

China on the Mind

Christopher Bollas



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Introduction

This work originated as a series of lectures to be given in Korea in 2010, following a tour of Japan in 2009.

To begin with I thought I would base my talks on readings from key philosophical figures whose works have inspired the Eastern world: Lao Tzu, Confucius, and Zhuangzi in particular, and then consider whether their views had significant links to Western thinking.

However, in the course of preparation for this I began to see a relationship between Eastern thinking and psychoanalytical thought, and the project developed into an attempt to link certain aspects of psychoanalytical practice to Eastern ways of being.

In addition, I became fascinated by the extraordinary emotional and ideational implications of Chinese characters, and my reading of Li Po, Wang Wei, Tu Fu and poets from Korea and Japan introduced me to a form of poetry unique to this part of the world. Not only was I learning about how the East thinks; I was also discovering a way in which it invests mind into poetry, so that by reciting poems people are engaged in a type of open dreaming.

The theme of the work then turned into something of a theory of the mind – the Eastern mind – that seemed to have significant implications for the study of mental processes in the West, and especially for the mental action we term psychoanalysis.

The project was endlessly surprising. As a novice in Eastern studies I found that a new world was opening up for me, but I was also learning things about psychoanalysis that I had never

understood. This book is therefore not only a highly idiosyncratic study of the Eastern way of thinking and living but also a curious intellectual ‘happening’ within this author’s life as a psychoanalyst.

Although China has been open to travellers and traders from the Western world and elsewhere for over four thousand years it has nonetheless maintained what seems to be a remarkable isolation. Some of this is credited to the view in ancient China that it was the centre of the world and superior to all other cultures, but there are other reasons why China, and indeed Korea, Japan and other Far Eastern countries, share this isolation. It is not due to arrogance, nationalism, or insularity. It is because the people of the Eastern world *think differently* from the people of the Western world.

This book aims to explore the Eastern mind, but at the outset we face hazards inherent in dividing the world simplistically into different ways of thinking, and this author faces that challenge with trepidation. Is one really justified in using the terms ‘Eastern mind’, ‘Oriental mind’, ‘Chinese mind’ – or, indeed, ‘Western mind’, ‘Occidental mind’ or ‘European mind’? Such categories are not only arbitrary and reductionist, they are also – as this book will, I hope, demonstrate – in certain specific ways inaccurate. It is an irony of this exploration, then, that I will have to settle on part-truths in order to develop my argument.

The central idea explored in this book is that when we refer to a difference between Eastern and Western ways of thinking we are talking not about different minds but about different *parts* of the mind. Historically, Eastern thinking has tended towards forms of thought that are based on ‘the maternal order’ while Western thinking reflects forms of thought derived from ‘the paternal order’.

The maternal order refers to the *forms* of knowledge conveyed to the self as foetus, neonate and infant, prior to the acquisition of language. This is presentational knowledge. The world, as thing, presents itself – or is presented – and thus leaves impressions upon the self. The mother, for example, instructs the infant in countless axioms of being and relating presented through

the logic of her actions. These actions are assimilated by the infant's ego to become formative paradigms that partly govern the infantile self. This knowledge remains resident in all adults and is contiguous to the paternal order.

The various categories of communication experienced by the infant – including sound, vision and physical touch – involve the transformation of affects into emotional experiences that constitute the core of human relations.

The paternal order refers to those categories of communication that are language dependent. These convey the views of the father and, later, the assumptions and laws of society.

Of course, in reality mothers and fathers regularly utilize both of these orders.

Put simply, the Eastern mind favours pre-verbal or non-verbal forms of being, thinking, and relating (the maternal order) while the Western mind generally relies on articulate verbal expression in order to communicate itself and functions in accordance with the paternal order. The Eastern mind uses language to create possible interpretations of meaning and is implicit rather than explicit. The Western mind seeks lucid definitions that are explicit and not meant to be open to the other's readings.

The Eastern mind is founded on five classic books, three of which, *The Book of Songs* (or *Book of Poems*) (*Shi Jing*), *The Book of Rites* (*Li Chi*), *The Book of Changes* (*I Ching*) become literary structures that embody the Chinese mind. These five 'mother texts', as I will label them, serve as the mental foundation for the writings of Lao Tzu, Confucius, Mo Tzu, Mencius, Zhuangzi and the post-Confucians, whose works have come down to us in the form of collected commentaries by many authors over the centuries. The individual philosophical texts are therefore the work of subcultures, that become known as Daoism, Confucianism, neo-Confucianism and so forth. Given their relation to the mother texts, such long periods of source-based interpretation may be considered 'transitional objects' (to invoke Winnicott) or, more properly, 'transitional moments' with respect to the way the Chinese have developed the body of their rites and their poems to guide them through life.

The Eastern mother texts and their transitional interpreters offer a template for all human beings while the Western mind, although certainly cultivating life forms for traditional purposes, has a fascination with the rogue self, the individual set apart from the group, a challenge to tradition. Eastern discourse is ambiguous, allowing for communication to be co-constructed, whereas Western discourse favours lucidity and a clear distinction between speaker and recipient. The message is thus an indicator of *difference*, an act that separates and demarcates people from one another.

