

The Cultural Traditions of China and the Quest for a Global Ethic

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Abstract

This paper challenges the idea that there are essential and unbridgeable differences that separate the cultural traditions of China and Europe. The focus is on the belief that there is no transcendence in Chinese thought and the cluster of notions around this thesis, which have often been used in support of the thesis of essential differences. The conclusion is that this thesis is mistaken and that the multifarious traditions of China and Europe share many central features and can also mutually enrich one another. Together, they offer rich resources to a global ethic suited for the needs of our time.

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Keywords

Global ethic, China, Europe, cultural traditions, Confucianism, transcendence, essential differences

The most serious problems that face us today—climate change, the risk of war, local wars, or even a full-scale nuclear world war, the pandemic and other serious diseases, exploitation and oppression, poverty, and so forth—are global problems. And global problems require global solutions, solutions that, in turn, require a certain amount of consensus across national and cultural boundaries. Therefore, it is today more important than ever to seek agreement across cultural boundaries about basic principles and values. This is a good reason to be interested in global ethics. As a sinologist, I am especially interested in the cultural traditions of China as possible resources for a global ethic.

As for principles that can be part of a global ethic for our time, respect for difference is essential. Indeed, Confucius pointed out that we should be able to maintain harmonious relations with one another even when we have different views.¹ Especially in Europe, liberal thinkers have emphasized that differences of opinion and discussion can broaden and deepen our knowledge and understanding and that cultural diversity can enrich us all.²

Yet the respect for difference cannot be limitless. To define the criteria of a reasonable balance between the respect for difference and diversity, on the one hand, and the commitment to a set of values as universally valid, on the other hand, is an important challenge that we cannot escape if

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we wish to construct a global ethic. Are there values that can help us approach a definition of this balance? Is perhaps the Golden Rule, which holds a central position in both Chinese and European culture, although not formulated in exactly the same way, an example of a universal value that can be helpful in this regard? Jesus said, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, and Confucius said: “Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you.”³

Historically, the topic of fundamental values common to all mankind is by no means a new one. In different parts of the world, ideologies and religions with universalistic and sometimes hegemonic pretensions have emerged. Some representatives of such ideologies and religions have felt that they have the right, perhaps even the duty, to impose their values on others.

A global ethic for our time and for the future cannot be based on coercion and hegemonic ambitions, but must grow out of dialogue across cultural, national, and political boundaries and ideally be rooted in different cultural traditions.

As both Marianne Bastid-Bruguère and Hans Ingvar Roth remind us in their contributions to this issue of *Diogenes*, *The UN Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948 represents one successful attempt to define values for all mankind based on cross-cultural discussions.⁴ A contemporary attempt with a similar thrust is the Global Ethic Project initiated by the theologian Professor Hans Küng.⁵

Despite these and other ambitious endeavors, we are still in dire need of a higher degree of consensus about basic values across cultural boundaries and state borders to be able to deal effectively with today’s global challenges. Therefore, cross-cultural dialog is crucially important and an important task for scholars and international organizations engaged in promoting international scholarly cooperation. The need for cross-cultural dialog is a key reason why I suggested that CIPSH and the UAI should organize a seminar on Chinese and European Resources for a Global Ethic.

Apart from the urgency of increasing global consensus as far as values are concerned, my interest in the philosophical traditions of China has prompted me to consider Chinese culture from the perspective of a quest for a global ethic. I proceed on the basis of two perceptions of the philosophical traditions of China.

Are there essential differences separating Chinese and Western culture?

The first perception is that the differences between traditional Chinese and Western thought have often been grossly exaggerated. There is in the scholarly world a widespread notion that there are unbridgeable differences separating the cultures of China and Europa.⁶ The proponents of this view like to talk about Chinese or Western culture in the singular rather than the plural, which seems to express an exaggerated view of the cultural homogeneity of the vast geographical areas of China and Europe. As a matter of fact, there are in terms of intellectual orientation very considerable variations between different Chinese and different European traditions, which easily makes sweeping comparisons of what is Chinese and what is European, or Western misleading.

