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Chinese and Western Culture: The Myth of Essential Difference

I

During the past few decades China has undergone enormous economic, social and cultural changes. One significant aspect of these changes is the rehabilitation, as it were, of traditional Chinese culture. This turn to tradition means a radical shift from the critical appraisal of China's cultural tradition that was predominant during much of the twentieth century.

In the wake of the Opium War in the nineteenth century fundamental change came to be seen as necessary to save China from the threats posed by economically and militarily superior powers. By declaring that in order to save China it was necessary to reject much of the traditional cultural heritage, radical intellectuals in the early twentieth century set the agenda for much of the political and cultural discussion up until the end of the Mao era in the late 1970's. The underlying assumption was that traditional Chinese culture was in some way essentially different from and inferior to Western culture. Many people in China considered the rejection of the indigenous tradition as painful but necessary. In the words of the prominent scholar Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927), who in despair took his own life in 1927: 'That which I love I cannot believe, and that which I believe I cannot love'.¹

China's economic and political rise in the past forty years has culturally been accompanied by a turn to the indigenous tradition as a source of identity and national pride. China has a long and rich cultural tradition, which is a valuable part of all mankind's cultural heritage. To keep this tradition alive by studying it, reinterpreting it and drawing inspiration from it is indeed worthwhile.

However, this turn to tradition also involves the risk of exaggerating the specific characteristics of Chinese culture. During the past few decades we have seen the rise of so-called 'national studies' (*guoxue* 國學) as a major current in Chinese intellectual life and ideology.² The practitioners of such studies often tend to depict Chinese culture as essentially different from, and also in some ways superior to, other cultures.

¹ These words quoted from an article that Wang Guowei in 1922 published in the journal *Xueheng* 學衡 (Critical Review) refer primarily to different currents in Western philosophy. I quote them here because they capture, I believe, how many people in China have felt about Chinese and Western culture.

² Concerning 'national studies', see Wang Xiaolin, "'National Studies' in China and Japan", *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2016, pp. 413-426.

In the contemporary Western world, the idea that cultural traditions such as the European, the Muslim, the Indian and the Chinese are essentially different is also widespread. The political scientist Samuel Huntington's thesis, first formulated in the early 1990's, that the major source of conflict in the post-cold war era would be a 'clash of civilizations' rooted in essential cultural differences became very influential.³

It is my belief that the idea of essential cultural differences separating China and the West is factually questionable and misleading. It also easily makes cross-cultural communication and understanding more difficult than it need to be.

II

The notion of essential cultural differences separating China and the West is deeply rooted in the European tradition, probably more so than in the Chinese tradition.⁴

According to one central and particularly tenacious notion, there is no transcendent perspective in Chinese tradition: Chinese thought is seen as somehow incapable of reaching out beyond what exists in the here and now. I do not know where this notion has its origin, but in modern times it has exerted enormous influence in the form that Max Weber gave it, at first mainly in the West but during the past few decades also in China.⁵

Weber formulated his thesis against the background of his analysis of the role of Calvinism for the emergence of capitalism in Europe. What he had identified as a dynamic element in Calvinist thought was exactly what he found missing in China. The Confucian ethic was not anchored in a transcendent dimension of reality, he argued, and the tension between ethical demand and human shortcomings, which in Europe he meant had decisively contributed to Calvinism becoming a lever for social change, he found missing from the Confucian tradition.⁶

³ Huntington later expanded his thesis in a book that included a response to Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*. See *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

⁴ Concerning the image of China in Europe, see, e.g., Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967; Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Cf. also Donald F. Lach's monumental *Asia in the Making of Europe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965–93.

⁵ Concerning Weber's views of Chinese thought, see Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, translated and edited by Hans H. Gerth with an introduction by C. K. Yang, New York: The Free Press, 1968.

⁶ Weber wrote: 'Es fehlte, genau wie bei den genuinen Hellenen, jede transcendente Verankerung der Ethik, jede Spannung zwischen Geboten eines überweltlichen Gottes und einer kreatürlichen Welt, jede Ausgerichtetheit auf ein jenseitiges Ziel und jede Konzeption eines radikalen Böses.' Quoted from *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, I, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922, pp. 514f. He also wrote: 'Irgendwelche Spannung zwischen Natur und Gottheit, ethischen Anforderungen und menschlicher Unzulänglichkeit,

The idea that there is no transcendence in traditional Chinese thought is the centre of a cluster of conceptions of Chinese culture as essentially different.

