experience: how much of this assertion is applicable to a reader like myself?

In my case, at least, I am only too conscious of the disparity between my own condition and the one affirmed in He Zhizhang’s verse. In the many times I have re-visited Hong Kong since my departure in 1956, I have been made increasingly aware of how my accents have steadily altered. Of course, I have not forgotten how to speak Cantonese, for I still use the language daily at home, as well as with students and visiting relatives. Sharp-eared Hong Kong friends and relatives, however, have spoken more than once over the years about the subtle shifts of elocution, the occasionally garbled syntax and stilted vocabulary that they readily detect in my speech. They have repeatedly laughed at my ignorance of the vast amount of newly invented idioms that constantly measure the vitality of Cantonese as a language. My homecoming, in other words, cannot avoid or conceal the reality of some conspicuously “altered accents,” but this phrase which will serve as the focalizing metaphor of my talk, refers to much more than changes in speech patterns and habits. As someone who has spent the last forty years abroad, first as a student and then as a university teacher, it would be absurd for me to assert that I have not changed in other important respects such as my knowledge, my intellectual outlook, my emotional predilections, my system of values—in sum, the totality of my cultural identity. It is only with such open acknowledgement of personal alteration that I dare speak at all on the subject of my lecture which is liberal education, because the very subject itself already bears the stamp of an “altered accent.”

THE WESTERN MODEL

It is superfluous for me to remind my present audience that the term liberal education summons immediately into view the culture of ancient Greece, for the aims, processes, and materials of teaching both the young and the adult segments of the people have appeared as some of the most important and enduring themes of virtually all of their extant literatures. From Homeric poetry and the great dramas of the tragedians, through the reflective debates of the sophists and the academic philosophers, to the quest for historical truths in Thucydides and Herodotus, the consistent concern of the Greeks was for the exaltation of the ideal of aristocratic excellence (arete), the formation of the perfection of mind and body (kalokagathia) that constitutes the program and goal of all Greek paideia, a word that can be translated as both education and culture. Those familiar with the ideas and life of Plato will readily recall why and how he was credited with having laid the foundation for so many aspects of the long, complex, pluralistic, and multilingual tradition that we now call Western culture. In many of his dialogues, but especially in The Republic and The Laws, the Platonic Socrates has discussed, repeatedly and intensely, the necessity, goal, and content of a curricula that would serve the needs of general, public education, even as he disputes riling educational philosophy such as that of Protagoras. As Plato made clear in his analysis, only an educated citizenry could bring into existence and sustain an ideal city-state such as he had envisioned. For Plato, the task of educating the Athenian citizens had to be understood as nothing less than the inculcation of moral virtues, the equipment of service to society and state, and the transmission of right knowledge and culture. So stated, this summary of Platonic ideals in education may seem to bear remarkable resemblance already to the thinking of Classical and Neo-Confucianism, at least as interpreted by the contemporary scholar Tu Wei-ming.

In making this last observation, I do not mean thereby to suggest that there is more similarity than difference in the traditions of China and the West. The reference underscores only the specific intent of my talk as one of comparison. Plato’s most famous pupil, Aristotle, had more disagreement with his illustrious mentor than agreement in terms of their total philosophies, but in the matter of education, the student’s discourse follows and develops, rather than refutes and re-formulates. Aristotle was certainly one of the early Greek thinkers to whom the term liberal education must directly be traced. In Book VIII of his Politics, he speaks specifically of liberal arts or occupations.
Consistent with the overall emphasis of his thinking, Aristotle’s theory of education rests on the distinction between ends and means.

(eleutheron ergon), stating that the freeman, who is the sole beneficiary of his curriculum, should only learn to a certain degree some of those liberal arts. With a further stipulation that may jar our modern ears, Aristotle says that “all paid employments,” like the mechanical arts, tend to degrade the mind, and therefore they should not be the object of education.

Aristotle’s remarks reveal that his conception of liberal education reflects directly the fundamental assumptions and conditions of Athenian society. “Liberal” in his usage has a double meaning. First, with respect to content and aim, the training should not be directed toward the end of utility or profit, and this belief of his reaffirms his teacher Plato’s opposition to the Protagorean and sophist emphasis of technological education in their philosophy. Liberal education, in this understanding, is not concerned with the development of specialized skills, products, and knowledge for which one may be paid. It is not, in this sense, vocational training as we might call it today; for the word Aristotle uses to indicate what he means by the illiberal arts, banouso, often translated as either mechanical or vulgar, points to something associated with the handicraft of artisans. With respect to the student, therefore, the second meaning of liberal education envisioned by Aristotle concerns a specific social class, the male Athenian citizen who by definition is a freeman. Such a person has the presumed status and means to lead a mode of existence which, in Aristotle’s opinion, is the requisite context for the balanced quest for intellectual and moral excellence.

