

East Asian Voices on Science and the Humanities

Editorial & Introduction

with Willem B. Drees, “Zygon Goes Global: East Asian Voices”; and Thomas John Hastings, “Extending the Global Academic Table: An Introduction.”

Where Are We?

with CHEN Na, “Why Is Confucianism Not a Religion? The Impact of Orientalism”; KAMATA Toji, “Shinto Research and the Humanities in Japan”; KIM Seung Chul, “Religion and Science in Dialogue: An Asian Christian View”; and LEE Yu-Ting, “East Asia and Human Knowledge – A Personal Quest.”

How Did We Get There?

with HSU Kuang-Tai, “Science and Confucianism in Retrospect and Prospect”; SI Jia Jane and DONG Shaoxin, “Humanistic Approach of the Early Protestant Medical Missionaries in Nineteenth-Century China”; and ZHAO Aidong, “American Missionaries Transmitting Science in Early Twentieth-Century Eastern Tibet.”

East Asian Engagements with Science

with Thomas John Hastings, “Kagawa Toyohiko (1888–1960): Witness to the Cosmic Drama”; INAGAKI Hisakazu, “Kagawa’s Cosmic Purpose and Modernization in Japan”; HYUN Woosik, “An East Asian Mathematical Conceptualization of the Transhuman”; KANG Shin Ik, “Jumping Together: A Way from Sociobiology to Bio-Socio-Humanities”; FUKUSHIMA Shintaro, “Multilayered Sociocultural Phenomena: Associations between Subjective Well-Being and Economic Status”; and SHIN Jaeshik, “Mapping One World: Religion and Science from an East Asian Perspective.”

EAST ASIA AND HUMAN KNOWLEDGE—A PERSONAL QUEST

by Lee Yu-Ting

Abstract. This essay is a reflection on the ways we understand East Asia, as well as how East Asia is related to our knowledge construction. In spite of the personal tone, which I use strategically to formulate arguments in a carefully designed narrative flow, the article remains critical throughout and its conclusion is clear: exploration of the essence of East Asian civilization can constitute a meaningful effort to reevaluate and even restructure our current world of knowledge.

Keywords: civilization; Confucianism; East Asia; history; humanity; knowledge; language; logic; politics; science

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The theme of this special issue, “East Asian Voices on Science and the Humanities,” is one about which I feel both comfortable and uneasy.

On the one hand, East Asian culture and thought is what my research and teaching is about; this field, on the strength of its inexhaustible historical resources, is gradually gaining a due position in the curriculum of world civilizations. On the other hand, however, it is through incessant rumination over the field that I become aware of the challenges that East Asia poses to our modern knowledge system.

EAST ASIA AS A PROBLEMATIC CATEGORY

East Asia is no doubt a cultural unit—however different its form and content might be from the Western counterpart—but it was also a final piece to complete the modern West-centric map of world history, which means its general exemption from total colonization by Western imperialism, despite ruthless exploitation. This geopolitical particularity is looming even larger today, as, arguably, the wars of ideological antagonism in this region throughout the twentieth century have evolved into a struggle among would-be rule makers of the globalized capitalist world.

I am conservative on whether this trans-Pacific tug of war fits into a “clash of civilizations” scenario, and the main points of this essay are far from being political or diplomatic. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that culture is more often than not used as an excuse for the incompatibility or deliberate disagreement of interests. Later on, I will address the problem of cultural universalism *versus* relativism, of course on an intellectual level.

Critically speaking, the idea of East Asia does not sustain a fixed way of cognizance. It is rather precarious, so to speak. East Asia might be understood as a historical sphere of Confucianism, classical Chinese writing, or the imperial tributary system, depending on different academic approaches, but the area it covers does not correspond to the contemporary political shape as delineated, for example, by Wikipedia (search “East Asia”). Sinkiang and Tibet, both administrative districts of the People’s Republic of China, were not culturally East Asian, whereas Vietnam, a nation strongly influenced by Confucianism and Chinese folk religions, is excluded from the Wikipedia map of East Asia and cannot secure a comprehensive account for its more common identity as part of Southeast Asia in books on East Asian history (Holcombe 2011, 3). Furthermore, owing to the history of many Eastern countries’ being violently lumped together to serve the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” the term East Asia still reminds some people of the pre-1945 Japanese imperialism that keeps fraying relations between East Asian countries, as evidenced by Chinese and Korean responses to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s remarks on August 15, 2015, the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II.