One such conception relates to the distinction between ‘guilt culture’ and ‘shame culture’. To belong to a guilt culture implies having an inner moral compass based on values anchored in a transcendent dimension of reality, which makes you feel guilt whenever you break a moral rule, no matter whether anyone knows about it or not. To belong to a shame culture, on the other hand, means to lack such an inner moral compass: the only thing that matters is whether you get caught red-handed or not. According to a widespread conception, European culture is a guilt culture while Chinese culture is more of a shame culture.⁷

Another common conception is that Chinese thought does not make a number of distinctions which are fundamental in European tradition, e.g. between essence and phenomenon, substance and accident, body and soul.⁸

According to yet another conception, the words of the Chinese language were considered from the beginning so inextricably linked with those things or situations to which they referred that there were no metaphors in the oldest literature.⁹

In my opinion none of these conceptions is tenable. True, the core question whether or not there is transcendence in premodern Chinese thought is complicated, and an exhaustive treatment of it would require a conceptual analysis that time here does not allow. But if we proceed on the basis of a simple definition of transcendence as something that goes beyond what we may perceive with our senses or, in the words of a dictionary, ‘that cannot be discovered or understood by practical experience’, then the transcendent perspective appears as a central element in the intellectual universe of Neo-Confucianism.¹⁰ In this universe humans exist at the intersection of two dimensions of reality, the metaphysical dimension where the Heavenly Principles (*tianli* 天理) and the Way (*dao* 道) have their abode, and the

Sündenbewusstsein und Erlösungsbedürfnis, diesseitigen Taten und jenseitiger Vergeltung, religiöser Pflicht und politisch-sozialen Realitäten fehlte eben dieser Ethik vollständig und daher auch jede Handhabe zur Beeinflussung der Lebensführung durch innere Gewalten, die nicht rein traditionell und konventionell gebunden waren.’ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

⁷ Concerning this question, see Ambrose Yeo-chi King [Jin Yaoji] and John T. Myers, ‘Shame as an Incomplete Conception of Chinese Culture: A Study of Face’, Working paper, The Chinese University of Hong Kong Social Research Centre, 1977.

⁸ See, e.g. François Jullien, *Un sage est sans idée. Ou, l’autre de la philosophie*, Paris: Seuil, 1998.

⁹ See Martin Svensson Ekström, ‘Illusion, Lie and Metaphor: the Paradox of Divergence in Early Chinese Poetics’, *Poetics Today*, 23:2, 2002, pp. 251–89.

¹⁰ The quotation is taken from the entry on ‘transcendental’ in *The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*, London: Oxford University Press, 1963. Concerning Neo-Confucianism, see Thomas Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China’s Evolving Political Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

physical dimension where we find the building material of everything *Qi* 氣 as well as human desires (*renyu* 人欲). The values that Neo-Confucianism defined are anchored in the world of Heavenly Principles and *Dao*, which undoubtedly is beyond what we may perceive with our senses.

Furthermore, the main purpose of the individual cultivation that Confucian scholars have advocated through the centuries has been to overcome the tension between ethical demand and human shortcomings.¹¹

To use the distinction between guilt culture and shame culture as a way of differentiating between Chinese and Western culture also seems misleading. Surely there are people in China as well as in Europe who suppress their moral intuition and lack an inner moral compass. But the notion of an inner moral compass is certainly not absent from the Chinese tradition. On the contrary, it is central in Confucian moral philosophy as we meet it in, for example, Confucius and Mencius and in the classics *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) and *The Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸).¹²

The view that the distinctions between essence and phenomenon, substance and accident, body and soul are absent from Chinese tradition is quite peculiar. When the philosopher Gongsun Long 公孫龍 in the fourth century B.C. argued that a white horse is not a horse, what did he then have in mind if not the distinction between essential and accidental qualities?¹³ What was the fundamental Neo-Confucian distinction between heavenly *li* and *qi* about if not essence and phenomena?¹⁴ In the eighteenth century the philosopher Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724-1777) criticized the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy for making a radical distinction between body and soul.

