

May 15, 1994 (Vol. 9, no. 18)

Dear Colleague:

In a curious way, postmodern Westerners are beginning to think more and more like traditional Chinese. How so? Well, postmodernists have given up the idea of truth, which brings them closer to the Chinese, who have never regarded truth as all important. Another similarity is this. Postmodernists are enamored of image--of what appears at the surface and can be seen rather than what lies underneath: appearance and form matter more than reality and content. The Chinese have always been enamored of image, only they call it "face." What is important to them is to save face--to save the appearance: truth and reality can go hang. Postmodernists, like traditional Chinese, are religiously tolerant: they can afford to be since truth is no longer at stake. The Chinese, unlike Europeans, have never cared much about what people believe in--their creed--so long as they don't foam at the mouth.

Although we live in the postmodern age, we are still far from being always true to the tenets of postmodernism. We still don't cultivate image and form to the degree that the Chinese do. Take, as evidence, the way well-to-do young people dress: they dress abominably--torn jeans, filthy shirt, greasy hair, etc. Now, this is very (traditional) Western, very unChinese. To the Westerner, what counts is content, a sort of inner truth and essence, not outward appearance. Socrates is not much to look at, but his ugly mug hides a beautiful soul. A frog is repulsive outside, handsome inside--a prince. These myths are typical of the West. They are not typical of China. Indeed, Chinese myths purvey the opposite message: a beautiful face may be the deceiving mask of a ghost or demon.

Who has an easier time in life--the Chinese devoted to form and image, or the Westerner devoted to content and truth? In theory, the Westerner should have a far harder time, since truth is so hard to get at. In practice, it may well be otherwise. The Chinese constantly has to worry about his appearance--the appropriateness of every gesture he makes, every word he uses. The Westerner, by contrast, doesn't have to worry about appearance, since he is happily assured that the truth of his real self lies underneath. That real self doesn't have to be manifest: indeed to be manifest is to become part of a superficial world of image and form. So the Westerner can just relax, which is why I adopt the Westerner's posture. It allows me to say to myself, "What if to all outward appearance I am a poor teacher? Underneath--in my essence--I am a paragon of pedagogic integrity and virtue."

Best wishes,