Starting with definition and historical memory, the complexity of East Asia finds expression in many other aspects for researchers to explore. Here I do not attempt to investigate the array of related problems, for it is far beyond the scope of this paper and my capability as well. Rather, I will let my experiences speak, trying to lead the argument through my diversified background to a personalized view of what East Asia means to human knowledge. It might seem idiosyncratic, but the reflection will be critical.

Actually, as far as I can imagine, to address such an overarching issue as “East Asian Voices on Science and the Humanities,” one needs to be personal so as to be constructive, as, in the best case, the inevitable narrowness could be compensated by coherence and depth, which in turn might provoke other professionals’ thinking. In this regard, the symposium for which this paper was initially drafted was wonderfully designed; each participant was required to raise five big questions as regards the topic and to give his or her own view of interdisciplinary dialogue. This design induced me to present my specific approach to the general issue, and I will reuse the structure in this article, starting from my big questions and then enhancing arguments through narrative.

FIVE BIG QUESTIONS

The questions I am going to raise do not presuppose an ontological distinction between East Asia and the West. However, as the two traditions have quite different cultural and social outlooks—not to mention almost contradictory theories of natural phenomena—it is natural for us to wonder whether the Western discoveries are closer to truth (because the Western paradigm has been dominant for centuries), or whether “truth” might be a misleading term that suggests fixation of values, especially in cultural and social life. The following questions derive from this central inquiry:

- (1) Civilizationally, is there an East Asian value system that can relativize the Western one? If yes, does it follow a particular East Asian mode of thinking or might it contain certain universal elements?
- (2) Institutionally, in a world that demarcates public and private realms, what influence would Confucian ethics have on such practices as democracy and capitalism?
- (3) Semiotically, what are the characteristics of the world that the traditional Chinese writing system constructed? Did the system contribute any distinct traits to East Asian civilization in general?
- (4) Psychologically, how can the humanities satisfy needs of the human mind other than the need for rationality? Does an analytical framework and style of expression suffice to meet these needs?

- (5) Cognitively, do the sciences and the humanities form a continuum, with the former being more definite in data, procedural logic, and descriptive language, and the latter dealing with unquantifiable nuances and connections?

Although I tried to qualify the questions by using adverbs, they are mutually inclusive and continuous, with the first three being East Asia-specific and the last two more generic. Obviously, I do not have final answers to offer to any of them. However, to a great extent the weaving together of these questions reflects my own perception of East Asia's role in knowledge construction. Of course, here I refer to East Asia as a cultural rather than political entity, which, despite the aforementioned complexity, becomes a more and more meaningful category during my intellectual pursuit.

BRIEF ACADEMIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY

As an undergraduate, I majored in industrial management at a university in Taiwan, where I received training in mathematical modeling and information technology in addition to the regular courses of a business school. Becoming aware that culture is always a huge and even subversive variable in business theories, and being dissatisfied with the demand-and-supply treatment of humanity, after compulsory military service I went to Britain to study comparative literature, a discipline that introduced me to the world of cultural studies and critical theory. In spite of the disparity between business and literary studies, these two stages of my life have one thing in common, that is, knowledge is for the most part generalized from the Western experience, and even the ways of criticizing established rules usually follow Western criteria. This early alertness of mine, nevertheless, was to develop into large-scale reflection only years later.

Returning to Taiwan with a sharpened, albeit Westernized, sense of thinking and writing, I was employed as a research assistant by my alma mater and thus began my systematic understanding of Chinese thought and East Asian Confucianisms. Afterwards, I was given an opportunity to go to Japan for PhD study, and my dissertation focused on the Indian poet-thinker Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), exploring his subtle connections with the intellectual movements of various countries, especially China and Japan, against the ideological backdrop of the East-West dichotomy. In carrying out the doctoral project—for breaking through the framework of previous research indeed—I became interested in trans-contextual exchange of ideas and gradually developed my own perspective and methodology. In brief, by delving into the reactions to Tagore's vision of a unified, spiritual Asian civilization from different areas and groups, I was able to reconstruct an intellectual web spun around such ideas as

“modernity,” “nationalism,” “regionalism,” and even “world history;” their particular manifestations in a non-Western register no doubt constitute a significant episode for us to reexamine the history of the early twentieth-century world.

