

# 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, 不往教止) 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*; 竭智尽人事, 顺天应命) (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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on harmony and the unity of diversity was inspired by the following ancient Chinese saying on the harmony of diversity, which reads: *fu he shi sheng wu, tong ze bu ji. Yi ta ping ta wei zhi he, gu neng feng zhang er wu sheng zhi. Ruo yi tong bai tong, jin nai qi yi* (周, 2006, pp. 25). It means the following:

Therefore, harmony shall bring life to earth, while the attempt to create sameness will not last. Harmony is the allowing of diverse elements to be counterbalanced by one other, which produces growth while generating life and vitality. If sameness is being enforced, all shall be disposed eventually.

This is the spirit of the Chinese, which welcomes and embraces the diversity of all-under-heaven. It differs from Western thought which attempts to enforce sameness on the diversity of humanity. The West's parochialism of an *end of history* (Fukuyama, 1992) characterized by the enforcement of liberal-democratic governance upon the world, through humanitarian intervention and other forms of practices, is but one example of the West's attempt to bring about sameness to the world, whose beauty and vitality rests upon its vivid diversity. The propositions of Samuel Huntington (1993) on the *clash of civilizations*, though apparently distinguishable from Francis Fukuyama's *end of history*, rests upon the same Aristotelian-Hegelian dialectical logic of separation, boundedness, and differentiation, albeit with a different intensity. It means while Francis Fukuyama had proposed the erasing of diversity for a *world of liberal democracy*, Samuel Huntington had merely proposed a *world of clashes between diversities*. Both stem from the Aristotelian-Hegelian tradition of dialectics, though Francis Fukuyama's theory seems to resemble more of the Hegelian dialectics of *elimination*, while Samuel Huntington's theory appears to reflect better the Aristotelian dialectics of *differentiation*. Both of them stress the elimination or separation of diversities, instead of the *bringing about of diversities*, as was emphasized in the Chinese dialectics of inclusiveness, mutuality and interrelatedness, which is best visualized through the intercourse of two fishes, A and B, or *Yin* and *Yang*, which produces harmony, unity and humanity.

In prior writings I remarked that the US has misjudged its China policy due to its entrenchment in an illusion that China will democratize and play by international rules designed by the United States, which stems from a parochial belief in the *end of history*. Hence, all successes of its China policy, or engagement with China, were judged based on the degree of China's adopting liberal-democracy and Western-designed international rules. I also remarked that the US' parochialism is probably less grave compared to China's global policy such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which might resemble a resurrection of the tributary system of China, where all-under-heaven kowtows to the Chinese dragon (Chang, 2017). I argue that the US' unfounded idealism stems from a deep-seated Western belief in the zero-sum nature of international politics, which was rooted in the Aristotelian-Hegelian dialectical thinking. This is different from the Chinese dialectical thinking of mutuality, interrelatedness, and win-win, which was rooted in a belief in the unity of heaven, earth and humanity. Based on Chinese humanism, I suggest that the West's governance of all-under-heaven is characterized by the enforcement of its beliefs on all-under-heaven, which shall result in the *disposal of all*, including itself. The ancient sages have cautioned against the *enforcement of sameness upon all*, and have appealed that the only way life and vitality could be brought forth was through the allowance of *one element to be counterbalanced by another*, meaning the only way the vividness and livelihood our mother earth could be preserved, is by maintaining the diversity of all-under-heaven.

The following saying of Jiang Zi Ya (姜子牙), a sage-general of the Shang dynasty may serve as an advice to those who'd aspire to govern all-under-heaven: *da gai tian xia, ran hou neng rong tian xia; xin gai tian xia, ran hou neng yue tian xia; ren gai tian xia, ran hou neng huai tian xia; en gai tian xia, ran hou neng bao tian xia; quan gai tian xia, ran hou neng bu shi tian xia; shi er bu yi, ze tian yun bu neng yi, shi bian bu neng qian. Ci liu zhe bei, ran hou ke wei tian xia zheng* (《周易》) (English Translation Group of *Qunshu Zhiyao* 360, 2012, pp. 90-91). It reads as follows:

Embracing the world with big-heartedness, and one shall be able to include all-under-heaven within his heart; leading the world with trustworthiness, and one shall be able to put all-under-heaven into order; leading the world with compassion, and one's grace shall fill every corner of the world; leading the world with a rewarding spirit, and one

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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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