Historical Significance Activity 3

The Confucian Legacy in Modern China

Shared national traditions can often be an effective way of enlisting many different types of people in a country behind a single goal. The relationship of ancient Chinese thought to modern Communist thought is an example of this. Whereas Confucius’s teachings avidly support unequal class structures in a stable society, the Communists who took power in China during the 1950s favored a classless society where people shared equally in the wealth produced. Yet Chinese Communists have used the historical traditions of their country to inspire people to join their cause. Read the following definition of a good Communist by Liu Shao-Ch’i, who helped form the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

He [a good Communist] will be capable of possessing very good Communist ethics. Because he has a firm outlook he “can both love and hate people.” He can show loyalty to and ardent love for all his comrades, revolutionaries, and working people, help them unconditionally, treat them with equality, and never harm any one of them for the sake of his own interests. He can deal with them in a “faithful and forgiving” spirit and “put himself in the position of others.” He can consider others’ problems from their points of view and be considerate to them. “He will never do to others anything he would not like others to do to him.” He can deal with the most vicious enemies of mankind in a most resolute manner and conduct a persistent struggle against the enemy for the purpose of defending the interests of the Party, the class, and the emancipation of mankind. As the Chinese saying goes, “He will worry long before the rest of the world begins to worry and he will rejoice only after the rest of the world has rejoiced.” Both in the Party and among the people he will be the first to suffer hardship and the last to enjoy himself. He never minds whether his conditions are better or worse than others, but he does mind as to whether he has done more revolutionary work than others, or whether he has fought harder. In times of adversity, he will stand out courageously and unflinchingly, and in the face of difficulties he will demonstrate the greatest sense of responsibility. Therefore, he is capable of possessing the greatest firmness and moral courage to resist corruption by riches and honors, to resist tendencies to vacillate in spite of poverty and lowly status, and to refuse to yield in spite of threats or force.

—from Sources of Chinese Tradition © 1960, Columbia University Press

DIRECTIONS: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What Daoist and Confucian elements can you identify in Liu’s speech?
2. Why do you think Liu chose to include appeals to traditional values in his speech?
3. Write a short speech that Liu might have given linking Communist aspirations with examples from ancient Chinese history.