During my study in Japan, a historical dimension was virtually carved out in my humanistic thinking, which also helped me view social construction as a real, contextualized process that can hardly be exhausted by delicate theories, although in each society there do exist certain guiding principles. However, even more important is that Japan posed to me a whole new environment and language; strenuous adaptation was inevitable. Besides, as the first successfully modernized non-Western society, Japan was—and, to a certain degree, still is—a country striving to set up its own standards against the Western paradigm. Moreover, the fortunes of modern Japan and China were so different that one might wonder if the geographical designation of East Asia was appropriate for accommodating such contrasting historical experiences; later developments of the two countries and their neighbors, Korea and Taiwan in particular, from the 1980s do not seem to have rendered the notion of one East Asian culture any more secure. All these factors combined to stimulate my thought, and my research became comparative in essence. To sum up, throughout the seven years of assistantship and doctoral fellowship, apart from moderate accumulation of knowledge, the most important thing I learned was to be relative, though not necessarily relativistic, in thinking and perceiving, and I became suspicious that standardization could mean exclusivity, no matter what dominant pattern is being followed.

I went back to Taiwan in mid-2014 and worked for months as a post-doctoral fellow at a national research organization. Then in February 2015 I rejoined my alma mater as assistant professor. The institute I am affiliated with is proposing a synthesis of the social sciences and the humanities; therefore, this new appointment reconnects me to all my previous fields of training, and I am allowed great flexibility to conduct interdisciplinary and transcultural research. In the meantime, there is also a pivot shift, or expansion, in my research methodology. While my dissertation was a horizontal, synchronic comparison of ideas, more and more I feel obliged to engage in vertical, diachronic analysis, that is, to explore the historical formulation of ideas, conventions, and institutions; only after achieving such understanding, I reason, would further comparison of civilizations and proposals of civilizational dialogue become meaningful.

A WAY TO THE QUESTIONS AND ARTICULATION

Question 1. From the description above, it is obvious that my academic pursuit can be divided into two stages, which, according to current taxonomy, may fit the labels of “universalism” and “relativism” respectively. In an

unbalanced, West-centric power and knowledge structure, this pair of concepts draws much attention from scholars doing area studies indeed, and, as early as 1991, there was a forum in the *Journal of Asian Studies* that contributed to this debate between “cultural relativism” and “evaluative universalism.” The editor provides lucid explanations, as follows:

Implications drawn from relativistic reasoning differ and have varying influence in particular disciplines. . . . Cutting across the disciplines are epistemological and methodological problems involving the issue of whether any conceptual tools exist to understand and interpret human behavior and meaning in ways that are intersubjectively valid. The universalist position, on the contrary, assumes there is some general set of principles or rules which should be applied across cultures. (Buck 1991, 30)

As history unfolds, universalists—chiefly Europeans and North Americans—can hardly be immune from “a strong sense of the superiority and correctness of their values.” Hence, as the editor admits, Asianists, including himself, are more inclined to a relativist stance that attempts to “leave behind the limiting, confining assumptions of prevailing Western scholarship” (Buck 1991, 33).

Of course, the disputation between universalism and relativism is not exclusive to Asianists but prevalent in other realms of area studies as well, so our world, if depicted along intellectual lines, might be represented as one of “West *versus* non-West.” This is no mere exaggeration. The dichotomy came into shape because the West underwent radical transformations to become modern, a process that many scholars such as Max Weber (1864–1920) tried to explicate. Weber’s overarching question is: “To what combination of circumstances should the fact be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value?” (Weber 2006, xxviii). Among the distinct features of the modern West, Weber laid particular emphasis on capitalism and its religious and ethical foundations. As regards the belief in linear progress and the universalizing tendency of Western thought in general, I would like to reference Isaiah Berlin’s (1909–1997) lucid account that traces this tradition far back to ancient Greece:

It appears to me to rest on at least three basic assumptions: (a) that every genuine question has one true answer and one only: all the others being false. (b) The method which leads to correct solutions to all genuine problems is rational in character; and is, in essence, if not in detailed application, identical in all fields. (c) These solutions, whether or not they are discovered, are true universally, eternally and immutably. (Berlin 2001, 80–81)

While Berlin did not seem to approve of these assumptions of Western thought, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) showed unmistakable resentment at such tradition, or more precisely, its modern evangelizing efforts:

