
THE CHINESE AND WESTERN VALUES: REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGY OF A CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

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Value systems – although they come across today in a legitimized way as a ‘rule of law’ in Western societies – have their origins in religious traditions. Christian ideas and values still form the basis of Western societies, although now mostly in a secularized fashion; hence they can be called post-Christian values. Moreover, the ‘West’ (Europe and North-America) has successfully universalized its originally Christian based value system. Comparing the impact of Confucianism in East Asia to that of Christianity in the West, one can regard Confucianism – even though it is not a religion in the strict sense – as a functional equivalent of the Christian faith: Confucian values have exerted a profound and lasting influence on China (and East Asia) over a period of even more than 2000 years. As ‘post-Confucianism’ it still forms the ethical basis of the Chinese society.

Considering these differences, the basic methodological aspects concerning a cross-cultural dialogue between China and the ‘West’ will be explored. They include: the relation between partners who participate in a dialogue; asymmetry in the use of language (mostly English nowadays); different historical experiences (collective memory); different kinds of cultural framework (i.e., the symbolic orientation which, apart from language, is the basis of cultural identity), and others.

Considering these general conditions and impediments, a dialogue between cultures could deal with the following four aspects: 1) historical reflection and sensitivity; 2) getting to know the respective other culture; 3) search for common concepts; 4) openness towards the other and willingness to be informed by the other.

Centring, in the following, on intercultural dialogue as a means of defusing potentials for conflict in the international arena, I shall proceed from a few basic assumptions.

First of all, the notion of culture: I understand culture here with Clifford Geertz as inherited systems of meaning which convey identity and orientation in life. Its core is the value system (according to the ‘iceberg-model’ of culture, the one which is invisibly lying beneath the water surface but which is its determining part). In Charles Taylor's terms we might also call this value system the ‘horizon of significance’.¹ Taylor's notion is connected to the idea of cultural identity: in his view, defining our identity presupposes a sense of what is significant outside or beyond ourselves; in other words, we need a ‘background of intelligibility’ in order to make sense of our identity.

We should keep in mind, though, that cultures are not static entities but that they are changing over history – intra-culturally and inter-culturally – and are thus dynamic.

¹ Taylor, Ch. The Ethics of Authenticity. – Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. – P. 52.

They also allow for considerable differences within themselves. This dynamic of understanding cultures should not lead us, however, into other extremes, such as we often find in post-modern discourse, that is to proceed from a principal and fundamental hybridity of all cultures. In contrast to this fashionable viewpoint I want to emphasize the slowness of cultural changing processes – or the inertia of cultures. For historical processes are by nature quite long, and there is a certain resistance to sudden changes in value systems. Therefore, we can – statistically, as it were – often discern a certain mainstream or centre of gravity in cultures.

Second, being fully aware of the dangers of simple dichotomies, which have become close to being politically incorrect in an era of multi-culturalist creed and ideological anti-essentialism, I still consider simplifications as models to be useful, if not indispensable, namely for the purpose of making basic comparisons. For this reason, I shall refer to certain cultural models which have evolved through history at different ends of the world, such as the Sinic model of East Asia with China as its cultural centre or the Western, European-American model.

Third, cross-cultural dialogue is a hermeneutic attempt of understanding the other, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's terms of getting different horizons to overlap or to merge ('fusion of horizons').² This attempt of intercultural understanding has, of course, also its limitations. An intercultural point of view tries to assume a virtual standpoint between cultures; but we cannot, strictly speaking – even in the social sciences – completely step out of our horizon of expectations, which is shaped by our value system, in addition to our individual experience, history, readings, *Zeitgeist* related preferences and such. Understanding, after all, might be seen as just another form of misunderstanding. For this reason, my following musings will in the end offer nothing else but a probably very subjective and thus mistaken interpretation of cultures and the dynamics between them – I could also call it in the Chinese philosopher *Zhuangzi's* words a 'well-frog view' of cross-cultural hermeneutics.

The Dialogue between Civilizations: Methodological Considerations

How should we approach an intercultural dialogue between the East and the West? Which parameters influence it, what kind of conditions are favorable for it and what should it deal with? First of all, we have to be clear about certain basic conditions of dialogue in general that we are unaware of most of the time. Therefore, I would like to propose in the following a few methodological considerations.

– There is, to begin with, the question of the *relation between the two partners* who participate in a dialogue. Although our understanding of a dialogue presupposes a fundamental equality of partners, the actual relationship due to different political, economical, cultural and military power or due to a different standard of development is in fact often asymmetrical.

– The decision *which language to use* in a dialogue – being mostly American English nowadays – also results in asymmetry.

