A Reality between the Transcendent and Immanent in Early Chinese Thought

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INTRODUCTION

It is often the case that the transcendent contrasts oddly with the immanent from the Western point of view as Western thought is often permeated with bifurcation, of which all sorts of entities or phenomena are arrayed one against the other.[1] Holding onto such segregational mode of thought inevitably leads to myriad incongruities in the universe, thus setting numerous things in implacable hostility. The instances of antithesis of this kind might be infinitely multiplied. In contrast, an examination of the Chinese thought sheds light on a realm of aesthetic harmony where a sharp divide between the immanent and transcendent is absent. For those accustomed to dichotomist thinking, this may be utterly unintelligible, but for the Chinese, it was not even an issue of contention, because such differentiation simply did not exist. The burden of my paper, then, is to argue that this entirely different picture of the world

1 Thomé H. Fang, "A Philosophical Glimpse of Man and Nature in Chinese Culture," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 1 (December 1973): 7, doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6253.1973.tb00638.x

arose out of unique Chinese imagination.

AN AESTHETIC CONTEMPLATION OF BOUNDARIES

Zhuangzi epitomizes this ambiguity of boundaries beautifully in the qiwulun (齊物論) chapter. In his dream, Zhuangzi saw himself transformed into a flitting butterfly, and later when he awoke, he could not help but wonder if he was in reality a butterfly dreaming of being a human. While dreamscapes may be a sublime creation of the slumbering imagination - surrealistic and provoking a sense of otherworldliness, dreams can also appear to be as lucid as the "real" world. In other words, the waking "reality" may also transcend into an ineffable dreamlike state and vice versa.

The story is too familiar to require further elaboration, but the point is this: Zhuangzi does recognize that objectively, "there is a distinction between himself and the butterfly" (周與蝴蝶則必有分矣). However, transcendence can still occur by means of opening up our imagination in order to be able to accommodate the myriad things without discrimination. A radical transcendence to a foreign realm would be uncalled for. Zhuangzi, by virtue of being himself, was always deferentially engaged in the world of humans, but his stories indubitably revealed his knack for rendering what we think to be grounded in reality in an unfamiliar way, in an attempt to challenge our conventional ways of perceiving.

TIANREN HEYI 天人合一 – A CORRELATIVE WORLDVIEW

The notion of tianren heyi (天人合一)is a central component of Chinese thought with pervasive influence till this day. The meaning of this concept evolved throughout history, and by tracing its development, we can also relate it to the breaking down of the transcendent-immanent dichotomy.

The Heaven (tian 天) and man (ren 人) categories were already present in antiquity, but it was particularly during the Han Dynasty, when Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒) highlighted the convergence and harmony of tian and ren, that this interrelatedness was stressed upon, and such a mode of thinking through the two categories became quite rooted in the Chinese mentality. However, how these two tiers interacted was not definite. For instance, in his monumental Shiji (史記), the Grand Historian of China, Sima Qian (司馬遷), wrote that he needed to examine the realm of Heaven and the realm of man (究天人之際) as he was fascinated by the capriciousness of history. Unlike Dong Zhongshu though, Sima Qian was uncertain about a direct

correspondence between the two spheres. Dong Zhongshu saw humanity as a replica of heaven and conferred rich and deep cosmic meanings onto human actions. In spite of their differences, it is evident that these two categories were already firmly established.

