xiaolin (陳曉林), Taipei: Lianjing (聯經), 1986.

to many. What particularly strikes me, however, is that Lilla nowhere mentions Berlin, whom he knows well, in his essay.¹⁰ An investigation into Berlin's reception history in China will, I believe, precisely provide us with a better-rounded picture of contemporary Chinese intellectuals than Lilla's account.

Berlin's popularity among Chinese reading public is not difficult to understand. Naturally, prose plays a significant part. Poetry is not the only thing lost in translation; Berlin's prose is perhaps too stylish to be translated into a totally different language without damaging its elegance or losing its nuance. Nevertheless, the power of the eloquent and often long sentences flooding from his almighty pen is strong, and, as an historian of ideas, his gift in bringing the minds of the philosophers back from the past and in making them hum under his command are lavish—so much that his writings step over these barriers between cultures and languages, and successfully reach into the minds of his non-English speaking readers. Moreover, although not an expert in Chinese politics, Berlin's most insightful understanding of the strategies the Soviet Union employed in maintaining its rule within and confronting its antagonists without, his critical reflection of its totalitarian system and, above all, his moving account of the dreadful state the Soviet intelligentsia lived in make many Chinese reminiscent of Mao's age, which was not too remote to be forgotten. What Berlin saw and heard about in Moscow and Leningrad during his first visit to the Soviet Union in 1945 had parallels in China between 1949 and 1976—strong control over its people's minds by Party ideologies, purges after purges, ruthless extermination of the dissenters, intellectuals either silenced or co-opted, and, most importantly, an omnipotent leader with a fine 'art of government'.¹¹ Reading Berlin's writings on the Soviet Union, therefore, might help many Chinese readers understand and re-evaluate the history of that period. Furthermore, as a witness of what he called the 'terrible' 20th century in which so many 'unparalleled horrors' occurred, Berlin tried to discover their roots from the ideas, especially those ideas emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries which fundamentally influenced the history of later times.¹² His depiction of the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment thinkers, albeit impressionist and selective, nevertheless provided his Chinese readers who are unfamiliar with modern Western intellectual history a sketch of its main currents.¹³

Future historians working on 20th century Chinese cultural history might write a better account of the dissemination of Berlin's ideas than my brief account by investigating the ways they shaped, or reflected, the mentality of the common readers. However, I am not a social historian of ideas, and I am more interested to probe into how Berlin's works were absorbed and appropriated by Chinese intellectuals from different persuasions from the late 1980s to the beginning of the 21st century. In pursuit of this, contexts is needed.¹⁴

¹⁰ Mark Lilla, 'Reading Strauss in Beijing', *New Republic*, 17 December 2010. Also see Wang Tao, 'Leo Strauss in China', *Claremont Review of Books*, Vol. XII, No. 2, 2012.

¹¹ See especially the relevant essays in Isaiah Berlin, *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture under Communism*, Henry Hardy (ed.), Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

¹² Isaiah Berlin, 'A Message to the 21st Century'.

¹³ Laurence Brockliss & Ritchie Robertson (eds.), *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹⁴ See Chen Yan(陈彦), *China's Awakening: An Evolution of Chinese Thought after the Cultural Revolution(1976-2002)* (《中国之觉醒——文革后中国思想演变历程：1976-2002》), Hongkong: Tianyuan Shuwu (田园书屋), 2006; Xu Jilin (许纪霖), *Enlightenment and Counter-*

immense admiration and were highly revered, as no PhD. degrees had ever been awarded since 1949 and no Master's since 1966. A large number of them, however, were not satisfied with being pedantic scholars merely; they were benign nationalists who longed for a modernised China, and they genuinely believed it their inescapable responsibility to educate and enlighten their countrymen by engaging in public debates over the path China should take and the future of Chinese culture. More importantly, there were media via which their voices could be heard. *Dushu* was founded by SDX Joint Publishing Company in 1979, and it soon became one of the most influential intellectual journals in China by publishing all sorts of book reviews. Meanwhile, a number of young intellectuals founded several cultural groups to introduce ideas of many 20th Century Western thinkers by translation—‘Walking towards the Future’ (Zouxiang Weilai) and ‘Culture: China and the World’ (Wenhua: Zhongguo Yu Shijie) were the two most well-known. These young intellectuals might be ambitious and sometimes even pretentious, but they had qualifications, and they did speak publicly. They were, therefore, truly the first generation of public intellectuals in Communist China.

