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# ASIAN TEXTS — ASIAN CONTEXTS

## Encounters with Asian Philosophies and Religions

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# The Confucian Worldview: Uncommon Assumptions, Common Misconceptions

In thinking through the Confucian worldview, we might begin by playing with a thought-experiment. What would the history of the relationship between the Chinese Empire and the outside world have looked like if China had had its own imperialist aspirations? What would the world have looked like if indeed China had ravaged Europe and America rather than the other way round?

We certainly had our Columbus, our Cabot, our Cook, and our Vancouver. But imagine instead Chinese explorers beginning with Zheng He searching through the waterway systems of the "new world," mapping the coastline, and planting the Manchu flag at Jiujinshan (San Francisco) to declare "New Canton" for His Majesty Kangxi and the empire.

In the late sixteenth century, Jesuit missionaries began Rome's calculated attempt to convert the Chinese people, a population corrupted by superstitions and false ideas. For the next century, the Rites Controversy raged in Rome, where clerics debated the extent to which the Chinese mission could accommodate traditional Chinese culture in the conversion of Chinese Christians. But imagine instead Chinese missionaries penetrating deep into the European subcontinent from the southern ports of Iberia, brandishing their superior technologies to demand respect for Eastern learning in schools and temples, and debating in the high courts of Beijing whether European culture could be accommodated in the spread of Chinese ancestor reverence, or whether it must be eradicated to keep the Chinese culture free of Judeo-Christian superstitions.

Just as Rome was formally condemning the accommodationist strategies of the Jesuit missionaries in the eighteenth century, the East India Company kindled an incipient opium trade that, in the nineteenth century, would ignite to become the world's most valuable single commodity trade. But imagine instead Chinese merchant ships, under the protection of the emperor's navy, plying between China's colonies in the Indian subcontinent and Europe to trade for gold their cargo of "sweet poison" craved by the dissolute European aristocracy, and returning to China only to offload the bullion and *objets de curiosité* such as German musical instruments and Belgian lace.



The use of Chinese silver to finance England's colonization of India, and the use of the Indian fleet of British warships to coerce concessions from Beijing, inevitably led to contests between the superior English percussion-lock muskets and the obsolete Chinese matchlocks. But imagine instead Chinese gunships plowing up the Thames, the Rhine, and the Volga to deal the backward European victim a third humiliating defeat in a period of less than twenty years.

The Eurocentric focus of the curriculum in our colleges today—sociology is the Euro-American family experience, philosophy is Descartes to Kant, and so on—is being challenged by advocates of an inclusive international curriculum that more adequately reflects the roots of non-European Americans and the richness of the world's high cultures. But imagine instead a resolutely Sinocentric America, under pressure from students reflecting recent demographic changes that have brought waves of immigrants from Europe, having reluctantly to reevaluate undergraduate education in its seats of learning and to take into account exotica such as Shakespeare and Bach in the definition of American civilization.

Is this alternative scenario of recent human history—an imperialist China bringing Europe and America to their knees—unthinkable? I think the answer is yes—at least, it did not occur to the Chinese.

Chinese civilization established an early lead over the rest of the world in the development of her material culture—textiles, iron casting, paper, maritime arts, pottery, soil sciences, agricultural and water technologies, and so on. We must allow that as recently as the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century, it was China rather than Europe that, by most standards, was the arbiter of science and civilization on this planet. This gestaltist exercise of imagining an alternative pattern of world development over the past several centuries, then, requires us to probe into those features of the formidable Chinese

civilization that inhibited its spread beyond its East Asian sphere of influence. And the answers to "why didn't China?" posited by scholars familiar with the contest between China and the European powers are many and wonderful, ranging from the question-begging simple superiority of Western imperialism to curious psychological diagnoses proposed by Western modernization theorists: apparently, on some readings, the Chinese are "thalassophobic" (they dread oceans).[1]

China for the Western powers has been, and in large degree remains, a paradox—a Chinese puzzle. Why didn't China under Zheng He and his armada of hundreds of treasure ships colonize the Americas? Why hasn't China, a culture that places its highest value on community, ever been a member of the international community? Why does China send cooks rather than missionaries, and build restaurants rather than churches?

