UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE MIND

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS

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Contents

1 An Overview of the Chinese Mind

ROBERT E. ALLINSON

IN our attempt to understand the Chinese mind, we must agree upon what we mean by 'understanding', by 'the Chinese mind', and by 'philosophy'. While just such answers as these are articulated only towards the end of such a volume as this, it is helpful to formulate some preliminary definitions. To deal with the last question first, why do we choose philosophy as a key to understanding the way of thinking of a culture? This volume is the outcome of a belief that the Chinese mind can be understood through its philosophy. As philosophy is essentially an attempt to understand ourselves and the world around us, we can provisionally understand the philosophy of a culture as a representation of how that culture attempts to understand itself. Thus, we may utilize the attempt at self-understanding (philosophy) as a mirror to reveal what *understanding* means for any particular culture.

This volume is one of the first of its kind to set out to reveal how Chinese philosophy can be understood in the light of techniques and concepts taken from Western philosophy. In this respect, we may expand the mirror image to that of a mirror being looked at through another mirror. Classical Chinese philosophy is investigated with the intention of articulating philosophical terms and key concepts by comparing these terms and concepts with parallel terms and concepts developed in classical and contemporary Western philosophy. It is hoped that by presenting the philosophical roots of the Chinese mind in terms which are familiar to the Western reader that the Western reader can come to a better understanding of the Chinese philosophical tradition which has formed the Chinese mind, and hence to a better understanding of the Chinese mind.

If we have defined philosophy in a preliminary sense as the self-reflection of a culture, then, at the same time, we have come to an understanding of what we understand by 'understanding'. However, we must face the issue of attempting to understand one culture's self-understanding through the self-understanding of another culture. It would be foolish to consider that no problem

presented itself in the attempt to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. By the same token, however, we must not consider the crossing of linguistic and cultural boundaries an impossibility.

As John Smith points out in his chapter on crossing boundaries, even within one's own self, one is constantly changing and consequently a later phase of the same self must *interpret* in order to understand his or her earlier self. The task of crossing boundaries, rather than being something unusual, is something we are doing all the time. In order to cross boundaries, even within ourselves, we have to perform the task of interpretation. Thus, interpretation is an integral part of crossing boundaries.

How does the fact that we are constantly crossing boundaries in order to understand our own selves at earlier times apply to the difficulties of crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries? As John Smith notes, we must not make *too* much out of linguistic barriers. Otherwise, they become a taboo which prevents us from ever making the attempt to understand across cultures. What Smith stresses is that the fact that we refer back to experience in order to interpret across linguistic impasses suggests that there is a corrective to a purely linguistic understanding. To put this another way, there is a dimension of understanding that transcends our linguistic capacities and productions. In fact, as Chung-ying Cheng and Lao Sze-kwang illustrate in different ways in their chapters, it is an integral part of Chinese philosophy that understanding proper rises above linguistic boundaries. If there were not a trans-linguistic understanding, how could we even be aware in the first place that there was something further to understand that transcended our use of language? One must bear in mind that words are *ciphers of experience* and our experience is human which means that it is potentially universal in addition to being cultural and linguistic. We are, first and foremost, human beings and this is what makes possible our bridging of linguistic and cultural barriers.

What of cultural barriers? How much violence might we wreak upon the philosophy of another culture by interpreting it through the philosophy of a Western culture? Are we not forcing interpretations upon a mode of understanding that in many instances might not be there in the first place? Needless to say, cultural barriers are very substantial and form the *raison d'être* of this volume. The very existence of this problem is what makes the attempt to interpret across boundaries an exciting and an impor-

tant task. It is not a reason to shrink from such a task; it is a reason to proceed with caution and circumspection. To proceed with caution does not mean that there is no hope in understanding when boundaries are crossed. It only means that once we cross boundaries, we may be required to alter our modes of understanding in order to interpret the signs of another culture correctly. The philosophical crossing of cultures becomes itself a philosophical problem within the discipline of philosophy. In addition to the possible rewards we may glean from understanding another culture, we also enlarge the dimension of understanding required within the discipline of philosophy. If we looked upon the problem as imposing an understanding of Chinese philosophy by transposing the categories of Western philosophy upon Chinese philosophy, we would, of course, not only be guilty of cultural imperialism, but we would not further our quest for understanding. But by recognizing that Western philosophy itself can be expanded through its contact with Chinese philosophy, we find that by the end of our study it is not so much a question of interpreting East through West, but of interpreting East through East. What may seem, in the beginning, like an attempt to understand another culture through our own, in the end may result in a shift in our fundamental way of understanding, which is, in the end, the only way to understand across cultures. The difficulty in formulating the problem in the first place by considering that we are imposing Western philosophical categories upon the Chinese mind is to consider that Western philosophy itself is static and impervious to change. In the end, we are not cultural imperialists; we are dancing partners. The only difference is that, in this case, we are inviting our partner to dance.

