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China and the Shaping of Its Own Modernity

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[Edited transcript]

KAN, Qian

Good afternoon. Good morning to Roger and good evening to our friends from China and that part of the world. I am KAN, Qian. I'm head of Chinese, also UK Director of the Online Confucius Institute at the Open University. Almost a year ago - the day after tomorrow on the 13th of May - we officially launched the world's first Online Confucius Institute, with our partner university Beijing Foreign Studies University. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank our partner, University Beijing Foreign Studies University, thank all our speakers and the contributors to our events, and also, most of all, thank you, the audience for taking part in our various activities and talks, for engaging with the discussions.

As many of you in the audience know Roger very well, he doesn't need much of an introduction; he has made a significant contribution to Chinese studies and comparative philosophy. So, without further ado, I hand you over to Roger.

Roger Ames

Thank you very much. Qian.

Let me begin by congratulating The Open University and Beijing Foreign Studies University for establishing the Online Confucius Institute. In our time, over the last generation, we have witnessed a sea change, a seismic sea change, in the economic and political order of the world with the rise of East Asia and particularly China. Today, China is perhaps the largest economy in the world, and if not, it soon will be. And so, it really is incumbent upon us as educators to try to do what we can in order to enable the next generation to understand this antique culture, this China, better than we do. And so, today, I'm just going to tell China's story as I understand it. I've got my email address on the screen if there are any questions, any discussion that you would like to continue after today's talk, just send me an email and I'll be glad to continue our conversation.

The contemporary philosopher, 趙汀陽 (Zhao Tingyang), aware of a pernicious asymmetry in the way we go about making comparisons between Chinese and Western culture, challenges us, he says, 重思中國 (chongsi Zhongguo): 'We have to rethink China'. And what he means by this is that China itself needs to be more transparent, more open, it has to be more engaged, it has to be a stakeholder in the world economic and political order. In an outside perspective, we have to strive with imagination, perhaps, to take China on its own

terms, to give it its own voice, to give it its own perspective, to allow for its own logic. So China has to think with the world community and we have to think with China. This is the challenge that Zhao Tingyang gives us.

Now there is an asymmetrical relationship that has its history. On the western side, one obstacle to understanding China better is that in the centuries following the Jesuit Matteo Ricci's adventure in China, well-intended Christian missionaries took it upon themselves to introduce China into the Western Academy. And what they did was they used what is basically a Christian vocabulary to translate the Chinese canons. The example that we might cite is the Scotsman, James Legge, who went on to become the first professor of Chinese at Oxford. When he translated the canons - he spent most of his life actually in Hong Kong, translating the Chinese canons - he self-consciously used the vocabulary of the theologian, Joseph Butler, who had lived the century before. He translates 天 (tiān) ' as (capital H, Heaven. He translates 道 (dao) as 'the way': 'I am the way the truth and the life'. He translates 義 (yi) as 'righteousness'. (In what context would we use the word righteousness?) He translates 禮 (li) as ritual, the church. He translates 仁 (ren) as benevolence - a decidedly Christian virtue. And so, what the missionaries did was they converted this Confucian tradition into something to be understandable to a western audience. But it became a Christianized Confucianism. On reflecting on translating, Mencius, for example, he wondered out loud, why doesn't Mencius just use the term God instead of tian. And for him, Mencius's understanding of human nature was the same as Joseph Butler's. And so, when we look at our present situation, if we go into European, American bookstores, libraries, Chinese philosophy, Chinese culture, is shelved in the section called Eastern religions. If we want to look at Chinese philosophy, it's not in the philosophy section, it's not beside Kant, or Hume, or any other Western philosopher. And when we go to the higher seats of learning in Western countries, we find that Chinese philosophy is being taught in religion departments or in Asian studies departments, but not within the walls, within the corridors of the professional discipline of philosophy. But that's one side of the problem, the conversion of the Confucian tradition to a kind of Eastern religion.

