
*The Topicality of the Classical
Moral Philosophy of China*

After a positive phase during the period of the European Enlightenment, Chinese ethics has for the most part had a rather bad press in the West. This has mainly been due to the influence of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century philosophy, especially German Idealism. Even today we still find assessments of Chinese culture which could stem from the pen of Hegel. The corresponding claim that Confucianism as the most influential of the philosophical schools of China represents a mere heteronomous “ethics of accommodation” has found wide and international acceptance through the influential work of Max Weber. Not only in Western sciences including sinology have Weber’s theses been of great import, but also in China they have fallen on fertile ground in a time of hypercriticism of the traditional culture.

The *Weberian discourse*, as I would like to call it, describes China in terms of particularism, world optimism, mythos, and heteronomy, as opposed to universalism, world domination, transcendence, and autonomy in the West. Recently, this discourse has entered into a peculiar liaison with another discourse which primarily takes place in the United States—the *neopragmatic* or *contextualistic discourse*. The pragmatic discourse comes to conclusions quite similar to those of the Weberian one, but the assessment is different: the contextualists endorse what the Weberians view as a deficiency. When Weber called the “relentless canonization of tradition” a “barrier to Confucian rationalism,”¹ he unmistakably, despite his postulate of value neutralism, uttered a negative evaluation. In the pragmatic discourse, however, the alleged embeddedness of all thinking and, in particular, ethics, in tradition and cultural context, in the immanence of the “ontology of events,” as Hall and Ames have put it in Heideggerian terms,² has become an indication of the profoundness and competence of Chinese philosophy. The “sacredness of the

secular" (Fingarette), an initially negative topos dating back to Hegel and Schelling and later leading to Weber, is promoted to Confucius' message to present-day modernity oblivious of the rituals and customs of everyday life.

For reasons yet to be shown, the Weberian as well as the pragmatic discourses fail to appreciate the fundamental nature of China's classical philosophy in general and Confucianism in particular. This fundamental nature can be described as a *reflected reaction* precisely to the *crisis of the established context* and the inherited tradition. Hegel and Weber were wrong when they answered in the negative to the question they had posed and which, to me, is of first rate importance: whether ancient China knew of any context-transcending reflexivity. Pragmatist sinology, however, does not reject Hegel's and Weber's answer. It rejects their very *question* as springing from an unjustified generalization of modern Western idiosyncrasies. One of the sinological Hegelians has ridiculed the esoteric sinophilia of our time for "preposterously seeking 'ways to the self' in a culture one of the characteristics of which has been exactly not to develop a self separated from nature."³ Authors such as Fingarette, Rosemont, Hall, and Ames, however, assure us that China can teach us to recognize that the mentality of self, autonomy, and freedom has run its course. Together with the Chinese, we should recall our "communal rituals, customs, and traditions"⁴ and "inherited forms of life."⁵ We should abandon the "myth of objective knowledge," and adopt a "thinking that avoids the disjunction of normative and spontaneous thought."⁶ Confucius especially presents us a model which for our world is perhaps "more relevant, more timely, more urgent" than it has been even in China herself.⁷

The motivation of these authors and of their appreciation of China presumably is the sense-crisis of modern Western culture. However, in their rejection of modernism and their search for alternative ways of living, they overshoot the mark. Criticizing negative developments, including the development of our own societies, presupposes general normative criteria. Is it not paradoxical, then, to employ Confucius and the Chinese for a contextualism which is no longer interested in questions of right and wrong, of relativity and objectivity?⁸ And can this approach really claim the authority of the Chinese texts? Mo Di (c. 480–397 B.C.), one of the earliest Chinese philosophers, already brought forward a striking argument against a contextualistic or holistic ethics: whoever advocates funeral ceremonies (which was rejected by Mo Di) with the argument that they represent an established custom, would ultimately also have to advocate cannibalism and infanticide. Are not cannibalism and infanticide established customs among some peoples, too? Yet, said Mo Di, they contradict humaneness and justice.⁹ True, Mo Di was an opponent of the Confucian school, but his insight into the difference between the *normatively valid* and the *merely current* is characteristic of the consciousness of the Chinese "axial age" in general including Confucianism.

It constitutes a remarkable lapse behind this insight, if today we are told, in the name of Confucius, that we should learn and practice the "conventions and traditions we inherit from our culture," "not because we find [them] to be right,

but by virtue of [their] defining for us what we are to value as right," as Fingarette says. The "powerful prudential guides" of those conventions and traditions (the Confucian *li*), Fingarette adds, "preclude the need for further awareness, for they have their own autonomous authority *independently of consequences*."¹⁰

This devotedness to context and tradition, regardless of what the intentions of the various authors may be, is conspicuously blind to the experiences of history. Was not the practice of crippling the feet of women in China, burning widows in India, and enslaving blacks in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America (not to mention German commonsense half a century ago) sanctified by contexts or traditions? Do not these appearances represent "conventions and traditions we inherit from our culture"? And does not he who, nonetheless, recommends to replace conscious "awareness" by the "autonomous authority *independently of consequences*" of conventions and traditions willy-nilly make himself an accomplice of such developments?