¹¹ Cf. Metzger, *op.cit.*

¹² In classical Confucian texts such as *The Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) we find clear expressions of the view that a morally highly cultivated person is anxious to act morally even if not observed by anyone. For an interesting analysis of the *Zhongyong*, see Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality. An Essay on Chung-yung*, Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976.

¹³ Concerning Gongsun Long, see, e.g., A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989, pp. 82–95.

¹⁴ Concerning Dai Zhen, see Anping Chin and Mansfield Freeman, *Tai Chen on Mencius: Explorations in Words and Meanings*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990. See also my paper ‘On the Social Dynamics of Philosophical Ideas: Dai Zhen’s Critique of Neo-Confucianism’, *Rendez-Vous*, Festschrift in Honour of Marja Kaikkonen, special issue of *Orientaliska studier*, No. 146, 2016, pp. 113-145.

The notion that there are no metaphors in the oldest Chinese literature is also very odd. As far as I can see there are many metaphors already in the most ancient collection of Chinese poetry, the *Classic of Poetry* (the *Shijing* 詩經).¹⁵

The misconception that a transcendent perspective of reality is absent from the Chinese tradition often goes hand in hand with an exaggerated picture of the dominance of the transcendent perspective in the European tradition. Many scholars who use the concept of transcendence to distinguish between Chinese and Western culture seem to neglect not only the fact that there was transcendence in premodern China but also the prominence of the immanent perspective in the European tradition. For example, in Christian theology God is both transcendent and immanent and as we know many theologians have brought the immanent perspective to the foreground.¹⁶ The theologian Clayton Crockett explains the notion ‘secular theology’, which is today much discussed, in the following terms:

[...] secular theology is an affirmation of the Enlightenment shift from outside or beyond the world (an otherworldly transcendence) towards a more immanent, worldly locus of value and significance.¹⁷

III

Let me now move on to the present time and briefly discuss an example of what some people think is an essential cultural difference. Especially in China, but sometimes also in the West, it is sometimes said that because of deeply rooted cultural differences Chinese and Western people have different views of democracy and human rights. In China the notion of ‘universal values’ (*pushi jiazhi* 普世價值) has been banned by the Communist Party along with a number of other ‘Western’ ideas as ideological perils incompatible with Chinese culture.¹⁸

¹⁵ See Svensson Ekström, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ See, e.g., John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2002; *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought*, ed. Clayton Crockett, London: Routledge, 2001. *An Insurrectionist Manifesto: Four New Gospels for a Radical Theology*, by Ward Blanton, Clayton Crockett, Jeffrey W. Robbins, and Noëlle Vahanian, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

¹⁷ “Secular Theology and the Academic Study of Religion” *CSSR Bulletin* 37.2, 2008,

¹⁸ See Party Document no. 9 ‘Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere’, which was circulated within the Communist Party in April 2013 and which warns against seven ideological perils: (1) promoting Western constitutional democracy; (2) promoting universal values; (3) promoting civil society;

This is difficult to understand. To me it seems that a form of humanistic ethical universalism is very much at the core of the Chinese tradition. Confucius said that the noble man is not a utensil, which reminds us of Immanuel Kant's idea that we must consider human beings as ends rather than means.¹⁹ Varieties of the golden rule are very central both in the Chinese and the Western tradition. Jesus said, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you', and Confucius said, 'What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others.'²⁰ In the Confucian *Analects* we can read that the noble man considers all men within the four seas to be his brothers.²¹ These are all important values both in China and the West that we may with good reason refer to as 'universal'. It is also interesting to remember that a Chinese scholar and diplomat, Mr P.C. Chang (張彭春 1892–1957) played a key role in the writing of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. For Mr. Chang it was crucial that this text should not be exclusively Western, and he felt that he had been successful in anchoring it in Chinese tradition, especially in the thought of Mencius.²²

As for democracy and Chinese culture, yesterday's elections in Hong Kong show clearly that many Chinese people, just like people in the West and in the rest of the world, cherish the democratic ideals.²³

IV

The view of Chinese and Western culture as essentially different entities is often based on an exaggerated assumption of the homogeneity and permanence of the respective traditions. In fact, great diversity is characteristic of both.