I mean something which exists equally in Imperialism, Bolshevism and the Y.M.C.A. . . . What I mean is the habit of regarding mankind as raw material, to be moulded by our scientific manipulation into whatever form may happen to suit our fancy. . . . Both these creeds [i.e., Bolshevism and the Y.M.C.A.], in their Western adepts, involve a contempt for the rest of mankind except as potential converts, and the belief that progress consists in the spread of a doctrine. . . . This view, though I have called it mechanistic, is as old as religion, though mechanism has given it new and more virulent forms. (Russell 1922, 81–82)

The reason why I make lengthy quotations is to show how a seemingly neutral process of thinking becomes entangled with human intentions and, through the influence of historical conditions, leads to the antagonism between dominating and suffering peoples. It would be naïve to expect, as many people did a century ago, a separation between sober, scientific rationality and the competitive, mechanical view of life and hope for the latter's being supplanted by (a highly idealized) Eastern humanism or spirituality. However, on the civilizational level, the following question is still worth considering: Do there exist other value systems that can serve to complement and modify the Western paradigm that has brought human history to a bottleneck?

In this question I exclude such terms as “alternative” or “replace” so as not to be biased towards another form of universalism. I would not claim, at this beginning stage of my academic journey, that East Asia provides an answer, but my argument is that by delving into the very idea of East Asian civilization, our knowledge of the limitations of the current knowledge system will be enriched.

East Asia does not belong to the same category as the East or Asia; the latter is too broad to be meaningful, as Tagore lamented, “Our [Oriental] cultures are too scattered” (Tagore 2012, 607). On the contrary, East Asian countries used to share common values—at least they borrowed Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist terms and used Chinese characters to elaborate on these ideas. If this does not suffice to warrant an integrated cultural sphere, we can still learn a great deal by asking what is missing in East Asian history to form a genuine civilizational paradigm.

As a designation, “East Asia” was derived from an imperialist context: the slogan posed as an antithesis to Western hegemony on the one hand, while Japan used the anti-Western banner to justify its expansionism on the other. But East Asia's civilizational status becomes all the more conspicuous because of its combination of rich tradition, frustrating modern experience, and dramatic rise on the current global stage. In contemporary academia, where “region” assumes an axial role in civilizational analysis, East Asia provides a platform for both the reexamination of old orders and the promotion of new visions. In this regard, whether on the cognitive or institutional level, East Asia has not yet become as mature as the West.

Therefore, how East Asia gradually develops into a conceptual category and unit of narration is itself an urgent world-historical inquiry.

Question 2. I am by nature more philosophical than historical and attracted to grand narratives. However, as stated above, the Japanese experience turned me into a multidimensional scholar who now takes care to be sympathetic—but still critical—in thinking and pay attention to contextual nuances. This is why I become less fascinated with trendy theories but devoted to understanding time-honored principles or values of each civilization. Also, it was during my sojourn in Japan that I wrote a review article on Francis Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, a book that serves as a great connection to advance my big questions (Lee 2013; summary of the book is adapted from my review article).

In this ambitious work, Fukuyama provides a lucid historical account of the development of political order in human societies. He lays particular emphasis on the idea of contingency, mainly to ward off accusations of historical teleology concerning the emergence of, or global convergence toward, the modern Western political establishment. However, he also argues that once the three key institutions—the state, the rule of law, and government accountability—took shape and stood the test of time, their combination became imitable and indeed desirable for non-Western nations, although the degree of success in transplanting institutions is, again, historically conditioned. Theoretically, Fukuyama regards a well-balanced combination of these three institutional factors to be the key to sustainable political success, as well as a guarantee of both state power and social welfare. At the end of the volume, Fukuyama attributes the chronic dysfunction of democracy in the United States, the European Union, Japan, and India to different degrees of mutual alienation among the three institutions.

Despite the author's intention, in my opinion, this book is more typological than historical. It can be called historical in its delineation of the political development of each selected tradition, but throughout the book the account is spun around the crystallization of the state, the rule of law, and accountable government; shortcomings of their unfolding in different regions are indicated, with purposeful comparison to their later development, maturation, and even consummation in the West. More importantly, Fukuyama deals with each tradition mainly in isolation, although he is aware that intensive interaction and mutual influence occurred between civilizations. In his rather fragmentary treatment, however, analogy between situations in different contexts—a method that calls for extreme caution in historical studies—is frequently used, and such analogies are often directed to the difference between Western and non-Western political developments. Little wonder that this standpoint, ahistorical to a

certain degree, reminds some reviewers of Fukuyama's West-centric and end-of-history conceit demonstrated in his previous works.

