

A Philosophical Defense of Culture: Perspectives from Confucianism and Cassirer.

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Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese scholars have been trying to make Chinese thought look like Western philosophy. From Hu Shi's 胡適 *Main Themes of the History of Chinese Philosophy* (*Zhongguo zhhexueshi dagang* 中國哲學史大綱) and Feng Youlan's 馮友蘭 *History of Chinese Philosophy* (*Zhongguo zhexue shi* 中國哲學史) to Li Zehou's 李澤厚 *The Arrival of Chinese Philosophy* (*Li Zehou duihuaqi: Zhongguo zhexue dengchang* 李澤厚對話集：中國哲學登場),¹ Chinese thinkers have been earnestly looking for ways to give Chinese thought a "philosophical look." To achieve this goal, Chinese thinkers adopt the Western philosophical approach to analyse Chinese thought. They divide their subjects of inquiry into cosmology, epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, and ontology, as what their Western counterparts normally do. To further liken the Chinese thought to Western philosophy, they use Western concepts to present Chinese thought. Hence, the yin-yang cosmology in early China is understood from the perspective of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, the Learning of the Deep (*xuanxue* 玄學) of the Wei-Jin period is seen through the lens of Martin Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, and the Song-Ming neo-Confucianism is discussed on the basis of Kantian philosophy and Hegelian dialectics. In retrospect, these attempts at transforming Chinese thought into Western philosophy are successful and fruitful. They legitimize Chinese thought as a rigorous philosophical enterprise and globalize it as an arena for transnational, cross-cultural exchanges.

To a large extent, Shuchen Xiang's *A Philosophical Defense of Culture: Perspectives from Confucianism and Cassirer* can be seen as another attempt to match Chinese thought with Western philosophy. Rather than a simple pairing up of one specific form of Chinese thought with one particular form of Western philosophy, this matching is more nuanced and multifaceted. It connects Ernst Cassirer's philosophy with the Confucian philosophy of culture (*wen* 文) dated back to second century B.C.E. The goal of this pairing is to present the entire Confucian tradition through the lens of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, showing that Confucianism has been for centuries a quest for understanding the world through a system of symbols.

¹ Hu Shi, *Zhongguo zhhexueshi dagang* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1919); Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhexue shi* (Commercial Press, 1934); Li Zehou, *Li Zehou duihuaqi: Zhongguo zhexue dengchang* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014).

Considering its scope and scale, Xiang's comprehensive matching is daring and ambitious. Its starting point is Cassirer's well-known argument: Human beings are "symbolic animals." In his influential article, "'Geist' and 'Life,'" Cassirer describes human existence as a constant battle between the vicissitudes of life (Life) and the symbols that are deployed to make sense of human existence (Form).² While the former is "objective" involving empirical data and concrete facts in the tangible world, the latter is "subjective" based on a man-made system of symbols to represent the external reality to the perceivers. For Cassirer, it is this constant tension between what is external and internal, factual and representational, objective and subjective, realistic and idealistic, that characterizes the complexity and creativity of human existence. To encapsulate this tension, Cassirer tells us that "Life is thus caught up in a contradiction, that it can only be accommodated in forms, and yet it cannot be accommodated in form."³ To him, the only way to resolve this tension is to strike a balance between "the immediacy of life" and "the mediacy of thought." He writes,

. . . life must be seen as returning to itself, it "comes to itself" in the medium of the symbolic forms. It possesses and grasps itself in the imprint of form as the infinite possibility of formation, as the will to form and power to form. Even life's limitation becomes its own act; what from outside seems to be its fate, its necessity, proves to be a witness to its freedom and self-formation.⁴

Driven by this quest to balance Life and Form, necessity and freedom, Cassirer considers our existence a continuous endeavour to revise our system of symbols as we learn more about our surroundings. As a result, when our understanding of outside reality changes, we alter our system of symbols; conversely, when we alter our system of symbols, we change our perception of the world. In this continuum between Life and Form, necessity and freedom, Cassirer urges us to develop our "Will to Formation" to align our understanding of the world with our system of symbols.⁵ To him, the "Will to Formation" is more important than the "Will to Power" as Nietzsche suggests, because it helps us come to terms with the plurality and ambiguity in life.⁶

² See Ernst Cassirer, "'Geist' and 'Life,'" in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, edited by John Michael Krois and Donald Philip Verene (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 3–33.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–33.