The notion of essential differences between the cultures of China and Europe has a long history. According to one central and particularly tenacious idea, there is no *transcendent* perspective in Chinese tradition.⁷ 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 (1864–1920) gave it, at first mainly in the West, but during the past few decades, also in China.⁸ Weber formulated his thesis against the background of his analysis of the role of Calvinism in the emergence of capitalism in Europe. What he 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, Weber argued, and the tension between “ethical demand and human shortcomings” (*zwischen ethischen Anforderungen und menschlicher Unzulänglichkeit*), which in Europe had decisively contributed to Calvinism becoming a lever for social change, he found missing from the Confucian tradition.⁹

The idea that there is no transcendence in traditional Chinese thought is the center of a cluster of conceptions of Chinese culture as essentially different. One such conception relates to the distinction between “guilt culture” and “shame culture.”¹⁰ To belong to a guilt culture implies having an inner moral compass based on values anchored in a transcendent dimension of reality, which makes people feel guilty whenever they 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, whereas Chinese culture is more of a shame culture.¹¹ Another widespread conception is that Chinese thought does not make a number of distinctions that are fundamental in European tradition, for example, between essence and phenomenon, substance and accident, and body and soul.¹²

In my opinion, none of these conceptions is tenable. True, the core question of whether there is transcendence in premodern Chinese thought is complicated, and an exhaustive treatment of it would require a conceptual analysis that is not possible within the framework of this paper. But if we proceed on the basis of a simple definition of transcendence as a concept that goes beyond what we may perceive with our senses, then the transcendent perspective appears as a central element in the intellectual universe of Neo-Confucianism. 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 physical dimension where we find the building material of everything, *Qi* 氣, including human desires (*renyu* 人欲). The values that Neo-Confucianism defined are anchored in the world of Heavenly Principles and the Way, which undoubtedly goes beyond what we may perceive with our senses. Furthermore, the main purpose of individual cultivation that Confucian scholars have advocated throughout the centuries has been to overcome the tension between ethical demand and human shortcomings.¹³ 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 who lack an inner moral compass. But the notion of an inner moral compass is certainly not absent from Chinese tradition. On the contrary, it is central in Confucian moral philosophy, as exemplified in the thought of Confucius and Mencius and in the classics *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) and *The Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸).¹⁴

The view that the distinctions between essence and phenomenon, substance and accident, and body and soul are absent from Chinese tradition is quite peculiar. When the philosopher Gongsun Long 公孫龍 (c. 325–250 BCE) argued that a white horse is not a horse, what did he have in mind if not the distinction between essential and accidental qualities?¹⁵ What was the fundamental Neo-Confucian distinction between heavenly *li* 理 and *qi* 氣 about if not essence and phenomena? And in the 18th century, the philosopher Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724–1777) criticized the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy for making a radical distinction between body and soul.¹⁶ Thus, it is difficult to see that there are essential differences between Chinese and European thought that stand in the way of finding sources for a common global ethic.

Resources for a global ethic in traditional Chinese thought

The second perception of traditional Chinese culture that has prompted me to consider Chinese culture in the perspective of the quest for a global ethic is that the rich Chinese legacy seems to offer perspectives and insights that are valuable resources for formulating a global ethic.

One example is the humanism that we find in the Confucian tradition and which Professor Huang Chun-chieh discusses in his contribution. According to a major tenet of Confucian thought, humans are born with the innate ability to cultivate themselves and make the world a better place. In the classical writings of Confucianism, we also find a recognition of the dignity and integrity of human beings, a recognition that has tragically more often than not been absent from Confucianism as practiced by the imperial rulers throughout the centuries. Confucius's statement "The noble man is no utensil," like Kant's precept that human beings should be regarded as ends and not as means, may be understood as a call to uphold the dignity and integrity of human beings. Of course, Confucius refers only to "noble men," but I like to believe he thought that all humans have the potential to become noble men.¹⁷ As we know, his follower, Mencius (c. 372–289 BCE), explicitly recognized this potential. The ethics of Mencius, which emphasizes the importance of the human capacity for compassion, seems especially valuable in this regard.¹⁸ As Hans Ingvar Roth explains in his contribution, the Chinese diplomat and scholar P.C. Chang (18982–1957) also attached great significance to this aspect of the ethical thought of Mencius when Chang was engaged in the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A second example is the view of human beings and the natural world as forming an indivisible whole, a unity composed of interdependent parts, which we find in all three major traditions of Chinese thought, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, but especially in Daoism and Buddhism. This tenet of traditional Chinese thought can help us relate to our natural environment in a much more respectful and reasonable way than has been characteristic of human civilization during the era of industrialism. From different angles, the contributions by Hsien-hao Sebastian Liao and Zou Yun discuss this aspect of traditional Chinese thought.

