Beyond Universalism and Relativism - Reflections on an Intercultural Dialogue Between China and the West

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> There is nothing that cannot be seen from the standpoint of the "Not-I". And there is nothing which cannot be seen from the standpoint of "I". If I begin by looking at anything from the viewpoint of the "Not-I", then I do not really see it, since it is "not I" that sees it. If I begin from where I am and see it as I see it, then it may also become possible for me to see it as another sees it. Hence the theory of reversal that opposites produce each other, depend on each other, and complement each other. [...] The wise man therefore, instead of trying to prove this or that point by logical disputation, sees all things in the light of direct intuition. He is not imprisoned by the limitations of the "I", for the viewpoint of direct intuition is that of both "I" and "Not-I". Hence he sees that on both sides of every argument there is both right and wrong. He also sees that in the end they are reducible to the same thing, once they are related to the pivot of the Tao.
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> Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, p. 42-43 (ch. II, "On Seeing Things Equal")

The debate about universalism and relativism gained enormous momentum two decades ago when Edward Said with his seminal *Orientalism* began to scrutinize the Western view of the Orient. It led to a thorough questioning of the hitherto firm belief of the universal relevance of Western civilization, dating back from the age of imperialism and colonialism. Since then, this debate has also

preoccupied scholars of East Asian Studies[1], touching on questions of politics, values and ethics, in general, but bearing particular relevance to the topic of human rights which, likewise since a decade or two, has become a focal universalistic issue in Western countries. This tendency has even led – after the decline of genuinely religious concerns – to surrogate missionary activities under the banner of a secular universalistic creed.

The opposite position of cultural relativism (alternatively also particularism or contextualism) has been just as zealously defended, not only by cultural anthropologists but also by adherents of a new kind of culturalism which, in the wake of postmodernism, has swept through Western academia and societies. Culture – including issues such as religion, identity as well as sexual preference – has thus become equivalent to a lifestyle-option that in an age of unhampered individualism is being upheld with recourse to relativist thought.

The debate has, on the one hand, become somewhat deadlocked: adherents of the relativist position are being accused of "moral relativism" by the universalists, while the universalists are being charged by the relativists with ethnocentricity and ideological, if not quasi-religious, zeal. On the other hand, the positions have become, to a certain degree, fuzzy, universalists in the field of human rights, for example, are sometimes found to be stern advocates of relativism in the "culturalist" regard. Be that as it may, both positions, as so often is the case, have a certain legitimacy, and yet they are also flawed. We cannot deny that in a globalized world some universal rules are useful if not outright necessary. It should thus not surprise us that the human rights idea has been – mainly through the support of Western countries – adopted as a global standard by the United Nations in 1948 and has lately gained an immense international momentum. On the other hand, it can neither be denied – again to speak of human rights – that the idea has evolved under certain historical and cultural – i.e. religious, philosophical and political – conditions in the West, that they thus are a Western creation (as is the liberal-democratic model in politics). Hence there is some reason for the suspicion, as Charles Taylor once put it, that Western liberalism is also a "fighting creed" and, in the end, nothing but a "particularism masquerading as the universal".[1]

During the last decade, the debate on universalism and relativism has gained a further dimension through the fall of the Iron Curtain, the demise of the Soviet Union and the rise to ascendancy of the United States as today’s hyper-power. The tremendous global consequences of these developments are now becoming more and more apparent.

American values and culture – backed by the economic power of the Dollar, propelled by the newest computer technology and software of Intel and Microsoft, transported into the remotest corners of the globe by CNN and Hollywood, not to mention a military might of stunning sophistication which the whole world had the opportunity to watch in operation during the Kosovo war – have built up to an awesome de-facto universalistic power. This development, on the one hand, reminds one of the proverbial truth "might is right" and, on the other hand, makes any attempt to emphasize the particular and local against this powerful universalism appear like intellectual (and political) quixotry.