The prominent French sinologist Jacques Gernet argues that when the civilizations of China and Europe, having developed almost entirely independently of each other, first made contact in about 1600, the seeming ineptitude of the Chinese for understanding Christianity—and more importantly, the philosophic edifice that undergirded it—was not simply an uneasy difference in the encounter between disparate intellectual traditions. It was a far more profound difference in mental categories and modes of thought, and particularly, a fundamental difference in the Chinese conception of human agency.[2] Much of what Christianity and Western philosophy had to say to the Chinese was, for the Chinese, nonsense. Given their own philosophic commitments, they simply could not think it. The Jesuits on their part interpreted this difference in ways of thinking as a Chinese ineptness in reasoning, logic, and dialectic.[3]

And Europe fared little better in its opportunity to appreciate and to appropriate Chinese culture. In fact, it fared so badly that the very word "Chinese" in the English language has come to connote "confusion," "incomprehensibility," "impenetrability"—a sense of order inaccessible to the Western person.[4] The degree of difference between our dominant sense of order and the aesthetic order prevalent in the Chinese worldview has plagued our encounter with this antique culture from the start. Seeking corroboration for our own universal indices in the seventeenth century, we idealized China as a remarkable and curious land requiring the utmost scrutiny.[5] Our esteem for this "curious land," however, plummeted from these Cathay idealizations to the depths of disaffection for the inertia of what, in the context of our own Industrial Revolution, was cast as a moribund, backward-looking, and fundamentally stagnant culture.



To explore Chinese ways of thinking and living, then, we will, at the very least, have to recognize that we are dealing with a fundamentally different worldview. And the more distant Chinese thinking is from our own conceptions, the more likely it is that our own languages will have difficulty in accommodating our discussion of it.

In Chinese there is an expression, "We cannot see the true face of Mount Lu because we are standing on top of it." Although virtually all cultural traditions and historical epochs are complex and diverse, there are certain fundamental and often unannounced assumptions on which they stand that give them their specific genetic identity and continuities. These assumptions, extraordinarily important as they are for understanding the culture, are often concealed from the consciousness of the members of the culture who are inscribed by them, and become obvious only from a perspective external to the particular tradition or epoch. Often a tradition suspends within itself competing and even conflicting elements that, although at odds with one another, still reflect a pattern of importance integral to and constitutive of its cultural identity. These underlying strands are not necessarily or even typically logically coherent or systematic, yet they do have a coherence as the defining fabric of a specific and unique culture.

Within a given epoch, even where two members of a tradition might disagree in some very basic ways—the classical Confucian and Daoist, for example—there are still some common assumptions more fundamental than their disagreements that identify them as members of a specific culture, and that have allowed for meaningful communication to occur between them.

Looking at and trying to understand elements of the classical Chinese culture from the distance of Western traditions, then, embedded as we are within our own pattern of cultural assumptions, has both advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is obvious and inescapable. To the extent that we are unconscious of the difference between our own fundamental assumptions and those that have shaped the emergence of classical Chinese thought, we are sure to impose upon China our own presuppositions about the nature of the world, making

what is exotic familiar, and what is distant near. On the other hand, a clear advantage of an external perspective is that we are able to see with greater clarity at least some aspects of "the true face of Mount Lu"—we are able to discern, however imperfectly, the common ground on which the Confucian and the Daoist stand in debating their differences, ground that in important measure is concealed from them by their own unconscious assumptions.

Perhaps the only thing more dangerous than identifying and making such generalizations about complex cultural epochs and traditions is failing to do so. Assumptions, although always changing, are also persistent. In pursuit of an understanding of both the classical and the contemporary Chinese world—both Confucius and Mao Zedong—we have no choice but to attempt to identify and excavate these uncommon assumptions, and to factor them into our reading of the tradition. Some of the differences between the classical Chinese worldview and those classical Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian assumptions that had persisted and grounded the Western narrative are fundamental and might be drawn in broad strokes in the following terms.