(4) promoting neoliberalism; (5) promoting the West's idea of journalism; (6) promoting historical nihilism; (7) questioning the policies of reform inside China and opening up to the outside world and the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Document_Number_Nine

¹⁹ Confucius words 'The noble man is not a utensil' (*junzi bu qi* 君子不器) are found in *The Analects of Confucius*, 2:12, trans. Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. Kant's idea was that a rational being must never be treated only as a means. What he said was, in English translation: "So act as to treat humanity [*Menschheit*], whether in your own person or in that of any other, always at the same time as an end, and never merely as a means." Quoted from Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 6. *Modern Philosophy*, Part II *Kant*, New York: Image Books, 1964, p. 120.

²⁰ The Golden Rule in the words of Jesus are found in Luke 6:31 and Confucius negative formulation is found in *The Analects of Confucius*, 12:2, trans. Burton Watson, *op.cit.*, p. 80.

²¹ *The Analects*, 12:5.

²² See Hans Ingvar Roth, *P.C. Chang and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

²³ On November 24 local elections were held in Hong Kong and the voter turnout rate was 71 percent. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_Hong_Kong_local_elections

For example, we may consider the widespread notion that the Chinese think in holistic terms, while Westerners rather think in individualistic or ‘atomistic’ terms. According to this notion, the Chinese take their point of departure in an organic whole, while the Westerner proceeds from an individual thing or situation.

It is probably true that a holistic perspective dominates in Chinese tradition, but there are certainly also examples of more atomistic views. Two of the most prominent scholars in the eighteenth century, Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738-1801), once had a famous discussion about the principles of textual criticism. Dai argued that in interpreting a text one must proceed from the individual written character to the paragraph, sentence and finally the whole work, while Zhang maintained that one must first form an opinion about the meaning of the whole and then proceed down via the sentence, paragraph to the individual character.²⁴

Even though an atomistic view of the world has characterized much Western thought, this perspective has by no means been completely dominant. Suffice it here to refer to German idealism and Marxism as intellectual traditions largely based on holistic thinking.

Closely linked to the idea that Chinese thinking is holistic as opposed to the atomistic Western thinking is the idea that the Chinese think in terms of ‘both and’, while Westerners think in terms of ‘either or’.²⁵ This idea seems impossible to uphold against empirical evidence. It is of course true that syncretistic attempts to reconcile contradictions have been very common in China, but such attempts we may also find in Europe. Moreover, there are plenty of examples in Chinese tradition of thinking in terms of ‘either or’. When Mao Zedong sought philosophical support for his thesis that contradictions constitute the most fundamental feature of being, he borrowed the formulation ‘one divides into two’ (*yi fen wei er* 一分为二) from the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), one of the greatest thinkers in Chinese history.²⁶

²⁴ Professor Ying-shih Yü [Yu Yingshi] has analyzed the discussion between Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng in his book *Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng: Qingdai zhongqi xueshu sixiang yanjiu* 戴震與章學誠：清代中期學術思想研究 (Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng: Studies on scholarly thought in the middle of the eighteenth century), Taipei: Huashi chubanshe, 1970.

²⁵ See Johan Galtung and Fumiko Nishimura, *Kan vi laere av kineserna? (Can we learn from the Chinese?)*, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1975. At least in the Nordic countries this book was very influential in making people believe that Chinese people think in terms of ‘both and’, while people in the West think in terms of ‘either or’. There is a German translation of this book under the title *Von China lernen?* Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1978.

²⁶ Concerning this Maoist notion ‘one divides into two’, see, e.g., Meng Xianjun, “‘One Divides Into Two’ Reveals Struggle; ‘Two Combines Into One’ Reveals Unity”, *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1980, pp. 22-36. For the roots of this notion in Chinese tradition, see Chenshan Tan, *Chinese Dialectics: From*

When Chinese and Western thought are juxtaposed as essentially different, traditional Chinese culture is often compared with the individualistic and liberal currents of modern Western thought. If we were to compare traditional Chinese thought to European thought before the Enlightenment, the differences would be much less conspicuous.

