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## **A Way of Thinking and Living Called Chinese**

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## A Way of Thinking and Living Called Chinese\*

MANUEL B. DY

I would like to begin this talk with a confession and an apology. My confession: I am a Filipino, not full blooded — because my father is a pure Chinese — but a Filipino, nevertheless, who has never been to China, Communist or Nationalist. At most, my visit to any place Chinese is Ongpin, our Chinatown. I did study in a Chinese school in the province, but my education there was not pure Chinese: The curriculum was half Chinese which I abhorred at that time, and half English. And outside the environment was Filipino. And, so, my apology: I am by no means an authority on the Chinese mind. I don't even know if my mind, my way of thinking is Chinese. I admit it is a mixture, a hodge-podge of so many cultures, Chinese, Filipino, American, European. My interest in Chinese philosophy is recent and mostly academic. It grew out of a fascination with reading Confucius, Mencius, the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* and with watching so many Kung-Fu movies, Bruce Lee's and Meng Fei's. My master's thesis on the 16th century Chinese philosopher Wang Yang-Ming was a culminating point of that academic interest and a springboard for a more experiential synthesis of the East and the West, of all that has made me, me.

I accepted the invitation of Mr. Tinio to give this talk because I thought it might well be an opportunity for me to resolve a tension I have been experiencing for quite a long time: the tension of being Chinese-Filipino, or more accurately of being a western-educated Chinese-Filipino. In fact, as I am preparing

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this talk, I am experiencing a tension, the tension, anxiety, of a speaker about to give a talk on some topic he himself is not so clear about. But perhaps, the vagueness comes from the fact that the lecturer has somehow lived the topic. We often say: it is difficult to say what one has lived through, and so easy to say what one has not.

And so, I would prefer to consider this talk as a kind of search, a *re-search* into a past and a present of a way of thinking and living, called chinese. As in so many philosophical searches, I do not intend to be definitive, dogmatic, and exhaustive.

I remember hearing a parable in my high school days entitled "How the Fool Moved Mountains." It goes something like this:

Taihang and Wangwu Mountains are some seven hundred lie around, and hundreds of thousands of feet high.

North of these mountains lived an old man of nearly ninety, who was called the Fool. His house faced these mountains, and he found it very inconvenient to have to make a detour each time he went out and came back; so one day he summoned his family to discuss the matter.

"Suppose we work together to level the mountains?" he suggested. "Then we can open a road southward to the back of the Han River."

To this they all agreed. Only his wife was dubious.

"You haven't the strength to level even a small hill," she objected. "How can you move these two mountains? Besides, where will you dump all the earth and rocks?"

"We'll dump them in the sea," was the reply.

Then the Fool set out with his son and grandson, the three of them carrying poles. They dug up stones and earth, and carried them in baskets to the sea. A neighbour of theirs named Ching was a widow with a son of seven or eight, and this boy went with them to help them. It took them several months to make one trip.

A man living at the river bend, who was called the Wise Man, laughed at their efforts and did his best to stop them.

"Enough of this folly!" he cried. "How stupid this is! Old and weak as you are, you won't be able to remove even a fraction of the mountains. How can you dispose of so much earth and stones?"

The Fool heaved a long sigh,

"How dull and dense you are!" he said. "You haven't even the sense of the widow's young son. Though I shall die, I shall leave behind me my son, and my son's son, and so on from generation to generation. Since these mountains can't grow any larger, why shouldn't we be able to level them?"

Then the Wise Man had nothing to say.

I find this story of Leih Tzu very indicative of the Chinese mind or spirit.

First, the two main characters of the story are the Fool and the Wise. A perennial problem throughout the history of chinese philosophy is the question of sagehood and kingliness, of sageliness within and kingliness without. One must have both, self-possession and involvement with what is outside oneself. In fact, one can only be a sage within if he is a king outside; one can only be one with oneself if he is one with others. And vice versa, one can only be a king outside if he is a sage within, one can only be in harmony with others if he is one with himself.

In the story I recounted to you, the problem can be posed in this way: who is the better sage and king? The so-called Fool or the so-called Wise? The story seems to suggest that the Fool proved to be wiser than the Wise. But what is the criteria for wisdom, or for sagehood?