We can call the worldview that, by the time of Plato and Aristotle had come to dominate classical Greek thinking, a two-world theory. Later, with the melding of Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition, this dualistic mode of thinking became firmly entrenched in Western civilization as a dominant underlying paradigm. In fact, this way of thinking is so much a matter of second nature to us in the Judeo-Christian narrative that we do not have to be professional philosophers to recognize ourselves reflected in its outline. A significant concern among the most influential Greek thinkers and later the church fathers was to discover and distinguish the world of reality from the world of change, a distinction that fostered both a two-world theory and a dualistic way of thinking about it. These thinkers sought that permanent and unchanging first principle that had overcome initial chaos to give unity, order, and design to a changing world, and that they believed makes experience of this changing world intelligible to the human mind. They sought the "real" structure behind change—called variously Platonic Ideas, natural or divine law, moral principle, God, and so on—that, when understood, made life predictable and secure. The centrality of metaphysics in classical Greek philosophy, the science of these first principles, reflects a presumption that there is some originative and



independent source of order that, once discovered and understood, will provide a coherent explanation for the human experience.

There were of course many diverse answers to the basic question: What is the One behind the many? What is the *uni* that brings everything together as a "universe?" What—or who—has set the agenda that makes human life coherent, and thus meaningful? For the Jewish prophets and scribes, and later for the Christian church fathers, it was the existence of the one transcendent Deity who, through Divine Will, overcame the formless void and created the world, and in whom truth, beauty, and goodness reside. It is this One that is the permanence behind change, and that unifies our world as a single-ordered universe. It is this One that allows for objective and universal knowledge, and guarantees the truth of our understanding. Because this One is permanent and unchanging, it is more real than the chaotic world of change and appearances that it disciplines and informs. The highest kind of knowledge, then, is the discovery and contemplation (*theoria*) of what is in itself perfect, self-evident, and infallible. It is on the basis of this fundamental and pervasive distinction between a permanently real world and a changing world of appearance, then, that our classical tradition is dominated by a two-world theory.

Another way of thinking about this two-world view that has its origins in classical Greece begins from a fundamental separation between that which creates and that which is created, between that which orders and that which is ordered, and between that which moves and that which is moved. There is an assumption that there exists some preassigned design that transcends the world it seeks to order. The contrast between the real One—the First Cause, the Creator, the Good—and the less real world of change is the source of the familiar dualistic categories that we appeal to in order to organize our experience of the world: reality/appearance, knowledge/opinion, truth/falsity, Being/Nonbeing, Creator/creature, soul/body, reason/experience, cause/effect, objective/subjective, theory/practice, agent/action, nature/culture, form/matter, universal/particular, logical/rhetorical, cognitive/affective, masculine/feminine, and so on.

What is common among these binary pairs of opposites is that the world defined by the first member is thought to stand independent of, and to be superior to, the second. This primary world, defined in terms of "reality," "knowledge," and "truth," is positive, necessary, and self-sufficient, while the derivative world, described by the second members

as "appearance," "opinion," and "falsity," is negative, contingent, and dependent for its explanation upon the first. After all, it is reality that informs and explains what only appears to be the case, and that allows us to separate the true from the false, fact from fiction. On the other hand, appearances are shadows—the false, the fictive. And like shadows, they are at best incidental to what is real; at worst, they not only are of no help to us in arriving at clear knowledge, but also further obscure it from us. Because the secondary world is utterly dependent on the first, we can say that the primary world is necessary and essential, the *Being* behind the *beings*; and the secondary world is only contingent and passing, with the *beings* derived from *Being*. There is a fundamental discontinuity in this worldview between what is real and what is less so.

It is because the first world determines the second that the first world is generally construed as the originative source—a creative, determinative principle, easily translatable into the Judeo-Christian Deity that brings both natural and moral order out of chaos. Hence, our early tradition tends to be both cosmogonic (meaning that it assumes some original act of creation and initial beginning) and teleological (meaning that it assumes some final purpose or goal, some design to which initial creation aspires). God created the world, and human life is made meaningful by the fact that God's creation has some design and purpose. It is from this notion of determinative principle that we tend to take an explanation of events in the world to be linear and causal, entailing the identification of a premise behind a conclusion, a cause behind an effect, some agency behind an activity.

