

# An Examination of Chinese Humanism

Written by Bo Yuan Chang

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BO YUAN CHANG, FEB 20 2020

In the book, "Chinese Hegemony", Zhang Feng (2015) introduces the concept of "ethical relationalism" (pp. 181) to argue that international relations (IR) are not merely about states pursuing "exclusive self-interest" but could include their attempts to sustain "long-term ethical relationships". The idea of "ethical relationalism" was derived from the concept of Confucian relationalism, which seeks to minimize states' pursuit of self-interest in return for sustainability in international relations. According to Zhang (2015), the concept of Confucian relationalism is based on the principles of "appropriateness and justice" (*yi li*; 义利) (pp. 182), which highlights mutual assistance and ethical obligation in social interactions. The Confucian principle of *dao yi* (道义), or "the principle of righteousness", was also introduced to reinforce the need for principles to guide state behaviour so that "amoral realpolitik" caused by states' "extreme maximization of self-interest" could be reduced (pp. 182). In effect, it was argued that *relational-politik* centered on the principles of righteousness (*yi*; 义) and moral justice (义; 利) could lead to increased sustainability, cooperation and harmony in IR (pp. 182).

Similarly, Yan Xuetong (2014) proposes the concept of "moral realism" based on the Confucian teaching of *fai er bu ju, bu wang jiao zhi* (非攻不伐, 不王教止) (pp. 10), which means while one should not turn away those who have come upon to learn (from them), one shall never seek to spread his teachings without being asked. Such a Confucian teaching was used to differentiate the idea of "moral realism" from the Western liberalism, which was believed to be promoted by using military means. According to Yan (2014, pp.9), moral realism was inspired by the following saying of Xun Tzu, a Confucian philosopher during the Warring states period: *yi li er wang, xin li er ba* (义利而王, 信利而霸), which means a sage-ruler should be established on the principle of righteousness, while his pre-eminence should be formed on the principle of trustworthiness. Consequently, the differences between classical realism and moral realism were outlined.

First, it was argued that while classical realism is humanitarian-oriented[1], moral realism views morality, or a state's propensity to adhere to international morality as a constituent of national power. Second, it was suggested that moral realism views the two elements of national interest and international morality as not mutually exclusive but complementary, meaning the more a state conforms with international morality, the greater its national power, as opposed to the supposition of classical realism that states must forgo national interests to uphold international morality. Lastly, while classical realism sees nationalism and humanitarianism as two contradictory elements, moral realism sees nationalist governments as capable of preserving the ideals of humanity[2], particularly when they are resolved to share the concerns of the global community, or all-under-heaven" (*you tian xia*; 有天下)[3] (Yan, 2014, pp. 11).

The Confucian saying of *lai er bu ju, bu wang jiao zhi* (来而不往, 不王教止) resembles a well-known teaching of Confucius, which is "do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire", or *ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren* (己所不欲, 勿施于人). The teachings of Confucius reflects a spirit of non-interference, which Yan (2014) instanced to distinguish the concept of moral realism from classical realism. I suggest that the spirit of non-interference (*ke ji*; 克制) stems from the virtue of propriety (*li*; 礼), as Confucius has said: *fei li wu shi, fei li wu ting, fei li wu yan, fei li wu dong* (非礼勿视, 非礼勿听, 非礼勿言, 非礼勿动) (Ma Lai Xi Ya Er Tong Dao Du Tui Guang Zhong Xin, 1999, eds., pp. 82). It means one should refrain from witnessing, hearing, suggesting or acting upon something had it not been in accord with the principle of propriety.

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Similarly, the virtue of propriety (礼) is related to the virtue of compassion (ren; 仁), as seen in this saying of Confucius: *ren er bu ren, ru li he? Ren er bu ren, ru yue he* (礼?仁?何?仁?不?仁?，?礼?何?不?仁?) (Ma Lai Xi Ya Er Tong Dao Du Tui Guang Zhong Xin, 1999, eds., pp. 21)? It means how could one respect (the virtue of propriety) others, had he not himself been compassionate? How could one achieve happiness, had he not believed in kindness? The virtue of compassion (仁) is also related to the virtues of self-restraint (礼?) and propriety (礼), as illustrated by this teaching of Confucius: *ke ji fu li wei ren* (克己复礼为仁) (Ma Lai Xi Ya Er Tong Dao Du Tui Guang Zhong Xin, 1999, eds., pp. 81). It means one who practices self-restraint to observe propriety is considered a kind soul. This example illustrates the interrelatedness, complementarity and fluidity between the virtues of propriety (礼), compassion (仁) and self-restraint (礼?), or non-interference, and it is argued that they shall form a dynamic and interactive process which constitutes the oneness of Chinese virtues, or Chinese humanism.