What of the opposite fear, that instead of understanding too little from this volume we may understand too much? With our philosophical looking glass, will we now be able to see through the mystique of the Chinese mind and will it therefore lose its attraction for us as do the magician's tricks when his sleights of hand are detected by an artful observer? I do not think that we should be afraid of understanding too much, for this fear is based upon the concept of a closed circle of understanding. The closed circle concept is that, after understanding, there is nothing left to understand. All the cards are on the table. There is no more magic to behold. With an open, or creative concept of understanding, after

such an act of understanding, there may be more of ourselves to understand rather than less. I think that all of the essays to follow bear eloquent testimony to this.

Will we, as Westerners (and Westernized Chinese) destroy too much of the Chinese tradition by reducing it to Western terms? Again, I do not foresee this result. Cheng's essay, in particular, is encouraging in this regard because it shows that Chinese thought can be *further* developed in Chinese terms and not destroyed in the process of Westernization. What is especially interesting is the role that Western thinking has played in the development of Chinese thought. The current Western interest in the *Yijing (I Ching)* has undoubtedly played a strong role in renewing the Chinese quest into the sources of their own tradition.

Cheng points out that the Chinese tradition is treading a different path from the West. If we follow Cheng further in the direction in which he points, then it is only by a great familiarization with the Chinese tradition that we can hope to retain and maintain both the Chinese mystique and Chinese wisdom. What interests us, in a volume such as this, is that we could never know how Chinese thought differed so much from the West unless we had discovered it under the Western microscope. In fact, what exists is the opposite danger. Rather than understanding too much by our inquiry, without such an inquiry as the present one, by ignoring the uniqueness of the Oriental tradition, there is a real danger that its charm and wisdom may be lost.

There is yet another point here. Cultures, as well as our own individual minds, are capable of change. In fact, there is really no longer a pure "Western" mind any more than there is a pure "Chinese" mind. Perhaps the first result of studying the philosophy of another culture is the realization that there never was a monolithic "Chinese" mind to begin with. Likewise, the concept of a monolithic "Western" mind is a stereotype that overlooks the vast and important differences within the so-called West. For example, in the intra-Western case of the Hebrew language, as John Smith notes, there is no single Hebrew synonym of the word 'sin'. One can only imagine what linguistic and cultural obstacles to understanding exist for one Westerner attempting to understand another Westerner when one considers an example such as this.

As an aside, one may consider the inappositeness and the irony of the use of geographical terms to attempt to portray unities and differences in understanding. Even in "Western" thought, every

student of ancient Greek philosophy learns that the cradle of Western science and the beginning of Western philosophy is Ionia which is in Asia minor.

Cultural boundaries have never been pristine, and in this century they are becoming less and less distinct. As a case in point, as Lao Sze-kwang points out, the word 'philosophy' (and here I may add 'religion') is purely of "Western" origin and did not exist even in *translated* forms until as late as Meiji in Japan and thence from Japan into China.[1] However, the equally important fact is that these terms *have existed* for the past one hundred years as translated terms and are now used (in their translated forms) by some as terms to describe ways of thinking which previously were referred to as 'schools of thought' or 'teachings'. For good or ill, the "East" now uses Western labels to describe and thus to understand its own traditions. In these respects, cultural isolationism ended in the Far East over one century ago.

One can question whether one can apply Western categories such as 'philosophy' to the Chinese mind, but the fact is that this is a *fait accompli*. This does not mean that if we do apply such labels we should not do so with caution and qualification. It is part and parcel of a philosophical understanding to question whether applied labels accurately describe what we are attempting to understand. Thus, this discipline, properly understood, contains its own corrective within itself. If there is a real problem of possible misunderstanding created by the category of 'philosophy', then any philosophical understanding worthy of its name should be able to meet such a problem head on.