Perhaps a concrete example will help bring this dominant Western worldview into clearer definition. The way in which we think about the human being serves this need, because in many ways humanity is a microcosm of this two-world universe. From many of the Western traditions, we might generalize in the following terms. A particular person is a discrete individual by virtue of some inherent nature—a psyche or soul or mind—that guarantees a quality of reality and permanence behind the changing conditions of the body. The human being, as such, straddles the two worlds, with the soul belonging to the higher, originative, and enduring world and the body belonging to the realm of appearance. The soul, being the same in kind as the permanent principles that order the cosmos, has access to these principles through reason and revelation, and thus can make claim to knowledge. It is through



the discovery of the underlying order that the universe becomes intelligible and predictable for the human being.

Turning to the dominant worldview of classical Confucian China, we begin not from a two-world theory, but from the assumption that there is only the one continuous, concrete world that is the source and locus of all of our experience. Order within the classical Chinese worldview is emergent and site-specific—growing and transforming within things themselves—like the grain in each unique piece of wood, like striations in stone, like the cadence of the surf, like the veins in a leaf. The classical Chinese believed that the energy of creativity resides in the world itself, and that the order and regularity this world evidences are not derived from or imposed upon it by some independent, activating power, but inhere in the world as a source of reconstrual. Change and continuity are equally "real."

The world, then, is the efficient cause of itself. It is resolutely dynamic, auto-generative, self-organizing, and, in a real sense, alive. This one world is constituted as *qi*, psychophysical energy that disposes itself in various concentrations, configurations, and perturbations as one thing transforms to become something else. The intelligible pattern of experience that can be discerned and mapped from each different perspective within the world is *dao*, a "pathway" that can, in varying degrees, be traced out to make one's place and one's context coherent. *Dao* is, at any given time, both *what* the world is and *how* it is. In this tradition, there is no final distinction between some independent source of order and what it orders. There is no initial, determinative beginning or ultimate, teleological end. The world and its order at any particular time are self-causing—spontaneously "so-of-itself" (*ziran*). It is for this reason Confucius would say: "It is human beings who extend order in the world (*dao*), not order that extends human beings."[6] Truth, beauty, and goodness as standards of order are not "givens" as much as they are historically emergent, something done, a cultural product.

The two-world order of classical Greece has given our tradition a theoretical basis for objectivity—the possibility of standing outside and taking a wholly external view of things. Objectivity allows us to decontextualize things as "objects in our world." By contrast, in the this-world view of classical China—world as such—instead of starting abstractly from some underlying, unifying, and originating principle, we begin from our own specific place within the world. Without objectivity,

objects dissolve into the flux and flow, and existence becomes a continuous, uninterrupted process. Each of us is invariably experiencing the world as one perspective within the context of many. Since there is only the one world, we cannot get outside of it. From the inherently unique place one always occupies within the cosmos of classical China, one interprets the order of the world around one as contrastive "this's" and "that's"—"this person" and "that person"—more or less proximate to oneself. Since each and every person or thing or event in the field of existence is perceived from some position or another, and hence is continuous with the position that entertains it, each thing is related to and a defining condition of every other.

All human relationships are continuous from ruler and subject to friend and friend, relating everyone as an extended family. Similarly, all "things," like all members of a family, are correlated and interdependent. Everything is what it is at the pleasure of everything else. Whatever can be predicated of one thing or one person is a function of a network of relationships, all of which conspire to give it its role and to constitute its place and its definition. A father is "this" good father by virtue of the quality of the relationships that locate him in this role and the deference of "these" children and "that" mother, all of whom are intrinsically related to him.