Fukuyama's famous thesis, notwithstanding long elucidation, is quite simple: "At the end of history, there are no serious ideological competitors left to liberal democracy" (Fukuyama 1992, 211). Interestingly, one of the powerful critics of the thesis was Samuel Huntington (1927–2008), Fukuyama's teacher at Harvard, who saw the wars of identity taking the place of ideological conflicts in the post-Cold War era: "In this new world, local politics is the politics of ethnicity; global politics is the politics of civilizations. The rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations" (Huntington 2003, 28). Both Fukuyama's and Huntington's models are controversial, and, as Edward Said (1935–2003) pointed out, they are both "theorists and apologists of an exultant Western tradition" (Said 2003, 349) in spite of the incompatible pictures they present. What concerned Said, of course, was still the issue of Western universalism, which lies at the core of the modern knowledge structure.

Now I will return to East Asia. Fukuyama makes an interesting observation: "One of dynastic China's great legacies, then, is high-quality authoritarian government. It is no accident that virtually all of the world's successful authoritarian modernizers, including South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and modern China itself, are East Asian countries sharing a common Chinese cultural heritage" (Fukuyama 2011, 313). Following this clue, one may be prompted to ask—given the state, the rule of law, and accountable government are the cornerstone institutions—are different proportions of combination of these institutions allowed for countries in different traditions to achieve a good political order, or is there a "golden ratio" to approximate as exemplified by certain Western model countries?

When I proposed this question to a small gathering of professors at my university, they were apparently intrigued and it was soon linked to the question of whether there may be such a thing as "East Asian democracy" or "Confucian democracy" (a question that has engrossed generations of thinkers, Chinese and foreign alike!). As is widely known, many legal and political science scholars only acknowledge "democracy in East Asia" and they refuse to consider the principles of democracy being compromised, or conditioned, in the East Asian context. However, as far as I am concerned, the question is both institutional and civilizational. Although Confucianism can never again claim hold of both the social life and national apparatus of a country as it did in imperial times, in the face of Fukuyama's discourse that is inevitably West-centric and smacks of historical teleology—quite against his intent—how should intellectuals familiar with the Confucian tradition respond to this narrative of political development?

Concretely speaking, pre-modern Confucians generally believed that politics was an extension of household affairs; if the master—whether of a house or of a state—could rectify his own mind and conduct

self-cultivation, all the things in his charge would be put in perfect order. Although this view is not applicable to modern society that is highly professionalized, is it thus impossible for Confucianism to contribute ethical elements to modern political philosophy? Here I am reminded of my undergraduate major, business administration. As Peter Drucker (1909–2005), father of the science of management, indicated, modern society is a society of institutions, entrusting every major social task to large organizations whose functioning hinges on management. Highly demanding of specialized knowledge and skills, however, management is in essence the performance of managers and Drucker emphasized the necessity of their vision, dedication, and integrity (Drucker 1985). In this regard, while institutional affairs constitute an independent sphere in a rationalized world, personal traits, a higher form of which could be what Weber called “charisma,” still seem to be decisive in the carrying out of public tasks. Therefore, I am tempted to think that culture, which is immeasurably influential in shaping personalities, is still the key to understanding social practices and the institutions that ensue. If the terms “East Asian democracy” or “East Asian capitalism” are valid, I wonder, which is of greater weight, the attributive or substantive part?

Furthermore, “East Asian Confucianisms” is one of the rapidly growing fields in East Asian studies. “Confucianisms” is used in the plural form to show equality: the Confucianism developed in China, its birthplace, could not overwhelm or dictate those Confucian traditions formulated in neighboring countries in response to local circumstances. As a recent publication claims, “‘East Asian Confucianisms’ is an intellectual community that is transnational and multi-lingual. It evolved in interaction between Confucian ‘universal values’ and the local conditions present in each East Asian country” (Huang 2015, 7). If we can pinpoint what these Confucian universal values are, then such theses as “Confucian democracy” and “Confucian capitalism” will become much more persuasive, embodying the dialogue between, or even fusion of, two systems of “universalism,” namely, that of East Asia and that of the West.