Apparently, in high antiquity, the realms of Heaven and man were kept distinct. This, we get a greater understanding from Bodde's work:

> Anciently, men and spirits did not intermingle. At that time there were certain persons who were so perspicacious, single-minded, and reverential that their understanding enabled them to make meaningful collation of what lies above and below, and their insight to illumine what is distant and profound. Therefore the spirits would descend into them. The possessors of such powers were, if men, called hsi (shamans), and, if women, wu (shamannesses). It is they who supervised the positions of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters. As a consequence, the spheres of the divine and the profane were kept distinct. The spirits sent down blessings on the people, and accepted from them their offerings. There were no natural calamities. [2]

That kings still needed the assistance of shamans in performing rituals shows that the idea of tianren heyi back then was considered an exclusive right of the royalty. However, during Confucius' time and later on when the Hundred Schools contended and flourished, a reinterpretation of this concept took place. This reinterpretation is important because the access to the realm of Heaven was no longer a royal monopoly. When it became universalized, Confucius was thus able to say that at fifty, he knew the decree of Heaven[3] and averred that a junzi (君子) stands in awe of the ordinances of Heaven[4]. This implies that the idea of tianming (天命) underwent a subtle shift from reinforcing the legitimacy to rule to something that everybody had access to.

2 Derk Bodde, "Myths of Ancient China", in *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. by Samuel Noah Kramer (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1961), p.390

3 Zhu Xi 朱熹, si shu zhang ju ji zhu 四書章句集注, (Beijing 北京: zhong hua shu ju 中華書 局, 2012), p. 54 *Lunyu* 2.4: 子曰：吾十有五而志于學，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳順，七十而從心所欲，不踰矩。」

4 Zhu Xi 朱熹, si shu zhang ju ji zhu 四書章句集注, p. 173 *Lunyu* 16.8: 孔子曰：「君子有三畏：畏天命，畏大人，畏聖人之言。小人不知天命而不畏也，狎大人，侮聖人之言。」

Moreover, Confucius believed that he was vested with Heavenly-endowed virtue and tasked to transmit the culture (wen 文) of the past. He was fully confident of this and therefore remained composed and unafraid whenever he was held captive or faced dangerous situations during his decades of wandering. [5]

The changing meanings of *tianren heyi* shows a reinterpretation of tradition rather than a total rejection of it. In this reinterpretation, the reformulated ideology stands in continuity with history but its political overtones of *tianming* were played down. Instead of leaving the transcendent and immanent as two independent and mutually exclusive concepts, the Chinese sought to reconcile them. Perhaps the statement 'Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear'[6] in the Classic of History gives this very idea its full expression.

ROLE OF THE MIND-HEART (*XIN* 心) IN CHINESE SPIRITUALITY

So, what constitutes the core of the Chinese imagination? How exactly did it collapse the alleged transcendent-immanent dichotomy? Based on this writer's understanding, the solution to the ontological bifurcation lies in the xin (心), or more commonly rendered as the mind-heart.

It is perhaps little wonder that the notion of xin should be so closely associated with Neo-Confucianism given the overwhelming concentration on xin following the rise of xinxue (心學), or 'Learning of the mind-heart'. However, on closer examination, the idea of xin was already long present in Chinese thought. It was just that Neo-Confucian developed it to its full maturity. The Mencian thesis is that by fully penetrating our minds, we can be led to comprehend our self-nature and eventually understand Heaven[7].' Similarly, in the Zhuangzi, there is the mention of the famous 'fasting of the mind-heart' (心齋 xinzhai) to gain communion with the Dao. All these examples signify the direct linkage between tian and ren by turning inwards and seeking resources from oneself, instead of searching beyond the realm of humanity, as is often the case in Western thought. The function of the xin finds its quintessential expression in Chan Buddhism as well. In the Platform Sutra, it is said that "From the outset the Dharma has been in the world; being in the world, it transcends the world. Hence do not seek the transcendental world outside,

5 See *Lunyu* 7.23, 9.5 for such instances.

6 See *Shangshu*尚書 "Taishi" 太誓chapter: 「天視自我民視，天聽自我民聽。」 Also quoted by Mencius, see *Mencius* 5A:5.

7 Zhu Xi 朱熹, si shu zhang ju ji zhu 四書章句集注, p. 356

by discarding the present world itself."[8] Thus, it is possible that the notion of xin was already a defining feature in Chinese thought and served as a form of cultural conditioning so that when Chan Buddhism started teaching about seeing into one's own nature and becoming a Buddha, it was readily accepted.