Because all things are unique, there is no strict notion of identity in the sense of some self-same identical characteristic that makes all members of a class or category or species the same. There are no natural kinds in the Aristotelian sense. For example, there is no essential defining feature—no divinely endowed soul, universal rational capacity, or natural locus of rights—that makes all human beings equal. In the absence of such equality that would make us essentially the same, the various relationships that define one thing in relation to another tend to be hierarchical and contrastive: bigger or smaller, more noble or more base, harder or softer, stronger or weaker, more senior or more junior. Change in the quality of relationships between things always occurs on a continuum as movement between such polar oppositions. The general and most basic language for articulating such correlations among things is metaphorical: in some particular aspect at some specific point in time, one person or thing is overshadowed by another—that is, *yin* to another's *yang*. Literally, *yin* means "shady" and *yang* means "sunny," defining in the most general



terms those contrasting and hierarchical relationships that constitute order and regularity.

It is important to recognize the interdependence and correlative character of the *yin/yang* kind of polar opposites, and to distinguish this contrastive tension from the dualistic opposition implicit in the vocabulary of the classical Greek world we explored above, where one primary member of a set, such as the Creator, stands independent of and is more "real" than the world he creates. The implications of this difference between dualism and correlativity are fundamental and pervasive.

One such implication is the way in which things are categorized. In what came to be a dominant Western worldview, categories are constituted analytically by an assumed formal and essential identity—all human beings who qualify for the category "human beings" are defined as having an essential *psyche* or soul. All just or pious actions share some essential element in common. The many and diverse things or actions reduce to one essential identical feature or defining function.

In the dominant Chinese worldview, "categories" (*lei*) are constituted not by essences, but by analogy. One thing is associated or disassociated with another thing by virtue of the contrastive and hierarchical relations that set it off from other things. This particular human being evokes an association with other similar creatures in contrast to other less similar things, and hence gathers around himself or herself a collection of analogous particulars as a general category. "This" evokes "that"; one evokes many. Coherence in this world, then, is not so much analytic or formally abstract. Rather, it tends to be synthetic and constitutive—the pattern of continuities that lead from one particular phenomenon to some association with others. It is a concrete coherence that begins from the full consequence of the particular itself and carries on through the category that it evokes.

If we were going to compare these two senses of "categorization," instead of the set of objects "hammer, chisel, screwdriver, saw" being defined as "tools" by the assumption of some identical formal and abstract function, we are more likely to have a Chinese category that includes "hammer, nail, board, strike, blister, band-aid, house, whitewash"—a category of "building a house" constituted by a perceived interdependence of factors relevant to the process of successfully completing a given project. Whereas the former sense of category, defined by abstract and objective essences, tends to be descriptive (what something

*is*), the latter category is usually prescriptive and normative (what something *should be* in order to be a successful "this" or "that").

The relative absence in the Chinese tradition of a Western-style teleology that assumes some given end has encouraged the perception among some historians that the Chinese, with libraries of carefully recorded yet seemingly random detail, are inadequate chroniclers of their own past. There seems to be little concern to recover an intelligible pattern from what seriously threatens to remain formless and meaningless. Jorge Luis Borges captures this perception in his well-known citation of "a certain Chinese encyclopedia" in which the category "animals" is divided into: (i) belonging to the Emperor, (ii) embalmed, (iii) tame, (iv) sucking pigs, (v) sirens, (vi) fabulous, (vii) stray dogs, (viii) included in the present classification, (ix) frenzied, (x) innumerable, (xi) drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush, (xii) et cetera, (xiii) having just broken the water pitcher, and (xiv) that from a long way off look like flies.[7] From the perspective of a more rationalistic worldview, the penalty the Chinese must pay for the absence of that underlying metaphysical infrastructure necessary to guarantee a single-ordered universe is what we take to be intelligibility and predictability. The compensation for this absence in the Chinese world is a heightened awareness of the immediacy and wonder of change, and one's complicity in it—the motive for revering the *Book of Changes* as the ultimate defining statement of the tradition, and as an apparatus for shaping a propitious world.

For the classical Greek philosophers, knowledge entails the discovery and grasping of the defining essences, forms, or functions behind elusively changing appearances. Hence the language of knowing includes "concept," "conceive," and "comprehend." Reality is what is permanent, and hence its natural state is inertia. The paradigm for knowledge, then, is mathematics, and more specifically, geometry. Over the door of Plato's Academy was written: "Let none who have not studied geometry enter here." Visual and spatial language tends to predominate in the philosophical vocabulary, and knowledge tends to be understood in representational terms that are isomorphic and unambiguous—a true copy impressed on the mind of that which exists externally and objectively.