Centering, in the following, on intercultural dialogue as a means of defusing potentials for conflict in the international arena, I shall leave the somewhat intimidating implications of the above sketched scenario aside and proceed from the idea that dialogue, ideally, would be an exchange between partners of approximately equal strength and not between some Davids and a Goliath. In addition, being fully aware of the dangers of simple dichotomies which, in an era of multiculturalist creed and ideological anti-essentialism, have come close to being politically incorrect, I still consider simplifications as models to be useful, if not indispensable, namely for the purpose of making basic comparisons. For this reason I shall discuss and compare, in what follows, two models which have evolved through history at different ends of the world: the Sinic model of East Asia with China as its cultural center and the Western, European-American model. This cultural-hermeneutic attempt of intercultural understanding has, of course, also its limitations. Although an intercultural approach tries to assume a virtual standpoint between cultures (understood here, with Clifford Geertz – but against the culturalists – as inherited systems of meaning which convey identity and orientation in life), we cannot, strictly speaking – even in the social sciences – completely step out of our horizon of expectations, which is shaped by our culture in addition to our individual experience, history, reading, *Zeitgeist*-related preferences, and such. Understanding, after all, might be only another form of misunderstanding. For this reason, the following essay will in the end offer nothing else but a very probably subjective and thus mistaken interpretation – I could also call it in *Zhuangzi's* words a "well-frog view" – of two cultures and the dynamics between them.

1. Intercultural Dialogue

How should we approach an intercultural dialogue between East and West? Which parameters influence it, what kind of conditions are favorable to it and what should it deal with? First of all, we have to be clear about certain basic conditions of dialogue in general that we are unaware of most of the time. There is, to begin with and as already hinted, the question of the relation between the two interlocutors. Although our understanding of dialogue presupposes a fundamental equality of the partners, the actual relationship – owing to differences in political, economical, cultural and military power or to a different standard of development – is in fact often asymmetrical. Even the decision which language to use in a dialogue – this being mostly English nowadays – results in asymmetry. Furthermore, different historical experiences are decisive factors for the evaluation of certain contentious issues. The political discourse in Europe, for example, has been molded by devastating religious wars, fierce national rivalries, the conquest of new worlds, genocide and the philosophy of the Enlightenment, while in Chinese history (or the history of East Asia in general) we can hardly find any equivalent for these experiences. In the West, we most naturally presuppose that Chinese partners in a dialogue share our position of critical rationalism (and a critical public sphere) without considering that this approach has its very specific foundation and insights in the European Enlightenment. Finally, the different kinds of cultural framework with regard to myths, images, allusions, as well as references to literature, art, religion and philosophy – in short, the symbolic orientation which, apart from language, is the basis of cultural identity – are very important.

The greatest impediment to intercultural understanding is an ethnocentric attitude which, nevertheless, is very common in all cultures; what counts is only what one knows. Yet, ethnocentrism still has its use: for the purpose of cultural hermeneutics, we first of all need a firm "center", a framework for our orientation, before approaching the other. A "reflective" ethnocentrism is aware of this necessity. An uncritical ethnocentrism, however, treats cultural manifestations as mere superficial phenomena and neglects their foundation in the history of ideas (e.g. the attribution of a ritualized politeness to the Chinese which nowadays the West looks upon as something negative, without knowing its roots in Chinese ethics and without having an idea of its inherent positive meaning). Another pitfall is to judge the reality of the other according to one’s own ideals, without considering historical developments and processes. It is also common to view inconsistencies in the other culture as logical

mistakes instead of accepting them as a natural ambivalence (or being aware of contradictory phenomena within one's own culture). Finally, people easily fall into the similarity trap, assuming that, because of superficial similarities, what one deals with is one and the same (this fallacy has first been encountered in language learning; in terms of cultural phenomena, see the example of politeness just mentioned).
Considering these general conditions and impediments, an intercultural dialogue could deal with the following four aspects: 1. historical reflection and sensitivity; 2. getting to know the other cultures; 3. search for common concepts; 4. openness towards the other and willingness to be informed by the other.

1.1. Historical reflection and sensitivity

First of all, it might be helpful to leave universalistic assumptions aside and to reflect on one's own position from an historically critical viewpoint. Let us for a moment dwell on the Western conception of human rights. As already pointed out, this conception is based on certain ideals which were very important during the history of Western civilization (e.g. the Judeo-Christian and the Greek image of man). After the further development of these ideas during the Enlightenment it still took about 300 years until these values were (at least partly) converted into political practice in our cultural hemisphere during the past decades. These three centuries have been a remarkable period of history – to say it frankly, they have been mostly a history of barbarity. Even the celebrated American "Virginia Bill of Rights" of 1776, when human rights were for the first time included in a national constitution, marks the pinnacle of colonial subjugation and exploitation of the American continent. During the French Revolution human rights and the rights of citizens were proclaimed in order to limit the arbitrary execution of power by the government. Yet, as we all know, the end of this revolution was marked by sheer terror. The history of the 19th and 20th century with imperialistic endeavors in the rest of the world, two world wars, as well as the twelve years of barbarity in my home country, which ended only half a century ago, does not have to be further elaborated here either.
The simple conclusion that can be drawn from this sketch of history is that ideals need a long period of time until they pay off politically. Although the Western ideals have been trampled for centuries by Europeans and their American successors, we now expect that they should be realized within a few years in other cultural contexts. Considering our own history, however, we have to understand the

