

CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AS WORLD PHILOSOPHY? AN EIGHTFOLD CHARACTERIZATION OF CREATIVISM

Suncrates
James W. Kidd

Some Reflections on the Conference Theme: “Chinese Philosophy as World Philosophy”

At first sight, one may justly look askance at the conference theme itself and wonder: In precisely what sense can one claim Chinese philosophy as world philosophy? In the following discussion we wish to discuss this very issue.

The Kipling statement over a century ago that “the East is East, the West is West, never shall the twain meet” is found, and is bound to be a fallacy—the fallacy of labelism, especially when applied to the comparative studies of Chinese and world philosophies. The expressions “China” or “things Chinese,” as Russell pointed out in the early 20s, indicate less a political entity than a civilization. They signify more than a geographical division. Expressions like “Chinese” or “Non-Chinese,” “East” or “West” as labels of geographical divisions, are inherently misleading as labels of intellectual divisions.

Needless to say, Chinese philosophy forms a part of world philosophy as any other cultural philosophical heritages do, such as Egyptian, Greek, Indian, Persian, Islamic, European (German, French, English, Italian, Spanish), African, American (North American, Latin American). Obviously, the conference theme of “Chinese Philosophy as World Philosophy” is not to be taken in the geographical or segregational sense; otherwise, this conference itself should have been adjourned long before we meet—here and now. Essentially, it should be taken in the contributational-participational-integrational sense. Attention should focus on those aspects of classical Chinese philosophy that abound in perennial interest, universal appeal and modern global significance. Viewing the case *sub species eternitatis*, one is at a vantage point to appreciate A. N. Whitehead’s statement: “The more we know of Chinese art, of Chinese literature, and of the Chinese philosophy of life, the more we admire the heights to which that civilization attained. Having regard to the span of time, and to the population concerned, China forms the largest volume of civilization which the world has seen.”¹

How to Epitomize the Essentials of Chinese Philosophy

Professor Wing-tsit Chan, distinguished senior scholar in the field, opens chapter one in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*: “If one word

could characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophical thought, that word would be humanism...”² We are afraid that *that* one word is not enough; for as it stands, it is a description in terms of genus without species. Naturally one wonders: what then makes it different from humanism in ancient Greece (Heraclitus, Protagoras, Socrates) involving the tension of “Man vs. Nature” on the one hand and humanism in modern Europe since the Renaissance involving the tension of “Man vs. God” on the other? Fully aware of the importance of due qualification, Chan continues, “not the humanism that denies or slights a Supreme Power, but one that professes the unity of man, [Nature] and Heaven. In this sense, humanism has dominated Chinese thought from the dawn of its history.”³ In 1971 co-author Sunocrates coined the term “creative humanism” in his dissertation (SIUC) as an alternative, which was also suggested to the 5th Centennial Symposium on Wang Yang-ming, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1972. Now, if one word is still to be preferred we suggest “creativism” instead. Charles Hartshorne has a book titled *Beyond Humanism*; but never has he or any one else chosen “beyond creativism.” The ground-concept for Chinese philosophy is that of creativity, or more precisely, perpetual creativity.

Creativism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking

Nearly a century ago the distinguished American psychologist and philosopher William James spoke of “pragmatism” as “a new name for some old ways of thinking.” Recently another great American contextualistic philosopher, Lewis E. Hahn, in his keynote speech at the 1993 International Conference on the East-West Cultural Interflow, Macao, further points out that William James may not fully realize that it parallels some Taoist and Confucian ways of thinking in the 6th century B.C. Conversely, we may safely assume that “creativism,” developed from *I-Ching* or *The Book of Creativity* as the fountainhead of both Confucianism and Taoism, can be regarded as “an old name for some new ways of thinking” in today’s modern world. As a proto-metaphysics of experience, *The Book of Creativity* abounds in perennial interest, universal appeal, as well as global significance now and for ages to come. The entire Chinese philosophical heritage is, in keynote or *motif*, a grand tradition of creative humanism or, simply, creativism that has evolved steadily and gradually from time immemorial. It has been profoundly inspired by the religious commitment to the symbolism of the “Great Center” as the celestial archetype and firmly grounded in the metaphysical principle of “creativity” as the categorical *Begriffsgefühl* or comprehension; it branches into various streams of thought such as Primordial Confucianism, Taoism and Mohism. By confluence and concrescence with congenial strains of thought in Mahayana Buddhism, it culminates in various distinct but related types of Neo-Confucianism (realistic, idealistic and naturalistic) from the 10th century onwards, tending to move towards the phase of creative synthesis with world philosophies on a greater scale. In this connection comparative philosophers may have much

to learn from their Indian spiritual comrades: Ramakrishna Puligandla points out in *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy*, that Indian experience in recent times can be summed up as consisting of a series of responses to the challenge of the Western civilization. They cover four phases in total, from 1) stubborn rejection to 2) blind worship, to 3) critical selection and finally, to 4) creative synthesis.⁴ Such a four-phased progression well serves to make any people better aware of where they are in the historical process of cultural cross-fertilization and intellectual integration.

As students in comparative philosophy we have in the past tried some spade works in exploring the affinity of visions and insights in a global perspective: such as the Chinese views and Whitehead in metaphysics and Max Scheler in philosophical anthropology, Stephen C. Pepper in aesthetics, Charles Hartshorne in process theology, Karl Jaspers in the doctrine of elucidation of *Existenz*, as well as the Buddhist views (Vijñana-Matra) and Hursel in phenomenology. Findings of comparative studies are convincing of the perennial interest, universal appeal and modern global significance as embodied in the Chinese philosophical heritage. To substantiate such a claim, the following eight-fold characterization is provided as a frame of reference.