Liberal education is ultimately linked with politics, since the Aristotelian state rests on the foundation of this class of citizenry. He who wants to pursue the free arts must be free to do so, unfettered by social or economic constraints. On such a premise the philosopher can claim that this is “the sort of education in which parents should train their sons, not as being useful or necessary, but because it is liberal or noble” (Politics, VIII, 1338a).

To those of us sitting in this hall today and living in an inescapable environment of frenetic commercialism and agonistic industrialism—inescapable, because the very survival of our own society often directly depends upon such activities—Aristotle’s emphasis on leisure as a necessary context for serious inquiry may sound rather quaint, impractical, and outdated. His view of the matter may well have led to the caricaturing statement later in Cicero, who once wrote: “He does not seem to me a free man who does not sometimes do nothing,” a remark that may, in turn, conjure up visions of those silly, prankish, and know-nothing Oxbridge graduates of Britain’s aristocracy that populate P. G. Wodehouse’s novels. A comic satire of such ilk, however, tells only part of the story, for no serious thinker about the fundamental task and cost of university education today can afford to ignore the germinal insight of this ancient philosopher. At a symposium organized to celebrate The University of Chicago’s centennial, it was no surprise to those present when one speaker flatly declared that the university’s fulfillment of its essential task directly requires “a publicly acknowledged area of disciplined leisure.” Before we dismiss Aristotle outright, therefore, we may do well to ponder a bit further his argument for this type of education and thereby to understand its powerful persistence in the lengthy course of Western civilization.

Consistent with the overall emphasis of his thinking, Aristotle’s theory of education rests on the distinction between ends and means. If in the very first sentence of his Metaphysics he avers that “all men by nature desire to know,” he is also quick to insist throughout his philosophical system that there are different kinds of knowledge to satisfy different kinds of desire. The distinction of ends, when brought to bear on his educational philosophy, provides the fundamental theoretical justification for liberal education, because the separation from such other ends as utility and profit steers us to contemplate whether there is a knowledge that is an end in itself, and beyond which there is no other purpose or telos. The Nicomachean Ethics provides a succinct articulation of Aristotle’s way of reasoning:
The pursuit of liberal learning can thus be called a “chief good” in education, ... [it] liberates because, in theory at least, it enables the freeman to remain free...

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else...clearly this [end] must be the good and the chief good (Nicomachean Ethics, I, 1094a).

The pursuit of liberal learning can thus be called a “chief good” in education, not because other branches of skill or knowledge are not good, but because the other branches have different goals or objects. As examples of the many ends of various sciences, Aristotle in the Ethics cites health for medical art, vessels for shipbuilding, victory for military strategy, and wealth for economics. In his view of the matter, however, only certain arts can educate the freeman as he is, one “fit...for the practice or exercise of excellence” (Politics, viii). Across the centuries, John Henry Newman squarely identified this type of learning as “the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake,” which, for him, constitutes precisely the defining aim of liberal education (The Idea of A University, v). Liberal education concerns a form of knowledge that, in Newman’s own words, “is, not merely a means to something beyond it, or the preliminary of certain arts into which it naturally resolves, but an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake” (I.v.2).

If our skepticism about the viability of such a view of education lingers on the question of whether it is formulated on too arbitrary a classification of knowledge, we should remember that Aristotle’s profoundly political concern is what underpins his reflections on education. From his knowledge of the history of Greek civilization, his experience in civic and academic life, and perhaps most of all, his tutelage of Alexander and other Greek leaders, Aristotle knows that his vision of the cherished polis depends on an educated citizenry. From Plato he has already learned the crucial lesson that there are no guardians above the citizens in the ideal republic. For the state to flourish, the citizens must work, in the sense that they must function properly. For that to happen, the constituent members of the body politic must be trained to live, to think, and to exercise a peculiar set of virtues that will ensure the state’s continuance and prosperity. The content of Aristotle’s proposed curriculum—reading and writing, gymnastics, music, and possibly drawing—may strike the modern reader as no more than grade school pedagogy which, in fact, it was. But we should not allow its elementary character to obscure the philosopher’s basic point, which is the development of both mind and body of the Greek citizen. Such humble subjects and skills as he had enumerated were meant to inculcate in the young student those peculiar intellectual and moral virtues—rationality, discipline, judgment, and the capacity for continuous inquiry—that are absolutely necessary for his effective participation in the life of the state. Liberal education liberates because, in theory at least, it enables the freeman to remain free, since the continuity of his society depends directly on the continuous exercise of his trained faculties, a disposition of mind and habit of body that imprint his character.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