Questions 3–5. The field of intellectual history is quite new to me; I embarked on formal research only in 2010, although years of assistantship had already prepared the ground. After a period of reading and thinking, I gradually found myself interested in what might be the most challenging part of intellectual history, that is, the interplay between history and ideas, and I started trying to explore how they have shaped each other in different contexts. As specified above, East Asia, given its historical and cultural richness whose continuity was threatened but never really broken by whatever forms of imperialism (totalitarianism is another matter), is an ideal category for such investigation. In Questions 1 and 2 I have tried to demonstrate the way of my preliminary search for the civilizational significance and institutional possibilities of East Asia. Question 3, on the other

hand, is an inquiry occurring earlier in my academic life, which, combined with what I learned later, crystallizes into a pan-civilizational issue as well and brings out the last two of my big questions.

To begin with, *Shijing*, or the *Book of Songs*, is the earliest collection of Chinese poetry that had long been used as both literary and moral textbook in pre-modern China. Although these songs were often moralized, some technical clues generalized from them, namely, *fu*, *bi*, and *xing*, still allow us to see how ancient Chinese aesthetics operated, and my master thesis finished in Britain was a semiotic analysis of the poetics of *fu*, *bi*, and *xing*. According to the great neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (1130–1200), *fu* is straightforward narration, *bi* means analogy, and *xing* is a device that aims to arouse the true theme by mentioning irrelevant objects first (Zhu 2000). Not surprisingly, there are no clear boundaries between *fu*, *bi*, and *xing*, and which one of them functions in a specific line is largely a matter of interpretation. However, among the triad *xing* has always been the most problematic, not entirely because it is difficult to identify, but because explanations of its function are hardly satisfactory.

Technically speaking, the purpose of *xing* is to arouse certain affections in the reader through the performance of simple images, and the major difficulty facing theorists is exactly how and why these images work. My semiotic reading of classical Chinese poetics was, naturally, far from the solution of this mystery. However, this immature early work keeps stimulating my thought and I am keenly aware that a more convincing explanation must be sought in the deeper structure of Chinese culture.

My first experience in comparative literature studies was clearly theory-oriented. Those modern Western theories, despite their being more critical and ostensibly objective, are quite distant from traditional Chinese literary criticism, which almost invariably consists of belles-lettres and constitutes itself a genre of literature. Indeed, Chinese writing as a whole was blamed by its modern reformers as symbolic, elusive, illogical, and even ungrammatical. While none of these accusations were groundless, after the fading away of the passion for revolution, perhaps we have to reconsider, on the philosophical level, what kind of world it was that the Chinese writing system attempted to address or even create, and what kind of impressions it had left on East Asian civilization in general.

During the conference for which this article was initially drafted, a Korean scholar showed interest in the question and touched upon the “language of emptiness” in the Chinese tradition. This “emptiness” is actually deliberately “leaving blank,” a practice prevalent in all forms Chinese art including literature, painting, music, and so forth. In my own view, because such kind of “less is more” philosophy was widely followed with the written language being merely one of its manifestations, all the linguistic defects of traditional Chinese writing indicated above might have to be reevaluated from aesthetic and cosmological perspectives.

The *xing* imagery provides a brilliant case here. Those images that are used to arouse the reader's affection, as a rule, refer to real and natural objects, and the whole process seems to involve certain assumptions—unconscious perhaps—about the relationships between humanity and nature. As François Cheng argues, in Chinese cosmology Heaven, Earth, and Man form a dynamic circuit and traditional Chinese poets were good at using symbolic images to animate the natural circuit to attain “universal resonance” (Cheng 1986, 45). Taking this delicate and somewhat mystical model into consideration, one fact must be added that such resonance does not need to be evoked by grandeur or sublimity; small things or ordinary scenes are sufficient to move the reader's heart in an ineffable way. Furthermore, I want to step forward to argue: that no explanations of the function of *xing* are truly satisfactory might be due to the fact that the “affection” it aims to arouse is one of “ineffability.” Such affection finds no specific targets but is well contextualized in the ambience; the poet was thus stirred, for whatever reasons, and sought to transmit the affection through vivid, easy-to-approach images. Of course, the *xing* images are not exclusive to China; similar poetic techniques are also visible in Western, at least English, literature. But what is curious is that traditional China valued this “arousing” effect so highly that narrative poetry as a genre never fully developed in pre-modern Chinese literature.