– Different *historical experiences* are decisive factors for the evaluation of certain contentious issues. The political discourse in Europe, for example, has been moulded by devastating religious wars, fierce national rivalries, the conquest of new worlds, genocide and the philosophy of Enlightenment, while in the history of East Asia we can hardly find any equivalent for these experiences. In the West, we most naturally pre-

² Gadamer, H.-G. *Truth and Method*. – New York: Continuum, 1997.

suppose that East Asian partners in a dialogue share our position of critical rationalism (and a critical public sphere) without considering that this approach has its very specific foundation and realizations in the European Enlightenment. These are decisive factors for the evaluation of certain contentious issues and are related to what Jan Assmann has called collective or 'cultural memory'.³

– The *symbolic orientation* which, apart from language, is the basis of cultural identity, is very important. This includes different kinds of *cultural framework* with regard to *myths, images, allusions as well as references to literature, art, religion and philosophy*.

– A great impediment for intercultural understanding is an *ethnocentric attitude* which, however, is very common in all cultures; what counts is only what one knows.

– Yet, ethnocentrism still has another side: from the viewpoint of cultural hermeneutics, we, first of all, need a firm 'centre', a framework for our orientation, before approaching the other. A '*reflected*' *ethnocentrism* is aware of this necessity. An uncritical ethnocentrism, however, treats cultural manifestations as mere superficial phenomena and neglects their foundation in the history of ideas (*e.g.*, the attribution of a ritualized politeness to the Chinese which in the West is looked upon as something negative nowadays, without knowing its roots in Chinese ethics and without having an idea of its inherent positive meaning).

– Another pitfall is to *judge the reality of the other according to one's own ideals* without considering historical developments and processes or allowing the own reality being judged by the ideals of the other.

– It is also common to *view inconsistencies in the other culture as logical mistakes* instead of accepting them as natural ambivalence (or being aware of contradictory phenomena within one's own culture).

– People easily fall into the *similarity trap*, assuming that, because of superficial similarities, what one deals with is one and the same (this fallacy has first been encountered in language learning; in terms of cultural phenomena, see the just mentioned example of politeness).

– Some of the most ardent proponents of inter- or cross-cultural dialogue in the West take it as a means – according to their ideological universalistic convictions – to *level all cultural difference*, the sooner the better. This is not very useful when we want to pursue a dialogue with one another.

– We have to be aware of different stages of development between the 'West' and the 'rest' of the world (*e.g.*, in the implementation of basic rights). The consequence of this assessment is not a cultural relativism but a *historical relativism*.

– Intercultural dialogue cannot be understood as one side (the student) accepting the views of the other (the teacher). Much rather it should be based on *equality*, mutual enrichment, enhancing mutual understanding.

Considering these general conditions and impediments, an intercultural dialogue could deal with the following four aspects:

1. Historical reflection and awareness of our own standards.
2. Getting to know the respective other culture, in particular, the logics of its value system.

³ Assmann, J. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

3. Search for common concepts.
4. Openness towards the other and willingness to be informed by the other.

1. *Historical reflection and awareness of our own standards*

We engage in cross-cultural dialogue quite naturally on the basis of our own (political) standards and values, that is, if we take the American model as the *de facto* norm for so-called ‘modern societies’, from the standard of a post-industrialized, individualistic, pluralistic, libertarian, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic immigrant society. But if we do so, we forget not only that the majority of people across the globe neither live in such societies, nor that they would necessarily find such a standard as desirable as we do, we also forget the historical process and shaping factors that led to our standard.

Value systems as the core of cultures have their origins in religious traditions. As to our own so-called Western culture, whether we like it or not, Christian ideas and values still form the basis of Western societies, although now mostly in a secularized fashion and therefore not easily recognizable; hence we might better call them post-Christian values.

Hence, on a bedrock of Christian value orientation, a set of secular ideas and values developed: the combination of individualism, rationalism, scientism and ideology of progress. It became the driving force in turning Western-style modernization into an endeavour with a tremendous global or universalistic impact. In the course of this development not only half of the globe was colonized by the Europeans but a ‘one-dimensional order of progress’ was superimposed upon the world with its multitude of peoples. As the Korean scholar Yersu Kim, a philosopher formerly in charge of the UNESCO ‘Universal Ethics’ project, remarks:

The synthesis had such a pre-eminence in the minds and affairs of men that nations and societies were practically unanimous in accepting Westernization as the only means of ensuring a viable future. Under the banner of modernization, they abandoned customary truths, values and ways of life, and accepted their degree of Westernization as their measure of progress and regress.⁴

Thus, the ‘West’ (Europe and North America) has successfully universalized its originally Christian based value system. This was achieved in the age of colonialism and imperialism with the development of science and (military) technology and driven by a quest for discovery. The new Western post-Christian ‘civil religions’ (the ideals of civil society, liberalism *etc.*) have inherited the universalistic ideals, the original missionary zeal and absolutist claim of its religious predecessors.