These two concepts from Aristotle—knowledge for its own sake and knowledge that sustains a particular conception of social community—provided a powerful impetus for the development of Western education, and they led ultimately to the founding of the modern research university. Venerating as they did Greek ideals and institutions, the Roman intelligentsia appropriated a great deal from Greek paideia for the structure and curricular content of their governmental schools. The arrival of Christianity and the gradual development of the Church into an independent and powerful institution exerted further impact on education, for the medieval schools, though originally an apparatus of the Church, also performed the important though ironic function of preserving and transmitting pagan learning during the Middle Ages. Eventually, however, the educational enterprise thus emerging in the early Renaissance became one of the three great European social institutions—the Church (sacerdotium), the state (imperium), and the university (studium)—representing respectively the religious, the political, and the
...the European university...has enjoyed, from its inception, a degree of autonomy not known and not to be expected in the historical context of East Asia.

...
...this idealized model of preimperial Chinese education...embodies the perennially affirmed unity between government (zheng) and teaching (jiao).

THE CHINESE LEGACY

How does such a view of knowledge and education comport with Chinese culture, which has been distinguished across so many centuries by its continuous desire to foster literacy and education? Many Chinese thinkers, of varying background and experience of the West, have pondered such a question during the last two centuries. For example, Zhang Boxi (1847-1907), the Qing educator and architect of China's new school system at the beginning of this century, in his memorial of August 15, 1902 to Emperor Guangxu, compares the traditional Chinese system of education with the European model. He found that the two traditions had more similarities than differences, for he believed that Western subjects such as law, mathematics, and medicine taught in the late medieval and early Renaissance universities were comparable to certain subjects taught in the governmental schools of the Tang and Song dynasties. Zhang had further observed that the specialized curricula with fixed terms of study proposed by Song reformers, like Sima Guang and Zhu Xi, are again comparable to the Western segregation of studies according to different subjects and disciplines. In terms of the structure of different levels of education, Zhang even attempted to match the legendary four-tiered school system of preimperial China—allegedly family schools, schools for communities of five hundred, schools for communities of 12,500, and an advanced institution at the top for whole principalities—with such institutions of the West as the kindergarten, primary school, middle school, and the university. Divergence between China and the West on education, in Zhang's view, was a late historical development. "The whole point of educational reform in 1902," as Alexander Woodside has pointed out recently, "was [for Zhang] to devise a modern facsimile of the ancient school system, so that structures of education in China and the West would again resemble each other."[10]

Whether the traditional Chinese school systems did, in fact, and ought to resemble Western patterns are two separate and equally complex questions that my presentation this afternoon cannot hope to address adequately, let alone resolve. For the remainder of my talk, I can only lift up what seem in the present context to be the most noteworthy issues for comparative analysis and conclude with some personal observations.

In history and in legend, China's obsessive involvement with education manifests itself first of all in a "myth of a preimperial golden age of education."[11] In a text such as the Zhouli, the section on terrestrial offices (disian situ) details a massive and comprehensive system of schools and teaching officials for the instruction of the populace as citizens. The organizing principle for both the agents and content of instruction, as recorded in this early Han document, appears to be based squarely on the institutional structures of state, county, municipal, and local government. If juan 10 of the Zhouli is to be believed, the bureaucratic officials at various levels of government also double as educators, and the aim and instrument of their instructional efforts focus relentlessly and prescriptively on the issues of governance. As the first section of the juan makes clear, the established patterns of rites and rituals which form the government's curriculum are all designed to modify the people's behavior by instilling desirable social and political virtues. "Teaching about reverence with the rites of sacrifice will make the people not indifferent," declares the text, "and teaching about deference with the rites of Yang will make the people desist from strife" (Zhouli, 10, 2b; Siku beiyao edition) and so forth, until twelve types of teaching and their twelve purposes are all enumerated.