In addition, *xin* could possibly have played a part in the Chinese epistemology as well. Knowledge and knowing may not necessarily be established through empirical understanding in early Chinese thought. It is often intuitive, going beyond what contemporary thinkers would dub as scientific, yet it has nothing to do with superstitions either. Mote makes an important point in his explanation of what intuition is:

"Intuition is not reason, for the process by which one intuitively knows is not subject to analysis and reasoned understanding. Nonetheless to intuit is to know and to know with great certainty (even should the knowledge so acquired prove to be erroneous); it is not like faith which demands that one believe without knowing."[9]

Indeed, experience of direct, immediate knowing seems to be made possible through the *xin*. For instance, Zhuangzi feels that language is at once limiting and divisive. Although ideas cannot be adequately conveyed through words, they can be realized in the mind-heart. Thus, the *xin* is the medium through which the transcendent joins with the immanent.

To end off this section, the conversation between Wang Yangming and his friend, as follows, will also serve our purpose of understanding the *xin* well:

The friend pointed to flowering trees on a cliff and said:

You say there is nothing under heaven external to the mind. These flowering trees on the high mountain blossom and drop their blossoms of themselves. What have they to do with the mind?

Wang replied:

> Before you look at the flowers, they and your mind are in a state of silent vacancy. As you come to look at them, their colours at once show up clearly. From this you can know that these flowers are not external to your mind.[10]

8 Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press), p.140

9 Frederick W. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China (zhongguo sixiang zhi yuanyuan)* 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1989), p.19

10 Wang, Yangming, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p.222.

On the surface, what is internal seems to be diametrically opposed to the external. But ontologically speaking, they are intertwined. Just as the flowers are devoid of significance without the mind, so both the internal and external are inseparable. The external cannot be negated, rather, it is the mutual engendering that drives one's creative imagination.[11]

DIVINITY WITHOUT THEOLOGY

The Western theological perspective is typically associated with theism. Given the ontological dualism in the form of a vertical disjunction, religion in the sense of a wholly transcendent seems to require the support of an unflinching faith. In the interest of brevity, this paper shall not attempt to prove, or disprove religious metaphysics, but suffices to point out that the absence of theology is a salient feature of the Chinese tradition. This is very much in the spirit of Zhuangzi if we consider this observation in light of the statement "as to what lies beyond the universe the sage admits its existence but does not theorize".[12]

In the Lunyu, it is recorded that when Confucius offered sacrifice to the dead, he felt as if the dead were present. When he offered sacrifice to other spiritual beings, he felt as though those spirits were present too. Hence, he said, "If I do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice at all."[13] From this, it is apparent that when Confucius made sacrifices, he did not concern himself with the existence of spiritual beings. Even if they really did exist, that fact itself would be irrelevant. To genuinely participate in sacrificial rites is to feel a deep sense of reverence, it is the emotions evoked that counts.

The cogent intimations of reality that imagination provides is also eloquently evidenced in the Book of Rites:

The severest vigil and purification is maintained and practised in the inner self, while a looser vigil is maintained externally. During the days of such vigil, the mourner thinks of the departed, how and where he sat, how he smiled

11 Yuet Keung Lo 勞悅強, *Wennei Wenwai: zhongguo sixiang shi zhong de jingdian quanshi* 文內文外:中國思想史中的經典詮釋 (*taibei: taida chuban zhongxin*, 2010), p.vi