If we compare the impact of Confucianism in East Asia to that of Christianity in the West, we can regard Confucianism – even though it is not a religion in the strict sense and historically as heterogeneous as Christianity – as a functional equivalent of the Christian faith: Confucian values have exerted a profound and lasting influence on China (and East Asia) over a period of even more than 2000 years. Confucianism also claimed universal relevance of its teaching. Compared to Christianity, it lacked, however, the zealous missionary spirit. Instead, it spread to the rest of East Asia as an exemplary teaching of a harmonious social and moral order. Although Confucianism as an institution, unlike the Christian churches, disappeared with the end of imperial Chi-

⁴ Kim, Y. A Common Framework for the Ethics of the 21st Century. – Paris: UNESCO Division of Philosophy and Ethics, 1999.

na, it formed and, to a certain extent as 'post-Confucianism', still forms the ethical basis of the Chinese society.

2. *Getting to know the respective other culture, in particular, the logics of its value system*

Themes for a cross-cultural dialogue might, first, be the respective philosophical and religious traditions. Although the influence of religions has ceded considerably in the European secular societies, it would be impossible to properly understand the post-Christian value system without taking into consideration the transformation process through which religious values have become secularized into socio-political ideals or morals turned into codified law. The 'habits of the heart'⁵ are shaped by traditions whose working, in general, eludes our awareness.

The Chinese (and East Asian) traditions are, of course, just like those of the West, very diverse, and yet we can find some common traits that are, collectively speaking, different from their occidental counterparts:

1. More important than faith in revelations or 'teachings' believed to be true (*orthodoxy*) is right practice (*orthopraxy*) among men.
2. Not the transcendent is the sacred but the secular (Herbert Fingarette), the common or worldly, such as fulfilment of interpersonal duties (in Confucianism) or the natural (in Daoism/Zen-Buddhism).
3. The different schools do not compete with one another, nor do they try to oust each other; they tolerate one another and thus form a syncretistic unity.

This shows that Chinese religious/philosophical thought – different from the Western mainstream – does not pursue quasi-transcendental or epistemological questions (relationship between the world of senses and the metaphysical world); its focus, apart from being more inclusive than exclusive, is rather worldly and rationally pragmatic.

The different religious traditions in China have also led to a specific political culture with other priorities for the common good and living together in society. China and most of the East Asian countries give top priority to social harmony and stability. This preference is grounded in Confucian thought which, as is well known, has spread from China to Korea, Japan and Vietnam and which sees society or state modelled after the family, with consensus and harmony being essential for the survival of both. We thus find here rather a culture of consensus, built on the social cohesion of families and relationships, in comparison to Western societies which, particularly in the modern age of liberal democracies, are based on a pattern of conflict and have the individual as their fundamental element. According to the latter, history, politics and society develop through conflicts between antithetical forces (election fights, labor disputes, class conflict, lately also gender war, *etc.*) and progress towards a liberated world of autonomous individuals.

Next to individual liberty, the main battle-cry of the French Revolution was equality. Its backdrop was a class society in the *ancien régime* in which the majority of the bourgeois was dominated by a minority of nobility and clergy. In modern Western societies, equality is vigorously defended by the secular offspring of Christianity and is called, in today's terms, social justice. In the Chinese society, patterned after the Confucian model of the family, in which we have a natural hierarchy between parents and

⁵ Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swindler, A., Tipton, S. M. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life.* – Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.

children, equality was hardly ever an issue (apart from the Cultural Revolution). Instead, men and women were and largely still are seen in a network of relationships in which there is higher or lower status, mostly according to the principle of seniority or academic merit. We could thus characterize Chinese culture as a status-oriented culture, as compared to an equality culture in the West.