The answer lies in the second characteristic of the chinese mind: practicality. Almost everything of chinese literature deals with either the meaning of living or the purpose of life. Philosophy, art, literature — these are inseparable from life. Confucius was once asked by one of his disciples regarding what lies in the next life, and he said, "not understanding life, why understand death?"

The Fool, though he was nearing ninety, was concerned with a very practical problem of moving the mountains so he would not have to make a long detour. Being a fool, he did not have the ingenuity that most Filipinos have — the ingenuity of moving the house instead of the mountains. But he was practical. He proved to be wiser than the Wise because his reasoning was more practical than the Wise. He may not be able to level the mountain in his lifetime, but his son and his son's son can. The mountains cannot grow any larger, but he certainly can perpetuate himself.

To many of us the Fool will still sound impractical. This is because we have learned from our western way of thinking to equate the practical with the scientific. Indeed the Fool was far from being scientific. He did not have the scientific mind to think of bulldozers and other types of machinery to level the mountains. Science was never the discovery of the chinese or the

East. Science began in the West. It could only come from a type of thinking which separates the ego from the non-ego, a type of thinking we call analytic. The analytic mind presupposes a distance, a detachment from nature to be able to objectify it, split it into parts, transform it and use it for man's needs. The chinese mind, though it does not discard the use of analysis, is predominantly synthetic. It seeks for the harmony of the subject and the object, for man and nature, and fellowman, for knowledge and action. It's logic is not the logic of "either-or" but of "both-and." Listen to this quotation from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*:

To yield is to be preserved whole

To be bent is to become straight

To be empty is to be full

To be worn out is to be renewed.

To have little is to possess

To have plenty is to be perplexed

Therefore the sage embraces the One

And becomes the model of the world

He does not show himself; therefore he is luminous

He does not justify himself; therefore he becomes prominent

He does not boast of himself; therefore he is given credit

He does not brag; therefore he can endure for long

It is precisely because he does not compete that the world cannot compete with him

Is the ancient saying, "To yield is to be preserved whole," empty words? Truly he will be preserved and (prominence, etc.) will come to him.

To the Western analytical mind, it is inconceivable how one can be bent and straight at the same time, empty and full, worn out and renewed. And yet isn't it true that one can only be straightened if one is bent; he can only be filled if he is empty, renewed if he is worn out? For the intuitive mind of the chinese, a mind not in distance from but in harmony with nature, life can neither be black nor white but shades of gray or better, technicolor.

It is unfortunate that I have to use the word "mind," or "spirit" to describe to you the essentiality of the chinese. The word "mind" brings up at once its counterpart, action, and the word "spirit," its counterpart, matter. But for the chinese, these are all one, mind and action, spirit and matter are one. The chinese character for what is usually translated as mind is

“hsin” (心) which literally means “heart.” Our Tagalog word “kalooban” is nearer to it than the word “mind.” “Hsin” stands for what is innermost in man, the inner core of man’s being. Thought, Feeling, Will are united in the central core of man, hsin.

Let us go back to the Fool, he was practical not in the sense of being scientific, but in the sense of praxis — of bringing his thought into action. After all, isn’t “praxis” the very root word of “practical”? Thought is meaningless unless it is completed in action. Wang Yang-ming, a 16th century chinese philosopher, said “Knowledge is the beginning of action, action the completion of knowledge,” and again, “Knowledge is the direction for action, action the effort of knowledge.”

It is interesting to note and speculate that in chinese mythical thought, the five basic elements that constitute the universe are water, fire, earth, metal and wood; whereas for the Greeks from where western civilization arose, they were, I believe, water, fire, earth, apeiron, and air. Air and apeiron, something boundless, are missing in chinese mythical thought, while metal and wood are absent in the Greeks. Does this not somehow reveal the difference of the two types of thinking? While Greek or western thinking is abstract, speculative, “airy,” the chinese is concrete, practical, earthy.