In the classical Chinese model, knowledge is conceived somewhat differently. Form is not some permanent structure to be discovered



behind a changing process, but a perceived intelligibility and continuity that can be mapped within the dynamic process of experience itself. Spatial forms—or "things"—are temporal flows. Things and events are mutually shaping and being shaped, and exist as a dynamic calculus of contrasting foci emerging in tension with one another. Changing at varying degrees of speed and intensity, the tensions constitutive of things reveal a site-specific regularity and pattern, like currents in the water, sound waves in the air, or weather systems in the sky. Etymologically, the character *qi*—"the vital stuff of existence"—denotes an acoustic as well as a physical sensibility, making resonance and tensions a particularly appropriate way of describing the relations that obtain among things. In contrast with the more static visual language of classical Greek thought typified by geometry, classical Chinese tends to favor a dynamic aural vocabulary, where wisdom is closely linked with communication—with that keenness of hearing and those powers of oral persuasion that will enable one to encourage the most productive harmony out of relevant circumstances. Much of the key philosophic vocabulary suggests etymologically that the sage orchestrates communal harmony as a virtuoso in communicative action.

Reason is not a human faculty independent of experience that can discover the essences of things, but a palpable determinacy that pervades both the human experience and the world experienced. Reason is coherence: the dynamic intelligibility of things and their functions. Rational explanation does not lie in the discovery of some antecedent agency or the isolation and disclosure of relevant causes, but in mapping out the local conditions that collaborate to sponsor any particular event or phenomenon. And these same conditions, once fully understood, can be manipulated to influence and anticipate the next moment. Such is the foreknowledge of the sage.

An important factor in classical Chinese knowing is a putative comprehensiveness. Without an assumed separation between the source of order in the world and the world itself, causal agency is not so immediately construed in terms of relevant cause and effect. All conditions interrelate and collaborate in greater or lesser degree to constitute a particular event as a confluence of experiences. Knowing is thus being able to trace out and manipulate those conditions far and near that will come to affect the shifting configuration of one's own place and time.

There is a direct and immediate affinity between the human being and the natural world, so that no firm distinction is made between natural and man-made conditions—they are all open to cultivation, articulation, and manipulation. In fact, it is because of the fundamental continuity between the human pattern and the natural pattern that all of the conditions, human and otherwise, that define a situation can be brought into sharp focus. In the absence of a severe animate/inanimate dualism, every situation, from the stew pot to the battlefield, with its complex of conditions, is very much vibrant and alive.

The inventory of philosophical vocabulary used in classical China to define this kind of knowing tends to be one of tracing out, unraveling, penetrating, and getting through. Knowing entails "undoing" something, not in an analytic sense to discover what it essentially is, but rather tracing out the connections among its joints and sinews to discern the patterns in things, and, on becoming fully aware of the changing shapes and conditions of things, to anticipate what will ensue from them. The underlying metaphor of "tracing a pattern" is implicit in the basic epistemic vocabulary of the tradition, such as "treading a pathway, a way" (*dao*), "figuring an image or model" (*xiang*), "unraveling and undoing" (*jie*), "penetrating" (*tong*), "breaking through" (*da*), "naming and inscribing" (*ming*), "ritualizing" (*li*), "inscribing" (*wen*), and so on. In contrast with its classical Greek counterpart where knowing often assumes a mirroring correspondence between an idea and an objective world, Chinese knowing is resolutely participatory, pragmatic, and creative—"tracing," in both the sense of etching a pattern and of following it. To know is to realize, to "make real." The path is not a given, but is made in the treading. Thus, one's own actions are always a significant factor in the shaping of one's world.

Because this emergent pattern invariably arises from within the process itself, the tension that establishes the line between one's own focus and one's field gives one a physical, psychological, social, and cosmological skin, a shape—a continuing, insistently particular identity. This dynamic pattern is reflexive in the sense that one's own dispositions are implicit in and affect the shaping of one's environment. One's own shape is constantly being reconstructed in tension with what is most immediately pressing in upon one, and vice versa.