In the ancient Greek sense of philosophy as 'the love of wisdom', there should be no difficulty at all in attempting to understand the Chinese mind through its philosophy. But, if by philosophy, we mean the art or the practice of systematic argument and the overwhelming reliance upon understanding through the analysis of concepts, we discover that philosophy may mean something quite different to the Chinese mind from what it means to the Western mind. There are two items of great interest that result from this understanding. Firstly, if there is a different orientation in Chinese thought from that line of thinking within Western thought that stresses the importance of logical proof, then our concept of philosophy must expand to include this different orientation as legitimate philosophy, because it may lead us in otherwise unthought-of directions. Secondly, we may discover, by a close

analysis of the thought patterns of ancient Chinese thinkers, that conceptual analysis and theoretical understanding were in fact implicit (and sometimes explicit) within the ancient Chinese tradition. Such a result may in fact alter the stereotype (whether this be a self-stereotype or one which is imposed from the West) of Chinese philosophy as not being of the same orientation as Western philosophy. The first of these resultants that is the outcome of our inquiry into the Chinese mind is the perspective proposed by Chad Hansen; the second is the perspective proposed by Christoph Harbsmeier.

Hansen takes the refreshing and eye-opening view that rather than being something alien, formidable, and obscure, Chinese views of language and mind are more plausible and defensible than their Western counterparts. In particular, Hansen argues that Chinese views of language and mind require neither a commitment to obscure and invisible mental objects nor to the psychology of propositional belief. In addition, Hansen stresses the supra-linguistic role that Chinese written language plays among the numerous Chinese oral languages. This supra-linguistic role, in Hansen's view, is the role that is occupied by ideas or concepts in Western theories. It is important to add here that the language that in the West we construe as Chinese with a great number of variant oral dialects, should be more accurately described as a great number of distinct and independently evolved oral languages with their own unique grammatical structures which have all been made to conform to a single written language with its own grammatical structure.

Between the lines, what Hansen is saying is that our difficulties in understanding Chinese philosophy are not created by the obscurities of a more convoluted way of thinking than our own, but that our primary difficulties stem from our own way of thinking that is inherently obscure and convoluted. It is as if we were attempting to examine a biological specimen but insisted upon using a self-distorting lens for our microscope. For Hansen, the Chinese heart-mind does not have the mental counterpart of words and sentences. The fundamental distinction that every student of Western (Aristotelian) logic is taught, the distinction between a sentence and a string of words, does not exist. The syntactic sentence is not central to Chinese language. The Chinese heart-mind, rather than operating through the indirect mediate and abstract medium of words, operates directly and immedi-

ately as a source of dispositions and skills. What is of interest to note here is that we have a marvellous example of the use of an outlook of contemporary Western philosophy (the model of behaviourism), to interpret and understand ancient Chinese philosophy. It is entirely possible that ancient Chinese philosophy becomes *more* intelligible (rather than less) by the attempt to understand it through the viewpoints of contemporary Western philosophy. In fact, it may well be that such a model of understanding would make Chinese philosophy more theoretically understandable to the contemporary Chinese mind than it was to its ancient counterpart.

As an aside, we may be struck by Hansen's description of the Chinese mind as heart-mind. This is because in Chinese, the character for 'heart' contains both meanings at once, although in the West we most commonly choose the meaning of 'mind' and leave out the 'heart' connotation altogether. In ancient Chinese pictographic symbols, the character resembles the biological heart, not the brain. The modern character is an abstraction from this ancient pictograph.[2] Hansen's decision to translate by leaving in both connotations reflects an act of philosophical interpretation which to a considerable extent bridges linguistic and cultural barriers. This act, in and of itself, shows a modification of the Western way of understanding in its effort to understand its Chinese counterpart which in turn may expand the Western concept of understanding.

Harbsmeier, in contrast, cites a wealth of classical Chinese sources to support his claim that semantic truth predicates are commonly applied to statements or sentences in classical Chinese by all of the major philosophers, and that occasionally we find nominalized usages that remind us of the abstract notion of truth. He provides evidence for the existence of propositional attitudes such as 'belief' so that Hansen's reduction of 'knowledge' to 'knowing how' is not possible for a range of classical Chinese sentences. Regarding abstraction in ancient China, he shows that the ancient Chinese could speak of such things as the roundness of a circle. And, what is perhaps most interesting of all in a technical sense, he provides a refutation of Hansen's influential claim that classical Chinese nouns are mass nouns, which has been endorsed by such scholars as A.C. Graham. Harbsmeier outlines syntactic criteria for distinguishing between mass nouns, generic nouns, and count nouns.