The complementary and inclusive nature of the Chinese virtues leads to a dialectical thinking characterized by inclusiveness, mutuality and interrelatedness, which means the Chinese virtues are inclusive of each other, mutual in (their) existence as well as related to each other, which could be metaphorically expressed through the following equation:  $A=B$ . The Chinese dialectical thinking differs from the logic of Western dialectics, either in the Aristotelian or in the Hegelian tradition. To Aristotle, what defines A is its *separation* from B, or A is 'A' because it is separated from B. It means the more separated A is from B, the more distinct it becomes, and that A would not have derived its distinctiveness were it not separated from B (Li, 2016, pp. 10). Therefore, it is arguable that the Aristotelian dialectics reflects a logic of separation, boundedness and differentiation, which could be represented through the following equation:  $A \neq B$ . The Hegelian dialectics reflects a similar logic to Aristotle's, except to a different degree. To Hegel, a revolution should not cease until it has achieved a *dictatorship of the proletariat* (Qin, 2018, pp. 228), or A could not be 'A' until it has eliminated B. If Aristotle's dialectics was an expression of the European saying, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet", then Hegel's logic was probably an expression of the following saying: The East could not be East until it has eliminated the West, and vice versa. How horrifying! To the Chinese, however, the West could not be itself when it has eliminated the East from it, and vice versa. In fact, the West will burst asunder the moment the East is eliminated by it, because the West depends on the East for its existence, and without the East there could be no such thing as 'the West'. Put simply, the West is 'West' precisely because there is 'the East', and vice versa. Without either one of them, the other would not have come into being. This is the Chinese dialectics, or Chinese humanism.

One may still ask, even if the Chinese dialectical logic of  $A=B$  may stand in face of the Hegelian dialectics (that A wouldn't have come into being without having 'B'), why must it stand in the face of the Aristotelian logic? It is arguable that the difference between the Hegelian and the Aristotelian dialectics is one of degree, or intensity and not one of nature. This means the logic of *separation*, though apparently sound, may still falter in front of the Chinese logic of dialectics, as did the Hegelian dialectics. According to Aristotle, the more distanced object A is from B, the more it becomes like itself, or the more it becomes distinct. However, let's imagine a situation where A is completely separated from *all* other beings in the world, or imagining a space of complete boundedness. How could A know it is 'A', if A had known none other beings in the world? Or, how could I know if I am fat, or thin (for example), if I had known no other beings in the world? Hence, the Western logic of separation, boundedness and differentiation could burst asunder, or gradually fade away, when facing the Chinese dialectics of inclusiveness, mutuality and relatedness, or *yin-and-yang*.

Since antiquity, the Chinese have believed that the universe was an undivided whole, which means all substances of the universe, whether they are tangible or not, are contained within an anthropo-cosmic (undivided) space "living" (being) in a long slumber. There comes the heavenly giant (spirit), Pan Gu (盘古), with his gigantic axe. He awakes from his long slumber, only to find himself within a chaotic mass (*da hun dun*; 混沌), or an infinite and continuous space of universe, here unrefined, there unknown, looking like a huge (infinite) giant or spirit waiting to be awaked. There, Pan Gu picks up his heavenly axe and stroke upon the ground with all his heavenly might. The sleeping giant of the universe suddenly hears a huge crack on the ground, which deepens further and further until eventually the universe was divided into two, or "twoness"- the heaven and the earth. This is the ancient belief of the Chinese- that the universe was born, or activated, or simply awaked from its long slumber by the "striking upon the heaven and earth" (*kai tian pi di*; 开天辟地) of Pan Gu, whom was an anthropo-cosmic spirit[4] believed to be sent by heaven to bring the universe into "being" (before the birth of the universe it was indulged in its un-awakening slumber). Put

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simply, the universe was an undivided whole before Pan Gu (盘古) stroke upon the ground with his heavenly axe, thereby dividing the “sleepy” (undivided) universe into two (*er*, 二), the heaven (*tian*; 天) and the earth (*di*; 地) (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019).

This leads to the following saying of Lao Tzu[5], a Chinese sage born slightly before Confucius:*Dao sheng yi, yi sheng er, er sheng san, san sheng wan wu* (道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生万物) (Zhou, 2006, pp. 25), which could be literally translated as follows: the “Tao” or the heavenly force has given birth to the undivided universe (oneness). The undivided universe (oneness) then gives birth to twoness- the heaven and the earth. The heaven and the earth (twoness) then gives birth to the trinity of heaven, the earth and humanity. With the birth of the trio of heaven, earth and humanity, all beings were brought to life (*san sheng wan wu*; 三生万物). I believe the best way to understand Lao Tzu’s hidden message was through the following metaphorical example:

Before the birth of the universe, everything including the universe itself was sleeping. There comes Pan Gu, the spirit who stoke upon the ground with his heavenly axe, resulting in the partitioning of the universe into two, the heaven and the earth, which resemble two fishes, fish A and fish B or fish Yin and fish Yang. Then, the two fishes of Yin and Yang (or heaven and earth) interacts, until they have given birth to their son, fish C or humanity. With fish A (or father heaven), fish B (or mother earth) and fish C (or humanity) being brought to life, all forms of being within the universe were brought to life.