Reflecting on the post-Legalist¹ philosopher, Hsün Tzu² (293–235 BCE) who regarded human nature as chaotic and in need of profound ritualization in order to create a guiding social structure, Jacques Gernet concludes ‘One can understand the difficulties of the dialogue when the Chinese and European civilizations came into contact with each other in the seventeenth century’.³

David Hall and Roger Ames, in their brilliant text *Anticipating China*, maintain that Western thinking is causal and Eastern thinking is correlative. Western logic is metonymic or diachronic; Eastern thought is metaphoric or synchronic. Although in China there were intermittent periods of interest in logic and rational thinking, ‘these were soon effectively abandoned in favor of concretely interpersonal exercises in analogical thinking’.⁴ The Chinese examined the world in the differing forms of its process, rather than in its substantive differences.

Around 3500 BCE the Indo–European Aryan people entered North India and intermingled with the indigenous population. It was out of this mix that Hinduism arose. C. Scott Littleton⁵ argues that they brought with them ideas not dissimilar to those of the Ancient Greeks of that period. It was in the same region, North India, that the Buddha lived in the late 6th and early 5th centuries BCE, and so from this part of the world emerged two great movements: Hinduism and Buddhism.

In approximately 2500 BCE, in Ur in Sumeria (modern Iraq) some 2,000 miles to the west of North India, we discover the first decidedly Western epic: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It testifies to the

single individual's determination to conquer his world, to make a mark for himself that will last thousands of years. Enkidu runs with the animals and is a man of nature until he is seduced by a woman and forced into civilization. When Gilgamesh defeats Enkidu he therefore conquers the natural world. It will be almost two thousand years before Homer's epics appear, sometime in the 8th century BCE, but there is a clear line of thought from the Sumerian to the Homeric period that concerns the quest-oriented ambitions of the human being. The natural world is to be conquered and man is to make his mark in life through acts of memorable heroism. The emphasis is on the solitary form of the individual self and the tragic realization that even the fullest life is ended by death with no hope for resurrection.

In other words, in this area of the world, with its longstanding communication between many different races and ethnic groups, we can discern one tradition of thought that moves West and one that moves East.

Travelling East in 2000 BCE we enter the spiritual kingdoms of Hinduism and later of Chinese philosophy which emphasize man's obligation to live within the harmony of the natural world and to accommodate and revere it. They understand human life as merely a form of transience.

This is not to say, however, that the Eastern mind has no concept of the individual self; indeed, far from it. Hinduism believes in the *Brahman* or universal soul but also recognizes that this universal principle will exist in each person in a unique way: the inner self or *atman*. It recognizes an interrelation between *dharma* – the ethical, social, and divine order of things, and *kharma* – individual action. In this respect, as I shall argue, Hinduism anticipates and structures the conflict between the individual self and the large group. In China a different set of secular terms will be established in order to negotiate the same conflict.

While the Western epic is based on man's adventures in the external world, testing the strength, stamina, courage and intelligence of the hero, Eastern texts emphasize the ordinary evanescent moments of life's journey. In the Hindu tradition this

involves finding the link between one's *atman* and the universal soul of man, and this finding – *moksha* – is regarded as a transcendent act.

Transcendence in the East; heroism in the West.

Both East and West regard human life as a journey, but they differ in their understanding of this. The Western mind explores the material world, discovering new evidence in a never-ending journey that honours its adventurers, who are identified with the found. The emphasis is on a venture that penetrates the real, analyzes and organizes it, and presumes to add to the pool of knowledge. The Eastern mind explores the spiritual world, discovering new internal positions that a self can take in order to instantiate through heightened consciousness ever more inspired forms of the immanent. The aim is to minimize the self's destructive potential, to find through religious forms and ritual actions a route to the generation of a better human being.

In the West, with its tradition of self-representation through words, language is the commerce of intellect. It is democratic; it allows for a shared engagement with the found and it is open to scrutiny. The East's form of self-presentation consists in living itself as an exemplary form. The less said the better, as language indicates a failure to be self-evident through the manner of one's being. In the West to speak is to engage; in the East to speak is to repel.

Throughout this work I shall distinguish between the 'presentational' and the 'representational', between self-presentation and self-representation. Presentation (in any context) is the *form* of a being or a communication; representation refers to the *content* of a communication. The Eastern mind places more emphasis on the presentational and tends to shun the representational, whereas for the Western mind content is the core of communication.

Of course, although East and West diverge in the emphasis they give to many crucial philosophies of life, such distinctions are never absolute. Scholars point out that there are Eastern epics that are built firmly around the accomplishments of the heroic self – the 12th-century Japanese epic *Heike Monogatari* (*Tale of*

the House of Taira) has been compared to *The Song of Roland*. Conversely, we can find Western epics that use this idiom for a more spiritual insight into the form of individual life, as do medieval allegories.