What these intellectuals cared most was China's fate and the place Chinese civilisation play in the world. They disliked the Cultural Revolution and its anti-intellectualism, atrocity and suffocating political atmosphere—the analogy between it and the Medieval Ages was commonly used in the 1980s. These young intellectuals were, however, not thereby content with the present condition, under which political freedom was not fully enjoyed and inequality was prevalent; they craved for political reform, which they were confident to make happen. The essential problem of China was that it was primitive, unmodernised, and, in a word, un-Westernised. They were intoxicated with Western ideas, and contended that the Chinese civilisation would be saved by transplanting Western political and economic systems into China. Translation thence became a highly valued undertaking. The first group of thinkers' books that were translated were some late 19th and early 20th Century German bourgeoisie philosophers and Neo-Marxists, including Ernst Cassirer, Heidegger, Max Weber and Max Horkheimer, not least because German ideas were more familiar with the Chinese readers. Gradually, some Anglophone thinkers, e.g. Bertrand Russell, F. A. Hayek and Richard Rorty were also introduced because of their liberal views. It is thus in this context that Berlin's name came to be known.

Berlin's ideas were discussed by Chinese intellectuals for the first time in two articles written by Gan Yang for the 70th anniversary of the ‘May-Fourth Movement’ in 1989, published successively in *Dushu*. Gan was both a leader of those young intellectuals and an enthusiastic organiser of several translation projects, including ‘Culture: China and the World’. A vehement liberal in the 1980s, he made a sudden conversion to become a Straussian cultural conservative in the 1990s. In these articles, he argues that most Chinese intellectuals from the ‘May Fourth’ to the present age have underestimated the value of ‘negative liberty’ when championing social responsibilities. ‘May-Fourth Movement’ only worshipped ‘positive liberty’, which had its origin in German Romanticism, and urged an ‘overall’, ‘total’, ‘fundamental’ and ‘final solution’ to transform the whole society. However,

and the situation of the labours much more than the freedom normal people enjoy. However, it should be particularly noted that apart from being inspired by neo-Marxist and post-Colonialist theories, they particularly stress the function of State power. By contrast, the liberal camp, loosely organised, is composed of political thinkers and philosophers who still insist on the universality of certain values.¹⁸

1997 was a year of significance. For it marked the beginning of the debate between the so-called ‘liberals’ and ‘New Left’, which shaped Chinese intellectual history from then to the present day. In that year, Wang Hui, one of the most influential Chinese public intellectuals and a firm left-wing critic, published his famous essay, ‘The Current Situation of the Chinese Intelligentsia and the Question of Modernity’, in which he proclaims that the astonishing inequality and moral degradation should, to a large extent, be attributed to the co-operation between the State and liberals in promoting free-market competition. It is worth mentioning that by ‘neo-liberalism’ Wang means the ideology of the economists and ‘economic determinists’ who believe that capitalism alone can help to modernise China. As for those liberals who call for political reform, Wang Hui is sympathetic with their conscience and their pursuit of political liberty, but he believes that their thesis totally miss the point—political freedom cannot be achieved when people are deprived of economic opportunities. They do not realise that China has been embroiled into world economy, and its problems should be placed in a global context; the State should be criticised not only for its political suppression or coercion, but for its exertion of power in protecting what Wang Hui dubs the ‘hegemony of the free-market economics’. To Wang Hui, the liberals as well as the ‘New Enlighteners’, out of their uncritical teleological presupposition that the Western model will always prevail, have made a questionable distinction between a primitive, pre-modernised China, and an advanced, modern West, without realising that the Western capitalist modernity also needs to be criticised.¹⁹