The primacy of *xing* in ancient Chinese poetics probably originated from Confucius' appreciation that “It is by the *Poems* that the mind is aroused,” and that “The *Poems* serve to arouse the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment.” Confucius did not explain what this “mind-arousing” effect was for, but he once said, “Does Heaven say anything? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced. Does Heaven say anything?” (Quotations are adapted from James Legge's translation; Legge 2001) Although it requires greater effort to elaborate on the connections between *xing* and this highest form of ineffability, I tend to think that the aesthetics of simple imagery is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese cosmology.

Simple imagery can only come from simple language (that is, language made simple), which, nonetheless, was not confined to aesthetic use in traditional China. As the previous citations show, Confucius preferred to use terse sentences to convey his messages; they are not always logical but full of associative and sometimes intuitive statements. Nevertheless, for Confucius himself and many of his followers, both contemporary and later, the purpose of learning was more moral cultivation than knowledge acquirement and their efforts had certainly found expression in spiritual strength. Since it is undeniable that the profundity of humanity can hardly be exhausted by analysis and argumentation and there are more parts of the human mind to be satisfied than simply the rational part, should we not

reconsider the purpose, methodologies, possibilities, limits, and even ways of using language of the humanities that are still following the Western paradigm today?

It would be dogmatic to characterize the Chinese or even East Asian mode of thinking as contrasting with the Western one, but, again, from my personal experience I learn that a sort of “tyranny of logic” should be prevented in theory making. When I talk about historical studies, or the humanities in general, with scientist friends, sometimes I feel that they hold a ruler of logic to justify their own preferences: by distinguishing, in the name of logic, the factors that interest them for model-making from those that do not, they are actually trying to rule out the parameters—usually context-specific but of historical significance—that are beyond their grasp. But input matters. What logic guarantees is the rigor of the procedure of investigation rather than the completeness and suitability of the model. This is especially true for the humanities and the social sciences.

Here something more complicated is concerned. In the small gathering of professors that I mentioned earlier, a psychologist insisted that we, the East Asians, must counter Western theories by constructing our own. An intellectual historian, in contrast, pointed out that this line of thinking is itself Western, as traditional East Asian scholars tended toward the concrete; they preferred induction to deduction and showed obvious indifference to highly abstract matters. Indeed, although most contemporary intellectuals believe in cultural diversity, when it comes to theory formulation, a consciousness of countering the West might serve to enhance West-centric logic because West-related variables would be reproduced in the model.

On the other hand, there are some scholars such as the late Chinese philosopher Lao Sze-Kwang (1927–2012) who believed that Western analytical tools are appropriate for studying Chinese materials, just as microscopes invented by the Westerners are applicable to African bacteria (Lao 2002). This analogy does not really convince me as, I think, however objective a tool or methodology is, cultural, social, and psychological studies are faced with chemical, rather than physical, changes. Nevertheless, I am purposefully using scientific terminology here to show that I am not a strict relativist; a paradigm or paradigms that cover both West and non-West, or even both science and humanity, is still expected.

Finally, I believe that every research field must strive to be scientific, which means first of all an attitude—of being sober, objective, and investigative—and then a methodology and tool. But, to reiterate a former point, input matters, and matters a lot. We have to keep the model open especially when it concerns human activities and the relationships between humanity and the cosmos. Lights and shadows of the human mind, and both the regularity and singularity of historical events must not be overlooked. As two organized bodies of knowledge, the sciences acquire the status of objectivity through the accessibility of data, methodological rigor,

and, in some fields, the neutrality of mathematical modeling, while the humanities are bound to deal with non-programmable and sometimes even ineffable human experiences, in which personal or local concerns must be taken care of. Thus viewed, perhaps the sciences and the humanities can engage in a mutually enhancing dialogue with renewed self-awareness on both sides. Accordingly, the intellectual barrier between the West and other parts of the world may also dissolve: they are not competing with each other but working together to enrich the “big data” of human beings. Whether, and to what degree, this view is naïve or reasonable constitutes my last big question.

CONCLUSION

In brief, although I take sides with neither the universalist nor the relativist, I do believe that, by ruminating over the validity of the very idea of East Asian civilization—on historical, institutional, semiotic, and epistemological levels—we can be brought into some new dimensions of thought that the Western tradition has failed to open. Therefore, this is an article about “perspectives,” which I will continue to develop with more historical and philosophical insights.

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