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**UNTIL 7:30 p.m. EST Dec. 5, 2006**

**PREPARED REMARKS — check against delivery**

**ADDRESS OF YU YING-SHIH  
on the occasion of receiving the John W. Kluge Prize**

**at the Library of Congress  
December 5, 2006**

I feel enormously honored to be a co-recipient of the John W. Kluge Prize in 2006, for which I am grateful. After much reflection, however, I have come to the realization that the main justification for my presence here today is that both the Chinese cultural tradition and Chinese intellectual history as a discipline are being honored through me. The former has been the subject of my lifetime scholarly pursuit, and the latter my chosen field of specialization.

When I first became seriously interested in the study of Chinese history and culture in the 1940s, the Chinese historical mind happened to be cast in a positivistic and anti-traditionalistic mold. The whole Chinese past was viewed negatively, and whatever appeared to be uniquely Chinese was interpreted as a deviation from the universal norm of progress of civilization as exemplified in the historical development of the West. As a result, studies of aspects of the Chinese cultural tradition, from philosophy, law, religion to literature and art, often amounted to condemnation and indictment. Needless to say, I was at a complete loss as to the Chinese cultural identity and, for that matter, also my personal identity. It was my good fortune that I was able to finish my college education in Hong Kong and pursued my graduate studies in the United States, now my adopted country.

As my intellectual horizon gradually widened over the years, the truth was beginning to dawn on me that Chinese culture must be clearly recognized as an indigenous tradition with characteristics distinctly its own. The crystallization of Chinese culture into its definitive shape took place in the time of Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.), a crucial moment in the ancient world better known in the West as the Axial Age. During this period, it has been observed, a spiritual awakening or “breakthrough” occurred in several highly-developed cultures including China, India, Persia, Israel and Greece. It took the form of either philosophical reasoning or post-mythical religious imagination or, as in the case of China, a mixed type of moral-philosophic-religious consciousness. The awakening led directly to the emergence of the dichotomy between the actual world and the world beyond. The world beyond as a new vision provided the thinking individuals, be they philosophers, prophets or sages, with the necessary transcending point from which the actual world could be examined and questioned, critically as well as reflectively. This is generally known as the original transcendence of the Axial Age,

of which the exact shape, empirical content and historical process varied from culture to culture. The transcendence is original in the sense that it would exert a long-lasting, shaping influence on the cultures involved.

As a result of the Chinese original transcendence in the time of Confucius, the all-important idea of Tao (Way) emerged as a symbol of the world beyond vis-a-vis the actual world of everyday life. But the Chinese transcendental world of Tao and the actual world of everyday life were conceived from the very beginning to be related to each other in a way different from other ancient cultures undergoing the Axial breakthrough. For example, there is nothing in the early Chinese philosophical visions that suggests Plato's conception of an unseen eternal world of which the actual world is only a pale copy. In the religious tradition, the sharp dichotomy of a Christian type between the world of God and the world of humans is also absent. Nor do we find in classical Chinese thought in all its varieties anything that closely resembles the radical negativity of early Buddhism with its insistence on the unrealness and worthlessness of this world. By contrast, the world of Tao was not perceived as very far from the human world. As best expressed by Confucius, "The Tao is not far from man. When a man pursues the Tao and remains away from man, his course cannot be considered the Tao." I must hasten to add, however, that the notion of Tao was not the monopoly of Confucius and his followers but shared by all the major thinkers in the Chinese Axial Age, including Lao Tzu, Mo Tzu and Chuang Tzu. It was their common belief that Tao is hidden and yet functions everywhere in the human world; even men and women of simple intelligence can know and practice it in everyday life to a larger or lesser degree. Indeed, judging from the ever-growing and ever-deepening influences of the ideas originating in the Axial Age, especially Confucian and Taoist ideas, on all aspects of Chinese life down through the centuries, it may not be too much an exaggeration to suggest that Tao and history constitute the inside and the outside of Chinese civilization.

Taking the Chinese cultural tradition to be essentially one of indigenous origin and independent growth, I have tried over the decades to study Chinese history along two main lines. First, Chinese culture must be understood in its own terms but at the time also in a comparative perspective. By "comparative perspective" I refer to both Indian Buddhism in the early imperial period and Western culture since the 16th century. Needless to say, China's second encounter with the West in the 19th century was a historical event of world-shaking magnitude. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Chinese mind has been largely preoccupied with the problematique of China-versus-the-West. To interpret the Chinese past solely in its own terms without a comparative perspective would surely run the risk of falling into the age-old trap of simple-minded sinocentrism.