vehement resistance of members of other cultures against a West which is supposed to have changed in this regard from sinner to saint.
Historically speaking, the rest of the world has had very negative experiences with the West. For activists who argue from the standpoint of universalism this history is, of course, not relevant; it is important, however, if we want to understand the respective sensibilities and irritations. From a historical perspective at least, universalistic arguments are not necessarily satisfactory, because they would have to be valid at any time and at any place. Already in the 1960s an American journalist made the following observation regarding China:

> What right do we Westerners have, freshly back home from plundering the world for four centuries, fat and rich and worried about our calories, what nerve do we have really to poke around here and see if there's dust on the political piano, and worry so nobly whether these people, whose former drowning or starving by the millions didn't make our front pages, have enough democratic rights?[2]

Historical reflection should lead us to a simple insight into the dynamics of universalism and relativism and their respective insufficiencies: universalism fails to take into account that values take shape in a discursive community through a long process of "collective learning" and "collective remembering", that is, within a certain culture – *intra*-culturally – and by means of a continuous discourse. Cultural relativism errs when it takes cultures to be closed and non-historical entities. This, of course, also does not correspond with reality. A pure, monolithic culture could only be imagined without any historical development, such as contact with other cultures and the ensuing processes of assimilation and appropriation. This means that cultures also change and develop *inter*-culturally.[3] The European-occidental culture is a prime example for a hybrid cultural process that has been going on for over 2000 years.[4]
If a genuine dialogue – interculturally speaking – starts from the principle of reciprocity (if your views are relevant for me, then my views should also have some relevance for you), then, first of all, we have to become acquainted with the other's point of view. This also entails enlarging our discursive community and including the other in the process of collective learning, thus allowing the exchange to become a process of mutual learning.

1.2. Getting to know the other culture

Themes for a cross-cultural dialogue might, first, be the respective philosophical and religious traditions. Although the influence of religions has ceded considerably in the European secular societies, it would be impossible to properly understand the post-Christian value system without taking into consideration the transformation process through which religious values have become secularized into socio-political ideals or morals turned into codified law. The "habits of the heart"[5] are shaped by traditions the working of which, in general, eludes our awareness.

The Chinese (and East Asian) traditions are, of course, just like those of the West, very diverse, and yet we can find some common traits that are, collectively speaking, different from their occidental counterparts:

1. More important than faith in revelations or "teachings" believed to be true (ortho*doxy*) is right practice (ortho*praxy*) among men.
2. Not the transcendent is the sacred but the secular (Herbert Fingarette), the common or worldly, such as fulfillment of interpersonal duties (in Confucianism) or the natural (in Daoism/Zen-Buddhism).
3. The different schools do not compete with one another, nor do they try to oust each other; they tolerate one another and thus form a syncretistic unity.

This shows that Chinese religious/philosophical thought – different from the Western mainstream – does not pursue quasi-transcendental or epistemological questions (relationship between the world of senses and the metaphysical world); its focus, apart from being more inclusive than exclusive, is rather worldly and rationally pragmatic.

The different religious traditions in China have also led to a specific political culture with other priorities for the common good and living together in society. China and most of the East Asian countries give top priority to social harmony and stability. This preference is grounded in Confucian thought which, as is well known, has spread from China to Korea, Japan and Vietnam and which sees society or state modeled after the family, with consensus and harmony being essential for the survival of both. We thus find here rather a culture of consensus, built on the social cohesion of families and relationships, in comparison to Western societies which, particularly in the modern age of liberal democracies, are based on a pattern of conflict and have the individual as their fundamental element. According to the latter,

history, politics and society develop through conflicts between antithetical forces (election fights, labor disputes, class conflict, lately also gender war, etc.) and progress towards a liberated world of autonomous individuals.

Next to individual liberty, the main battle-cry of the French Revolution was equality. Its backdrop was a class society in the *ancien régime* in which the majority of the bourgeois was dominated by a minority of nobility and clergy. In modern Western societies, equality is vigorously defended by the secular offspring of Christianity and is called, in today's terms, social justice. In Chinese society, patterned after the Confucian model of the family, in which we have a natural hierarchy between parents and children, equality was hardly ever an issue (apart from the Cultural Revolution). Instead, men and women were and largely still are seen in a network of relationships in which there is higher or lower status, mostly according to the principle of seniority or academic merit. We could thus characterize Chinese culture as a status-oriented culture, as compared to an equality culture in the West.