Wang Hui’s essay instantly aroused huge controversy among the liberal camp, and was exacerbated by Berlin’s death in November 1997. A whole page was dedicated to him in *Southern Weekly*, the mouthpiece of the liberal-minded intellectuals.²⁰ Most of the tributes praised Berlin for his robust defence of the ‘negative liberty’, his anti-monism and his criticism of totalitarianism. It is particularly interesting to note that in one of those memorial articles, Zhu Xueqin, a well-known liberal, suggests that ‘negative freedom’, a legacy of the English Revolution, stands for moderation and toleration, whereas ‘positive freedom’, originated from the French Revolution, embodies violence and oppression.²¹ However, this view is pleaded against by Gan Yang in his essay ‘Liberalism: Aristocratic or Civilian?’ published two years later, when he had become an ally of Wang Hui. Gan admits that he used to worship the ‘English aristocratic liberalism’ and repel the French Revolution for its radicalism, but

¹⁸ See Wang Hui, *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity*, London: Verso, 2009; Wang Shaoguang(王绍光), *A Report on the State Power of China* (《中国国家能力报告》), Shenyang: Liaoning People’s Press (辽宁人民出版社), 1993; idem, *Four Speeches on Democracy* (《民主四讲》), Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company (三联书店), 2008.

¹⁹ Wang Hui (汪晖), ‘The Current Situation of Chinese Intelligentsia and the Question of Modernity’ (《当代中国的思想状况与现代性问题》), *Tianya*, no.5.

²⁰ Qian Yongxiang, ‘In Memory of Berlin’ (《纪念柏林之死》), Chen Shaoming, ‘A Hedgehog as a Fox’ (《作为狐狸的刺猬》), Zhu Xueqing, ‘Berlin is Gone’ (《柏林去矣》), *Southern Weekly* (《南方周末》), 28 November 1997, p.16.

²¹ Zhu Xueqing, ‘Berlin is Gone’.

Though regarding Berlin as a significant predecessor and a huge source of inspiration, some liberals' attitude towards him is sometimes ambivalent, particularly because they feel uneasy about Berlin's value pluralism, which can be best demonstrated by the point Qian Yongxiang raises in his famous essay, 'I Always Live on the Surface' published in *Dushu*.²⁶ Qian is a Taiwanese political philosopher, but he has been engaging in Chinese public intellectual debate since 1990s. Qian appreciates value pluralism for its 'respect of, instead of guide over, individuals', but he believes that pluralism undermines Berlin's defence of liberalism.²⁷ He continues to condemn Berlin for reducing liberalism to a freedom to choose, and for not developing 'a set of political/social theories' to justify liberalism. Berlin was indeed a distinguished historian of ideas but only a 'superficial' and 'second-rate political philosopher'.²⁸ Among the liberals, this view has not been uncommon. For example, Feng Keli, the translator of *Against the Current*, also argues that Berlin was too much a 'chatterbox' to have any rigid systems of his own and that his liberalism cannot be supported by value pluralism. In comparison, Rawls was a better political thinker. For he developed a more theoretical and systematic political philosophy which can be applied in practical life, while without losing sight of the plurality of values.²⁹

Interestingly, it is for the same reason that Gan Yang champions Berlin. In an essay shortly published after Berlin's death, Gan argues that Berlin's liberalism founded on pluralism destroys other forms of dogmatic liberalism. Liberalism does not thereby die out, but the liberals have to accept the coming of a 'post-liberalism'—quoting John Gray's term. Their endeavour to maintain its legitimacy cannot succeed:

According to Berlin……it always attempts to take one value as the measure of all other values by one particular value, whereas one culture as the standard of all other cultures. Its essence is placing one value above other values, and the domination of other cultures by one culture. Eventually, it will exterminate other values in the name of the realisation of one value, and strangle other cultures for the sake of advancing one culture.³⁰

Like many intellectuals taking part in the 'New Enlightenment' movement in the 1980s, Gan was once an admirer of the Western political and economic systems, absorbing much from the Western thinkers. However, he gradually came to criticise, if not loathed, the 'Western' values, of which liberalism, he believes, is a salient embodiment. He claims that the greatest contribution of Berlin is his equal treatment of different and incommensurable values, and hence that the individuality of cultures should not be overlooked. Therefore, Gan insisted on exploring China's own path by rediscovering Chinese cultural traditions, which, apart from Confucianism, however, also include the legacies of Mao and Deng. He contends that equality had been realised in Mao's

²⁶ Qian Yongxiang, 'I Always Live on the Surface', (《我总是活在表层上》), *Dushu*, April 1999, pp.36-45.