Here, Shuchen Xiang sees a direct parallel between Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic form and the Confucian project of culture. Even though the two philosophical systems are separated by centuries and continents, Xiang finds them sharing a common interest that transcends temporal and spatial differences. "As 'symbolic animals' (in Cassirerian terms) or people of *wen* (in Confucian terms)," Xiang writes, "we are inherently *cultural* beings, and implicit in this definition is a way of thinking about personhood that gives an important role to pluralism in our identities while acknowledging a fundamental commensurability" (p. 3). In this pairing, culture (or *wen*) is the link between Cassirer's philosophy and the Confucian project. She admits that this link is not explicit at first glance and that a "philosophical translation" is necessary to highlight their similarity (p. 4). Nevertheless, the philosophical translation is worth trying for two reasons. First, Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms will provide "a vocabulary of critical idealism" that helps situate the Confucian project of culture within current debates in Western philosophy. Second, the Confucian project of culture will highlight Cassirer's "ethical undercurrent" that became more prominent at the end of his life (pp. 6–7).

The result of this pairing is astounding and inspiring. Not only do readers gain a deeper understanding of the Confucian project of culture and the hidden ethical concern of late Cassirer, they also see the importance of symbols in their lives. The ultimate goal of the Cassirer-Confucian comparison, Xiang argues, goes beyond making Chinese philosophy look Western. Rather, it is to find a more balanced definition of human beings in our globalized world. Instead of defining human beings by emphasizing their "fundamental sameness" (such as their rational capacity) or their "ontological differences" (such as their racial differences), Xiang suggests us to use symbols (including those in fine arts, language, poetry, and music) to reveal the underlying commonality among human beings. To her, through the diversity and openness of symbols, human beings will be able to find unity on the one hand, and develop an acceptance of differences on the other. "The empirical fact is that," Xiang asserts, "there has *always* been a plurality of cultures and that cultures, through mutual engagement, absorb and transform each other" (p. 3).

Furthermore, Xiang intends to find a new role for philosophy in our contemporary world. She writes:

The ultimate aim of this project, however, is to transcend the national boundaries in which contemporary philosophy conceives itself. . . . Philosophy is an activity that characterizes all human beings, that is, a systematic attempt to think about the human being's relationship to the world. A truly "universal" philosophy needs to earn its name by actually seeking to include the totality of humanity. This project aspires to be philosophy written under such a cosmopolitan mode." (p. 7)

To her, there is no better question for all human beings than the one Cassirer raises: “How do we understand the world and conduct our lives if we accept that we are symbolic animals?” On this score, Xiang is right. Both Cassirer and Confucian thinkers view the constant struggle between the “immediacy of life” and the “mediacy of thought” as an enriching force and a living spring. This struggle pushes human beings to renew, reinvent, and recreate themselves daily in responding to the ever-changing world. For Cassirer, the struggle gives rise to the “Will to Formation”; for Confucian thinkers, it leads to an “organic harmony” between human beings and nature. And yet, in both scenarios, human beings are seen as being partially conditioned by the outside world, and being partially free to create their own (perceived) world.

In *A Philosophical Defense of Culture*, Xiang tries her best to locate Cassirer’s argument in various Chinese texts. After a summary of Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms (Chapter 1), she uses Cassirer’s argument as a guide to interpret the “Great Treatise” (*Xici* 繫辭) of the *Book of Changes* 易經 (Chapter 2), the “Great Preface” (*Mao shi xu* 毛詩序) to the *Book of Odes* 詩經 (Chapter 3), the famous literary texts *Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍) and “The Origins of *Wen*” (*Wen yuan* 文原) (Chapter 4), and finally, the quintessential Confucian text, the *Analects* 論語 (Chapter 5). Throughout the book, Xiang does not explicitly explain her choice of the texts or the sequence with which she discusses these texts. Nevertheless, judging from the titles of the chapters, Xiang hints that each of these texts provides a glimpse of matching Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms with the Confucian project of culture. Thus, the “Great Treatise” of the *Book of Changes* tells us about “giving (symbolic) form to phenomena,” the “Great Preface” to the *Book of Odes* informs us of “giving (poetic) form to *Qing* 情,” the literary texts *Carving of Dragons* and “The Origins of *Wen*” acquaints us with “giving (linguistic) form to *Dao*,” and the *Analects* inspires us for “giving (human) form to the self.” Together, these Chinese texts bring forth one of the fundamental arguments in Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, namely human beings use a variety of symbols (including visual arts, literary writing, poetry, and ritualized behaviour) to represent the outside world. In the Confucian tradition, these different forms of symbols are collectively known as *wen*, culture.