Second, in my study of Chinese intellectual, social and cultural history, from classical antiquity to the 20th century, my focus has always been placed on periods of change when one historical stage moved to the next. Compared to other civilizations, China's is particularly marked by its long historical continuity before, during and since the Axial Age. But continuity and change went hand-in-hand in Chinese history. Therefore, the purpose I have set myself is twofold: firstly, to identify the major

intellectual, social and culture changes in the Chinese past and, secondly, to discern if at all possible the unique pattern of Chinese historical changes. More often than not, such broad and profound changes in Chinese history transcended the rise and fall of dynasties. Thus the notion of “dynastic cycle,” long held in traditional China but also briefly in vogue in the West, is highly misleading. In the early years of the 20th century, Chinese historians, following the example of their Japanese colleagues, began to reconstruct and re-interpret the Chinese past according to the historical model of the West. Since then it has been generally assumed that China must have undergone similar stages of historical development as shown in European history. In the first half of the 20th century, Chinese historians adopted the earlier European schemes of periodization by dividing Chinese history into ancient, medieval and modern periods, which has been replaced since 1949 by the Marxist-Stalinist five-stage formulation. The latter remains the orthodoxy in China up to this day, at least in theory if not always in actual practice. This Procrustean approach, whatever merits it may otherwise have, cannot possibly do full justice to Chinese culture as an indigenous tradition. Only by focusing on the unique course and shape of Chinese historical changes, I am convinced, can we hope to see more clearly how that great cultural tradition moved from stage to stage driven, mainly if not entirely, by its internal dynamics.

Now let me turn to the question of how, as two different systems of values, does Chinese culture stand vis-a-vis Western culture in historical perspective? My earliest exposure to this question occurred in the late 1940s when the problematique of China-versus-the-West, mentioned earlier, dominated the Chinese intellectual world. It has not been out of my consciousness ever since. Living in the United States for half a century, the question has acquired a truly existential meaning for my life as I move between the two cultures from moment to moment. With some initial psychological readjustments, I have long been able to enjoy the American way of life while still retaining my Chinese cultural identity. However, the best guide with regard to whether Chinese culture is compatible with the core values of the West can only be provided by Chinese history.

China first encountered the modern West at the end of the 16th century when the Jesuits came to East Asia to do their missionary work. The culturally sensitive Matteo Ricci, who arrived in China in 1583, was very quick to discover that the Chinese religious atmosphere at that time was highly tolerant; Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism were generally regarded as one and same thing. As a matter of fact, under the influence of Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529), late Ming Confucians firmly believed that each of the three religions in China captured a vision of the same Tao (Way). It was this spirit of religious tolerance that accounted for Ricci’s extraordinary success in his conversion of many leading members of the Confucian elite, notably Hsü Kuang-ch’i (1562-1633), Li Chih-tsao (1565-1630) and Yang T’ing-yün (1557-1627), the “three pillars of evangelization.” The Confucian faith in the sameness of human mind and the universal accessibility of Tao to every human person anywhere led some Chinese converts to promote a synthesis of Christianity with Confucianism. The Chinese Tao was now further expanded to include Christianity. This early relationship between China and the West at the religious level can by no means be described as a conflictual one.

In the late 19th century, it was also the open-minded Confucians who enthusiastically embraced values and ideas dominant in the modern West such as democracy, liberty, equality, rule of law, autonomy of the individual person and, above all, human rights. When some of them visited Europe or America for the first time and stayed there long enough to make first-hand observations, they were all deeply impressed, first of all, by the ideals and institutions of Western constitutional democracy. Wang T'ao (1828-1897), who assisted James Legge in his English translation of Confucian classics, returned to Hong Kong from England in 1870 praising her political and legal systems to the sky. He was probably the first Confucian scholar to use the term "democracy" in Chinese (min-chu). Wang exerted a considerable influence on Confucian political thinking in the late Ch'ing. At the turn of the century, there were two rival Confucian schools in China known as the New Text and Old Text, respectively. Both advocated democracy, though each in its own way. The former was in favor of constitutional monarchy, while the latter pushed for republicanism. Perhaps inspired by Wang T'ao, who compared the British political and judicial systems favorably to China's Golden Age as described in Confucian classics, both Confucian schools began a systematic search for the origins and evolution of democratic ideas in early Confucian texts. In so doing, it is clear that they took the compatibility between Chinese culture and Western culture as two systems of values for granted.

Last but not least, I wish to say a word about "human rights." Like "democracy," "human rights" as a term is linguistically specific to the West and nonexistent in traditional Confucian discourse. However, if we agree that the concept of "human rights" as defined in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of 1948 is predicated on the double recognition of a common humanity and human dignity, then we are also justified to speak of a Confucian idea of "human rights" without the Western terminology. Recognition of a common humanity and respect for human dignity are both clearly articulated in the Analects, Mencius and other early texts. It is remarkable that by the first century C.E. at the latest, the Confucian notion of human dignity was openly referred to in imperial decrees as sufficient grounds for the prohibition of the sale or killing of slaves. Both imperial decrees, dated 9 and 35 C.E., respectively, cited the same famous Confucian dictum: "Of all living things produced by Heaven and Earth, the human person is the noblest." Slavery as an institution was never accepted by Confucianism as legitimate. It was this Confucian humanism that predisposed late Ch'ing Confucians to be so readily appreciative of the Western theory and practice of human rights.

If history is any guide, then there seems to be a great deal of overlapping consensus in basic values between Chinese culture and Western culture. After all, recognition of common humanity and human dignity is what the Chinese Tao has been about. I am more convinced than ever that once Chinese culture returns to the main flow of Tao, the problematique of China-versus-the-West will also come to an end.

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Princeton University  
December 1, 2006