What do we make of this debate? Perhaps, the most important

consequence of such a debate is its reminder that the Chinese mind is not monolithic and that *Chinese philosophy, rather than being simply a body of doctrines, is a dialogue between philosophers*. It is not so much a matter of choosing 'who is right' as it is a realization that the task of understanding is largely a work of interpretation, and that every act of interpretation that we perform alters and expands the object that we are attempting to understand. The proper result is that the Chinese mind grows under our fingertips as we attempt to understand it. Understanding is not reductionistic; it is expansive. In order to understand we do not need to reduce what is unfamiliar to what is familiar as in the Aristotelian model of understanding. We may expand our repertory of familiarity. Understanding may not only take the form of reductionism, but it may also take the form of growth.

Hansen seems to be joining forces with Lao Sze-kwang in Lao's impressive argument that even the abstract *appearing* form of language *functions* differently for the Chinese mind and thus reveals (in my own words) a different mental functioning. In this, he seems to be joining forces with Chung-ying Cheng as well, who argues that the essential differences between Chinese and Western thought may well be traced to the differences between a phoneme and an ideograph language. For Cheng, the nonpictorial quality of the Greek language lent itself naturally to the development of abstract thought more than the picture image quality of the Chinese language. To enlarge upon Cheng's point, a culture that could learn to function with an alphabet language would both be more theoretically inclined and *ex post facto* conditioned to think abstractly than a culture that was inclined to, and accustomed to, thinking in terms of concrete images. On the other hand, could a culture have developed such a sophisticated argument form as Gongsun Long's White Horse dialogue if it could not practise systematic thinking or analysis by the means of highly abstracted concepts? (This would hold true whether or not one takes the view, as Harbsmeier does, that Gongsun Long's White Horse dialogue is a sophisticated joke.)

With whomever one sides on this issue, the debate itself, and the means taken to resolve it, form the crux of the issues raised by this volume as a whole. For the issue that is being raised is what constitutes the Chinese mind in its essence. It is obvious from the outset that different investigators differ with respect to what they take to be the Chinese mind. If nothing else, this should dispel our

illusion that such an entity as the monolithic 'Chinese mind' exists at all. The Hansen–Harbsmeier debate is a debate in which both sides can find the roots of their claims in Chinese culture. And one root, the Harbsmeier root, is a root which we normally associate with the 'Western' mind. Our inquiry, which initially began as a West-East inquiry we find expanding into an East-East debate.

What all of this reflects is that it is not only the subject matter as to what constitutes the Chinese mind that is at issue, but the diversity of means adopted by the various investigators in order to understand the Chinese mind. What counts as a satisfactory explanation from the point of view of Cheng and Hansen is very different from what counts as a satisfactory explanation in the case of Kuang-ming Wu. Instead of proposing an explanation of the difference(s) between the Western and the Chinese mind (as in the case of Cheng or Hansen), Wu invites us to join in understanding the Chinese mind through appreciating its productions. Instead of offering a theoretical distinction between East and West, Wu asks us to *alter* our mode of understanding in order to understand properly the differences between East and West. Wu asks us to *become* a Chinese philosopher in the act of attempting to understand Chinese philosophy. If I may borrow a strategy from R.G. Collingwood's *Idea of History* in order to describe what Wu is proposing, just as a student of Western history must re-enact the way of thinking of the past in order to understand the past, one must re-enact the way of thinking of the ancient Chinese philosopher in order to understand his philosophy. Chinese philosophy cannot be understood as an objective body of data one scrutinizes from the outside. It can only be understood from the inside out. Thus, Wu's *example* (which I have described as a *theoretical proposal*), is at the same time an expansion of our traditional concept of understanding in which we understand across cultures in a way similar to how we understand from present to past within the same culture.