Lastly, the Chinese society is more shaped by particular relationships and networks, emphasizing the principle of reciprocity as well as duties and responsibilities (this applies as well for other East Asian societies). This is in contrast to the Western tradition which, with claims and rights in accordance to natural or positive law, sets universal rules and codes for everyone alike. For this reason we may follow Fons Trompenaars's distinction of universalistic *vs.* particularistic in describing Western and Chinese cultures respectively.⁶

As already mentioned, such a black-and-white dichotomy is – as a model – rather simplified. And yet, not only statistically speaking, but also because it highlights certain traits and trends, it is still justifiable, if treated with due caution. To give an example, the value of social harmony might well be questioned by pointing out the many instances – from the earliest times until the most recent past – when harmony or consensus does not seem to have played a significant role in China. We should not overlook, however, that certain ideals (which is not the same as essences) do play a decisive role in the history of a civilization, even if these ideals – by nature – can never be fully realized. Regarding Western civilization, one might meditate for a moment on the notion that ideals such as charity, peaceableness, equality and the singularity of every person before God, have in their secularized or politicized forms – as social welfare, peace missions, equality before the law, human dignity and rights – moulded our thought and practice in an undeniable way, although the 2000-year long history of the Christian Occident seems to have been a far cry from charity and peace. This is to say, we should be cautious dismissing the shaping power of certain ideals through history by pointing out singular incidents of non-congruence.

3. Search for common concepts (*trans-cultural universals*)

Simply put, while making comparisons, we can either highlight the similarities or the differences. Having just focused on the differences, we should now look for the similarities. In fact, the search for common concepts in different cultures has been the mainstream of cross-cultural endeavours for quite a while. These concepts are sometimes called trans-cultural universals. There is, for example, in the Confucian as well as in the Christian tradition the concept of the Golden Rule (in its positive and negative form); in *Mencius* we find ideas of an inborn goodness of human nature which correspond to those of Aristotle as well as to natural law and the modern notion of human dignity. Mencius also has the idea of ‘humane government’ (*ren zheng*), giving priority to the people and not to the ruler in the polity. Finally, we also find the ideal of the morally autonomous person, all of which has certain parallels in the history of Western thought.

We have to take into account, however, that these ideals exerted a different impact and led to a different philosophical and socio-political history. For example, the idea of moral autonomy of man did not bring about the notion of emancipation of the subject in the sense of Western philosophy, but a so-called ‘personalism’ (*gerenzhuyi*), meaning

⁶ Trompenaars, F. *Riding the Waves of Culture*. – London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1993.

that personal moral cultivation should lead to a heightened sense of responsibility for the common good – an attitude which we find, for example, in the tradition of the *qing guan* (incorruptible official) and which is exemplified in the words of the great Song dynasty reformer Fan Zhongyan: ‘To be the first to worry about the world's worries and to be last to enjoy the world's joys’.⁷ In short, what was called for was not self-assertion but the overcoming of selfishness; not self-realization, as it is fashionable today, but self-transcendence, in other words, cultivation of oneself from a small, egocentric self to a large, all encompassing self (similarly to Buddhism where the recognition of the fictitiousness, the illusion of the self is, in fact, enlightenment).⁸

Hence, we have to be aware of the similarity trap and keep in mind that these similar philosophical or political ideals developed in a different context, the main difference being that in Western thought there evolved around the Enlightenment and French Revolution an antagonism between state (government) and individual (citizen). This antagonism brought about the concepts of civil society and public sphere with the notion of citizens or intellectuals being critically and independently opposed to the state. In the Confucian tradition, however, the intellectual should be concerned about the welfare of the people and was always supposed to serve within the government; at the same time he ought to be a loyal critic of moral misconduct, an attitude which is certainly still alive and well in East Asian societies.

Neglecting this context, Western universalists mostly try to find traces of Enlightenment thought such as individual autonomy or notions of individual human rights, dignity, pluralism or democracy in the history of East Asian ideas, often combined with the reproach, that the Chinese, for example, are not maintaining their own traditional standards and would contradict their own tradition. According to such logic, a Chinese universalist could argue that Europeans or Americans find the ideals of charity, equality, justice and fraternity in their tradition but that they are not living up to them, for example, in their relationship to people or countries from the Third World. Apart from that, East Asian universalists might rather look for other trans-cultural universals, perhaps, the idea of accountability, unselfishness, altruism, *etc.* This means, we have to proceed with caution while looking for such universals. It should not lead us to find logical mistakes or contradictions between tradition (or ideal) and reality in the other culture.

4. Openness towards the other and willingness to be informed by the other

Other than Europe and America, East Asia can refer to an already a century-long history of intercultural learning from the West. The following assessment made by an African might just as well hold true for East Asian intellectuals:

Which European could ever praise himself (or complain about) having put as much time, studies and effort into the learning of another ‘traditional’ society as the thousands of Third-World intellectuals who have studied in the school of Europe?⁹

This is a remarkable advance in terms of mutual openness and readiness to learn from each other. It might give us an idea of what we as Europeans (and, perhaps, also Americans) have to catch up with in terms of cross-cultural learning.