Yet, by casting her net far and wide when discussing the Confucian project of culture, Xiang appears at times unsure of what the Confucian project of culture really means. First, in terms of text selection, it is highly problematic to call the “Great Treatise” of the *Book of Changes* a Confucian text. Compiled in the third to the second century B.C.E., the “Great Treatise” is a collection of passages from writers of different strides. There are indeed passages from the Confucian writers; but there are also passages from the Daoist and yin-yang writers as well. The biggest problem is that to this day, scholars have not reached a consensus on how to classify the *Great Treatise*. This uncertainty about the nature of the text also applies to the *Carving of Dragon*. Written by Liu Xie 劉勰 (c. 465–c. 520) during the Northern and Southern Dynasties

period, the text is partly Confucian and partly Daoist due to the milieu of the times. It would be more accurate if Xiang uses the text to discuss the philosophy of scholars of the Learning of the Deep (*xuanxue* 玄學) or neo-Daoism rather than the Confucian project of culture.

This uncertainty about text nature is also extended to the *Analects*. As Confucianism evolved from classical Confucianism of Confucius's times (approximately sixth century B.C.E.) to state Confucianism of the Han-Tang period (second century B.C.E. –tenth century C.E.), to Neo-Confucianism of the Song-Yuan-Ming-Qing period (eleventh century–nineteenth century), the *Analects* was given different interpretations in response to the changing socio-cultural perspectives. One of the pivotal changes was Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) compilation of the Four Books, joining the *Analects* with the *Great Learning* 大學, *Mencius* 孟子, and *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸 to form a new canon for the Cheng-Zhu school of neo-Confucianism. In Xiang's discussion of the *Analects*, it is unclear whether she analyses the *Analects* from the perspective of state-Confucianism of the Han-Tang period, or neo-Confucianism of the Song-Yuan-Ming-Qing period. This ambiguity affects the accuracy in her analysis of the *Analects*.

In the end, these textual issues reveal a fundamental problem in Xiang's Cassirer-Confucian dialogue. Despite her good intention, the dialogue is structurally imbalanced. By juxtaposing one European philosopher with the entire Confucian tradition, the dialogue covers literally everything under the sun on the China side. With so many different schools and trends within the Confucian tradition, and with so many mixing between Confucianism on the one hand and Daoism and Buddhism on the other, it is difficult to discuss the Confucian project of culture as if it is a homogeneous philosophical project. Rather than having a Cassirer-Confucian dialogue on culture, it would have been better if Xiang would reframe her study as either *broadly* as a Cassirer-Chinese dialogue that allows her to pick freely any text she likes, or *narrowly* as a dialogue between Cassirer and the authors of the "Great Treatise" which she devotes more than sixty pages to discuss (see Chapters 1–2).

This problem aside, *A Philosophical Defense of Culture* remains a profound book. First, for readers who are interested in sinology (the study of China in Western academia), they will benefit from Xiang's sharp criticisms of some sinologists (such as Michael Puett, Mark Edward Lewis, and Willard Peterson) who misread Chinese texts because they are preoccupied with a narrow definition of language as a reflection of the empirical world (pp. 25–27). They also find inspiration from Xiang's heart-warming praises to other sinologists (such as Pauline Yu, Andrew Plaks, and Stephen Owen) who take pains in insisting on the absence of allegory in Chinese poetics due to the Chinese dynamic view of the universe (p. 103). Although occasionally Xiang may appear harsh and overbearing in examining sinologists' writings, it is refreshing to find her offering a clear and consistent yardstick to compare sinologists' views. In the field of sinology where stellar academic stars dominate, it is rare to hear discordant

voices or diverging views about the sinological approaches. For the long-term growth of sinology, it is healthy—and indeed necessary—to hear well-intentioned criticisms such as Xiang's.

Second, *A Philosophical Defense of Culture* raises a fundamental question about how we look at the world and conduct our life if we accept that we are symbolic animals. This is a question that both the Chinese thinkers and Cassirer raise, and this question is significant if we view the world as both empirically real and symbolically represented. Regardless of whether we fully accept the Cassirer question, it is clear that *A Philosophical Defense of Culture* pushes us to think more deeply about the role of symbols in our life and in our globalized world.

Last but not least, the ultimate goal of this Cassirer-Confucian dialogue is to develop a universal philosophy. It aims to join people from different parts of the world for a common quest while preserving their unique cultural and linguistic identities. Today, this noble mission of having a universal philosophy is gravely needed when ethnic nationalism, xenophobia, and racial conflicts are spreading rapidly around the world. We would like to see universal philosophy to flourish as the world becomes increasingly divided by geographical and ideological differences.