How can we criticize the unspeakable injustice inflicted upon man in the name of traditions and contexts if we leave the final say to both and abandon any ethical reserve? And how can we identify it as injustice in the first place if we do away with the "fact-value dichotomy," as Hall and Ames recommend, again appealing to the alleged authority of Confucius?¹¹ The indispensability of traditions and contexts notwithstanding, the contextualistic message, in view of the drama of our world, sounds naive, and it is ethically dubious.¹² I doubt in particular that its sane world perspective offers a solution to the problems of today's China.

The new discovery of Confucianism in the West unmistakably bears *postmodernist* traits. Modern Chinese intellectuals, in contrast, occupy themselves with the seemingly outdated question how China can participate in *modernity*. This debate has received new incentives by the return of Confucianism in mainland China during the last decade and the economical success of the East Asian countries. But it already existed in the nineteenth century. Since the shock of the military defeat and political humiliation by Western imperialism and Japan, China has faced the question how to reconcile an age-old form of culture and the new measures of an alien industrial civilization. The Reform movement at the end of the nineteenth century, the founding of the Republic, the May Fourth movement, the introduction of Marxism, and the establishment of the People's Republic constitute various efforts to solve this problem.

Today, a contradictory situation has arisen. On the one hand, it is characterized by the economic progress of the "Confucian" states which seem to meet the Western challenge successfully. For Weber, China served as a contrasting foil to "Occidental rationalism" which laid the fundamentals for modernity. Today, however, the question is raised by some authors whether Confucian ethics does not represent a functional equivalent to the Protestant one. They even ask whether it is not superior to the latter as far as the problems of the future are concerned, since this form of ethics could provide correctives for some of the Western devel-

opmental errors.¹³ China, accordingly, should no longer be measured by the standards of current modernization theories. These theories, it is argued, should be reformulated instead on the basis of the East Asian experiences.¹⁴

Regardless of whether one subscribes to this opinion—Weber's assumption that China, because of an ostensibly "mythical" attitude towards nature, could not by her own resources achieve a "rational mastery of the world,"¹⁵ but would have to adopt this capability—a thoroughly ambiguous one as we know today—from the Occident, has ever since been a myth itself.¹⁶ The different economic developments of the West and the East can hardly be explained by different worldviews.¹⁷ That Confucian economic ethics are not at all inferior to those of Protestantism was already stated by Keyserling.¹⁸ And Weggel tries to show that Confucianism disposes not only of the virtues advantageous for economic activity, which according to Weber distinguish Protestantism, but of another trump which is lacking in the West: "corporativity."¹⁹ Weggel's "Meta-Confucian" catalogue of values—willingness to integrate oneself, "face," efficiency, submission, thrift, etc.—is tailored to serve the economy. China, however, not only faces economical, but also political and social problems, and there are many contradictions between them. To give an example, how does an alleged value like submission relate to the demands for freedom of expression, human rights, and individualism? It looks plausible that Confucianism has developed an economic ethic which is nearly equivalent to the Protestant one. But what about the political and the social side of the interaction of tradition and modernity, if modernity is not to be understood in merely functionalistic terms? Is there more than political subordination and social adaptation which Confucianism has to offer?

Confucianism seems to enjoy above all the sympathy of conservative circles. In the People's Republic, its return lies in the interest of stability. The Cultural Revolution has not created a new man, but rather demoralized the old one. A rapid economical modernization, orientated towards profit making, competitiveness, and initiative, has deeply affected the old jog trot of the *danwei*-society with its solicitous tutelage by the state. An enormous population growth and a continuing political oppression cause additional stress. Under these circumstances, the Chinese once again recall to mind the efficiency of the traditional ethics. These ethics serve also in Taiwan and Singapore as a counterweight against the sequels of industrialization. It would be astonishing, indeed, if in order to convey the corresponding timeless norms of social behavior such as manners, modesty, solidarity, assiduity, sense of duty, etc., China would not draw upon the well-proven capacities of the one philosophical school which, among other things, specialized in this field. The desire for a stabilizing everyday morality is nothing but normal. It becomes ideological, however, if it merely serves the purpose of consolidating established power structures. This is one of the reasons why the Chinese youth turns a deaf ear to Confucian or other traditional Chinese values and rather adheres completely to Western standards. The statue of liberty on the Tiananmen Square was a clear indication of this attitude. The conservative block of functionaries, however, finds the traditional secondary virtues expedient, and discredits

democracy as “foreign,” while in Stalinism they have always felt at home. Yet, the People’s Republic does not stand alone in East Asia with her inclination to authoritarianism.