The modern reader of this ancient text today may be far less inclined than eighteenth-century Chinese literati, or even early republican educational theorists, to give credence to this idealized model of preimperial Chinese education. What we must acknowledge, however, is that such a model has persisted in its appeal and influence in the Chinese consciousness from high antiquity because it embodies the perennially affirmed unity between government (zheng) and teaching (jiao). That unity, as Alexander Woodside has astutely observed, is basically "alien to the tradition in the Christian West of dividing spiritual and
...the preponderant role of government in all phases of education...necessarily defines and limits the nature and goal of education.

temporal power,” but in the Chinese context it implies “the symbiotic equality of schooling with all other government activities.”

A symbiosis of such a nature, in fact, has always existed in the long course of Chinese history, and it is one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Chinese educational tradition. Whereas Western history, has in various moments, struggled to find the ideal balance between state and private sponsorship of education, and this struggle intensifies, particularly in our time, in the face of the ever-mounting cost of both early and higher education, the Chinese from the time of the Han to the present have never seemed to doubt the governmental obligation to be involved in such a process. However, the preponderant role of government in all phases of education not only skewes the process by subjecting it to the intervention of the ruling ideology of the state, but such an intervention itself also necessarily defines and limits the nature and goal of education.

In the Chinese history of education, the state’s ruling ideology reveals itself both in stipulating service to the state as the supreme goal of knowledge and in the recruitment and training of personnel for this enterprise. The practice of governmental solicitation and superintendence certainly began as early as the Han period. If such recorded edicts of Emperor Gaozu (196 BCE), Wendi (178 BCE), and Wu Di (140, 134, 130 BCE), form example, expressly declared an imperial intention of locating worthies for the court, the repeated memorials submitted by such erudite ministers as Jia Shan, Jia Yi, Lu Jia, and Chao Cuo all articulated the reciprocal ideal that learning, ultimately, must be measured in terms of the successful establishment of order and permanence for the empire. Within this line of development, it is not surprising that a person who was reputed to have done so much in making Confucianism a virtual state orthodoxy as Dong Zhongshu (ca. 195-115 BCE) also contributed decisively to the formation of the state’s educational philosophy. His consultative memorial to Han Wu Di in 140 BCE specifically urges the emperor “to revive the taixue and hire enlightened teachers so as to support the scholars throughout the empire,” for in his view, “educational transformation (jiaohua)” must be “the supreme responsibility (da wu)” of both ruler and subjects (Hanshu, 56).

This model of education—state-initiated, state-defined, and state-financed—has not only remained a fundamental paradigm in Chinese history down to the present century, but it has also functioned to shape and synthesize the distinctive ideal in Chinese culture that posits an inseparable linkage between knowledge and morality, between politics and ethics. That was the undeniable emphasis of the person whom Chinese down through the ages have honored as the exemplary teacher, Confucius himself. Whatever we may think of him as a private teacher, and however we may assess today the tenets of his teaching, we know that he was not primarily concerned with promoting knowledge for its own sake, nor certain branches of knowledge—for example, agriculture, medicine, or language—that may have ramifications beyond the immediate interest of the state. The preserved portrait we have of him, as with other thinkers both contemporary with and subsequent to him in the Warring States period, is as someone to whom the ruling nobility—Duke X or Y—came frequently and repeatedly to inquire about the principles of governance (wen zheng). That Confucius was quite inept, in fact, in what we might call today scientific and practical knowledge may be gathered from the episode in the Analects (18, 7), when an old man chided Zilu, one of the Master’s favored disciples, with the observation: “You seem neither to have toiled with your limbs nor to be able to tell one kind of grain from another. Who may your Master be?”

Those persons, past or present, who favor Confucianism would, of course, not be troubled by this sarcastic remark, for the affairs of state in their view would be much more important than sturdy limbs or a discriminating knowledge of grain. Confucius, so they argue, had trained instead his steadfast attention on the dao and how its operative efficacy in the state (bang) might be tied to his personal, moral destiny. A contemporary Confucian advocate like Harvard’s Tu Wei-ming can, in fact, seek to update such an ancient discourse by contending that the Confucian core idea of dao “addresses the question of the ultimate meaning of...
human existence” and thus represents a sort of “transcendental breakthrough” in Confucian humanism. Against the modernistic veneer of such an interpretation, however, I should point out that Dong Zhongshu in his memorial offers a far more mundane definition. “The dao,” he says, “is the road leading to proper governance.” For a person to enlarge the dao, as Confucius once asserted, would mean that the educational content and process, the curriculum and pedagogy, must fulfill its fundamental task of political transformation, for in the last Confucian analysis, the most learned person must also be the most moral citizen.

