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Western, Chinese, and Universal Values

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to resist “Western values” and to promote “Chinese values” are often based on a crude cultural relativism which is implausible on both historical and philosophical grounds. Admittedly, worries about a facile equation of “West” with “universal” are sometimes well-founded, but the answer is not to retreat to a relativism that would limit all parties’ abilities to seek self-improvement. Rather, building on examples like Chinese new cosmopolitans and modern Confucians—including the great Confucian thinker Mou Zongsan (1909-1995)—current reformers should look to undermine dichotomous, monolithic “East versus West” views of the world. Chinese (and, for that matter, non-Chinese) education, cultural life, and politics will be strengthened by the continuing development of distinctively Chinese perspectives that draw on the best the world has to offer.

The complex interaction between existing Chinese values and values arriving from “the west” has a long history. It is not limited to just the century of interest in Marxism, nor even to the more than four hundred years since Jesuit missionaries arrived in China. In fact the 1400 years of Islamic presence in China still pales before the close to two millennia that Buddhism has thrived in China, both challenging then-indigenous values as well as adapting and growing in its new context. Zen Buddhism is one of the products of this process of adaptation; so is Neo-Confucianism, the dominant state-sponsored intellectual tradition from 1300-1900 CE. Both can be said to be syntheses between Chinese and Western (that is, initially non-Chinese, from the west of China) values. If we take this historical context seriously, we can easily see the absurdity of Chinese today trying to reject Western values. Of course, the current regime’s worries about Western values are not about Zen or Confucianism but about things like democracy and human rights; indeed, they would like to promote the importance both at home and abroad of traditional Chinese values like Confucian harmony. The trouble is that the government’s approach to

“Western” and “Chinese” values is self-defeating: the only way to get the best out of Western or Chinese values is to see them both as potentially universal, and to put them into dialogue with one another.

The late-January announcement by China’s education minister that tightened controls against textbooks’ spread of “Western values” is the latest in a series of efforts that many analysts trace to a party directive that was issued in April 2013, known as “Document 9.” Among the “false ideological trends” that the document seeks to identify and combat is “Promoting ‘universal values’ in an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party’s leadership.” It goes on to explain that “the goal of espousing ‘universal values’ is to claim that the West’s value system defies time and space, transcends nation and class, and applies to all humanity.”¹ The document also specifically targets “Western constitutional democracy,” which is presumably an instance of such an allegedly universal value. According to the document, the goal of those advocating “universal values” is to challenge the Party, its institutions, and its core value of socialism. As China-watchers have noted, one of the underlying motivations for criticism of universal or Western values is a conviction that collapse of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union can be traced to its openness to the institutions and values of Western democracy; the Communist Party of China would like to avoid the same fate.² At the same time, some Chinese leaders have been eager to promote China’s cultural and political models abroad: for example, this desire for “soft power” clearly motivates China’s on-going investment in the nearly 500 Confucius

¹ “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation” (<http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>)

² For example, see Simon Denyer, “Twin historic traumas shape Xi Jinping’s China presidency,” *Washington Post* (March 2, 2015); http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/twin-historical-traumas-shape-xi-jinpings-china-presidency/2015/03/02/b4074516-b2f0-11e4-bf39-5560f3918d4b_story.html.

Institutes around the world. So we can conclude that opposition to Western values has two sides: a resistance to change at home, and a desire for change abroad.

One way of reading Chinese rejection of Western values—especially when it is also cast as a denial of “universal values”—is as a kind of cultural relativism. According to such a relativism, the only set of values that applies to us is our values; your group’s values apply to you, and to your group alone. As already noted, a cursory look at Chinese history shows the untenability of such a view. Values, and even the very words that we use to discuss them, adapt over time to changing circumstances. Whether our example is Zen Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, or Chinese Marxism, it is clear that China and Chinese values are not unchanging, monolithic entities, applying only to Chinese. The same goes for Chinese ideas of rights: there has been explicit discussion and debate about rights in Chinese for more than 150 years.³ The way that Chinese rights discourse has developed relates to new circumstances as much as to pre-existing value orientations, and even these pre-existing orientations were themselves open-ended enough to allow for considerable flexibility. The story of Chinese rights discourse is one of Chinese thinkers and political actors seeking to solve local problems by developing new solutions that adapt and synthesize language and values from multiple sources, foreign and domestic.