12 Qian Mu錢穆, Zhuangzi zuan jian 莊子纂箋, (Taipei台北市: Dongda tushu gongsi東大圖書公司, 2011), p.18.

13 Zhu Xi 朱熹, si shu zhang ju ji zhu 四書章句集注, p. 64 (*Lunyu* 3.12: 祭如在，祭神如神在。子曰：「吾不與祭，如不祭。」)

and smoke, what were his aims and views, what he delighted in, and what he desired and enjoyed. By the third day he will perceive the meaning of such exercise. On the day of the sacrifice, when he enters the apartment [of the temple], he will seem to see [the deceased] in the place [where his spirit-tablet is]. After he has moved about [to perform his operations], and is leaving by the door, he will be arrested by seeming to hear the sound of his movements, and will sigh as he seems to hear the sound of his sighing…[14]

The above describes in some detail the psychological state of the filial son in mourning. As Fung Yu-Lan notes, "to gain communion with the dead through abstraction"[15] is to give satisfaction to the emotions of affectionate longings. In the Han lexicon Shuowen jiezi (說文解字) compiled by Xu Shen (許慎), etymologically, the Chinese character 廟 miao, where ancestral worship takes place, is an iconic representation for the countenance of the ancestor.[16] This corroborates with the above view that sacrificial rites are about expressing one's deep-seated feelings through imagining the spiritual presence of the dead.

Due to the absence of a sharp division between the transcendent and immanent, the Chinese civilization has often been criticized of lacking religious import. Are the Chinese really irreligious people then? To answer this question, one has to probe much deeper. Does one need a religion to be religious? What is a religion anyway? In a sense, a 'religion' is a mere label, an appellation given to a particular system of belief. If religions all share the same essence in awakening an internal quest, then naming is ultimately divisive. Seen in this light, perhaps the whole question about Chinese religiosity is meaningless because the West do not share the same sort of metaphysical understanding, and thus their charge is groundless to begin with.

AN EMIC VERSUS ETIC PROBLEM

Throughout the paper, there has been a focus in attempting to argue that the early Chinese people were constantly engaged in some form of imagination that has helped shaped Chinese thought and produced a beguiling philosophical worldview. Such an imagination offers us a reconciliation of the 'actual' and

14 Fung Yu-Lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derke Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), I, p.351-52. Fung quotes from the *Liji*禮記.

15 Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, I, p.352

16 See *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, 卷九 (*juan 9)* 广部:「尊先祖皃也。从广朝聲。」(清) 段玉裁注:「尊其先祖而以是儀皃之。故曰宗廟。諸書皆曰。廟，皃也。祭法注云。廟之言皃也。宗廟者，先祖之尊皃也。古者廟以祀先祖。凡神不爲廟也。爲神立廟者，始三代以後。」

'transcended' world, which continues to have an enormous purchase on our current imagination, through which this tradition will live on. That a tradition can be anything but invented is hard to conceive of, for it is a human creation, one that necessarily reproduces and reinvents itself. This paper is thus a retrospective study, and so its tenability is also a matter of framing. But it has to be emphatically pointed out that framing is determining, it is not merely about putting things into context. Hence, therein lies an emic versus etic problem, an implication of this paper which warrants some discussion. Simply put, this is a question of interpretation whereby a particular *problématique* may be considered from either the insider or the outsider's perspective. (It may also be suggested that the insider and outsider are equally capable of producing both emic and etic accounts, but for definitional purpose and to simplify things a little, this need not concern us here.) The key is just that any attempt to understand the past necessarily involves historical inquiry into the subject matter. Ergo it is important to distinguish between emic and etic accounts so as to better understand our understanding.

For instance, during the time of Confucius, the House of Zhou had fallen into disuse, and rites and music had fallen into neglect. It was under such circumstances that Confucius committed himself to preserving historical records by compiling anthologies. From conventional sources, we know that this included the editing and arranging of the Classic of Odes (shijing 詩經), Classic of History (shangshu 尚書) among others. Despite being a descendant of the Shang, Confucius staunchly defended the Zhou. While the Zhou empire continued its decline, he nevertheless remained resolute in 'following the Zhou' . Although some modern historians have argued that the Duke of Zhou is at best a shadowy figure in ancient history,[17] he was indubitably a luminous figure in the eyes of Confucius, and the surest evidence that the Mandate of Heaven had indeed passed to the House of Zhou.

