

Chinese Way of Thinking

中国人的思维

Wang Keping

Shanghai Brilliant Publishing House

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Preface^①

Li Zehou

When I was a guest speaker in Germany in 1992, I said to the audience that the intercultural communication between East and West is not proportionately at the same level. For a Chinese professor or university student in general can provide a name list of more than a hundred well-known figures in the Western history. Then, how many of the Chinese counterparts from antiquity to the present could a German professor or university student at large possibly know? No more than a dozen, I guess. There are of course exceptions among the faculty members and students in the departments of Sinology who surely know more. How come it is so? In my opinion, it is mainly due to the fact that China has been in a passive position or “under attack” since the advent of the modern era, thus bearing a kind of eagerness to look into and learn from the West. In contrast, the West has been in an active position, having far less need to know China because her existence would matter little to the Western mentality in the past century or so. Such a situation corresponds more or less to that in the 18th century when China assumed herself to be the center of the world and felt no need to take any look at the West.

Time flies. It has been 15 years ever since what I said above.

① This preface was originally written in Chinese by Professor Li Zehou in 2007, and was afterwards translated into English by the author of this book. Those who would like to see the Chinese version can go to Li Zehou's *Za zhu ji* (*Miscellaneous Essays*) published by Beijing Sanlian Press in 2007.

Nowadays, more and more things “Made in China” are prevailingly circulated across the globe. Accordingly, the rapid economic boom in China has even rendered Sinology no longer a discipline as it used to be. That is to say, Sinology that was previously kept side by side with Egyptology and Dunhuang Studies has now turned into “Chinese Studies” and become increasingly leagued up with daily life. This being the case, peoples in the West have come to realize the need of approaching Chinese culture. All this is just a beginning. I suppose it would possibly take them at least 50 years to secure an adequate understanding of Chinese culture in its entirety.

At the primary stage of understanding different cultures, what get perceived and discussed most often are almost always the issues about their similarities and differences (especially in the cultural psychology). We human beings all belong to the same species. Hence we share a great deal in such areas and aspects as clothing, food, housing, transportation, sex, health, and entertainment available in our cultures of varied kinds no matter whether we live in the East or the West. This is due to the similar mentality and rationality as well. However, we also have a high awareness of cultural differences embodied in such domains and things as words, languages, morals, faiths, chopsticks, spoon and fork, Chinese costume and Western uniform, etc. Under such circumstances, it is lop-sided when we over-generalize all the sameness among cultures, and it is to stir up conflict if we presume to rigidify the discrepancy between cultures. Therefore it is necessary for us to attain a clear insight into the similarities out of the differences or vice versa on the one hand, and on the other, it is equally necessary for us to recognize the distinct characteristics while seeking after mutual understanding in a complementary manner with regard to the cultural diversity or pluralism. All this seems to be, in a cosmopolitan sense, the merely working way of peaceful co-existence and cooperative development for all the cultures across the world.

Chinese cultural heritage emphasizes the idea that “the harmonizing of the diverse is to create more whereas the uniformizing of the diverse is to produce less”. In other words, it recommends the role of diversity while opposing that of uniformity. The school of Confucianism, for instance,

advises people to worship their ancestry and offer sacrifices to heaven and earth, and meanwhile it permits them to take faith in other religions. As a result, the rituals and doctrines of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism could be performed and promoted at the same venue as early as a thousand years ago. With the introduction of the Western way of life into China in the modern period, people here can encounter wedding ceremonies in either the Chinese or Western style on the same day, and they find it neither a conflict nor guilt at all. How is all this possible? And how is such a cultural psychology formed? I think this could be an interesting point to explore for the sake of understanding China and her heritage more profoundly and relevantly.

This volume by Professor Wang Keping starts with the focus on the theme of “heaven-and-human oneness” (*tian ren he yi*), demonstrating an in-depth discussion on the point from a philosophical-religious perspective. The notion of “heaven-and-human oneness” originated from the ancient tradition of *wushi* as sorcerers who were officially appointed to pray for deities’ help, practice divination through turtle’s shells, and take charge of the activities connected with astronomy, configuration of the stars, and calendar directories altogether. Since this tradition believes in multiple deities and pays more heed to practical effect, it gives no rise to any form of one-God religion that concentrates on the salvation of the soul and the pursuit of Heavenly bliss. It is because of its preoccupation with “heaven-and-human oneness” that Chinese philosophy speaks of becoming instead of Being, and stresses functions and relationships instead of essence or substance. Accordingly, the *Yin* and the *Yang* are by no means referred to the light and the shade, the good and the evil, or the God and the demon. They are in fact freed from both dichotomy and essentialism. In contrast to the logical way of apprehending the world through the use of reason, they provide an aesthetic way that is saturated with emotion and compassion.