Our investigations, it seems, have borne some unexpected fruit. The investigation into what constitutes the Chinese mind can also yield as a result new *products* of the Chinese mind: new ways of thinking. Our understanding of the Chinese mind is not a mere historical repetition; it is an understanding that can add to the Chinese mind. Interpretation and understanding are inextricably intertwined. We cannot understand without interpreting and our interpretations alter both what we are attempting to understand and our own modes of understanding. There is no neutral body of

data that forms the object of our inquiry. What constitutes the Chinese mind is to some extent formed by our modes of investigation and our modes of investigation are in turn altered and expanded by our contacts with the Chinese mind. After reading the essays of Robert C. Neville, or Chung-ying Cheng, or Chad Hansen our idea of the Chinese mind can never be the same again.

We may not be able to totally resolve the Hansen–Harbsmeier debate, although it is not clear that a resolution is really what is needed or desired. The idea that cross-cultural interpretation must yield a resolution of conflicting views is a reductionistic view of the nature of understanding. The fact is that both the object of our study (the 'Chinese mind') and our multi-perspectival approach to our study (our different understandings of what constitutes understanding in the first place) constitute a two-way mirror. Our initial metaphor of looking through one mirror (the self-understanding constituted by one culture's philosophy) into another mirror (the self-understanding constituted by another culture's philosophy) must be expanded to become a two-way mirror in which both the object of our understanding and the mode of our understanding grow and transform to yield a new understanding both of the Chinese mind and of understanding in general. What begins as a study of the Chinese mind ends as a contribution to the study of the hermeneutics of understanding as well.

However, in our endeavours to avoid reductionism, we must also avoid the opposite pitfall of becoming too vague in our attempts to depict the Chinese mind. While it is true that every simplification is an over-simplification, it would be equally inaccurate to say that the Chinese mind had no definable characteristics whatsoever. We must, being aware of the qualifications we have discussed above, venture forth with some essential description (not a definition) of the Chinese mind. Rather than attempting to distill a list of salient characteristics of the Chinese mind *à la* Charles Moore's *The Chinese Mind, Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture*, it may be of interest to attempt to portray the Chinese mind, as distinguished from the Western mind, in its emphasis and consequent development of a single characteristic. In this respect, we could demarcate the Chinese mind in terms of its greater *emphasis* upon, and consequent *development* of, the practical as against the theoretical mind. In this sense, the Chinese mind does not differ from the Western mind in terms of representing a different *kind* of mind but rather a different *degree* of emphasis upon a uni-

versal human potential of understanding. The Chinese mind is not a unique and impenetrable way of thinking but a development of a universal human potential in a striking form.

Cheng's and Hansen's analyses of the Chinese language represent ways of attempting to understand the possible origin of the difference in the *directionality* of the Chinese mind. It is a fascinating question whether language influenced the directionality of the Chinese mind or whether the language itself was a reflection of a certain characteristic mode of thought that in turn influenced the creation of a language system that suited its purposes. Either pole of these extremes of conjecture carries with it certain assumptions which are difficult to sustain. If it is a simple case of language influencing thought, the assumption is that a mentality is shaped by its language forms and thus lacks any creative developmental properties of its own. On the other hand, if it is a case that a mentality chooses a language that fits its purposes, then it would appear that a mentality can achieve a sophisticated level of development at a pre-linguistic level. Most likely, the truth lies somewhere in between these two extremes. A mentality, predisposed towards the concrete is likely to manifest its communication form in terms of pictographic and ideographic symbols; these, in turn, would play a strong role in reinforcing these traits. Most likely, the causal arrow between language and thought is a two-way arrow rather than being simply unidirectional. Below, I will offer my own analysis of the origin of the difference in mentality which differs from the linguistic thesis.

Before exploring further the explanation for the difference that we have noted, we may pause for a moment to comment on the nature of the difference. I should like to emphasize the point that whatever difference(s) we discover are not antagonistic differences, but complementary differences. If we see East and West as developing in different degrees and with different potentialities of the human mind, these differences need not be seen as conflicting with each other, but rather as complementing each other to form a more complete whole. This is very much in accord with the view of Chinese philosophy present in the *Yijing*, a text which has attracted much interest in the West. While a very thorough analysis of the *Yijing* awaits the reader in Chung-ying Cheng's chapter, we may note that the primary opposition of the *yin* and *yang* in the *Yijing* is not viewed as one of antagonism but rather as one of complementarity. The *yin* is not complete without the *yang* and