

The Significance of Chinese Thought in the Contemporary World

Prof. Haiming Wen 温海明

Professor, Associate Dean, School of Philosophy,

Renmin University of China

中国人民大学哲学院教授、副院长

Senior Fellow, Center for East-West Relations, BFSU

- While significant cultural communication between China and the West has only gone on for about 400 years, **the impact of Chinese thought on the ancient world started more than a thousand years earlier.**
- After Indian Buddhism first came to be accepted by Chinese people around two thousand years ago, Chinese thought began to communicate with Indian, and its influence in other civilizations like **Asian Pacific regions** continued to grow.

- In most historical periods, including the famous Tang (619-907), Song (960-1279), and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties, Chinese thought had a profound and persistent influence over China's neighbor countries, especially Korea, Japan and Vietnam, and the **Confucian cultural circle lasted over a millennium.**
- In ancient times, Chinese thought influenced the world through the channels for trade like the **Silk Road**, and other similar paths have been created as communication between China and the West has increased over the last four centuries.
- Water Road, in Ming Dynasty, **Peace road**

- It was the Western colonial powers that suspended cultural communications among ancient Eastern civilizations, and it is time for countries to have more cultural communication among themselves after the end of the colonial period, especially with their rapid social-economical development in the last few decades.
- In many senses, both **China and Australia** were “modern” countries in the ancient world, and they had been leading both Eastern and **Pacific civilizations** before the so-called “industrialization” and “modernization”, as well as “Enlightenment” periods etc.

- Unfortunately, in the last couple of centuries, China has had certain conflicts with various Western nations. After China was defeated by the Western powers, traditional Chinese culture began to be seriously criticized by literati.
- Only in the last three decades has China begun to have a voice on the international scene, and along with this Chinese thought has also become ever more significant, despite being viewed as exotic, irrational, and even barbarian by some Western thinkers at the beginning of Chinese-Western cultural communication.

- Today, it is time for **both China and Asian-Pacific countries** to enter into a new era of cultural communication, and it is marvelous that many prominent minds from all over the world gather together to discuss how to promote mutual understanding among different civilizations at such a historical time when both Chinese thoughts are rejoining the world.
- A younger generation of Chinese like me, familiar with Western cultures, are now re-examining their own heritage, to identify both its richness and relevance for the contemporary world, and also indicators for the potential re-fashioning of the world in the future, for the benefit of all humankind.

- Here, please let me address four points of relevant contribution that ancient Chinese thought can bring to our world:
- First, Chinese thought can bring more justice to our world.
- On top of the Eastern Gate of the Federal Court of the United States, Confucius stands to the right side of Moses, while to his left is Solon. This is because Confucius is a symbol of social justice in China. The Confucian School and Confucianism that Confucius founded have been movements devoted to social justice from ancient times through to today. Confucians have helped sustain the unique Chinese civilization and ensured that “This Culture of Ours (*siwen*)” never ends. Chinese civilization has an unbroken history in the world. Why does the Confucian school possess this everlasting power?

- It is not only because Confucian people devoted themselves to save the falling culture at critical historical moments, but also because Confucian literati are pro-active people, because they always care for their society, and try their best to make their society better, even sometimes at the cost of their own lives.
- Like in many ancient historical times, the young Confucian generation of today's China have devoted themselves to resolving the unjust phenomena in our society. Many of them stick to **the ideal of Great Harmony** like their ancient forerunners, and devote themselves to construct a harmonious social order.
- From ancient times through to the present day, Confucian people embody the consciousness of their time, and they insist both that their **rulers should represent the common people's consciousness**, and that the people retain the right to remove their rulers if these rulers do not do their job properly.

- Today, serious problems of injustice exist both in China and around the world, so it is very significant for world thought to cherish the ideal of **Great Harmony** and the acting power of Confucianism in making our world a more just one. In this process, Daoism and Buddhism can also make very significant contributions.
- The Chinese philosophies and religions, i.e., Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, share a common ground that humans are born equal as natural processes, that in the way of **self-fulfillment to become sages or worthy persons**, humans should have equal opportunities, and that a just society is always a goal that humans as a communal beings should strive for. It is a everlasting tradition and deep-rooted belief that humans should **live in a just society**, and that people should fight for it if they find themselves living in unjust conditions.

- Second, Chinese thought can bring universal values to our world.
- The Chinese civilization is one of the enduring ancient civilizations still in existence today, and its core is Chinese philosophy, which determines both Chinese people's thought paradigm and their social living patterns. In ancient Chinese philosophy, there are **universally valid concepts like benevolence, righteousness, ritual, intelligence, and trustworthiness**, which were common truths in ancient times, and these humane values have proved to have universal importance across the millennia. Before China's communication with the West, China had remained a leading power and one of the most civilized nations for over a thousand years. People in other countries studied these values and **incorporated them into their own thought.**

- Today, Chinese universal values are still evident in Chinatowns and Chinese cultural circles around the world, and their influence should be extended to other communities.
- The traditional, **universal ancient values are still rooted in the minds of today's Chinese people**, and sustain their basic worldview.
- No matter where Chinese people go, they embrace a basic worldview **of mutual benevolence, family values and filial piety**, which effectively maintains the Chinese community as it moves forward and develops. Even when China as a nation suffered, her people still valued the universal values in their daily lives.