Just as is exposed in the book by Professor Wang, Chinese aesthetics celebrates the highest realm of experience in what pleases the human will and spirit that usually end up in “the pleasures of lofty aspiration and moral integrity” (*yue zhi yue shen*). The experience as such is associated with “the cosmic state of being” (*tiandi jingjie*) that is sustained by the

synthesis of the sensible and the spiritual under the guidance of “heaven-and-human oneness”. It is thus distinguished from the Kierkegaardian conversion to divinity that treats the sensible with contempt and hostility.

Professor Wang also formulates how to appreciate nature in the light of the experience aforementioned. As is noticed by and large, most Chinese people tend to take delight in natural landscapes decorated with poetically descriptive inscriptions on the chosen rocks and stones. These inscriptions are rare and even absent in many other cultures except those that used to be associated with Chinese influence in certain fields. They represent various kinds of vague and obscure aesthetic feelings of the scenic spots contemplated, and work to direct the feelings, somewhat physical and mysterious, towards the more determinate and symbolic dimension of morality and the human world, only to help bring the pure beauty into the dependent beauty, so to speak. Even though I personally dislike the abuse of such inscriptions in some places, I must acknowledge the fact that they reveal part of the conventional cultural psychology of Chinese people, and deserve our attention and respect because they are deeply concerned with both the reality of and the interaction between nature and humans within given limits of their spatial environment.

As I have said elsewhere, the Western dialectics is originally derived from the *techné* of verbal dialogue or debate, and it is by nature an art of thinking or speculative wisdom. The Chinese dialectics is basically developed from the art of warfare, and it is in principle an art of living or wisdom on human existence. The former pertains to the exercise and nourishment of the speculative reason that is then conducive to the emergence of highly abstract theoretical sciences, having left Chinese tradition far behind in this scope. In contrast, the latter pertains to the exercise and nourishment of the practical ability that is then conducive to the invention of many technologies, helping foster and retain such an enormous space-time entity of China with a large population, vast territory, united language, and long history without discontinuity. All these merits and demerits of Chinese culture as a whole are deeply related to the thought of “heaven-and-human oneness”.

In respect to the foregoing observation at a time when the Westerners

commence to feel the need of understanding China, what Professor Wang Keping has investigated here in this book with focus on the most fundamental aspects of Chinese culture and aesthetics is, to my mind, of considerable generalizing power and far-reaching significance, for it serves the purpose of helping the reader obtain the gist of Chinese thought at least. It is for this reason that I have drawn out this preface so as to make the above remark.

Beijing, China

September 19th, 2007

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I wish to express my appreciation to Professor Li Zehou who has encouraged me to write more about Chinese thoughts in English. His preface to this book is a piece of evidence in this regard. I would also like to extend my grateful acknowledgement to the following sources for permission to reproduce some of the materials: “Confucius’ Expectation of Poetry” from the *Journal of Social Sciences in China* (English edition, No. 4, 1996); “Harmonization without Being Patternized” from the *International Journal of Skepsis* (Vol. XV, 2004); “Zhuangzi’s Way of Thinking Through Fables” from Albert A. Anderson et al (ed. s), *Mythos and Logos* (Rodopi, 2004); “A Rediscovery of Heaven-and-Human Oneness” from the *Journal of American Economics and Sociology* (Blackwell, Dec. 2006); “Poetic Wisdom in Zen Enlightenment” from Gao Jianping (ed.), *International Yearbook of Aesthetics* (Vol. 11, 2007); “Appreciating Nature in View of Practical Aesthetics” from the *Journal of Frontiers of Philosophy in China* (No. 2, 2007); “Aesthetic Criticism of Transculturality” from Wang Keping, *Spirit of Chinese Poetics* (Foreign Languages Press, 2008); “No More Hiroshimas and Sharp Weapons” from the *Journal of American Economics and Sociology* (Feb. 2009). What is reproduced here in this book features some minor modifications and additions as well.

Introduction

As the renaissance of China is coming along with its economic boom continuing in the past three decades, the old but rejuvenated nation in many domains has once again become the focus of the whole world. Naturally there arises a question about what the Chinese people are really thinking at a time when viewing the rapid development and increasing influence of their own country. This question seems to be not simply one of curiosity, but one of knowledge for the sake of mutual understanding. To my mind, the question itself implies at least two most primary dimensions: one concerns the specific content of their thinking (i. e. what) while the other pertains to the particular way of their thinking (i. e. how). As regards the first dimension, the possible answers to be fished out will vary from one to another, but they must share several elements in common among all walks of life, for instance, “to live a better life” and “to keep the country in peace and the people at ease”, etc. Then, as regards the second dimension, the potential answers to be solicited will reveal in most cases a transculturally synthetic mode that progresses and improves with the passage of time. This mode is basically stemmed from the Chinese intellectual foundations, and consciously modified by the Western counterparts as a result of the New Cultural Movement (i. e. Westernization) launched in China ever since the 1920s. The former mainly involves the key sources of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism while the latter those of rationalism, empiricism, and pragmatism, among others.

