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Philosophical Reflections on Cultural Difference

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Introduction

- Reflections on difference, to provoke discussion
- Conference seems to be predicated on the assumption that China and the West inhabit two “totally different” cultural worlds, which are “incommensurable.” There is a hard “barrier” between East and West—a cultural barrier, with its “foundations in different philosophies of life, different ways of thinking, different modes of governing and different perspectives on the world.”
- Against cultural incommensurability

Questioning the incommensurability Thesis

- What is the nature of cultural difference? Is it a difference in kind, or a difference of degree?
- What does it mean to say that Chinese and Western ways of thinking are fundamentally different? Neurological difference, or guided by radically different ideals and basic assumptions? “Moon cakes” are served during the mid-autumn festival, whereas turkey is consumed at Thanksgiving. They are surely different, but why are cultural differences deemed “incommensurable”?
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: Language determines thought and thus, behavior and culture

Argument for incommensurability

“The frameworks between China and the West are so different that the two cultures seem incommensurable. We can find this pessimism reflected in the Chinese language. On one hand, the Chinese refer to barriers such as the **language barrier as 语言障碍 *yuyan zhangai*** (literally: language barrier/obstacle) ... there is the image of an obstacle/gap that can be resolved and overcome. **Yet, when it comes to cultural divides, the Chinese language has only one term to describe it: 文化差异 *wenhua chayi*** (literally: cultural differences or discrepancies). In fact, the use of 差异 *chayi* connotes a very strong sense of “difference.” On their own, 差 *cha* and 异 *yi* already means “different.” By compounding the two words together, the meaning emphasizes that **the differences between cultures are so great, that it is [sic] the differences of all differences, so incommensurable that even the language itself does not offer an image to suggest the slightest hope or possibility that we could ever form a bridge between different cultures.”**

Against incommensurability

- Category mistake: compare “barrier” with “barrier”, not “difference” with “barrier” – cultural difference/*wenhua chayi*, but cultural “barrier”/*wenhua zhang'ai*
- *Chayi* does not necessarily suggest “a very strong sense of ‘difference’” and much less, that *wenhua chayi* “emphasizes that the differences between cultures are so great, that it is [sic] the differences of all differences.”
- In *Records of the Three States*, for example, the phrase *chayi* is used no more than to convey difference in treatment extended to individuals by the state (*juan 4*).

Alleged East-West philosophical differences

Western Tradition	Chinese Tradition
Thinking framed by “What” questions	Thinking framed by “How” questions
Truth is important	Practicality is important
Abstraction is key for arriving at eternal and unchanging, universal principles. Knowledge as abstract principles that are eternal, unchanging, and universal	There are no eternal and unchanging, universal principles. Abstraction only strips away the richness of meaning. Context and content matters greatly
End-states are important. The desired state (whatness) must be defined, and only when these conditions are met, has one arrived at that state	Processes are important. Cycles are to be sustained and preserved
Perfection is an ideal to be constantly strived for	No perfection, but excellence in performance that can be achieved through self-cultivation. Uncertainty is part of life
Ethics based on principles	Ethics without principles
Focus on the individual, the concept of self is an abstraction. Consequently, the conception of the “I” versus the “other,” as opposites	Focus on community. The concept of self is dependent on the context of family and society.

No interest in the “what” in Chinese tradition?

- Zhu Xi (1130–1200): “What is there beyond heaven?” *Analects* 2.4: “At fifty, I came to know the mandate of heaven.” Rituals and institutions of future generations can be known (*Analects* 2.23). “Knowing words” and “knowing men” are key features of Confucian teachings. Emphasis on knowledge; ethical implications, but the “what-how” divide seems overstated. Ethical action not divorced from knowledge. Wang Yangming (1472–1529): “unity of knowledge and action.”
- *Yijing* (Classic of Changes): that which is beyond the realm of form and shape is what is meant by the Dao or Way. Not about “practicality.” The concept of *li*, pattern or principle in Chinese philosophy. Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins published a volume entitled *Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems* (Cambridge UP, 2015).

Chinese language lacking in precision?

- Chinese language rich in “ambiguity” but lacking in “precision”? This also will be difficult to defend. “*Yi, er, san*” means “one, two, three,” regardless of context. “Ambiguity” is an English word, and ambiguity has an important role to play in “Western culture.” Meaning can be extended; there may be irony, *double entendre*, but all these are common features of languages. I can say, “one-two-three (go),” or I can say, “one, two (last chance), three!” In either Chinese or English, with equal effect. It cannot be the case that whereas one language is always context dependent, another language is not. And this applies to behavior as well.
- Studies in philosophy of language on speech acts—J. L. Austin and John Searle: language is not only about propositional content but also carries illocutionary force, the intention to act.

Reflections on cultural difference

- No disagreement that cross-cultural understanding will contribute greatly to minimizing conflicts in the world, whether it is between Louisiana and Maine, between US and Europe, or between China and the West.
- Closer examination of meaning of “culture difference” needed. A fork and a pair of chopsticks are different in form and substance, but they may serve the same function. A ship is different from a plane; a sword is different from a pen; a bird is different from a fish. When we say culture A is different from culture B, do we mean that they are two different species of the same genus, or are they two separate species altogether?
- A “differentia” is a distinguishing element or feature that sets an entity apart from another. Are there distinctive elements in Chinese culture that are absent in Western culture?
- For example, is it the case that filial piety is unique to the Chinese value system, that only the Chinese value kinship ties and honor family obligations, whereas the West does not? I’d imagine that this is not the case. If this is not the case, do we conclude that there are universal values that shape behavior? If it is affirmed that there are certain universal values, does it follow that filial care and concern, for example, is the same in all cultures?

