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Dear Colleague:

Surprise! I'll follow fashion for a change and indulge in a bit of cultural chauvinism. I look back to my grade school education in war-torn China with pride. Our families were poor: we ate only two meals a day. And yet our elementary education in the one-room school had a certain grandeur. What impresses me now, as I think back, is its universalism. Morals must be imparted to the young. One of the lessons we underfed children learned came out of Oscar Wilde's story "The Happy Prince." Its moral vision goes beyond "eat your spinach," or even filial piety, to compassion for the needy stranger. How many English educators would think of using a work by Wilde to inspire virtue in the very young?

Another lesson I remember from my Chinese childhood is the transcendental glory of the mind. The mind is valued not only because it is practical, but because its exercising is simultaneously a keen source of delight and the only means by which an individual can confirm the original covenant, established by nature or God, between her and the universe. The model held up to Chinese children for admiration is Immanuel Kant, who supposedly placed his watch in a pot of boiling water while holding an egg in his hand to time its cooking. Now, I ask you, is this the sort of story that American children in the elementary grades read? Is this the sort of individual held up for admiration? As a Chinese child I thought the absent-minded Kant wonderful: how I wished that I could be so engaged in an intellectual problem that I too consulted my egg for time.

At a conference of Chinese intellectuals, held coincidentally at the time of the Tiananmen democracy movement, two values, both clearly traceable to the European Enlightenment, were given prominent display. One is "inwardness." The poet Bei Dao lamented the fact that Chinese writers, unlike foreign ones, seldom committed suicide: reason--they always sought to escape individual tragedy in a social solution. The other value is progress. The astrophysicist Fang Lizhi argued that countries should not be designated "East" or "West," China or foreign, but should be judged against a scale of trans-cultural values--"less advanced," "more advanced", "less democratic," "more democratic." Patriotism and ethnicism merit low priority at best, for, to Fang, it is clear that "human beings and human rights are the same everywhere." Oh boy, are the Chinese intellectuals out of step with the times!

Best wishes,

*Ji-Fu*