²⁷ Ibid, p.41.

²⁸ Ibid, p.45.

²⁹ Feng Keli, 'Translator's Words', in *Fan Chaoliu* (《反潮流》), pp.498-504.

³⁰ Gan Yang, 'Berlin and Post-Liberalism', (《柏林与后自由主义》), *Dushu*, April 1998, p. 43.

Berlin was opposed to. The essence of Berlin's value pluralism, to recapitulate, is that values are incommensurable and clash, so that people must make trade-off and choices when faced with difficult situations—of course this view is what Leo Strauss still would have dismissed. Liu's attack of Berlin might be prejudiced, but it is by no means the most malicious one. In an essay which reminds is of Christopher Hitchens's notoriously unfair review of Berlin's biography, Lu Jiande, a well-known literary critic, depicts Berlin as a vehement Zionist whose ideas and works solely served the interests of his Jewish people.³⁷ He was deeply if clandestinely involved in several influential events, and was knighted not for his academic contribution—which he did not have much, but for his affinity with the Jewish community in the U.S., which Harold McMillan wished to please. Not only did Berlin not protect the intellectuals who became victims of the Cold War, he even deliberately damaged the reputation of Hannah Arendt and Isaac Deutscher, and tried to ban Noam Chomsky's polemical essay, because they seemed to him endangered the Zionist cause. In short, Berlin was a 'modern Machiavelli', whose writings and thought were always secondary to his political allegiance.³⁸

Berlin always held a rather holistic view of culture, which roots in his study of Herder, according to whom every culture has its 'gravity' and bears its own irreducible distinctiveness and particularity, which is manifested in all of its constituents, from the most insignificant details to its general outlook.³⁹ He believed that cultures differed not only in the trivial details, e.g. the way people live, but in the way different values are ranked in a hierarchy as well. Henceforth, he would have agreed with many of Gan and Hu's contentions. However, Berlin also stressed that even if one did not endorse the values of other cultures, he can at least understand them with his or her empathy; and, more importantly, that there are always common values and moral cores between however *prima facie* different cultures—'Quod ubique, quod semper quod ab omnibus creditum est' (what is believed everywhere, always, by anyone), as Berlin often said.

As we have seen, Berlin's thought, after it was first introduced to China in the 1980s, has informed intellectual debates participated by Chinese thinkers from different political persuasions. Remarkably, Berlin's works are sometimes interpreted based on the doctrines and principles the interpreters have already embraced, and hence appropriation and even perversion are not surprising. But on the one hand, it demonstrates the importance and power of Berlin's ideas; on the other hand, an examination of the ways Berlin was accepted provides us with a unique perspective to observe the Chinese intelligentsia in the previous two decades. Berlin never gave a comprehensive and systematic clarification of the relationship between liberalism and value pluralism—his most original theory. Does pluralism inflict damage on liberalism? Is liberalism merely one of the many possible ways human beings are entitled live with dignity and comfort? It seemed to Berlin that liberalism was the prerequisite for

³⁷ Christopher Hitchens, 'Moderation or Death', *London Review of Books*, 23 November 1998, pp.3-11.

³⁸ Lu Jiande, 'The Benefit Hidden behind Ideas', see his book under the same title, Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2005.

³⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of Enlightenment*, p. 177.

Meinecke was sceptical about the cosmopolitan values promulgated by the Enlightenment thinkers. However, Berlin still highly praises Meinecke, for Meinecke was absolutely certain of the 'need for a common ground between men'.⁴⁴ This, I believe, can also be seen as the message Berlin sent to his Chinese readers.

⁴⁴ Isaiah Berlin, 'Meinecke and Historicism' in Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 252-258.