⁷ Fan Zhongyan. Inscription on the Yueyang-Tower (Yueyang-lou ji). Guwen guanzhi. – Taipei, 1981.

⁸ Tu, Wei-Ming. Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation. – Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985.

⁹ Miské, A.-B. Lettre ouverte aux elites du Tiers-Monde. – Paris: Sycomore, 1981.

In this context, the Sinic model might serve as a critical reflection of our own Western blueprint of the 'good society'. Such a critical reflection would entail a stock-taking as well as an extrapolation of the global implications of Western civilization into the future. In other words, we would have to ask what a civilizatory blueprint for the twenty-first century could be like. By now it has become clear that the Western model – although having been an unprecedented success-story and being copied worldwide – has serious deficiencies and would not, in many ways, stand up to the standards of a civilization, at least not in the sense the word 'civilized' is commonly used today. (This insight prompted Mahatma Gandhi's celebrated quip: asked 'Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western civilization?' he responded 'It would be a good idea'.¹⁰) We know by now that the ideology of progress and growth (built on the positive understanding of self-interest) underlying the present global capitalist system will sooner or later arrive at its economical and ecological limits simply because of the limitations of the natural resources and a growing world population. The risks inherent in a global (*i.e.*, universalistic) market with quick and unlimited capital flow between different regions of the world have also become apparent, having led not only to the 'Asian' financial crisis in 1997 but also to the most recent and far more serious 'American' financial crisis. The development of science has brought about a tremendous material progress; but the belief in scientism, as Immanuel Wallerstein pointed out, has also led to a separation of the true from the good in the social sciences, apart from the problem of their grounding in eurocentric presuppositions.¹¹ We consider social pluralism to be a great emancipatory leap forward but are also becoming more and more aware of the social fallout, of the waning of solidarity and the rise of social anomie, the break-up of families or other traditional institutions which used to lend stability and cohesion to our societies – in short, the weakening of the social fabric. We may reach a point where our generation will have to apologize to the later-born for the squandering, not only of natural but also of social and ethical resources – squandered in the spirit of *après nous le déluge*. Where are the cohesive forces in our societies, in which its members are only seen as standing in contractual relationship with one another? Such questions, I assume, will be at the top of the agenda of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Because of basic ethnocentric attitudes, we find universalistic impulses regarding value systems in cultures or civilizations all over the globe. Having successfully universalized its originally Christian based value system, the 'West' shows particularly strong universalistic traits. There are for sure important universal messages in the Western (Christian *and* post-Christian) tradition, but there are just as important elements also in the Confucian tradition, not to mention contributions from other cultures. Particularly in view of the global dominance of Western secular values, they fulfil at least a locally valuable compensating or complementary function. Both the social problems in Western countries and the ecological crisis which we are facing today due to the dominance of the eurocentric development model should make us aware that the whole world might benefit considerably from alternative ways of thought, and we should therefore welcome the

¹⁰ Wallerstein, I. Eurocentrism and Its Avatars: The Dilemmas of Social Sciences // New Left Review. – 1997. – № 101/102. – P. 98.

¹¹ Wallerstein, I. Eurocentrism and Its Avatars... – P. 98. *Ibid.*

contribution of intellectuals from other cultures to offer their views on the solution of those problems that concern us all. For human flourishing on this planet, these non-Western values are probably just as important as our Western priorities. Apart from that, universal values – such as human rights – cannot be postulated a priori, as they have, in terms of their implementation, historical differences of development that have to be taken into consideration. For this reason we should entertain more the idea of *negotiated universals* – instead of postulated universals.

To open up to any other cultural tradition through intercultural dialogue means to become aware of the own conditioning through collective memories, experiences, history, *zeitgeist*, that is culture, and to be able to view one's own standards as only relative – or better, as merely provisional and incomplete. In other words, intercultural openness and dialogue might help us – and this, of course, also holds true for people from other cultures – in making us aware of the blind spots in our respective cultural, political and ideological orientation.

What may be needed then in terms of intercultural understanding is neither a theoretical nor an ideological but rather a pragmatic and hermeneutic point of view. In merging Charles Taylor's and Hans-Georg Gadamer's metaphors we could put the task like this: To approach the horizon of significance of the other culture in full consciousness of one's own horizon of significance. If this endeavour is pursued in an open-minded fashion, we may actually arrive, if not at a fusion, then at least at an overlapping of horizons. This would possibly enable us to regard the other concept of the human *telos*, coloured by a specific cultural background, as not simply a different but rather an enriching concept of the human enterprise on this planet.