If we reject cultural relativism, is there a way to salvage Chinese resistance to Western values, or must we conclude that it is simply an intellectually bankrupt effort to prop up the status quo? One thing to say is that we should not assume that all of the relevant actors have the same motivations. Perhaps for some, the philosophical and historical implausibility of cultural relativism does not matter, so long as it gets the job

³ See Stephen C. Angle, *Human Rights and Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2002).

done (of defending their current power). Still, worries about Western universalism are actually rather broad-based in China, and if we look closer we can see some good reasons for this. Can Americans who pay attention to the current state of our democracy really claim that our precise model of political values and institutions is the best possible way to go? For some Chinese, that is, the question is not whether all Western values should be rejected wholesale, but whether the current, pre-packaged set of values and institutions must be accepted *en bloc*. One intellectual current in China is “new cosmopolitanism,” which accepts that we can talk about values cross-culturally, but denies that the West has already found all the answers. This is all the more true, they assert, because it probably makes sense to realize some shared values in different ways in different contexts. There might be broad agreement that sovereignty resides with the people or that politics should rest on basic laws, but the details of how these principles are worked out might legitimately vary, either because there are multiple, equally good models, or because cultural, economic, and other factors may contribute to determining the best way to realize such principles.

Equally resistant to crude cultural relativism are those contemporary Confucians who see Confucianism as having global relevance. Confucians over many centuries have not thought about the Sage’s teachings as relevant only to “Chinese”; Confucianism seeks to understand the place of humans—all humans—in the cosmos, and on the basis of this understanding to prescribe ethical, political, and social practices that enable us to live in harmony with one another and our environment. Heirs of this universalistic approach to Confucianism can be found in China and other East Asian countries, and also scattered in

other parts of the world.⁴ Just as the broad tradition of Confucian learning has been catalyzed through encounters with other traditions over the centuries, so many modern Confucians have also been open to developing their ideas in dialogue with Kant, Hegel, Marx, Dewey, and others, with the goal of enriching both sides of these dialogues via constructive engagement. At the same time, within today's China there are also other appropriators of the banner of "Confucianism" who insist that it is a uniquely Chinese cultural heritage, which modern Chinese people cannot abandon without losing their Chineseness.⁵ This latter group is naturally much more friendly to the recent efforts to reign in Western values, which they see as inimical to Confucianism and to China.

While culturalist Confucians may welcome an opposition to Western values, such repression is not just a problem for Chinese liberals. It is also stifling to the open-ended, creative thinking that is represented by both new cosmopolitans and universalistic Confucians. To the extent that the new climate makes it harder to teach Kant or Dewey, it will also be more difficult to develop new ideas stimulated by encounters with these thinkers. It remains to be seen how wide and deep the restrictions will be. Since the reform period began in 1978, there have regularly been efforts to restrict the practice of "Western" ideas while simultaneously allowing for quite free discussion at an abstract, academic level. Philosophers talking about the strengths and weaknesses of multi-party democracy has been one thing; advocating multi-party democracy, quite another. There are some signs

⁴ See Robert Cummings Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000); Stephen C. Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012); and Sam Crane, *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Dao: Ancient Chinese Thought in Modern American Life* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

⁵ Jiang Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future*, trans. Edmund Ryden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

that the current campaign is reaching into individual classrooms and having effects on conferences, which is very worrying.

Ironically, there are good reasons to think that an exclusion of Western values is problematic for Confucianism in deeper ways than the limits on creativity just discussed. This is not just because of the way in which cultural relativism makes it self-contradictory to urge adherents of another culture to take a different set of values seriously. Perhaps culturalist Confucians are willing to abandon China's efforts to promote the "soft power" appeal of Chinese values. The more fundamental problem is that refusing to take seriously institutions like laws and rights may make it impossible for Confucians to realize their central goals of social harmony and individual moral development. At least, that is the influential argument of one of the twentieth century's leading Confucians, Mou Zongsan (1909-1995).⁶ Mou was worried about any political system that relies on leadership by individuals who claim to have highly developed moral insight. He had in mind the periodic, terrible excesses of both the traditional Confucian state and the modern Communist one: in both cases, leaders who believed in their own virtue sometimes sought to impose their vision of morality on the realm, with bloody consequences. Mou characterized this as politics being "swallowed" by morality.⁷ To be sure, Mou was deeply committed to the importance of striving for sagehood. Among other things, he saw laws and rights themselves as rooted in and emerging from moral struggles. Without morality, there would be no politics. Nonetheless, he recognized that "achieving sagehood is an endless process."⁸ Politics (including law) must, therefore, be independent from morality, or else it, too, would