Lastly, the Chinese society is more shaped by particular relationships and networks, emphasizing the principle of reciprocity as well as duties and responsibilities (this applies as well for other East Asian societies). This is in contrast to the Western tradition which, with claims and rights in accordance to natural or positive law, sets universal rules and codes for everyone alike. For this reason we may follow Fons Trompenaars' distinction of universalistic vs. particularistic in describing Western and Chinese cultures respectively.[6]

As already mentioned, such a back-and-white dichotomy is – as a model – rather simplified. And yet, not only statistically speaking, but also because it highlights certain traits and trends, it is still justifiable, if treated with due caution. To give an example, the value of social harmony might well be questioned by pointing out the many instances – from the earliest times until the most recent past – when harmony or consensus does not seem to have played a significant role in China. We should not overlook, however, that certain ideals (which is not the same as essences) do play a decisive role in the history of a civilization, even if these ideals – by nature – can never be fully realized. Regarding Western civilization, one might meditate for a moment on the notion that ideals such as charity, peaceableness, equality and the singularity of every person before God, have in their secularized or politicized forms – as social welfare, peace missions, equality before the law, human dignity and rights – molded our

thought and practice in an undeniable way, although the 2000-year long history of the Christian Occident seems to have been a far cry from charity and peace. This is to say, we should be cautious dismissing the shaping power of certain ideals through history by pointing out singular incidents of non-congruence.

1.3. Search for common concepts

Simply put, while making comparisons, we can either highlight the similarities or the differences. Having just focused on the differences, we should now look for the similarities. In fact, the search for common concepts in different cultures has been the mainstream of cross-cultural endeavors for quite a while. These concepts are sometimes called trans-cultural universals. There is, for example, in the Confucian as well as in the Christian tradition the concept of the Golden Rule (in its positive and negative form); in *Mencius* we find ideas of an inborn goodness of human nature which correspond to those of Aristotle as well as to natural law and the modern notion of human dignity. Mencius also has the idea of "humane government" (*ren zheng*), giving priority to the people and not to the ruler in the polity. Finally, we also find the ideal of the morally autonomous person, all of which has certain parallels in the history of Western thought.

We have to take into account, however, that these ideals exerted a different impact and led to a different philosophical and socio-political history. For example, the idea of moral autonomy of man did not bring about the notion of emancipation of the subject in the sense of Western philosophy, but a so-called "personalism" (*gerenzhuyi*), meaning that personal moral cultivation should lead to a heightened sense of responsibility for the common good – an attitude which we find, for example, in the tradition of the *qing guan* (incorruptible official) and which is exemplified in the words of the great Song dynasty reformer Fan Zhongyan: "To be the first to worry about the world's worries and to be last to enjoy the world's joys."[7] In short, what was called for was not self-assertion but the overcoming of selfishness; not self-realization, as it is fashionable today, but self-transcendence, in other words, cultivation of oneself from a small, egocentric self to a large, encompassing self[8] (similarly to Buddhism where the recognition of the fictitiousness, the illusion of the self is, in fact, enlightenment).

These similar philosophical or political ideals thus developed in different contexts, the main difference being that in Western thought there evolved (rather late), around the Enlightenment and the French

Revolution, an antagonism between the state (government) and the individual (citizen). This antagonism brought about the concepts of civil society and the public sphere, with the notion of citizens or intellectuals being critically and independently opposed to the state. In the Confucian tradition, however, the intellectual should be concerned about the welfare of the people and was always supposed to serve within the government; at the same time he ought to be a loyal critic of moral misconduct, an attitude which certainly is still alive and well in China and other East Asian societies. Thus we have a tendency toward a "top-down" civil society in China in contrast to the ideologically correct "bottom-up" version (which accords with the democratic idea) in the West.[9]