This book is intended to expose some aspects of Chinese way of thinking in particular, but it follows neither any historical line nor systematic scheme available in some other writings. Instead, it attempts to demonstrate how the Chinese way of thinking operates practically and synthetically in the living experiences and political affairs. However, one may detect the employment of comparative analogy and intercultural reference in the process of the exposition and reconsideration herein.

As is revealed throughout this collection, the Chinese way of thinking itself is not generalized into a set of abstract principles and logical procedures. Actually it is placed in a wide scope of historico-cultural context and presented via an in-depth discussion of various issues we confront with today. It is so deliberately conducted for three main reasons as follows: firstly, the author of this book would like to examine some of the societal and human issues with particular reference to some of the fundamental notions in the ocean of Chinese thoughts in order to reconsider their practical values and rediscover their hidden relevance. He finds this treatment more stimulating in a sense that it could make it possible for the reader to see how the Chinese way of thinking works in more authentic situations. Secondly, the author himself is highly aware of the tendency to read new messages into the traditional ideas, but he puts more stress on *the significance of reviewing the old ideas in order to understand the new situations from a historical viewpoint*. That is, he intends to experience together with the reader how the philosophers in the past were thinking about and coping with the core issues that repetitively recur in the course of human history. Thirdly, the author himself has produced all these writings out of his personal observations in the past decade or so. He has in fact delivered these papers on different occasions including international congresses, symposiums, seminars and workshops. Most of the ideas contained in this book have turned out to be appealing to further investigation and questioning, apart from criticism and redevelopment, from a diversity of perspectives and positions.

This volume is thematically arranged in three sections. The first section is about the interaction between nature and humankind. In contrast with the Western conception of a creator-creature relationship, the Chinese

embraces a unique world outlook that is characterized by the oneness between heaven (*tian*) and human (*ren*). More specifically, the notion of *tian* qua “heaven” or “nature” had been “an anthropomorphic conception of a deified ancestor” earlier in antiquity, and had later become “an abstract conception of cosmic function”.^① The notion of *ren* as “human” or “humankind” had been an indication of an initiative agent “who is possessed of the most complete sincerity such that he can fully realize his own nature, and help all other men, animals and things fully realize their own natures. Moreover, he can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth (*tiandi*) and then form a ternion with Heaven and Earth”.^② Such an outlook is coupled with the organic and creative cosmic process functioning through the dynamism of harmony or oneness between heaven and human beings. The cosmic process in turn affects human life in a multi-sided manner, for man is an active part within that process. Here it seems justified to say that the Chinese intellectual foundations including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are all preoccupied with the interrelationship between nature and human. Yet, they offer different alternatives to perceive it in their respectively individual fashions. In brief, Confucianism tends to take heaven and earth as sublimating models of complete sincerity, and thereby develops a kind of moral metaphysics that brings other-worldly (heavenly) values into this-worldly (secular) deeds. So persistently it emphasizes the significance of personal cultivation in order to accomplish the highest virtue of social commitment and praxis. Taoism tends to consider heaven and earth as great beauty in silence, and thereby nourishes a kind of naturalistic detachment from social bounds and involvements. Hence it extends more attention to the value of personal independence and spiritual freedom. Buddhism tends to use the constant change of natural phenomena as the perceptual symbol of emptiness or *sūnyatā*, and thus promotes a kind of mystic intuitionism in the pursuit of the nirvana mentality as is exemplified in zen. It is in principle embodied in

① Frederick W. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p.22.

② *Ibid.* *The Doctrine of the Mean* (tr. James Legge), 22.

such features as poetic wisdom or *prajñā* and perfect tranquility in either sudden or gradual enlightenment.

Nevertheless, the traditional preoccupation with heaven-and-human oneness (*tian ren he yi*) remains susceptible to reflection and reformation from the perspective of modern ideology merely because no one can live in the past for ever. A rediscovery of the preoccupation leads to new interpretations and findings in light of practical philosophy, among other schools of thought. In this regard it assists facilitating a timely understanding of “the humanization of nature” (*ziran renhua*) on the one hand, and on the other, to enhance the necessary prospect of “the naturalization of humanity” (*ren ziranhua*). It is hypothesized that a dialectic and constructive balance between “the humanization of nature” and “the naturalization of humanity” may help the sustainable development of nature and humankind alike.