The point is not that East and West are utterly dissimilar. In certain ways, Western and Eastern frames of mind still share many qualities in common. Indeed, I shall argue that they developed from a mind that was once unified, and that this original unity offers precedence for the rejoining of the two mentalities. However, the polarities are usefully identified in order for us to see how far the two traditions have emphasized quite different aspects of human being, leading to profound differences in the way the world is viewed.

Both have evolved powerful religions that cultivate orthodox scholars who interpret scripture in prescriptive ways. They share, in other words, a hierarchy within their religions, especially if we compare the arcane schools within the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy – based on interpretation of the *Upanishads* – with early medieval interpretations of the Bible in the West.

However, although both traditions have their sacred texts, orally transmitted and often set to music, it is significant that in the East it is not only the *content* of the texts that is considered to be holy; the *sound* of them spoken aloud is in itself regarded as a sacred experience. This illustrates again the Eastern emphasis on form.

In the era of Plato and Aristotle, Greek society was centred on the *polis*, where religious edicts had long since been secularized and transformed into objects of debate, and laws were continuously scrutinized in a hotbed of democratic controversy. At the same time China was on the move towards centralization; large populations were glued together by a combination of religion, submission and an ethic that mandated cooperation. The Chinese rarely questioned their laws, and usually shunned any individual's attempts at asserting new ideas that might diminish the power of the authority. Although China did develop its own system of rational thought, one that was notably successful in coordinating new commercial, military and technological

realities, it never abandoned the mentality of the archaic period. The ancient and the new continued to walk hand in hand.

Comparing Greece and China between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE, Jacques Gernet claims that Chinese philosophy may be described as 'organicist'.⁶ It is rational but cosmological, absorbed in issues that were of no interest to Western philosophers at the time. Comparing Mencius⁷ to the Greeks, Gernet claims that Mencius focused on the complementarity of 'productive and administrative functions'⁸ while Greeks were interested in the 'radical opposition' between 'the sensible world and the intelligible' a distinction which the Chinese would 'have rejected ... emphatically as artificial'.⁹

Linguistic impediments, argues Gernet, would have made it difficult for the Chinese to develop a philosophy of being and 'the elaboration of logic'.¹⁰ While the Greeks searched for the Truth, the Chinese followed a different route, concentrating on those elements that ordered the social, natural and cosmic world.

Gernet points out that Greek and Chinese physics attended to very different matters. The Greeks ordered the world in geometric spatial perspectives while the Chinese were more interested in 'the phenomenon of magnetism and vibration, tides, and sonic and seismic waves'.¹¹ When it came to musical composition the Chinese concentrated on 'the tonal quality of different instruments and ways to construct accurate models of chimes, whereas the Greeks defined the musical scale geometrically'.¹²

Gernet ponders the very question addressed here: does the comparative backwardness of the Chinese in respect, for example, to their lack of interest in logic, represent 'an inferior stage in the evolution of the human mind?'¹³ Gernet rejects this assertion but it serves our purpose to point to it. One aspect of the argument proposed in this study is that, although the Western and Eastern minds have evolved very different forms of thought, they are now starting (for many reasons) to turn towards each other, and in so doing can be seen to complement one another, even if such contiguity may be conflicted.

Jean-Pierre Vernant puts it this way: 'It is not that the Chinese did not get so far as the Greeks; they simply advanced

in a different direction'.¹⁴ The Greeks valued an ideal man who exemplified the combination of differing attitudes – what Vernant terms the 'agonistic spirit'.¹⁵ The aim to prove oneself above all others, to excel in acts of generosity that become forms of largesse, and above all 'a desire for autonomy and non-servitude'¹⁶ is in stark contrast to the Confucian concept of virtue achieved through the abandonment of human traits – an ideal shared by Zen with its goal of becoming the Buddha.

Vernant cites a fascinating study by André G. Haudricourt¹⁷ that compares East and West based on a fundamental social division: the mentality of herdsmen and sailors versus the mentality of gardeners. The former involves leadership by one figure – men must be led in society as a shepherd guides his flock – while for the gardener the optimal social order reflects a natural order that needs no such intervention.

Hinduism provides, in some senses, a buffer between West and East. Even though it was to have a profound influence on Chinese philosophy, there was from very early on something of Bollywood¹⁸ in its fabulous, soap-like stories of Vishnu and the cast of avatars through whom he appears in drama after drama. The *Ramayana* is perhaps the most famous example of this feature, as the heroic figure of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, endures repeated trials of his faith. It is ultimately a religious romance, with Shiva as the perfect anti-hero who will be located in one form after another by the endless inventiveness of the Hindu imagination.

Hinduism is religious surrealism. Set against the respective austerities of Christianity and Buddhism it is refreshingly excessive. There are countless myths of creation, scores of gods and lesser gods, with each small village entertaining its own representations of the deities.

As discussed, in the concepts of *dharma* and *kharma* there is a hint of what is to be passed on to China – and, much later, to Buddhism. *Dharma* refers to the order of the universe and includes religious, social, and ethical action to which men must adhere. *Kharma* is the individual action of man whose spiritual and ethical obligation is to be part of the cosmic order