But there's a second problem that we have in terms of understanding the tradition that the Berkeley scholar Kwong-loi Shun. In an essay that he wrote recently, he talks about how we approach the Chinese tradition. We theorise we conceptualise China from a Western perspective, we use a Western lens to understand China. But the problem is that this is not simply something that happens within the Western literature, but it's true of the Chinese literature as well. That is to say that Chinese scholars are participating in this asymmetry in using a Western vocabulary to understand China. So, how did this East Asian asymmetry come about? Well, in the middle, the late, 19th century, in a world where Japan had really established itself, with the Meiji Restoration, the restoration of the Emperor, and Japan becoming sort of the modern country of East Asia, a new vocabulary began to be created using Chinese characters to synchronise the languages of East Asia with Western modernity. The apparatus of Western education, European and American education, were imported wholesale into Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam, and the disciplines. Importantly, the curriculum of Western modernity was imported. I teach at Peking University, and 哲学系 (zhé xué xì). 哲学 (zhé xué) is a translation of *tetsugaku*, the Japanese word for philosophy. I teach courses there: 伦理学 (lún lǐ xué), that's a Chinese translation of ethics. Sometimes I teach 形而上学 (xíng ér shàng xué), that's a Chinese translation of metaphysics.

On occasion, I teach 逻辑学 (luó jí xué), logic. It's not only the philosophy department, all of the departments at our contemporary Chinese, Japanese, Korean universities, are using a Western framework to look back at their own traditions. And so, this has become another obstacle in terms of taking these traditions on their own terms, understanding them, according to their own perspective.

But there's more to the story. And that is that when we look back on the history of China, the first wave of Western learning in the second century of the Common Era, was Buddhism. And when Buddhism first comes into China, just like when Confucianism comes into the Western Academy, the Chinese domesticated Buddhism by using a Daoist and a Confucian vocabulary, just as we use a Christian vocabulary, they use a Daoist and Confucian vocabulary. And of course, just as we have distorted the Confucian tradition, the Chinese themselves distorted the Buddhist tradition in a fundamental way. And so, efforts were made as Buddhism took root in the Chinese tradition, to try to take Buddhism on its own terms, give it its own voice. And so, at the capital, 长安 (Cháng'ān) in the fifth century, Buddhism has been in China now for three or four centuries. Kumārajīva established an institute to translate the Buddhist canons and to establish a standard of vocabulary for understanding them. Now, this Buddhism, its influence on indigenous Chinese culture was so profound, that by the time that we get to the neo-Confucian tradition, 宋明理学 (Sòng-Míng lǐxué), philosophers like 朱熹 (Zhu Xi), 王阳明 (Wang Yangming), we can't understand them, unless we take Buddhism into account. So that's one thing. But at the same time, China developed its own form of Buddhism. And so, when we look at the indigenous Chinese Buddhism, 华严 (Huá yán), 三论 (sān lùn), the 禅 (chán); tradition that becomes Zen in Japan, it has become a distinctively Chinese form of Buddhism that has been understood within the tradition through the worldview, the common sense, the cosmology, that is made explicit in *The Book of Changes*, that is to say that it becomes a Buddhism integral to the Chinese philosophical narrative itself.

The same kind of thing happens with Marxism. At the beginning of the 20th century, China develops Marxism, it solicits counsel from the Soviet Union, but what happens with Marxism in China is that it again becomes domesticated, to become something that is consistent with the common-sense, the worldview, the cosmology, of the Chinese tradition itself. So that the kind of theoretical pretensions of Marxism give way to a localising historicist and particularist sensibilities that are familiar in traditional Chinese understandings of Confucianism. The Marxism that we have in China today describes socialist values, but these socialist values are largely traditional Chinese values. And so, Marxism too becomes a decidedly Chinese version of Marxism. So, we've seen as we've seen that you have this kind of Christian conversion of the Confucian tradition. You have the understanding of East Asia, both in the West and in China itself through the vocabulary of a Western modernity.