Chicken soup



Common core

- Chicken soup is found in many cultures. Chicken soups are not the same. For example, Jewish chicken soup looks and tastes different from Chinese chicken soup. Korean chicken soup with ginseng has a special flavor. In ordinary language, we would say that these are different kinds of chicken soup. But they are all chicken soup nonetheless. This is because they share a common core, namely, chicken and water.
- Is this a reasonable analogy? Can this be applied to cultures? Is there also a common core in cultures, despite their differences?
- To some, common core may be power (Foucault), or sexuality (Freud); to others, "Heaven," *Xing*-nature, or the Dao. Not to debate which is the correct view here. These concepts are not unrelated, and the core need not be a single idea. The only point to make is that cultures are not "incommensurable," if they have a common core.

Cultural soup

- Chicken soup is not just made of chicken. Again, if ginseng is used as an ingredient, it will create a distinctive taste. What you put into the soup and how you cook it will make a significant difference.
- Root meaning of the word culture: tillage or cultivation.
- In this context, filial piety, for example, does not function in isolation, in any culture; rather, it derives its meaning and significance from the ways in which it interacts with other ingredients in the ethical and social soup, such as norms for proper conduct, attitudes towards non-kin groups, and obligations to the state. Similarly, compassion and justice interact in the weaving of any cultural fabric.

Need for a balanced view

- If a culture seems highly “individualistic,” it does not follow that it “lacks” any sense of relationships. Conversely, if familial ties seem prominent in a culture, it does not mean that it has no sense of an individual “self”.
- Neo-Daoism in early imperial China, for example, reflects a high degree of individualism. Ruan Ji defied tradition in partaking wine and meat at his mother’s funeral. Perhaps this never happened, maybe he was an alcoholic—that’s unimportant; what is important is how such stories are received. Ji Kang calmly played one of his favorite musical pieces before he was executed. They are held up as iconic figures by the Chinese literati—not as individual crazy rebels but as exemplars of a type of ideal that contains a heightened sense of the value of individuality. Lu Xun’s *A Madman’s Diary* is similarly iconoclastic. Lu Xun’s short story may have been influenced by the work of Nikolai Gogol, but this only shows that cultural mixes are always ongoing, evolving.

Need for deeper understanding

- If a culture seems to emphasize “processes,” we should not presume that it does not have sight on “perfection” or ideal “end-states.” When Buddhists pray for rebirth in the Pure Land, they are not thinking of the “process.” Karl Barth (1886–1968), found in Pure Land Buddhism a close parallel to Protestant Christianity, despite the fact that he set out to affirm the uniqueness of the Christian faith. When a Daoist priest summons demon soldiers to his aid, he is thinking of the end result.
- Buddhism is not only about Zen and Daoism ≠ philosophy of the *Daodejing*. Daoist religion can be traced to the Han dynasty. Strong liturgical orientation; organized priesthood; it attends to the needs of the poor, the propitiation of sin, healing and morality. Though polytheistic in scope, devotion is often focused on particular deities (e.g., “Nine Emperor Gods”). Monastic Daoist tradition. The Daoist Canon contains 1,400+ titles. Like other major world religions, Daoism ministers to the both the mind and the heart. With theology, devotion, and activism as key ingredients, the ways in which they are mixed together, and the conditions under which they flourish, like chicken soup, determine the texture and taste of what we call Daoism.

Understanding culture

- Understanding a culture means recognizing its richness and diversity. Culture is a complex system. Ironical while we pursue complexity science, we essentialize culture. In a multicultural society, it is especially important that we do not do this. Understanding rests on careful observation, allowing the tradition to display its full colors. Sweeping comparisons often only create misunderstanding. If you want to drink chicken soup, drink it slowly and savor its rich aroma and taste.
- In a globalized world, new ingredients impact the evolution of culture. Family still the core of Chinese society, but the family today no longer a unit of production, but more a unit of consumption. Urban migration and the effects of the one-child policy are adding to this mix in China today. This gives new flavors to the cultural soup. When new elements are thrown into the mix, strong reaction, but the old and the new are always in the mix in the development of culture.

Comparing culture

- Different, not “incommensurable”. Compare fairly. Compare ideals with ideals, and not ideals with actual practice, which always falls short. If we compare devotional traditions in the different world religions, we may discern a common core and how that becomes different through the mixing and cooking. May also understand better how, for example, evangelical Christianity flourishes in modern Asia, as it strikes a chord already inherent in Asian devotional traditions. If we just compare, say, the philosophy of Plato with Daoist devotion, we would come to the conclusion that they are “totally different.” But that’s only because we are not comparing right.
- Cultural differences not to be underestimated, which makes it even more important for deeper engagement and thicker description of individual cultures before we put them under comparative scrutiny.

Family resemblance

- Notion of “family resemblance”
- Different cultures share a common core, like chicken soup. But the chicken should not be seen as an identical and unchanging essence. Rather, envisage a set of similar core interests and conditions. Kinship, spirituality, labor, play, among others—these are fundamental ingredients of being human. If we highlight any one of them, human beings may appear to us as *homo ludens*, *homo religiosus*, or *homo faber*. But they are always in the soup. Fused with other elements in complex ways, some cultures may appear stronger in one dimension, but it does not mean that they are one-dimensional. Perhaps better to speak of soup in general. Chicken soup and vegetable soup are not incommensurable. Different cultures are connected not because of abstract ideas like Dao or *logos*, but in the way human beings make sense of phenomena, endow meaning and value to them, and interact with one another and the environment.
- *Analects* 13.23: “harmonizing without becoming the same” (*he er bu tong*). Recognizing the commonality of being human, we nonetheless affirm the diversity of cultures. No gulf to bridge, if we don’t create one, only a world to be embraced with its harmony and difference.

Reflections on cultural difference

Discussion