As can be seen, there are in the realm of trans-cultural universals many ways of understanding each other in dialogue. However, one has to be aware of the pitfalls, such as neglecting the development of these ideas in a different context. Another danger is to ignore our subjective approach (cultural or political preferences) in the comparison of universals, reflecting *Zeitgeist*-related priorities, fashions or models. Western universalists thus mostly try to find traces of Enlightenment thought, such as individual autonomy or notions of individual human rights, dignity, pluralism or democracy, in the history of Chinese ideas,[10] often adding the reproach that the Chinese are not maintaining their own traditional standards and are prepared to contradict their own tradition. According to such logic, a Chinese universalist could argue that Europeans or Americans find the ideals of charity, equality, justice and fraternity in their tradition but that they are not living up to them, for example in their relationship to peoples or countries from the Third World. Moreover, Chinese universalists might rather look for other trans-cultural universals, perhaps the idea of accountability, unselfishness, altruism, etc. This means, we have to proceed with caution while looking for such universals and should be wary of finding logical mistakes or contradictions between tradition (or ideal) and reality in the other culture. It would be fruitful for intercultural hermeneutics to enlarge our respective horizons and to approach the other culture with an open, possibly even with a curious mind.

1.4. Openness and readiness to learn

With its features as sketched above, the Sinic model can hardly be called attractive to Westerners, for it runs counter to the political credo of Western modernity. According to age-old reflexes formed through centuries of colonial hegemony over the rest of the world,

Westerners would probably dismiss this model as backward and pre-modern in comparison to its own progressive model. And yet the Sinic model might serve as a critical reflection of our own Western blueprint of the "good society". Such a critical reflection would entail a stock-taking as well as an extrapolation of the global implications of Western civilization into the future. In other words, we would have to ask what a civilizatory blueprint for the 21st century could be like. By now it has become clear that the Western model – although having been an unprecedented success-story and being copied worldwide – has serious deficiencies and would not, in many ways, stand up to the standards of a civilization, at least not in the sense the word "civilized" is commonly used today. (This insight prompted Mahatma Gandhi's celebrated quip: asked "Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western civilization?" he responded "It would be a good idea."[11]) We know by now that the ideology of progress and growth (built on the positive understanding of self-interest) underlying the present global capitalist system will sooner or later, simply because of the limitations of the natural resources and a growing world population, arrive at its economical and ecological limits. The risks inherent in a global (i.e. universalistic) market with quick and unlimited capital flow between different regions of the world have also become apparent, having led to the Asian financial crisis. The development of science has brought about a tremendous material progress; but the belief in scientism, as Immanuel Wallerstein pointed out, has also led to a separation of the true from the good in the social sciences, apart from the problem of their grounding in eurocentric presuppositions.[12] We consider social pluralism to be a great emancipatory leap forward but are also becoming more and more aware of the social fallout, of the waning of solidarity and the rise of social anomie, the break-up of families or other traditional institutions which used to lend stability and cohesion to our societies – in short, the weakening of the social fabric. We may reach a point where our generation will have to apologize to the later-born for the squandering, not only of natural but also of social and ethical resources – squandered in the spirit of *après nous le déluge*. Where are the cohesive forces in our societies, in which its members are only seen as standing in contractual relationship with one another? Such questions, I assume, will be at the top of the agenda of the 21st century.

In the face of such problems of Western-style modernity, it might be useful to look at other civilizatory models. Let us dwell for a moment on the Sinic one:

- Common good before individual good? That sounds familiar, sounds like socialism which, as we all know, did not function well and deceased a decade ago, at least in its European variant. But this unexpectedly early death – the presumed "end of history" – does not mean that the idea or the principle has died as well. Meanwhile there has been a debate arising about communitarianism and family values etc, which all share this common denominator: giving more prominence to the common good.
- Duties before rights? In the last decade or so, civil society became a much-debated topic. According to former US Vice President Al Gore, to mention just one prominent figure, the problems of our Western societies are caused by putting too much weight on civil rights rather than civil duties. There has to be a new balance between the two. In this context one might remember J.F. Kennedy's famous words: "Don't ask what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." Most recently, a group of elder statesmen (InterAction Council) made an attempt to add a declaration of human responsibilities to that of human rights. It was interesting to note the different opinions among Western and Eastern intellectuals on a forum in honor of Helmut Schmidt's (former chancellor of Germany and one of the initiators of this endeavor) 80th birthday. Western participants were mostly quite critical, whereas the project was very favorably received by East Asian intellectuals.[13]
- Harmony before conflict? Of course we value our democratic system which functions on the idea of peaceful conflict (election campaigns), but we also notice that sometimes the polity can be paralyzed and reforms are stalled because of deadlocks between political parties (or between president and parliament, or labor and business). It is still a question whether the gender war, or the looming war of generations – new blossoms of our culture of contention – will improve matters. Would a more pragmatic and consensus- (or compromise-) orientated behavior be better than a polarizing, contentious one?
- Responsibility before freedom? Could it be just our so highly treasured freedom that, at least in its excessive variety, was to be responsible for many of the problems of modern societies? The German political scientist Heinz Theisen speaks of the "cancerous growth of our subjectivity"[14] as being the main reason why we collectively tend to go beyond our limits. This means that it might not be enough just to appeal to collective responsibility in the