The second section deals with a number of proposed strategies applied to such matters as those with interrelationship, governance, and warfare. On this occasion the principle of harmonization without being patternized is commended and explained as a multicultural strategy with reference to the soup analogy. The principle itself is claimed to improve human relations in particular and international relations in general. In addition, it is intended to nurture societal harmony and world peace by reducing the emerging or hidden clashes through dialogue among civilizations and cultures. Even though the principle is deep-rooted in the Chinese heritage, it could be transformed into a multi-cultural mechanism by effective communication and synthetic creation. For this reason it is argued that

*East is not all East, West is not all West,
And why not the twain shall meet.
Let the world be in order with diversity
Or be in harmony without uniformity.*

In order to fulfill all these foregoing purposes, we call for a new *philosophos poiesis* and political wisdom to push forward the meeting of East and West by getting over cultural boundaries and ideological

discrepancies.

China is now undergoing a social reform and structural transformation in a more extensive and profound manner than ever before. Its *status quo* is promising as a whole but problematic in some areas. For example, its quick development especially in the economic revolution invents more opportunities for the educated and the skilled while leaving behind the vulnerable group in sharing the opportunities given or the fruit of the reform. This is prone to result in a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Hence the Chinese government needs to redouble its efforts to build up a harmonious society that is expected to narrow down the gap.

It is widely agreed that the possibility of constructing the harmonious society depends upon such factors as justice, equity, and inclusiveness, among many others. In my opinion, humane governance could be the most crucial and practical of all the alternatives with regard to China's current situation in a socio-political sense. This form of governance must bear such features as high accountability, credibility, effectiveness, efficiency, transparency, and rule of law, in addition to humanity, fairness, competence, and morality. Comparatively speaking, its actual operation and performance will rely in proportion on two most critical elements: one is *fazhi* as rule of law derived from the Western democracy and the other is *xianming* as wise leadership originated from the Chinese Confucianism. The former works to secure justice and equity whereas the latter moral decency and political wisdom. It is synthetic in principle, partly traditional in the Chinese sense, and partly modern in the Western sense, thus forming a pair of compasses to sustain the exercise of humane governance. This pair of compasses can be enabled to draw proper circles so long as they are integrated into an organic whole by virtue of pragmatic reason that stresses the integrated role of usefulness (*youyong xing*), moral sense (*lunli gan*), emotion-rationality inseparateness (*qingli bufen*), and historical awareness (*lishi yishi*).

Of all human activities war is the most dangerous and destructive by nature. Its danger and destructiveness lie primarily in the use of "sharp weapons" or excessive force. Moreover, war stirs up such evils as hatred and revenge that will conduce to endless conflicts. When the memory of

the Hiroshima A-bombing is re-examined in terms of effective history and international justice, it arouses at least two forms of response: the poetic reflection after Hiroshima and the philosophical pondering over sharp weapons. The former turns out to be a humanistic one, accompanied by general sympathy, understanding, and protest against the brutality of warfare. The latter calls forth an anti-war stance, denoted in the philosophizing of Taoism. Now we are living in a world that is still shrouded in the threat of regional wars and terrorist attacks often launched in the name of national interests and certain values. We must keep a clear vision of the existing jeopardy, and devote ourselves to preserving the global peace by all feasible means. In this regard what matters a lot to our observation on war and peace is denoted in such Taoist aphorisms as “Years of famine are sure to arise after a war,” “A strong army is doomed to perish,” and therefore “Never display sharp weapons” because very often one lifts a stone to hit others but only to drop it on his own toes instead. If we look back into the history, we may collect enough evidence of self-defeat in the Roman Empire, the Napoleon Regime, the Third Reich and the Japanese Military Party as well. It is for this reason that we sincerely hope to have “no more Hiroshimas and sharp weapons”.

What is presented in the third section is associated with morality, art, and aesthetics. As is discerned in Confucius's philosophy of education through poetry, the character training is the priority concern. It is purposively oriented towards the moral pursuit of personal cultivation on the one hand, and on the other, the ultimate realization of the political ideal as is embodied in social order, stability and harmony altogether. This being the case, poetry was employed as a meaningful media to function three-fold: firstly, it is used as a special form of social discourse on many social encounters for diplomatic and pedagogical ends as it helps one identify the political attitudes of others, improve his art of speech and refine his manners, etc. Secondly, it is used as a special form of aesthetic discourse to inspire (*xing*), reflect (*guan*), communicate (*qun*) and admonish (*yuan*). In other words, it helps one cultivate his emotion, feeling, spirit and will through aesthetic experience. Thirdly, it is used as a special form of moral discourse to help one cleanse his mind of depraved