Regardless of the fact that Confucius might have misconceived the past, this meaningful reconstruction of a historical and cultural symbol would not have been able to come about without a dose of creative imagination. The Zhou that Confucius had in mind was a romanticized one – a fantasy of a laudable moral universe which was no less a reality for him. The ontological possibility of such a realm was made plausible by relying on the extant literary culture

17 Zhu Xi 朱熹, si shu zhang ju ji zhu 四書章句集注, p. 65. *Lunyu* 3.14: 子曰：「周監於二代，郁郁乎文哉！吾從周。」

established. Confucius had effusively praised the resplendent literary culture of Zhou[18], and this eventually became the sustenance of his imagination. In the compilation of the Classic of Odes for example, he was selective in the material, expunging undesirable works which were the ones that probably did not exemplify the normative order of ancient times. As recorded in the Analects, Confucius believed that for the three hundred and five pieces that he retained, they may all be succinctly described in a word as having not deviated[19]. Clearly, Confucius had projected his own ideals onto his works. His ingenuity lies in re-writing tradition, re-organizing and synthesizing a culture while building his own cultural enterprise on it.

On the other hand, from Confucius' point of view, he was a self-proclaimed lover of antiquity, a 'transmitter' instead of 'creator'[20], intent on upholding the integrity of history. He continued the honoured tradition of recording and memorializing human deeds of the past. He also sought to celebrate and glorify the literary culture of the Western Zhou, which he ardently admired and desired to revive. Indeed, Zhou culture was great, but according to Confucius, it already had before it the examples of two previous dynasties, and thus its achievements were also built upon them. Therefore, in urging his contemporaries to follow the wisdom embedded in the golden past, Confucius did not think that he was proposing something radical. In a Gadamerian sense, Confucius does stand in continuity to tradition because he sees himself recapitulating and transmitting what has been handed down to him[21].

Is there, then, a 'right' interpretation? Both are relevant, and perhaps a more nuanced question deserving of some contemplation would be if Confucius had actually intended the social evolution that drew ideological support from his teachings. Oftentimes by choosing to take a historical approach, one tends to think it is safe enough to assume that the results of the study offer an objective point of view. We fall into a ridiculous delusion that the historical approach allows us to be observers who write from a thoroughly detached point of view. But the truth is that; because we are situated as part of this creation of history,

18 Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China*, p.29

19 Zhu Xi 朱熹, si shu zhang ju ji zhu 四書章句集注, p. 65.

20 Zhu Xi 朱熹, si shu zhang ju ji zhu 四書章句集注, p. 53. *Lunyu* 2.2: 子曰：「詩三百，一言以蔽之，曰『思無邪』。」

21 Zhu Xi 朱熹, si shu zhang ju ji zhu 四書章句集注, p. 93. *Lunyu* 7.1: 子曰：「述而不作，信而好古，竊比於我老彭。」

we also inevitably write from a contextualized point of view.

CONCLUSION

In the twilight zone between transcendence and immanence, the Chinese finds reality and the fullest meaning of life. As Bertrand Russell insightfully points out:

> "Instinctive happiness, or joy of life, is one of the most important widespread popular goods that we have lost through industrialism and the high pressure at which most of us live; its commonness in China is a strong reason for thinking well of Chinese civilization."[22]

'Instinctive happiness' is certainly a very apt phrase for this Chinese asset. Something instinctive surely comes from within, yet it also cannot arise without influence from without. The prima facie mundane self is clearly the locus for restoring the equilibrium and harmony between the self and that which is external to it. Pursuing this further, we may conclude that the secular is also the sacred, and vice versa in the Chinese imagination.

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22 Zhu Xi 朱熹, si shu zhang ju ji zhu 四書章句集注, p. 59.
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