⁶ For more on Mou, see Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*.

⁷ Mou, Zongsan 牟宗三. 《政道與治道》 [*Authority and Governance*]. Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1991, 140.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

be endlessly unfinished and inadequately protective. Mou thus advocated a position that falls between liberal right-based theories and traditional Confucian (or Communist) good-based theories. Unlike the liberals, Mou held that moral and political value must retain a continuity, lest politics be unmoored from the underlying source of all value, in which case we would have no reason for confidence that the outcomes of our political processes were ultimately aimed at making our lives better. Unlike the Communists and earlier Confucians, though, politics and law must nonetheless stand on their own, independent of morality. In other words, Mou rejected both a direct connection between morality and politics, and a lack of connection. His alternative is an indirect connection. Political value, he says, emerges out of morality, but achieves an independent status because the further development of moral value requires that our moral judgments be self-consciously limited by the autonomous authority of law.

Mou Zongsan's argument is controversial, but it should be clear enough that even discussing it requires an openness to Western values as well as to the possibility that current Chinese institutions may have significant flaws. Indeed, there are reasons to think that Mou's argument applies with similar force to Western philosophers' efforts to link virtue to politics.⁹ More broadly, we may be on the cusp of a much more global conversation about values and ideas than humanity has so far achieved, and the Chinese leadership's desire that Chinese values, Chinese culture, and Chinese intellectuals play important roles in such a conversation is eminently possible.¹⁰ There is no reason to

⁹ For an argument that both Aristotle and Hume—and their modern followers—can learn things from Mou, see Stephen C. Angle, "Virtue Ethics, The Rule of Law, and the Need for Self-Restriction," in Brian Bruya, ed., *The Philosophical Challenge from China* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 159-82.

¹⁰ Another indication of where things may be going is Michael Slote, "The Philosophical Reset Button: A Manifesto" *Dao XIV* (2015). 1: 1-11.

believe that the precise values and institutions of present Western countries are somehow the best that humanity can achieve, the “end of history.” So we should join in questioning whether the “West’s value system defies time and space, transcends nation and class, and applies to all humanity.” Still, there are good reasons to think that current Chinese values and institutions—no matter whether we have in mind modern versions of long-lasting traditions like Confucianism, or more recent innovations like Chinese Marxism—also fall short of the best that humanity can achieve. To be sure, “the best that humanity can achieve” may well be plural: that is, there are probably multiple excellent ways to arrange values and institutions, each making different sorts of trade-offs, such that no one perspective is the unique best. What we can be sure of, though, is that none of our existing models is the best that we can do, and we can only improve by being open to wide-ranging critical conversations.

What, then, are concrete steps that reformers can strive to accomplish? Those of us outside of China can begin by noticing when our own peers and institutions take it for granted that the theories and values that have emerged from the Western tradition are the only possible theories and values for us. Too often attention is only paid to foreign ideas in a cultural relativist mode: “if you want to understand them, then you need to study their culture.” We need to recognize that “their culture” almost surely has things to teach us about ourselves. This will be good for us, and also models the approach we would like to encourage “them” to take toward “our” culture as well. As for engaged intellectuals within China, two things are crucial. On the one hand, anything that undermines a dichotomous view of the world—us versus them, our values versus theirs, East versus West—is constructive. On the other hand, resisting dichotomies does not mean giving in to the

power of Western cultural and political institutions. Simultaneously learning from self and other, while also being appropriately critical of self and other, will often be a delicate balance. Luckily, Chinese traditions have long embraced the idea of constructively harmonizing differing values...which is, of course, something from which we non-Chinese can learn.