- These universal values were national guidelines for ancient China, and they share similar importance to their Western counterparts, freedom and democracy. Therefore, people of other civilizations should recognize and support these Chinese universal values and concepts, and join the process of **helping Chinese ancient core values become truly universal once again.**
- Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism all advocate that **being humane, benevolent to all living creatures are fundamental values for human flourishing** and these values are deeply rooted in humans' ordinary and familial lives.

- Third, Chinese philosophy helps people's minds become peaceful, thus bringing more inner-peace to every person's life.
- In the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), under the influence of Indian Buddhism, Chinese Daoist philosophy evolved into the Daoist religion, and the quiet-sitting idea in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* developed to become a systematic practice in the Daoist religious tradition, remaining influential across the world today. **Chinese culture is a culture of great openness.** From ancient times to the present, many different thoughts in China have been engaged in peaceful dialogue with each other, especially among China's many different religious groups. In most historical times, Islamic religious groups found no problem living peacefully with China's local communities.

- The cultural openness and peaceful mind involved in harmonizing various religions is very significant for a contemporary world that is full of conflicts among religions or civilizations.
- Many different religions have had diverse impacts in China, and Christianity has become more and more influential, especially in the last four hundred years, but **China remains a peaceful environment for most religions**, and very few wars or conflicts have happened among religious groups.
- **This is because Chinese philosophy has played a mediating role among different religions.** On the one hand, Chinese philosophy can reduce religious dogmatism, and on the other it can help other religious groups to be more open and less exclusive, so it can help sustain a harmonious and peaceful situation throughout history.

- Chinese people have strong religious feelings, especially to their ancestors, but their religious feelings did not develop into a religion of worshiping transcendent deities, rather asking people to rely on their own efforts.
- Thus, Chinese people developed a tradition of systematic harmonious lifestyles which has gone on to influence many neighboring countries. Ancient Chinese philosophies like Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism function in common people's everyday lives and their inner minds.

Ancient Chinese people documented their wisdom about how human beings should deal with the changing world, and this kind of wisdom is still meaningful and powerful in the contemporary world, not only for Chinese people, but for all humankind.

- **Fourth, Chinese historical experience can bring peace to the world.** In a global village like ours, Chinese ancient wisdom is a valuable resource for humans to live together peacefully, to help heal this world and create a better world. Chinese people have long historical experience of governing an enormous state over more than two thousand years, and have forged **a unique path of sustaining such a great power in harmony and peace.**
- **This kind of historical experience is very valuable for the whole world to live and develop together.** Australia and China share many social, economic, political, and cultural traditions and problems due to the size of the nation, population and mixtures of various cultures, so the cultural communication between Australia and China is the most important instance of **reviving ancient peaceful cultural relations in world civilization history.**

- As a nation that has been imbalanced for millennia, but remained relatively united throughout most historical times, the ‘China Model’ and Chinese experience are very valuable for the whole world. China is not only the most populous nation, but also a nation with most detailed documents of governing experience.
- Chinese thinkers are very anxious to help not only their own nation and people, but also to work hard to make sense of their past experience in terms which can influence the modern world.

- For example, by borrowing wisdom from Confucianism and Legalism, Chinese people have come up with a system of balancing power, to enhance the stability and prosperity of society, which is now called the ‘China Model’ or ‘Beijing Consensus’, and it can play an extremely important role for the world in a historical moment in which it suffers from economic crisis, political dangers and religious conflicts.
- The relevance of Chinese thought for today’s China and the world is clear: through the process of internationalizing Confucianism, Daoism and other Chinese schools of thought, Chinese people, together with the people of the whole global village, can help people pursue their greater happiness.

- In short, Chinese thought can promote justice and universal values, while simultaneously spreading inner peace for every individual and outer peace for the world as a whole. I hope all prominent minds and leaders of the world will take Chinese thought seriously, and promote Chinese thought to be a living power of thinking for the future of humankind.
- In the Song and Ming dynasties, in responding to the challenges from the Chinese Buddhism, which itself was another version of Indian Buddhist traditions in China, Neo-Confucian philosophers developed their systematic philosophical arguments, and Chinese philosophy reached one of its peaks in history.

- Today, facing challenges from Western philosophies and civilizations, like their ancient forerunners' responding to Indian thought, Chinese thinkers focusing on Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism are making efforts to continue the tradition of cultural communication between **China and Asian-Pacific countries**, and in doing so, they would like to shape world culture into an ever more flourishing and harmonious one.

Thank you! 谢谢!

- Haiming Wen 温海明
- Professor, Associate Dean
- 中国人民大学哲学院教授、副院长
- School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China
- Senior Fellow, Center for East-West Relations, BFSU
- wenhaiming@ruc.edu.cn
- Ph. D. University of Hawaii
- Copyright @ 2015 Haiming Wen RUC