1) Cosmologically, Chinese creativism espouses a dynamic, process view of the world, taking Creativity as Reality; or to put it more dramatically, taking the Creatively Creative Creativity as the Really Real Reality. (易即體; 生生之謂易; yi ji ti; sheng sheng zhi wei yi.)

2) Ontologically, it is value-centric, implying a functional view of substance and an axiological commitment to Value or Goodness as the ground of Being (nay, Becoming). The process of life is the process of value-actualization moving towards the Supreme Good as the Omega-Point for Teilhard de Chardin, or the axiological idealism for Nicolai Hartmann (即用顯體; 大化流行, 即是仁體彰露, 至善發顯; 參天地, 贊化育, 位萬物, 致中和, 止至善; ji yong xian ti; da hua liu xing, ji shi ren ti zhang lu, zhi shan fa xian; can tian di, zan hua yu, weiwan yu, zhi zhong he, zhi zhi shan.)

3) Methodologically, it is synthesis-oriented, anti-bifurcational. trans-dualistic, hence reasonably dialectical (尚綜會而斥二分, 雖辯証而無悖情理, shang zong hui er chi er fen; sui bian zheng er wu bei qing li), in that it is free from the Hegelian formal rigidity (which Whitehead calls “childish”) and the Marxist dialectic tendency gone mad, which overemphasizes contradiction, opposition and conflict as the essence of nature while minimizing the importance of harmony for life, let alone Comprehensive Harmony (廣大和諧, guang da he xie).

4) Epistemologically it emphasizes the intuitive and experiential

rather than the conceptual and theoretical, as a way of knowing and takes the experiential immediacy (體驗, ti yan) as an approach to and a criterion of, truth and meaning.

5) In philosophy of action it is full of the pragmatic spirit as exhibited particularly in the Confucian School that stresses the unity of knowing and acting. Knowing by doing and as the late Professor T'ang Chün-I reformulated it, “realizing the heavenly reason in every actual occasion of life.” (隨處體認天理, sui chu ti ren tian li.)

6) In philosophy of *Existenz*, to borrow a term from Karl Jaspers to whom philosophy is *philosophia perrenia* and to philosophize is to illuminate *Existenz*, it is existential through and through in spirit, in that the problem of the “self-elucidation as illumination of *Existenz*” (明性, ming xing) constitutes the central concern for all major philosophers in China since Confucius, who called the authors of *The Book of Creativity* “men of profound care and concern.” (憂患, you huan)

7) In religion, it represents panpenetheism (萬有通神論, wan you tong shen lun), a position it has adopted since the 12th century B.C. as a twin position to panentheism (萬有在神論, wan youzai shen lun). It regards creativity as the ultimate concern (cf. Paul Tillich). Instead of conceiving God as Creator, it has conceived God as Creativity-in-Itself pervading the entire cosmos throughout. For comparison and contrast, it is noteworthy that for pantheism the relationship between All and God is one of identification (All=God); for panentheism, one of inclusion (All God); for panpenetheism, one of interpenetration (All God). If Divinity is infinite in substance, so shall it be in function as Its manifestation. Just as panentheism is a synthesis of traditional theism and pantheism, so panpenetheism is a synthesis of traditional pantheism and panentheism. Notice the subtle but important distinction between pantheism and pan-en-theism.⁵ Even the great Chinese philosopher Thomé H. Fang hesitated between “pantheism” and “panentheism” for lack of an appropriate term while attempting to characterize the religious position and sentiment of the ancient Chinese people.⁶

8) In aesthetics, the Chinese philosophers of art and beauty have adopted a “quality-oriented” position (氣韻 “qi-yun”). Formulated by Hsieh Hê in the 5th century, 氣韻生動 (“qi-yun sheng-dong”) has remained the master principle in the art of painting.⁷ Like the German term “*Geist*,” it defies translation—literal or otherwise.⁷ The famous writer Lin Yutang, in *The Chinese Theory of Art*, has listed seven samples from Osvald Siren and Lawrence Binyon to Benjamine March and none is found satisfactory. But fortunately, Stephen C. Pepper, America’s great contextualistic philosopher of art, has hit upon it by the phrase “vividness of quality” in his aesthetic writings, especially *Aesthetic Quality* (1936); and most self-revealing is his

“Review” (1948) of George Rowley’s *Principles of Chinese Painting* (1947): “And yet the final impression is that basic principles are the same the world over. In fact, for me it was a special joy to recognize as if in a Chinese character (qi) some principles I had often taught in English. . . . We could do a lot of qi in America.”⁸

In view of the above eight-fold characterization one tends to regard Nietzsche’s remark on Kant as “a great Chinese of *Königsberg*” is a statement that can be neglected only at one’s own peril. To sum up, in world philosophies the great Chinese are not confined to *Königsberg*.

- 1) Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 6.
- 2) Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 3.
- 3) *Ibid.*
- 4) Cf. Ramakrishna Puligandla, *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1975).
- 5) For details on the subtle but important distinction between pantheism and panentheism, see John B. Cobb, Jr., “The World and God,” in Ewert H. Cousins (ed.), *Process Theology: Basic Writings by the Key Thinkers of a Major Modern Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), especially pp.165-66.
- 6) Cf. Thomè H. Fang, *Chinese Philosophy: Its Spirit and Its Development* (Taipei: The Linking Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980), p. 2; pp. 64-65; *Creativity in Man and Nature* (Taipei: The Linking Publishing Co., Ltd., 1081), p. 146; *Primordial Confucianism and Primordial Taoism* (Taipei: The Dawn Cultural Enterprise, Ltd., 1980), pp. 111-112.
- 7) Cf. Henry Cassirer, *Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1969), p. v.
- 8) Cf. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. IX, No.1, 1948, pp. 329-33.

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