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2016-9-29, Lecture for the University of Social Sciences and Humanities 华沙人文大学 organised by Prof. K. Gawlikowski

The Particular “Metaphysical Grammar” in Chinese Culture

In China, there is a very big Polish name, Sienkiewicz. His historical novel *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero* has already had several translated versions in Chinese, entitled *Where Are You Going*. Relatedly, the tradition of western philosophy is normally described to be composed of three basic questions: where am I from, where am I going and who am I. Anyway, if we trace back the ancient Chinese thought, we may find a completely different logic.

The Buddhist temple 大觉寺 locates in the suburb of Beijing, where an Emperor of Qing Dynasty 乾隆 bequeathed his calligraphy of the saying “无去来处” - “There is no definite origination or destination”. This saying comes from a Buddhist chant. So when a Buddhist is confronted with the questions “Where am I from and where am I going”, the answer would be “I am from where I was, and I go where I am going”. In some sense, I think such an idea does not abolish the Western philosophical question but dissolves the “metaphysical grammar.” To change a word, there is no need for the Chinese philosophers to negate the pursuit of the origin of the world, but the question has been transformed: we cannot say anything “originates” from anywhere, and what we can say is only “everything originates from no origination” (自无始以来). Going further, 无始 (no origination) does not mean anything “certain” as a starting point, but it implies the beginning of the sense of “certainty”, because nothing, but the correlation of the “uncertainties”, could be regarded “certain” legitimately.

Similarly, the French philosopher and sinologist as well, Francois Jullien believes that Chinese thought has a special innate feature demonstrated in his learning the first Chinese sentence when he came to China in 1970s. In accordance with his memories, the first sentence he learnt is “这是什

么东西” (What is this)? He was fascinated to know that 东西 (this/something) is a combination of the two opposite directions: “east” (东) and “west” (西).

Jullien asserts that this “contains a great possibility of ideas – so great that I even cannot dream of! ... I still remember my shock and do not know how to explain the kind of ‘aberration’ I felt at that moment. It is an extraordinary aberration from a ‘category of the object’ to a ‘category of relationship.’” For Jullien, the concept of “*dongxi*” can produce “completely different understandings if seen through a relationship of two extremes. ... The contrast between ‘*dong* (east)’ and ‘*xi* (west)’ in the term ‘*dongxi*’ tells us what has separated the Chinese ideas from the whole (Western) history of ideas and science.”

Many years later, Julien interpreted Confucian *Doctrine of Mean* (中庸) as “the possible equilibrium between any kind of extremes”, which closely related to his key term *écart* (间距关系). He argues that we should replace the descriptive “différence” with the productive “*écart*,” stressing the “entre (between)” produced by “*écart*” so that we can find the other, make dialogue into “dia-logue” and make between into “in-between.”

As the matter of fact, such a compound structure as “*dong-xi*” is quite common in the Chinese language: “*shijie* 世界”, the world, is composed of “*shi*” (moving and shifting of time) and “*jie*” (position, direction, or boundary of space); “*tian xia* 天下”(the world) refers to the governance of “*tian*” (heaven) and “*xia*” (earth); “*guojia* 国家” (country or state) integrates the communal “*guo*” (state) and one’s own “*jia*” (family).

If we move further, this parallels exactly the “yin 阴” (inactive, negative) and “yang 阳” (active, positive) in the *Book of Changes*, which claims that “*tai ji sheng liang yi* 太极生两仪” (the Grand Terminus produces the two elementary forms).

Jullien's shock and amazement when seeing the structure of Chinese language and ideas may have come from the fact that he recognized a new discursive form that is completely different from metaphysical grammar in the West.

For Chinese speakers, “*dongxi*,” “*shijie*,” “*tianxia*” are commonly used words. Few people would realize the implied polarities or extremes. Anyway, the ideas offer a chance for Chinese to think of China from outside, via the West, just as Jullien thinks of the West via China, in which our own tradition could be mutually revitalized.

Pictures may be more impressive and convincing, and make the presentation less boring: “The Tablet of the Unity of Three Religions” erected in 1209 in the Buddhist Shaolin Temple, Henan Province, records the dramatically harmonious relations among Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. You may notice just one face carved on the tablet at the 1st glance, but to be more careful, you will find it is actually shared with Buddha, Confucius and Laotzu, with only one scripture in their hands.



It could be recognized more easily if it is cut into two pieces.



The tablet inscription includes such a statement: “Buddhism is centered on the enlightenment of human nature (见性) ; Daoism focuses on the methods of longevity (保命) ; Confucianism emphasizes the ethical way of living, and keeping the right order and the basic virtue as the appropriate way.” (明伦) That is a brief description of “integration of three religions” in China.

The mixed faces may be traced back to a more influential shape of Taiji (The ultimate One or the Grand Terminus) in *The Book of Change* (《周易》), in which the “positive” and the “negative”, the white part and the black part are also mixed, shared and pre-conditioned each other, just like the mixed faces of Buddha, Confucius and Laotzu, something believed to be the Chinese logic “both / and” instead of the western logic “either / or”.