This is the unsounded message of Lao Tzu, and it shall contain the key to understanding most, if not all ancient China’s wisdom, such as the son of heaven, or *Tian-Zi* (天子) and the unity of heaven and humanity, or *tian-ren-he-yi* (天人合一) (Tu, 2001, pp. 243). To the Chinese, all forms of being were brought to life through the intercourse between *yin* and *yang*, or *fish A* and *fish B* in the mentioned example, which represents heaven (*fish A*) and earth (*fish B*). This shows that the spirit of respecting heaven have been ingrained within the Chinese people since antiquity. Hence, the ancient Chinese proverb which reads: He who won the hearts of the people, earns the right to rule all-under-heaven (*de min xin zhe de tian xia*; 得民心者得天下) (Guan, 2005, pp. 45-46). Hence, the emperor of China were heretofore revered as the son of heaven, or *Tian-Zi* (天子), which means He who has gathered the support of the people, shall obtain heaven’s consent to rule all-under-heaven on her behalf. There is another ancient Chinese saying which reads: *mou shi zai ren, cheng shi zai tian* (谋事在人, 成事在天) (Wang, 1990, pp. 798), which means the planning of actions is in the hands of men, but the success of them are in the hands of heaven. Similarly, another ancient Chinese proverb reads: *jin ren shi, ting tian ming* (尽人事, 听天命) (Xu, 1981, pp. 133). It means one may give his best to his undertakings, but the success of them is up to heaven. This is the anthropo-cosmic vision of the Chinese people, or Chinese humanism. It is arguably different from Western anthropological thought, or Western humanism, which is characterized by a *ren-ding-sheng-tian* (人定胜天) mentality (Zhou, 2006, pp. 25), meaning it is commonly believed in the West that human actions may override the forces of heaven in the determination of the outcome of actions (*ren-ding-sheng-tian*; 人定胜天). Such a human-centered, or human-overriding-heavenly-forces worldview of the West is arguably the root cause of a common realist mentality in contemporary international affairs: the strong does what it desires, the weak accepts what it must (Korab-Karpowicz, 2017). This means in Western-humanism-dominated practices and discourses of international relations, it is commonly believed that the strong always triumphs over the weak, due to its superiority in strength.

The Chinese disagrees. To them, the wise shall only do what they could, leaving the outcome of their actions to Heaven (*zhe zhi, jin ren shi, shun tian ming*; 择智, 尽人事, 顺天命) (Qiu, 2019). This is because the Chinese believe, or indeed knew that whatever they wish to do, or whatever the course of development of their action, is up to (has already been decided by) heaven, because men were united with heaven (*tian-ren-he-yi*; 天人合一) before it was born, or all humanity was but the son of heaven and earth. Therefore, it is argued that all men, and not just the emperor, is the son of heaven (and earth), and hence the need for all men to love each other, and embrace each other (each other’s existence), including their surroundings, to fulfil their love of heaven, as the children of heaven. This is the spirit, and essence of Chinese humanism.

I shall now discuss the ideals of the Chinese on humanity, which stems from two important perspectives of Confucius on humanity, namely *tian-xia-da-tong* (天下大同) (Bao, 2017), which means the unity of all-under-heaven, and *he-er-bu-tong* (和而不同) (Bao, 2017), meaning the harmony of diverse elements. It is proposed that the Chinese worldview



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shall be able to maintain his rule on all-under-heaven; governing the world with sheer authority, and one shall not lose his rule of all-under-heaven. Acting without hesitation, and the heavenly gods and spirits shall always be with you. Those who'd possessed the six virtues as mentioned, may proceed to rule all-under-heaven.

This is the spirit of Chinese humanism, and perhaps the spirit of those who have governed, or are governing, all-under-heaven.

## Notes

[1] Meaning that it focused mostly on human rights and security.

[2] Note the "ideals of humanity" mentioned here had arguably a slightly different conceptual orientation compared to "humanitarian ideals" or humanitarianism, for it had a broader ontological focus than the concept of humanitarian intervention. This is because the "ideals of humanity" within moral realism was oriented towards the common concerns of humanity, or all-under-heaven (Yan, 2015, pp. 11), as (will be) illustrated in the latter-half of the sentence, rather than focusing merely on the promotion of human rights values characteristic of humanitarianism. The difference argued here merits a more detailed discussion on the difference between the Western idea of humanitarianism and Chinese ideals on humanity, or simply Chinese humanism. Put simply, how did the Chinese understand the "common concerns of humanity, or all-under-heaven" and how might it differ from Western ideals such as universal human rights? In what ways might the Chinese understanding of "ideals of humanity" be different, and possibly broader and more inclusive, than the Western ideal of humanitarianism?

[4] This means the spirit of Pan Gu (盘古) contains both heaven and earth inside him, or *tian-ren-he-yi* (天人合一).

[5] Lao Tzu is believed to be the founder of Taoism.

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