A COMPARATIVE CONCLUSION

This last observation may conveniently bring me back to ancient Greece, for on the surface of the matter, did not the Platonic Socrates also advocate as well that knowledge is a form of virtue? An affirmative answer to this question, however, should not be permitted to obscure the basic divergence of thought and practice between the Greek and Chinese traditions. Although Plato and his Academy also advocated service to the state as one of education’s goals and functions, it is almost a certainty to classicists of our time that that Athenian institution was privately directed and financed. The city-state had litde say in its operation or curriculum. Down through the lengthy course of Western civilization, as I have mentioned earlier, the development of the academy in the form of the secular, research university has always maintained a paradoxical relation to its immediate, envirioning society. Despite the enormous social and political impact a university may generate, its prosperity and proper functioning depend directly on the degree of intellectual, financial, and administrative independence it can enjoy as an institution.

Furthermore, the tradition of liberal education stemming from Aristotelian thought regards the process and product of learning as grounded upon the supreme good of individual self-fulfillment, just as a particular form of government may be said to represent the best institution for meeting the political needs of the individual citizen. In such a philosophical model, the intellectual virtues to be upheld, cultivated, and transmitted are premised upon their value for the discrete individual quite apart from his or her classification as a member of the body politic. This crucial point is in sharp contrast to traditional Chinese social thought, wherein political and moral virtues unite as an indivisible homology in which the communal and collective take precedence over the individual. The independent exercise of the mind and rational inquiry, from this Chinese perspective, can become as undesirable as dissent in the household or in the state.

Whether the Western conception and model of learning are applicable within an East Asian context, and particularly in a locale such as Hong Kong, is a question that cannot be swiftly and simply resolved not only because it is a complex question, but also because part of that very complexity is produced by the uncertainty of this city’s social and political prospects after 1997. Much as many Chinese resisted in this century the call for “total Westernization (quan pan xi hua)” spawned by the May Fourth movement, a few Asian leaders today are arguing that some Western institutions, including political ones, are by definition and custom ill-fitting for Eastern consumption. They are right up to a point, of course, for no one today would advocate with the Greeks a slave society or an educational program that excludes women.

Against, however, a certain brand of convenient, but also self-serving, defense of cultural particularism, one must also ask whether East Asian societies can envisage values—intellectual and political—which transcend state power, as it is presently and locally conceived. As far as a place like Hong Kong is concerned, one must further point out that this city’s cultural tradition cannot avoid speaking with “altered accents.” For nearly a century, and perhaps even much longer, the freedom of commerce that has made Hong Kong world-renowned has involved far more than economics. The vibrant and productive traffic of languages, ideas, and institutions that constitutes this island’s inalienable history includes the espousal of values more consonant than at odds with liberal education, values to which the
As this native son of Hong Kong finishes his remarks, he, too, is keenly aware that he speaks only as a guest.

University that now celebrates its fortieth anniversary bears proud witness. May such values long persist. For education to be truly liberal and thus liberating, the student must be free to think and write footnotes! Without such ability and such freedom, the capacity of learning, as well as knowledge itself, will suffer, and that in turn may adversely affect even the economic stability and growth that is the watchword of every developing region of the world.

To speak in this vein, in view of what may, or will, happen to Hong Kong a year from now is, of course, to speak also with altered accents. I end with the poem with which I begin. The last two lines of He Zhizhang's poem, you remember, go as follows:

Children see me but they do not know me.
Smiling, they ask: where does the guest come from?

The paradoxical consciousness voiced by the poetic speaker is that of his alien status; despite his earlier affirmation of unchanged speech and tone, there is a cultural divide or discontinuity, after all, between him and his home. Would the older folks of his hometown have recognized He Zhizhang? Does recognition depend on age or experience? Could there be recognition despite physical or cultural distance? Intriguing questions, these, but they must await another occasion for their exploration. As this native son of Hong Kong finishes his remarks, he, too, is keenly aware that he speaks only as a guest. I can only hope that the ideas expressed will receive as hospitable a reception as the speaker already has enjoyed.

ENDNOTES

1. This essay was written by invitation from the Hong Kong Baptist University as part of its fortieth anniversary celebration. It was delivered as a public lecture on April 17, 1996, in Hong Kong. A Chinese version of the essay will be published by that University.


6. This is, in fact, Aristotle’s justification for including reading and writing (grammar) as the first item of his curriculum, because it is considered an instrumental science through which "many other sorts of knowledge are acquired."


12. Ibid., loc. cit.


14. See, for example, Chen Dongyuan, Zhanggu jiaoyu shi (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936), pp. 22-23, 32.

15. Yu, op. cit., p. 139.