So we get to a point where the Cambridge rhetorician I. A. Richards in the 1930s, he goes to China, to Beijing to Tsinghua University, to Peking University, to work with Chinese scholars on translating Mencius - you have Confucius, you have Mencius - translating Mencius, into the English language. And he reflects long and hard on the methodology for doing that. How do we understand Mencius on his own terms? How do we understand him in terms of his own interpretive context, we could say. And so, what Richards says - this is his own language - he says:

Before long, there will be nobody studying Mencius, into whose mind philosophical and other ideas and methods of Western origin have not made their way, Western notions are penetrating steadily into Chinese. And the Chinese scholar of the near future will not be intellectually much nearer Mencius than any Western pupil of Aristotle, and Kant.

But is this in fact true? Was Richards right on this, or, as with the examples that I've given you, Buddhism, Marxism, is China in fact, producing its own domesticated form of Western modernity? Is China, are Chinese scholars, is the Chinese Academy, not making Western modernity into something that is consistent with their own common-sense, their own worldview, their own cosmology?

Angus Graham was my dear old teacher at the University of London when I did my PhD and he was very interested in this idea that people from different cultures, think in different categories, think in different ways. That ways of thinking and living in different cultures are importantly different and that it's not an easy business to understand, to move between these traditions, to understand them better. And so, with our job being to try to help the next generation, understand Chinese culture better, we have to deal with this problem that Angus Graham has given us. Just to make the point that when Chinese scholars talk about the topics that I mentioned in philosophy, that is ethics, metaphysics, logic, they're using the same term, but does it have the same meaning? That's the point.

I have recently been working on a book where I compare Western ontology, like when we think about 'first philosophy', in the classical Greek tradition, we call it ontology. What it does is it takes us back to the idea that there are underlying, natural and moral laws that we might call first principles that are defining of the human experience. When the classical Greek language of the philosophy becomes the language of Abrahamic religions, those first principles become the concept of God. God creates the world, God is truth and beauty and goodness. And if we want truth and beauty and goodness, we have to go back to the origins and that is to get to the concept of God. And so, this is sort of the ontological tradition that Angus is thinking about. But when we step over into East Asia, its first philosophy has nothing to do with a concept of God. The great 20th century French psychologist Marcel Granet said quite starkly, Chinese wisdom has no need for the idea of God. That whatever 'tian' is, it is not an Abrahamic concept of God. Instead, when we look at *The Book of Changes* as the first among the Confucian canons, and we look at the worldview that is made explicit in *The Book of Changes*, it says, 天地之大德曰生 (tiān dì zhī dà dé yuē shēng), 'the greatest capacity of the cosmos, is life itself'. And so, in the first philosophy in the Chinese tradition, in the Confucian tradition, is 'the art of living', as opposed to 'the science of being' ontology. And so, the idea of a different first philosophy is really important in terms of trying to understand the differences between these two traditions.

In *The Book of Changes*, it says 生生之谓易 (shēng shēng zhī wèi yì), ie, that the concept of change itself is procreativity is life. And so, this Chinese alternative to Western ontology is fundamental. In the tradition, there is no beginning, no Creator God, there is no end, there is simply - this turtles all the way down, you have this kind of genealogical progression of life.

The strength of this Confucian tradition has always been its capacity for hybridity, its capacity to draw into itself, Buddhism, to use Buddhism to transform its own indigenous tradition, but at the same time to create its own Buddhism. Marxism - the same thing. Western modernity - the same thing. And so, when we look back on the three or four

thousand years of this Confucian tradition, what we have is the centrality of the notion of 孝 (xiào), that is the family reverence, that you have the intergenerational transmission of a living civilization, where each succeeding generation takes upon itself, the responsibility for appropriating the tradition, for embodying that tradition, for reflecting on it, and writing commentary on it, for using that tradition to address the pressing issues of the time. And then to pass it on to the next generation. And so, this, this living tradition, where ancestors live on in their progeny, is the story of China. And so, you have this contrast between what we call an ontological way of thinking, and what we might term a zoetological way of thinking - we could use the classical Greek word ζωή (zōē) 'life', to think about a different, an alternative, first philosophy in the Chinese tradition.