The Confucian virtues as a ferment for economy and as guarantors for the stability of authoritarian societies—is this the future potential of Chinese civilization? And is the only alternative the rejection of tradition and the adoption of the Western model? There is a third road already discussed by the nineteenth-century reformers, one of integration of tradition and progress. This road is anything but obsolete, and is probably the only one that can be taken, if China neither wants to perpetuate her traditional authority structures,²⁰ nor to give up her cultural authenticity and suffer the same loss of identity so many societies of the Third World have witnessed after having been overrolled by the West. China, above all because of her rich intellectual history, can spare herself such a fate. To achieve this goal, a *nonregressive appropriation of tradition* would be necessary which combines the interpretation and adaptation of the intellectual heritage with the modern demands for democracy and change. A formally similar program has been followed by the historians of the People’s Republic under the motto of “making the old useful for the present” (*gu wei jin yong*). But their “inheritance of the philosophical legacy” (*zhexue yichan de jicheng*) stood under the auspices of the party, was utilized for the legitimation of the regime, and degenerated into a clumsy and schematic application of Marxist labels to Chinese intellectual history.²¹ In the eighties, China was on the way towards a less ideological attitude. After the setback of 1989, it can, for the time being, hardly be expected that the Chinese state will loosen its monopoly of opinion, which it exploits in such a blunt and shameless way, and will tolerate a free public realm.

To appropriate tradition in a nonregressive way,²² under modern conditions, does not mean to promote a renaissance of traditional modes of thought. The most simple reason for this is that the Chinese tradition is in many respects discredited for good reasons. The People’s Republic, to give an example, has not only made use of imported Stalinistic methods of rule, but has also employed traditional devices—the well-proven mixture of legalist *raison d’état* and of conventional obligations from the Confucian canon, which has rendered the Chinese state good services since Han times. But “tradition” is more than this. To appropriate it in a nonregressive manner—which should be the task of the Chinese humanities, if they could develop without regimentation—could well provide the foundations for the modern, imported demands for democracy and codified human rights and subsequently underpin these with autochthonous thought taken from the Chinese intellectual heritage. Ideas of human dignity, equality, and autonomy were developed in China no less than in the Occident. What has to be reconstructed and regained is, therefore, the *universalist potential* of the old culture, which has ever since transcended the narrowness and injustice of the established forms of life and the simple worldview of most of China’s leaders. For China, and this is my central hypothesis against Weberian and neopragmatic sinology, has, during the “axial age,” gone through an epoch of early *enlighten-*

ment in the sense of a reflective disassociation from everything hitherto valid, and of a breakthrough towards "postconventional," detached thinking. Since then, Chinese culture disposes of a textually fixed and transmitted stock of critical consciousness, the potentialities of which have never been exhausted. On the contrary, the later generations have, on the whole, fallen behind the preexisting level. From the distant perspective of its effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), this potentiality has, therefore, always been underestimated.

The question as to whether or not Chinese philosophy holds a universalist potential is of importance not only for China, but also for ourselves. It cannot be all the same to us whether humaneness and human dignity are nothing but the prejudice of a specific civilization, and have only relative validity in consequence, or whether they are based on interculturally shared convictions. Hence, neither for the Chinese nor for us is classical Chinese ethics a topic of merely archival interest. It is a topic which is in itself ethically relevant. Such a topic needs a specific methodology which can, with Habermas, be called "reconstruction."²³ Reconstruction means to reorganize the ideas of the ancients in a form which is more appropriate to their true intentions—if our interpretation of these intentions is right—than are their quite unsystematic and often unclear arguments, and to make the best of them in the light of the ethical problems of our time. In order to avoid "intentional fallacies," philological exactness is indispensable. Reconstructive hermeneutics does not mean free extrapolation at will, but must always be coupled with the testimony of the text. On the other hand, however, the texts will remain unintelligible, if we do not approach them with a set of well-reasoned questions. I derive these questions, which are decisive for the form of reconstruction, from the current ethical discussion in the West. For reasons yet to be shown, it is especially Kohlberg's theory of the genesis of the competence of moral judgment which offers a promising basis of interpretation.

It could be objected to this approach that we cannot apply a "Western" measure, and the more so a modern one, to "Chinese thought." But in order to decide whether or not "our" categories can be applied, we have to make the test. To get into the "circle of understanding" at all, we have to invest something beforehand. As will be shown in the following chapter, the West has got into the habit of doing this on a level as low as possible. Not only Western philosophy—exceptions only prove the rule—but also some sinologists have adopted an attitude towards Chinese philosophy which could, polemically, be termed "hermeneutic supposition of incompetence."²⁴ Conversely, I will try my best to treat the ethics of the Chinese axial age from the perspective of a demanding discussion in contemporary moral philosophy. The thinkers of ancient China stood at the peak of their time, and sinology owes them at least the attempt to treat their thought at the peak of ours and give them their due. This also involves evaluation and criticism. To refrain from them would be equivalent to not taking the ancients seriously and ignoring their claim to rightness and truth.²⁵