The dissemination of Christianity in China seems not to be so smoothly compared with Buddhism, as argued by Prof. Erik Zürcher “why it is that the foreign religion Buddhism succeeded in implanting itself in Chinese soil and

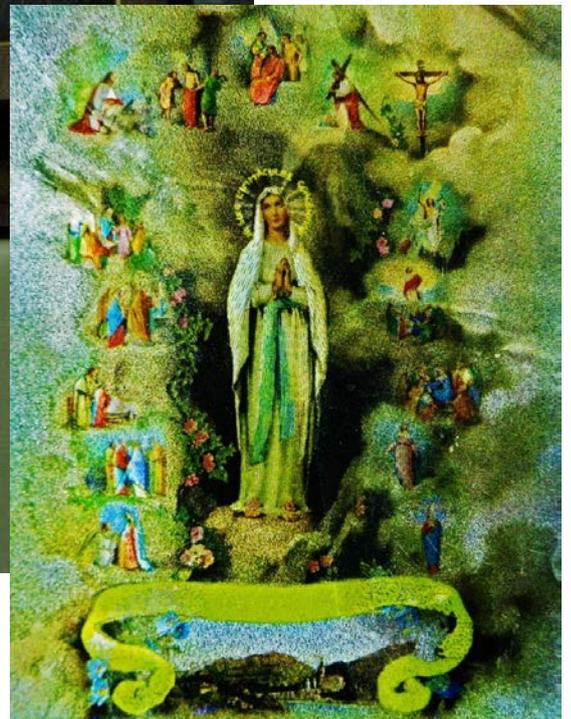
why Christianity failed”. He described the comparison of Buddhism and Christianity in China as “spontaneous diffusion” vs. “guided propagation”, nobody would like to accept whatever is promoted too much, so sometimes, for the preachers, the less convinced they are, the more convincing their teachings would be. Whether we agree with Prof. Zürcher or not, the adaptation of Christianity also left some interesting demonstrations and even more surprising instance, stimulated by the inclusive mixture and sharing mentioned above.

There is a famous painting entitled “Chinese Maria”, preserved in the North Cathedral in Beijing, illustrating Maria and Jesus according to the images of the Chinese Empress in Qing dynasty and the young emperor.

“Chinese Maria” with young Jesus dressed in yellow, the color of imperial family, with royal pictures and sculptures of dragon and phoenix.



The picture of Chinese Maria is even put alongside with the Lourdes Maria, which might be taken as the symbol of what Christianity is really like in China, as well as the symbol of the true religious practice in the complicatedly mixed attitude and an in-culturated way.



The similar mixture has been copied as the Sino-Christian symbols in the shape of the Cross and lotus, as shown in a tablet in Yuan Dynasty, collected in Nanjing Museum.



With such cases, we may understand why “harmony with diversity”, “mutuality” and “inclusiveness” has been so much emphasized in China.

“Reading thousands of books and travelling thousands of miles” (读万卷书, 行万里路) is a crucial idea of education or self-cultivation for Chinese intellectuals. And “travelling thousands of miles” actually implies to enrich oneself through understanding other’s experience. This echoes a famous saying of a highly respected scholar Chen Yique (陈寅恪) in his comment on the contribution of a Chinese philosophical master Wang Guowei (王国维). He believes that Wang Guowei concentrated in three issues in his late years: reinterpretation, supplementation and comparison (释证、补证、参证), all of which are based on “resources and ideas from the outside world”. In this sense, the Chinese modern academia and education itself originated in the combination with others, and originated in the inclusiveness of others.

The four clarifications promoted by President Xi Jinping are as follows: 1. to clarify the historical background and evidence of “Chinese exploration” (or “Chinese mode”), 2. to clarify the cultural foundation and environment of “Chinese characteristics” (or the so-called “socialism with Chinese characteristics”), 3. to clarify the syncretic and inclusive features of the Chinese civilization, 4. to clarify the modern transition of Chinese traditions. The key point in these four is how we can contribute more to the global family, instead of taking a defensive posture or a position of refusal, or imposing our own views on others.

American theologian Jaroslav Pelikan once quoted an anonymous saying: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”¹ What President Xi implies in his “four points” might also be that the real vital and living tradition is able to be re-activated and modernized, and the spirit of Chinese culture should be able to be integrated into the world culture and so be internationalized.

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jidu jiao chuan tong: da gong jiao chuan tong de xing cheng* (The Christian Tradition 1: the Emergence of Catholic Tradition 100-600), trans. WENG Shaojun, CHEN Zuoren (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies Ltd., 2002), xix, xxxii.

What needs to happen in a discussion of “shared values”, therefore, is that, first of all, we should not be content with a list of similar concepts that each civilization holds to. Unfortunately, many inter-faith dialogues in the world today have stopped at this stage, which deserves our reflections: It seems that human beings are not lack of shared values and ethical resources, then why these values have never worked out?

For instance, all people seem to agree with the notion of world peace, but the ways to keep world peace are never peaceful. All people seem to agree with the concept of forgiveness, but as the matter of fact, we could hardly tolerate those who disagree with us. We do share many similar or even identical values and ideals, but sometimes they lead to irreconcilable conflicts. We hate holocausts and other crimes, but they are normally carried out in the name of God, Heaven or Justice.

We are confronted with such paradoxes which requires an effort to understand the differences and reasons behind the similar concepts. In short, it is true that “constructive global coexistence” should be based on shared values; however, if we cannot realize that none of us is “the only tent in town”, “value” is not “value” any more but has been replaced by our own identity, position or context. If we foolishly assume that we can represent the shared values of all human beings, we are even farther away from the genuine meaning of “value”.

The effectiveness of “value” does not depend on its form as “nouns” that can be interpreted or endowed with meanings, but on the “verbal process” that generates the value. In other words, this process is not just sharing values as nouns, but itself a mutual participation in the act of sharing, to make the values “sharable”.

The fundamental logic to this process is probably a kind of “impossible possibility”: because when “value” itself is defined as an absolute ideal, we have been relativized by this definition and thus become the “impossible.” And because “value” cannot be replaced or internalized by “us”, our “impossibility” brings out the “possibility” of “value”, which enables “value” to surpass any kind of “centralized discourse” or “politics of identity” and become the foundation of values supporting such a “global co-existence”.