So, what I want to do is to look at Western modernity in a Chinese context, and make the argument that just as with Buddhism and Marxism, Western modernity is being transformed into something distinctively Chinese. And so, the question is, how do we understand that? I just described this kind of ontological way of thinking, what you have is you have a notion of transcendence. Transcendence means that a self-sufficient God stands independent of the world. You have a kind of universalism, where this God's-eye view, gives us an objective perspective, that allows us to think in terms of universals, something outside of space and time, it gives us a powerful concept of objectivity. It defines human beings as beings, that is to say that there's something permanent and unchanging, that is reduplicated in each human being. So, this world is being translated into the Chinese world, where it's all about life. You don't have human beings in a Confucian world, you have human becomings. That being human is not something that you *are*. It's something that you *do*. That by cultivating your relationships and family in community, what you do is you gradually emerge within that social context to be distinguished as a particular human being, to be distinctive as a particular human being. And so, the, the oneness of the human being, the individuality of the human being, is not something that you begin from, it's something that you're able to achieve in this process of becoming a human being. Now, I talked about how in the late 19th century, Western philosophical terms were translated into Chinese. The word 'transcendent' was translated 超越 (chāo yuè), the word 'universal' was translated as 普遍 (pǔ biàn). These terms, if we're speaking, English, belong to an ontological way of thinking. But when we see them within a Chinese context, they become something that is consistent with the Confucian worldview itself.

There's a very distinguished scholar at Wuhan University, named 郭齐勇 (Guo Qiyong) . Guo Qiyong wrote a commentary on a book I wrote some time ago called *Confucian Role Ethics*. The objective of this book is to really try to take Confucian ethics on its own terms, instead of shoehorning it into 'virtue ethics' or 'deontic ethics' or 'utilitarian ethics'. What I wanted to do is I wanted to say is that the encounter of the Confucian tradition with Western culture was not its defining moment, that this tradition has a long history and it has its own vocabulary, that has its own table of values, and that we have to try to understand it on its own terms. So Guo Qiyong and his student, 李兰兰 (Li Lanlan) wrote a commentary on this *Confucian Role Ethics*, and it was a very, very complimentary, a very positive, a very generous reading of the book, but still Guo Qiyong insists - he says:

In speaking of Confucian ethics itself, there is no question it includes a sense of 'universalism'. As confirmed by many scholars such as Feng Youlan, Tang Junyi, and

Zhang Dainian, when Confucianism deploys its social structures, it includes both a concrete dimension and a search for both the 'universal' and what is 'ultimate.'

Guo Qigong goes on and he says, with respect to transcendence:

In Confucian conceptual thinking, 'tian' has both a transcendent reference as well as denoting its relationship to human beings. Human beings revering 'tian' in sacrifices to ancestors, and emulating 'tian' indicate that for the ancients the transcendent 'tian' could descend into the human world. . . . Terms such as 'tian' itself, 'the mandate of tian', and 'the way of tian' that serve as ground for Confucian ethics, all have a transcendent and ultimate dimension.'

Now, the question is, when Guo Qiyong and Li Lanlan, when they're using these terms, are they meaning the same thing, as they meant within the context of Greek ontology? This is not simply a problem. I'm using Guo Qiyong and his student, as an example. But what I wanted to do is I wanted to say that this problem is a problem - and an important problem - that we have. If we're speaking Chinese and Guo Qiyong is using these terms according to a Confucian, a zoetological worldview, a common-sense cosmology, then they do mean what he says. But if we are understanding them, according to their original meaning as when they were translated into Chinese, then they mean something very different.

So, what I wanted to do, the story that I wanted to tell you today, really begins from the problem that we have in terms of understanding China and Chinese culture. That one obstacle to the understanding of Chinese culture has been the crystallisation of the conversion of Confucianism to a Christian vocabulary, and then the second problem has been this introduction of a Western vocabulary of modernity, the invention of this vocabulary that transformed the languages, the modern languages of East Asia.