Respect for difference is a third example of a valuable resource in the Chinese tradition for a global ethic. Although not often recognized, we may find this in Confucianism. As mentioned at the outset, Confucius himself taught that noble persons uphold harmonious relations, even when they differ. Yet this is a current of thought that we can more easily associate with the Daoist tradition. In the *Zhuangzi*, we find this wonderful piece that I quote here in Burton Watson's excellent translation:

Once a seabird alighted outside the Lu capital. The Marquis of Lu escorted it to the ancestral temple, where he entertained it, performing the Nine Shao music for it to listen to and presenting it with the meat of the Tailao sacrifice to feast on. But the bird only looked dazed and forlorn, refusing to eat a single slice of meat or drink a cup of wine, and in three days it was dead. This is to try to nourish a bird with what would nourish you instead of what would nourish a bird. If you want to nourish a bird with what nourishes a bird, then you should let it roost in the deep forest, play among the banks and islands, float on the rivers and lakes, eat mudfish and minnows, follow the rest of the flock in flight and rest, and live any way it chooses. [...] Fish live in water and thrive, but if men tried to live in water they would die. Creatures differ because they have different likes and dislikes. Therefore, the former sages never required the same ability from all creatures or made them all do the same thing.¹⁹

Especially, in the Daoist tradition, the respect for difference goes hand in hand with the idea that men, and animals too, for that matter, should be free to live in accordance with their specific nature. Zhuangzi's plea for "easy wandering" (*xiaoyao* 逍遙) may be seen as plea for freedom. However, when directing our attention to this aspect of Chinese thought, we should also recognize that especially in Confucianism there is a strong emphasis on "duty," duty to our fellow human beings and to nature.²⁰ Maybe this emphasis on duty to balance the ideal of individual freedom is one of the major resources that Chinese tradition has to offer for a global ethic suited to the need of our time and for the future.

Notes

1. See *Lunyu* 論語 [The Analects of Confucius], 13:23. Confucius words *junzi he er bu tong* 君子和而不同 can be interpreted in different ways, but they certainly mean that a noble person can combine harmony and difference.
2. This was, as we know, one of the main ideas that John Stuart Mill propounded in his classical work *On Liberty* in 1859.
3. The Golden Rule in the words of Jesus is found in Luke 6:31, and Confucius's negative formulation is found in the *Lunyu* 論語 [The Analects of Confucius], 15:23.
4. For the text of this declaration, see <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
5. Concerning this project, see <https://www.global-ethic.org/> See also Küng (1991).
6. In their contributions to this issue, several participants discuss the differences between Chinese and Western thought, for example, Göran Collste, Geir Sigurðsson, and Zhang Longxi.
7. The literature on the question of whether transcendence can be found in Chinese tradition and, if so, what the specific characteristics of Chinese transcendence have been has grown quite enormous over the years. One early and seminal contribution to this discussion is Benjamin I. Schwartz' article "Transcendence in Ancient China" in 1975.
8. Concerning Weber's views of Chinese thought, see Weber (1968). For a collection of articles discussing Weber's views of Chinese thought, see Schluchter (ed 1983).
9. In Weber's own words: "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". In Weber (1922), 514 f. He also wrote: "Irgendwelche Spannung zwischen Natur und Gottheit, ethischen Anforderungen und menschlicher Unzulänglichkeit, 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." In Weber (1922), p. 522.
10. Concerning the meaning of "guilt culture" and "shame culture," see Benedict (2005).
11. Concerning this question, see King and Myers (1977).
12. See, for example, Jullien (1998).
13. See Metzger (1977).
14. For an interesting analysis of the *Zhongyong*, see Tu (1976).
15. Concerning Gongsun Long, see Graham (1989): 82–95.
16. Concerning Dai Zhen, see Chin and Freeman (1990) and Lodén (2016).
17. Confucius words are found in *The Analects*, 2:12. 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 F. Copleston (1964: 120).
18. Concerning Mencius and his position in the Confucian tradition, see Huang (2019).
19. *Zhuang Zi*, 18; trans. Burton Watson (1968).
20. Cf. Professor Huang Chun-chieh's article in this issue.

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