To continue with the personhood example from our discussion of the classical Greek worldview, generally in classical Chinese philosophy a



particular person is not a discrete individual defined in terms of some inherent nature familiar in recent liberal democratic theory, but is a fluid configuration of constitutive roles and relationships: Yang Dawei's father, An Lezhe's teacher, Gao Daren's neighbor, a resident of Yonghe village, and so on. These roles and relationships are dynamic, constantly being enacted, reinforced, and ideally deepened through the multiple levels of communal discourse: embodying (*ti*), doing (*xing*), ritualizing (*li*), speaking (*yan*), playing music (*yue*), and so on. Each of these levels of discourse is implicit in every other, so there is a sense in which a person can be fairly described as a calculus of specific patterns of discourse. By virtue of these specific roles and relationships, a person comes to occupy a place and posture in the context of family and community. The human being—or better, "human becoming"—is not shaped by some given design that underlies natural and moral order in the cosmos, a design that stands as the ultimate objective of human growth and experience. Rather, the purpose of the human experience, if it can be so described, is more immediate: to coordinate the various ingredients that constitute one's particular world here and now, and to negotiate the most productive harmony out of them. Simply put, it is to get the most out of what you've got here and now.

Creativity also has a different place in the classical Chinese world. Again, in gross terms, the preassigned design and ultimate purpose assumed in classical Greek cosmology means that there is a large investment of creativity "up front" in the birth of a phenomenon—a condition reflected rather clearly in the preestablished Ideas of Plato that have to be "recollected," in the potentiality/actuality distinction of Aristotle, or in the Creator/creature dualism of the Judeo-Christian tradition. For the Confucian worldview, in the absence of an initial creative act that establishes a given design and a purpose governing change in the cosmos, the order, regularity, and meaning of the world emerge from the productive juxtapositions of different things over the full compass of their existence. No two patterns are the same, and some dispositions are more fruitfully creative than others. For this reason, human knowledge is fundamentally performative—one knows a world not only passively in the sense of recognizing it, but also in the active shaping and realizing of it. It is the capacity to anticipate the patterned flow of circumstance, to encourage those dispositions most conducive to a productive harmony, and ultimately to participate in negotiating a

world order that makes best advantage of its creative possibilities. Harmony is attained through the art of contextualizing.

A major theme in Confucius and in Confucianism is captured in the phrase, "the exemplary person pursues harmony (*he*), not sameness."[8] This Confucian conception of harmony is explained in the classical commentaries by appeal to the culinary arts. In the classical period, a common food staple was *geng*, a kind of millet gruel in which various locally available and seasonal ingredients were brought into relationship with one another. The goal was for each ingredient—the cabbage, the turnip, the bit of pork—to retain its own color, texture, and flavor, but at the same time to be enhanced by its relationship with the other ingredients. The key to this sense of harmony is that it begins from the unique conditions of a specific geographical site and the full contribution of those particular ingredients readily at hand—*this* piece of cabbage, *this* fresh young turnip, *this* tender bit of pork, and so on—and relies upon artistry rather than recipe for its success. In the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lu*, cooking as the art of contextualizing is described in the following terms: "In combining your ingredients to achieve a harmony (*he*), you have to use the sweet, sour, bitter, acrid and the salty, and you have to mix them in an appropriate sequence and proportion. Bringing the various ingredients together is an extremely subtle art in which each of them has its own expression. The variations within the cooking pot are so delicate and subtle that they cannot be captured in words or fairly conceptualized."[9]

The Confucian distinction between an inclusive harmony and an exclusive sameness has an obvious social and political application. There is a passage in the *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu*), a collection of historical narratives probably compiled around the fourth century BCE, that underscores the fertility of the kind of harmony that maximizes difference:

> While harmony (*he*) is fecund, sameness is barren. Things accommodating each other on equal terms is called blending together in harmony, and in so doing they are able to flourish and grow, and other things are drawn to them. But when same is added to same, once it is used up, there is no more. Hence, the Former Kings blended earth with metal, wood, fire, and water to make their products. They thereby harmonized the five flavors to satisfy their palate, strengthened the four limbs to protect the body, attuned the six notes to please the ear, integrated their various senses to nourish their hearts and minds, coordinated the various sectors of the body to complete their persons, established the nine main visceral meridians to situate their pure potency, instituted the ten official ranks to organize and evaluate the bureaucracy . . . and harmony and pleasure prevailed to make them as one. To be like this is to attain the utmost in harmony. In all of this, the Former Kings took their consorts from other clans, required as tribute those products that distinguished each region, and selected ministers and counselors who would express a variety of opinions on issues, and made every effort to bring things into harmony. . . . There is no music in a single note, no decoration in a single item, no relish in a single taste.[10]



This harmony is not a given in some preassigned cosmic design, but is the quality of the combination at any one moment created by effectively correlating and contextualizing the available ingredients, whether they be foodstuffs, farmers, or infantry. It is not a quest of discovery, grasping an unchanging reality behind the shadows of appearance, but a profoundly creative journey where the quality of the journey is itself the end. Indeed, simply put, it is making the most of any situation.

In summary, at the core of the classical Chinese worldview is the cultivation of harmony—a specifically radial and centripetal harmony. This harmony begins from what is most concrete and immediate—that is, from the perspective of any particular human being—and draws from the outside in toward its center. Hence, there is the almost pervasive emphasis on personal cultivation and refinement as the starting point for familial, social, political, and cosmic order. A preoccupation in classical Chinese philosophy, then, is the cultivation of this centripetal harmony as it begins with oneself, draws inward, transforms, and radiates outward. The cultivation of this radial harmony is fundamentally aesthetic. Just as those specific bits of paint constitute the one and only *Mona Lisa*, so one coordinates those particular details that constitute one's own self and context, and in so doing seeks a harmony that maximizes their creative possibilities.

The Confucian worldview is thus dominated by this bottom-up and emergent sense of order that begins from the coordination of concrete detail. It can be fairly described as an aestheticism, exhibiting concern for the artful and eventful way in which particular things can be correlated

efficaciously to thereby constitute the ethos of concrete historical events and cultural achievements. Order, like a work of art, begins with always unique details, from "this bit" and "that bit," and emerges out of the way in which these details are juxtaposed and harmonized. As such, the order is embedded and concrete—the coloration that differentiates the various layers of earth, the symphony of the morning garden, the relief in a wall of stone, the rhythm in the rustling of the autumn leaves, the wind piping through the orifices of the earth, the enacting of rituals and roles that constitute a communal grammar to give community meaning. Such an achieved harmony is always particular and specific—resistant to notions of formula and replication.

## Notes

1. Mark Mancall, *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 3–4. In fairness to Mancall, his exploration of this question is far more complex and intelligent than this one passage might lead one to believe.
2. Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3–4.
3. Ibid., 242.
4. The examples of such a usage are many and varied: a Chinese puzzle (an intricate maze), Chinese revenge (doing a mischief to oneself to spite another), a Chinese flush in poker (a hand with no discernible sequence or pattern), a Chinese screwdriver (Australian slang for a "hammer"), and the ever popular Chinese fire drill (a college prank: stopped at a traffic signal, students leap from an automobile, run around in circles, and then as the light changes, they reenter the automobile in a different order, much to the perplexity of other motorists).
5. See the introduction to D. E. Mungello's *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985) for a discussion of the "curious (L. *curiosus*)" inquiry of the seventeenth century intellectuals.
6. *Analects* 15.29.
7. See Borges's anthologized "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," in *Borges: A Reader*, edited by Emir Rodriguez and Alasdair Reid (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), [Poges']. Ironically, Chinese categories found in the traditional *lei-shu* often appear to an outsider as altogether too close to Borges's parody. Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973) is a self-conscious response to Borges's categories.
8. *Analects* 13.23.
9. Xu Weiyu, *Lushi chunqiu* (Peking: Wenxue guji kanxingshe, 1955), 540.
10. *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu*), sibubeiyao edition (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1928), 16.4a–b.

# II

# Texts