environmental realm and to limit individual freedom there (as is now done in most Western countries) or to blame the neo-liberal economy for the malaise of the welfare state. From an ecological view, everything in our life-worlds is connected. Thus we have to take into account the detrimental impact of an unchecked individualism in many other areas as well. Should we understand individual freedom as "a species of consumer choice", or should it be regarded as "a public good which expresses a common form of ethical life"?[15]

- Authority before equality? For most Westerners, this proposition would make their hair stand on end. The eradication of authority, believed to be an utterly pre-modern concept, with such nasty connotations as orders, subjugation, totalitarianism, etc., is usually hailed as a great victory of modernity. Indeed, since the student movement of 1968, the global flattening of all hierarchies, lately also their deconstruction, has become a new missionary task. In China (and East Asia), as far as I can tell, the concept of authority seems to have more positive connotations, such as maturity, seniority, responsibility, good example, etc. According to my limited view as an educating non-expert father, we do need exemplary authority in rearing our children – at home and at school. How else, if not through example, should their ethical faculties (moral judgment and conduct) come to develop? A problem of modern Western societies might be simply that there are hardly any positive examples left in the ranks of those who are socially or politically prominent. Instead, the moral failings of our political elite appear to be contributing to the profits of the entertainment industry. In the media, particularly in TV and film, celebrating the cult of youth, there seems to be only the trivial and the violent to invite emulation.

To sum up, the answer is not, of course, to simply follow the way of the "chop-stick union" (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam), but to do justice to it and acknowledge it as a vital model worth considering in its own right. It may be that we need counter-models more urgently than we thought, in order to become aware of the blind spots in our own system of orientation. About a decade ago, the West lost its counter-model, and now there is no other system competing with or challenging the Western capitalist and liberal-democratic system – even China has adopted it to a certain extent. And yet, there is a chance that the Sinic world might find a different way of appropriating this Western import. Roderick MacFarquhar, as early as

1980, spoke of the post-Confucian challenge, voicing the hypothesis that Western-style individualism might have been the major and appropriate stimulus for bringing about modernization in its initial phase, but that the post-Confucian collective spirit might be better suited for the phase of mass industrialization in an increasingly populous world.[16] More recently, Wolf Lepenies, president of the German Academy of Sciences, asked, if it might not be some kind of Confucianism, although it has long been considered to be a major block to modernization, that could keep together those post-modern industrialized societies which needed a Protestant ethic to develop in the first place.[17] That being so, the Golden Mean Conclusion could perhaps be that in China (and East Asia in general) there might be a need for catching up with individualization, civil liberties and rights, whereas the West could do with an equally strong dose of community spirit and sense of civil responsibility.[18]

2. End of the Missionary Age?

Unlike Europe and America, China can claim to an already 100 year long history of intercultural learning from the West – a remarkable achievement, contributing to mutual openness and readiness to learn from one another. The following assessment made by an African might equally hold true for Chinese (and East Asian) intellectuals:

> Which European could ever boast (or complain) of having put as much time, study and effort into discovering another "traditional" society as the thousands of Third-World intellectuals who have studied in the school of Europe?[19]

In the light of this history, it would not be far-fetched – though again this is something of a generalization – to characterize the Sinic culture as a learning culture (not least in reference of the high esteem of learning in the Confucian tradition), and Western culture – given the collective expertise of Christian or political missionaries, foreign experts and such – as a teaching culture.

The Chinese (and East Asians) found in Western thought a counter-model which they studied eagerly and from which they absorbed much, making it their own. It is possibly just for this reason that the economic development of the East Asian countries (first Japan, then South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and now also mainland China) has become such a success story, evidence of a remarkable

vitality. Along with the newly gained self-confidence and self-awareness, despite the still-open wounds dating back to the age of colonization, an effort has emerged recently to sift the ideas copied from the West and to shed some concepts now seen as being detrimental to a healthy society in the long run. The recent economic problems brought about by the Asian financial crisis (which hardly affected the Chinese countries in Asia) might not make much difference in this review of Western civilization. All the serious attempts to reform institutions according to Western teachings and standards are one thing, but modernization does not need to conform with other manifestations of modern Western pluralistic societies, such as the break-down of the family, drugs, abandonment of sexual taboos with its various consequences, etc. Whether these pitfalls of Western-style modernity can really be avoided in China, East Asia or other parts of the world where the Western model is copied (some of the problems being certainly tied up with globalized capitalism) remains to be seen, for these countries seem to be eager to catch up with the sad record of the West in this regard as well. At all events, there is a growing number of intellectuals, not only among the Chinese and East Asian elites, who, because of the West's social crises, reject Western leadership in questions of ethics and rights.[20]

