

Preface

On my first trip to Hong Kong in 1996 I was met at the airport by Chan-Fai Cheung, professor of philosophy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. As Hong Kong was new to me, I did not know what to expect. One thing I certainly did not expect was that this friendly and youthful professor, who was hosting and organizing the conference I was attending, would become, over the next 23 years—almost a quarter century!—one of my best friends and most admired colleagues. In the years since that first meeting I have made many return visits to Hong Kong and have spent many memorable hours with Chan-Fai, both in Hong Kong and in the United States. I was honored and delighted when he asked me to write a preface to this collection of some of his essays in English.

The essays themselves need no introduction from me. The topics are appealing and their style is open and accessible. They have an earnest and searching quality which reflects the character of their author. Like all good philosophers he is focused on raising questions and is suspicious of easy answers. He has an insistent curiosity not easily satisfied. He wants to get to the bottom of things.

But if these are qualities he shares with all other philosophers—good ones, anyway—what sets him apart? It is this question I want to address in this preface, in hopes it will guide the reader in understanding what follows. And when I ask what sets him apart, I am thinking not so much of his individuality, for every individual is set apart from every other. I am thinking instead of Chan-Fai as a creature of his place and time. I am referring, of course, to Hong Kong in the late 20th and early 21st century. Chan-Fai was born, raised and educated there, until he went to Europe to study German philosophy, and he has spent his career as a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

The reader of these essays will notice that the author displays a profound knowledge of both Chinese and of Western philosophical and literary traditions, and he brings it to bear on almost every topic. The Western observer may feel admiration that a Chinese has succeeded so well in embracing an alien tradition of thought. And indeed, many Chinese have. But Chan-Fai is not from China. He is from Hong Kong,

and people from Hong Kong occupy a place apart in the division between east and west. They embody a quite peculiar duality. It started with the Colonial background, and whatever one may think about it, it determines the character of Hong Kong, the flavor of its daily life, including its architecture and its place-names, down to the present day. But the separateness of Hong Kong has become even more of an issue since the “handover” to China in 1997. This is not the place to comment on Chan-Fai’s political and artistic efforts in the struggle for Hong Kong’s independence.¹ My point is that when he mingles Western and Chinese views on certain topics, or reflects on the relations between them, he does so from a unique perspective not shared even by the Chinese, much less by Western thinkers.

Most often in these essays Chan-Fai explores Chinese and Western attitudes toward some topic, notably that of love, which he treats in several chapters. But in some places he reflects in a more general way on the differences between China and the West, for example in the essay on intercultural understanding. Here one might expect a compare-and-contrast, with a defense of Chinese thought against the cultural hegemony of the West. What Chan-Fai offers is something much more subtle and much more profound. Is ancient Chinese thought really philosophy? Right-thinking Westerners would be horrified at the thought of excluding it. But they fail to notice that by generously extending this honorific title to an ancient tradition they may be assimilating it to something it is not, giving it a lofty stamp of approval that unwittingly ignores its difference. Such inclusion thus turns out to be just the latest form of cultural imperialism.

Cultural imperialism has been under way for a long time, with the juggernaut of Western thought invading anything in its path. And Chan-Fai is well aware that at least since the beginning of the 20th century, it is almost impossible to keep the traditions apart. Whatever one may think of ancient Chinese thought, what is taught today in the philosophy departments in Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan bears the stamp of Western Philosophy. The influence of Western teaching cannot be avoided. As Chan-Fai puts it in the essay “Western Love, Chinese Qing”: “Our generation is born into this predicament: we are both Chinese and Western. The stock of knowledge in our everyday

¹ Chan-Fai Cheung, *Another Place, Another Time*, see Part III in this book.

life-world, using Alfred Schutz's phenomenological terminology, is built on the sedimentation of the cross-fertilization of Chinese and Western culture in the last 150 years. If this is the case, then there is no sense in talking of a pure Chinese cultural tradition, because the Western tradition is also *our* tradition."²

Like many of his contemporaries, Chan-Fai went to Europe to study philosophy, drawn to Germany by the work of Heidegger. Heidegger's influence is felt in many of these essays, especially the concept of *Existenz*, which contrasts with a concept of essence found in both Chinese and Western traditions. There is also an essay on boredom which owes a lot to Heidegger. But Chan-Fai's overriding preoccupation in these essays is with a concept that does not figure importantly in Heidegger's thought: love. He examines love from every angle, from the love of God and the love of truth through friendship and romantic love to the erotic and the sexual. He reflects on the ancient Western notions of *eros*, *philia* and *agape*, and notes that the Chinese tradition has no corresponding distinction. He concurs in the widespread view among experts that romantic love, so important in the literature and art of the West, has no counterpart in the Chinese tradition, at least until recently. At the same time he finds examples of erotic and even pornographic depictions in older Chinese pictures and texts. The collection closes with very personal meditations on death, on the representation and symbolism of hell, and on utopia.

Everyone who knows Chan-Fai well will recognize his distinctive voice in these essays. For me and others who are unable to understand him when he speaks or writes in Chinese, he has provided another access to his thought and his view of the world. He is a gifted photographer who has produced many collections of striking originality and insight, and these collections may tell us more about the author of these essays as an individual than his philosophical work. In any case I have not tried to capture that individuality here. It speaks for itself, just as it speaks in the altogether different medium of photography. Instead I have tried to convey the place and time of Chan-Fai's distinctive voice, emanating as it does from the most important geopolitical and geocultural intersection of the 21st century.

David Carr

² "Western Love, Chinese Qing," see p. 119 in this book.