The synthetic intuitive character of the chinese “hsin” brings me to my fourth important point: the ethical or moral trait of the chinese. The chinese is reluctant to make distinctions because he cannot divorce philosophy from life. As I said in my thesis, for the chinese, the question of true and false is inevitably linked up with the question of good and evil. If Socrates can say, “the unexamined life is not worth living,” the chinese will say, “the unethical life is not worth living.” Listen to these words from Confucius:

Riches and honour are what men desire, but if they cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and meanness are what men dislike, but if they cannot be avoided in the proper way, they should be accepted (Analects, Book IV)

And again,

A righteous man thinks of virtue and abides by the law; a mean person

cares only for his comfort and indulges in taking favors. (Analects, Le Jin)

This ethical mind pervades the whole of chinese literature and life. I cannot remember any story in my grade school and high school that did not have a moral lesson. After reading a story, the teacher was bound to ask, and we expected it, "how, what is the moral lesson of the story?" (It was only in my college years in the Ateneo that, to my surprise at the beginning, I was trained to look down at moralistic short stories as poor quality short stories.) I also remember in my grade school days, that before the classes begin right after the flag ceremony, the head teacher would give some sort of demonstration of the proper way of bowing or of giving something to a superior or a friend (always with both hands to a superior, and with the right hand to a friend). There was always a proper way of doing things. The virtuous life is worth living, and the virtuous man, even if he lives in poverty, is the happy man.

The chinese loves to talk of virtues, of the four or five cardinal virtues of *jen* ( 仁 ) translated as love or benevolence, righteousness, *li* ( 禮 ) propriety, *chih* ( 智 ) wisdom, and *hsin* ( 信 ) faith. These virtues are inherent in man, as basic to man as his four limbs. The philosopher Mencius once said that man is basically good, this inherent goodness is what makes man equal to another. It is only in practice that men differ and become unequal. He likens human nature to the Bull Mountain: The Bull Mountain was once covered with lovely trees. But it is near the capital of a great state. People came with their axes and choppers; they cut the woods down, and the mountain has lost its beauty. Yet even so, the day air and the night air came to it, rain and dew moistened it till here and there fresh sprouts began to grow. But soon cattle and sheep came along and browsed on them, and in the end the mountain became gaunt and bare, as it is now. And seeing it thus gaunt and bare people imagine that it was woodless from the start. Now just as the natural state of the mountain was quite different from what now appears, so too in every man (little though they may be apparent) there assuredly were once feelings of decency and kindness, and if these good feelings are no longer there, it is that they have been tampered with, hewn down with axe and bill. As each day dawns they are assailed anew. What chance then has our nature, any more than that mountain, of keeping its beauty? To us, too, comes the air of day, the air of night. Just at dawn, indeed, we have for a moment and in a certain degree a mood in which our promptings and

aversions came near to being such as are proper to men. But something is sure to happen before the morning is over, by which these better feelings are ruffled or destroyed. And in the end, when they have been ruffled again and again, the night air is no longer able to preserve them, and soon our feelings are as near as may be to those of beasts and birds; so that anyone might make the same mistake about us as about the mountain, and think that there was never any good in us from the start. (Mencius VI, 1)

Goodness then is inherent in man, but humanity has to be preserved, extended, practiced. Of all the basic virtues proper to man as man, the most important of them is *jen*, often translated as love, and rightly so because the character is made up of two other chinese characters, "man" and "two." *Jen* stands for the interpersonal relationship of man, of love, benevolence, reciprocity.

The unique character of chinese ethics is that it is predominantly social, interpersonal. It emphasizes man's duties and obligation to fellowman rather than his rights and freedom. Once Confucius was asked by his disciple, Tsu-kung, "Is there one word that I can use all my life as a motto for my behavior?" And the Master said, "The word reciprocity should do. What you do not want or do to yourself, you must not do to others."

