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Dear Colleague:

I was a child (from age 7 to 10) in worn-torn Chun-ch'ing, where the Chinese people were making a last desperate stand against the invading Japanese army. The economy was reduced to bartering. My father, who had a respectable job in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was paid irregularly. A necktie given him by an American friend would be quickly exchanged at a store for two apples and a banana. We cut them into slices, shared them among ourselves and possibly with a neighbor. In 1941 we could afford only two meals a day. We were undernourished: childhood knee-cuts refused to heal, or healed slowly. Schooling, held in a single room attached to an electricity-generating station, was frequently interrupted by air raids. Nevertheless, we had a princely education. Besides the three Rs, we read a number of inspiring stories taken from Chinese history, but also from the history of the West. Not only the Sung-dynasty patriot Yueh Fei (remember we were fighting for our lives) was set up as a model but also James Watt, Louis Pasteur, and Benjamin Franklin. Traditional Chinese filial piety was taught, again through stories, but also some hint of transcendental Good via Oscar Wilde's tale "The Happy Prince." We might be half-starved, our young lives could be wiped out by a bomb anytime; yet, subtly, we were given to understand that we were potentially citizens of the world, cosmopolites, inheritors of not only Chinese culture but world culture.

In Sydney, Australia, my two brothers and I were the only foreign students in the school's history. We were "freaks," who didn't speak a word of English. Australian schoolboys danced around us, shouting contemptuously in a sing-song voice, "Chin Ch'iang Chinaman, him very bad...etc.", and pretended to pull our nonexistent pigtails. We complained to our teachers, who (raised in the philosophy of muscular Christianity and Tom Brown's Schooldays) simply told us to fight back: they the teachers would not intervene unless the bullies disrupted our schooling in the classrooms. So we fought back as the "Three Musketeers" (remember our internationalist education). I was scared. But were my brothers and I demoralized? Frankly, I don't think we were. To the contrary, the taunting reinforced our sense of superiority: more than ever, we were able to perceive ourselves as civilized beings surrounded by a horde of barbarians!

The religious basis of a human individual's dignity, constantly threatened by the narrow values of the group, is that he is a child of God. The secular basis of that dignity must be, it seems to me, the assertion that every child is potentially the inheritor of the cultural wealth of the entire world.

Best wishes,

*Yi-Fu*