As already mentioned, the West has a long history of universalist thought (the Christian message turned secular), ranging from the religious claim to absolute truth, through the secularized Enlightenment project of world civilization, to political internationalism (of a liberal-democratic and Marxist kind) and lastly to economic globalism. The missionary zeal, as compared to the age of colonization, has only shifted from the religious into the political and finally economic sphere.[21] The Western attempt to keep the rest of the world in political tutelage, however, is increasingly found to be presumptuous. Today, in an era of post-colonialism, different cultural traditions increasingly assert themselves: we also find proponents of a "Chinese" or an "Asian way of doing things". In the West, there seem to be reflex-like responses dismissing such claims of other than Western (i.e. universal) values simply as myths. This is also the prevailing attitude in the debate on Confucian or Asian values (usually defined as follows: 1: community over self, 2: upholding the family as the basic building block of society, 3: resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention, and 4: stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony[22]). Appeals to these values are often decried in the West as a simple and "infamous" ploy by holders of power to remain in power. Another way to criticize them is to assume the

West's superior developmental position and equate Asian (or other than Western) values with pre-modern Western values, or to deny outright the legitimacy of particular values in an age of globalization (i.e. universalism). To quote one of the critics, the German researcher of peace issues, Dieter Senghaas:

> Instead of Asian values we could just as well talk of Lombardian, Anatolian, Swabian or simply of traditional values.[23]

Now from the perspective of the diversity within Asia we may, of course, question the legitimacy of discussing Asian values *in toto*. It is also true that discussion of Asian values can be, and has been politically misused (in fact, political instrumentalization of values and religion will always be prevalent). Nor should it surprise us that, in the tradition of Hegelian Eurocentric philosophy of history, some Western scholars like to see the *Weltgeist* ("progressing towards self-awareness in freedom") achieving realization first and foremost in the modern Western world (according to Hegel, East Asia hardly took part in world history). But to narrow the debate on Confucian, Chinese, Asian or whatever other than Western "universal" values only to this perspective means that we fade out essential issues, particularly ethics, which deserve serious discussion. To dismiss the proposition of Asian values from some such position of assumed superiority means to avoid discussing areas of special interest in the intercultural field and also to overlook the dialogic potential inherent in the issue.

Finally, with regard to the question of the "right polity", i.e. of the desirability of universal relevance of the Western pluralistic and liberal-democratic model, we have to remember that the functioning of Western democracies – with their longer history of democratic institutions and the respective traditions – is based on the synergy of a conflict culture, an equality culture, and a culture of universalism. With this in mind, we have to ask ourselves whether Westerners can permit alternative democratic models to take shape, models perhaps less pluralistic but more compatible with other cultural patterns (culture of consensus, status and particularism).[24] This does not mean giving up our own political values, it simply means giving up the claim to absolute truth, the missionary zeal and the mentoring attitude. The meaning of dialogue, let me emphasize this at the end, is not that one side lectures the other in a master-apprentice relationship but that it leads to *mutual* understanding in a *common* learning process and thus helps change the views not only of one but of *both* partners. In

the light of power-related asymmetries between partners, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, this is possibly asking for too much, maybe even asking for trouble, but we should at least be aware of the desirability of fair conditions. The idea of mutuality, together with the need for a historical, evolutionary consciousness, also applies to the dialogue on human rights, as Daniel A. Bell observed:

> Many progressive liberal voices in the West still seem compelled by a tradition of universalist moral reasoning that proposes one final solution to the question of the ideal polity, yet paradoxically draws only on the moral aspirations and political practices found in Western societies. If the ultimate aim is an international order based on universally accepted human rights, the West needs to recognize that human rights have been in constant evolution and should welcome the possibility of a positive East Asian contribution to this process.[25]

In today's world we have an inter-penetration and cross-fertilization of local knowledge and cultures on a global scale. This situation offers unprecedented possibilities of cross-cultural exchange and enrichment. The remarkable progress and success of the Sinic world during the last few decades demonstrate that this part of the world possesses an unimagined vitality, rooted in an unparalleled continuous cultural history.