Now, what is really interesting in the story – and the story isn't finished – is that when we talk about ontological thinking and zoetological thinking, we're not talking about Chinese thinking and Western thinking. That would be a big mistake. That, first off, within the corridors of the Western philosophical narrative, you have philosophers like Machiavelli, like the anti-Cartesian Vico, like the antinomian, William Blake, Spinoza, Emerson, that all of these counterculture thinkers within the Western philosophical narrative, were zoetological thinkers, they were people who didn't buy into the idea that there's something permanent and unchanging, *the* human experience. And what they did was, they were really using this 'art of living' this kind of 'correlative' way of thinking that we associate with zoetology - Yin-Yang thinking, we could say - but even more important than recognising the fact that there is this counterculture within the Western Academy, that at the end of the 19th century, in Europe ... I mean, we can use Nietzsche as pronouncement that God is dead, as a signpost that really begins the process within the Western philosophical Academy, to denounce ontological thinking, to denounce that old way of thinking and to turn decidedly in a zoetological direction. Darwin is a good example. Up until Darwin, you have this Aristotelian idea of the immutability of species: species are fixed and unchanging. Darwin says, no, that's not true. There's not something in the human experience that is permanent and unchanging. So the post-Darwinian way of thinking about philosophy is a challenge to universalism, to formalism, to foundationalism, to all of these different ways of framing this idea of something permanent and unchanging, the human experience. And so, when we look at the philosophical movements of the 20th century, pragmatism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, of post-structuralism, And so, on, when we look at the

movements within the Western philosophical narrative, what has happened is that Western philosophy has rejected ontological thinking, and is moving in the direction of zoetological thinking.

The problem within the Western tradition, a problem that we see in Nietzsche himself, that we see in Heidegger and Whitehead, And so, on, is that this ontological way of thinking has been so deeply sedimented into the grammar and semantics of Western languages, that it's very difficult for us to escape the pull of ontological thinking. And so, what is very interesting, within the Western philosophical narrative, is that its own modernity has moved in the direction of the Chinese translation of Western modernity into something that is consistent with the Chinese tradition. And so, we have a very interesting story. We have a story that ends with an opportunity in our present moment, and that is to say that the barriers that prevented a conversation between the Western philosophical narrative and the Chinese philosophical narrative have fallen, and these two traditions are converging in a way that opens up a space for world philosophy to be truly world philosophy. Instead of Asian philosophies being excluded from the professional discipline of philosophy, we enter a time when philosophy becomes world philosophy.

When I went to Hong Kong as an 18 year old in 1966, my first professor at the Chinese University was a man named 劳思光 (Lao Siguang). Lao Siguang, even in that time, had this kind of synoptic capacious way of thinking about philosophy. He would say to me, '羅傑, 我們不想談中國哲學。 我們想在世界哲學的大前提下談中國哲學 (Wǒmen bùxiǎng tán zhōngguó zhéxué. Wǒmen xiǎng zài shìjiè zhéxué de dà qiántí xià tán zhōngguó zhéxué). 'Roger, we don't want to talk about Chinese philosophy. We want to talk about Chinese philosophy within the context of world philosophy.' And so, the end of my story today, is that Lao Siguang's anticipation of the world that was in front of us at that time, when Chinese philosophy was something that was left outside the door, was that world philosophy is going to be an inclusive philosophy and the story of the Chinese transformation of Western modernity and the story of the Western rejection of their old universalist transcendental modernity has given us a world where a conversation, a robust conversation, can take place between Western and Chinese philosophy.

Thank you very much.

Kan, Qian

Thank you so much, Roger, for this very stimulating and inspiring talk.

Mirjam Hauck

Yeah, a big thank you for me as well, Roger, for giving your time to this joint event of the Online Confucius Institute and The Open Centre for Languages and Cultures has been a great pleasure and an immense honour.

Thank you.

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