The root of this social ethical life is filial piety and brotherly respect. The *Doctrine of the Mean* says:

Love is the characteristic element of humanity and its greatest exercise is in loving thy parents. Righteousness is acting according to what is right, and its greatest exercise is in honouring the worthy. (Doctrine of the Mean, Ch. 19)

Nowhere in the history of philosophy has the interpersonal and the family been more emphasized than in chinese philosophy. Watch any chinese Kung-Fu movie, and you will find that the plot always revolves around some family feud — a son avenging his father's death, or a pupil seeking vengeance over his Master's death under the hands of an enemy. The Master was considered the father of the martial arts clan. For the chinese, the root of all social relationships lies in the family. There are in the chinese system five basic human relationships: father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother,

sovereign-subject and friend-friend. Of the five, however, that of filial piety and brotherly respect constitute the very root of all other social relationships. All other social relationships are extensions, branches of filial piety and brotherly respect. In the words of the *The Great Learning*, a text used for the education of the adult,

From the loving example of one family, a whole state can become benevolent; and from its courtesies, the whole state can become courteous. On the other hand, from the greed and perverseness of one man, the whole state may be led to disorder. (*The Great Learning*, chap. 9)

It is true that these family ties can be carried to an extreme in business and politics: somebody is given a position or favor because he happens to be a relative, a member of the clan. Anybody outside the family clan, no matter how deserving he may be, is rejected. But this has never been the moral ideal of the chinese. Ssu-ma Ch'ien, the ancient chinese historian, said, A wise superior will not give any undeserved positions to his relatives. He will pay fairly according to performance and only put the most capable man into office. (*The Historical Records*)

If a chinese prefers to give a position or favor to a relative rather than to a stranger, it is because he can trust his relative more than the stranger. After all, how can one learn to love, respect and trust a stranger unless he first love, respect and trust the ones near to him, his father and his brother, his family? By all means, of course, this love for the family has to be extended to the neighborhood, to the nation, and to the world.

To go back to our story of the Fool who wanted to move the mountains. He was indeed a typical Chinese fool who had to carry his "foolishness" to his family. He wouldn't be chinese if he tried to move the mountains alone. His foolishness was a family affair and had to extend to the widow's son. And the widow's son had the chinese decency not to question the old Fool. It was but ethical to respect and help the old man and his family.

One can ask if the chinese have ever some sense of spirituality. To this my reply would be "yes." The ancient chinese believed in Heaven, "langit". Heaven was a concept that verges sometimes on the natural and the anthropological. But as a whole, the

chinese never preoccupied themselves with religion — what took the place of religion in other civilizations was philosophy. Nowadays, if ever a chinese becomes religious, it was for practical purposes: to win the favor of some person of that religion in a business contract or simply to gain good fortune in business. That is why it is possible for a chinese to hear Mass in a Catholic church on a Sunday and to recite the Buddhist chant on a chinese temple on a Monday. And if you have been to the Taoist Temple in Cebu, you will notice that the Temple contains not only images of Taoist gods but also of Buddha as well. One can imagine what dialogues these gods must have!

If the chinese hardly bother themselves with spirituality, what then is their concept of immortality? The answer lies in the reply of the Fool to the query of the Wise: "Though I shall die, I shall leave behind me my son, and my son's son, and so on from generation to generation." Man can immortalize himself by leaving behind him to his children and his children's children his goodness, his truth, his name. This the mountains cannot do; they cannot grow any larger.

And so the Wise man had nothing to say. He had nothing to say because the Fool had captured the very essence of the chinese spirit — humanism. It is a unique brand of humanism, different from the rugged individualistic humanism of the Renaissance. The humanism of the chinese is a humanism that seeks for an inner tranquility within by harmonizing oneself with nature and fellowman, a humanism that is practical, synthetic, ethical and interpersonal. If there is anything that counts in china, it is man, people — not man versus man, man against society; nor man versus nature, but man with fellowman, man with nature. Confucius said, "It is man that can make the Way great, and not the Way that can make man great." (15:28) And man to the chinese can make the way great if he persists and perseveres. In the words of 19th century Neo-Taoist Leung Chi Chao (1873–1929):

There is no definite route to success or failure as they are very intricate. Generally speaking, if you want to know why some people succeed, and some fail, the only answer is: people who persevere and persist will

succeed, while those who do not, will fail. (On Persistency; Leung Chi Chao)

The ideal man to the chinese is likened to the bamboo. It bends and bends with the wind but never breaks, always seeking for a mean between the ground and the sky. The chinese will not despair in times of misery nor over-joy in times of prosperity. He will stay in the middle, harmonizing the two extremes.

And so we conclude, the Fool will succeed in moving the mountains.