We need to use the new ways of cross-cultural communication, learning and understanding as a means to add a new dimension to the global debates, and to proceed from an era of cultural monologue, based on the Western Enlightenment paradigm, into a new era of intercultural dialogue.

Notes

[1] David D. Buck, "Forum on Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies, Editor's Introduction", in: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 50, 2/1991.

[1] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay*, Princeton 1992, p. 44- 62.

[2] Hans Koningsberger (*Love and Hate in China*, New York 1967, p. 22) quoted in Andrew J. Nathan, "The Place of Values in Cross-Cultural Studies: The Example of Democracy in China" in: Paul A. Cohen and Merle Goldman (eds.), *Ideas Across Cultures: Essays on Chinese Thought in Honor of Benjamin Schwartz*, Cambridge, Mass. 1990, p. 303.

[3] Eliza Lee, "Human Rights and Non-Western Values" in: Michael C. Davis (Hg.), *Human Rights and Chinese Values*, Oxford 1995, p. 72-90.
[4] This insight should not lead us, however, into other extremes, such as we often find in postmodern discourse, that is to proceed from a principal and fundamental hybridity of all cultures. For historical processes are by nature quite long, and there is a certain resistance to sudden changes in value systems.
[5] Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley 1985.
[6] Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture*, London 1993.
[7] Fan Zhongyan, "Inscription on the Yueyang-Tower" (*Yueyang-lou ji*), *Guwen guanzhi*, Taipei 1981, p. 520.
[8] Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, Albany 1985.
[9] For the different concept of civil society in China see Philip C. C. Huang, "'Public Sphere'/'Civil Society' in China? The Third Realm Between State and Society", in: *Modern China*, 19 (1993) 2, p. 216-240. For the distinction between "top-down" and "bottom-up" models, see Thomas Metzger, "The Western Concept of the Civil Society in the Context of Chinese History", Hoover Essay: http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/publications/he/21/a.html
[10] For such an approach see for example Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction Under the Aspect of the Breakthrough Toward Postconventional Thinking*, Albany 1993.
[11] Quoted in Immanuel Wallerstein, "Eurocentrism and its Avatars. The dilemmas of Social Sciences", *New Left Review*, 101/102 (1997), p. 98.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] *DIE ZEIT*, December 16, 1998, p. 16-20.
[14] Heinz Theisen, "Die verbleibenden Ressourcen der politischen Theorien - Wir brauchen eine grosse Koalition der Gedanken", in *Mut. Forum für Kultur, Politik und Geschichte*, 347 (7/1996), p. 31.
[15] John Gray, *Endgames. Questions in Late Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge 1997, p. 80.
[16] Roderick MacFarquhar, "The Post-Confucian Challenge", *The Economist*, Feb. 9, 1980, p. 67-72.
[17] Wolf Lepenies, "Ende der Ueberheblichkeit", *DIE ZEIT*, November 24, 1995, p. 62.
[18] Manfred Mols and Claudia Derichs, "Das Ende der Geschichte oder ein Zusammenstoss der Zivilisationen? - Bemerkungen zu einem interkulturellen Disput um ein asiatisch-pazifisches Jahrhundert", in: *Zeitschrift fuer Politik*, 3/1995, p. 247.
[19] Ahmed Baba Miské, *Lettre ouverte aux elites du Tiers-Monde*, Paris 1981, p. 143.
[20] An editorial in the liberal Hong Kong *South China Morning Post* suggested as a headline: "Decaying West needs a dose of Confucius" (March 21, 1995).
[21] William Pfaff, "In America, Radical Globalizers Talk Like Missionaries, *International Herald Tribune*, July 9, 1998
[22] Simon S. C. Tay and Poon-Kim Shee, "Economic Crisis, Accountability and the Singapore Example: Political Ethics and Law" in: Karl-Heinz Pohl and Anselm W. Müller (eds.), *Chinese Ethics in a Global Context – Moral Bases of Contemporary Societies*, Leiden 2002, p. 167-186.
[23] Dieter Senghaas, "Ueber asiatische und andere Werte", *Leviathan*, 23 (1/1995), p.

11.

[24] For such a model, see, for example, Daniel A. Bell et al., *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*, Oxford 1995.

[25] Daniel A. Bell, "The East Asian Challenge to Human Rights: Reflections on an East-West Dialogue", *Human Rights Quarterly*, 18 (1996), S. 655.