Besides, for more than a century now, Chinese culture has absorbed so many elements from Western culture and also changed according to its inner logic to such an extent that it is very different from the culture of premodern China.

The writer Lung Yingtai once told me about an interesting experience. She grew up in Taiwan and learnt in school that whereas Chinese people focus on the collective, people in the West are more individualistic. Her experience as a graduate student in the United States tended to confirm this stereotype notion of an essential difference between China and the West. Then, while in the US, she met her future husband, a man from Bavaria in Germany. They married and settled down in Germany. Getting to know her husband's family and other people in Bavaria, she found to her surprise that they seemed to be even more family oriented and 'collectivistic' than her family and friends in Taiwan.

A few years ago, we invited a Chinese diplomat in Stockholm, who has a special interest in education, to give a talk about her impressions of education in Sweden as compared to China. It turned out that one of her main impressions was that while the Chinese system is highly competitive and each student is expected to struggle hard to be better than his or her fellow students, the Swedish system is based more on teamwork and cooperation.

A research project carried out in Scandinavia about fifteen years ago compared political attitudes in China, Japan, South Korea, Denmark and Sweden. The results of this research suggest that in some ways attitudes in Sweden and Denmark are now more 'Confucian' in their emphasis on the importance of solidarity and equality than attitudes in the big Chinese cities, which in their focus on individual success approach the stereotype of Western individualism.²⁷

V

Yijing to Marxism, Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005, especially Chapter Seven 'Mao Zedong: The Mature Formulation of Dialectical Materialism'.

²⁷ See Geir Helgesen and Sören Risbjerg Thomsen, *Politics, Culture and Self: East Asian and European Attitudes*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006.

Cultures are changing and developing according to their inner logic and in contact with other cultures. Chinese culture is not a homogeneous entity which has remained unchanged since the beginnings. In cultural terms Chinese people growing up today, be it in huge cities such as Beijing and Shanghai or in small villages in the countryside, are very different from their ancestors, who lived two hundred or two thousand years ago. Their mindsets now include notions of pop music, computers, market economy etc. However, this does not make them less Chinese than their ancestors. It is the meaning of Chineseness that is in constant flux.

My personal encounter with Chinese culture has been an enriching experience, which has broadened my horizon, and I have indeed discovered cultural differences. For example, in the history of thought it cannot be denied that there has been a much greater interest in logic and epistemology in the European than in the Chinese tradition. Yet, in spite of this and other conspicuous differences, it is the similarities rather than the differences that have struck me most. The differences often appear as variations on common themes rather than as essential differences.

Bernhard Karlgren, the great pioneer of sinology in Sweden, on his first visit to China in 1910 reported an interesting observation in a letter to his fiancée:

Coming out here one is not at all amazed, as everyone assures one, that everything is so different from our own culture. On the contrary I keep feeling surprised at the fact that the material culture is so utterly similar to ours. As early as 2000 years B.C. the Chinese were already using the forearm (cubit) as a measure and dividing this into inches. Is not such a detail marvellous?²⁸

Scholars have too often, it seems to me, exaggerated differences and thereby mystified Chinese culture rather than torn down the walls of prejudice and ignorance that surround it. Therefore, it is a challenge for us to puncture the myth of Chinese culture as being essentially different, while at the same time keeping our eyes open to its richness and great diversity.

There are today many examples of tension and conflict between China and the Western world. For example, we see this in the ongoing trade war between China and the United States and also in issues concerning democracy and human rights. It worries me that the myth of essential differences may be used to describe a clash of civilizations between China and the West as more or less inevitable. In my view, these and other examples of tension and

²⁸ Quoted from Göran Malmqvist, *Bernhard Karlgren: Ett forskarporträtt* (Bernhard Karlgren: A portrait of a scholar), Stockholm: Norstedts, 1995, p. 145. My translation from the Swedish original.

conflict are rooted in diverging political interests and ideologies and have very little to do with essential cultural differences.