

“The Good Life”

China and the West

Introduction

In this essay I will investigate the relation between the concept of a good life in China versus ‘the West’ and the way society is responding to provide structures and institutions to allow their citizens to pursue their version of a good life. I will argue that China is on a crossroad and that its two most important challenges are reducing the rising inequality and to re-study the value of morality from the ancient Chinese masters.

My assumption is that everyone wants to lead a good life, defined as *eudaimonia*, the ‘succeeded life’ as described in Aristotle’s *Nicomachea Ethics*. Apart from the social aspect that *eudaimonia* is ‘a life with others’, Aristotle points out that we need some external goods as well. Whereas he gives little attention to a possible transcendent aspect of life he investigates the contributions of virtue extensively.

The idea of organising society for a good life has been elaborated further by contemporary western social philosophers like John Rawls and especially Amartya Sen¹ who points out that society needs to organise institutions to allow its citizens the freedom of choice to pursue their version of a good life, “for reasons they value” as he calls it. So what do people value in the west and what do they value in China? How does the western view of ‘personal freedom within a social structure’ compares to the Chinese notion of ‘a moral person in a collective structure’? The first challenge is to compare the concept of a good life since we have to organise society around it. The second step is to compare the ideas of how societies have taken shape in the pursuit of this quest.

1. The Concept of a Good Life

¹ Rawls was mainly concerned with the concept of justice and how to structure society to guarantee all citizens a fair share of the external goods available. Sen specified the importance of the concrete opportunities someone needs to have as well as the process as such, not just the end result, to reach a good life. For references to the works that have been consulted for this paper, see the bibliography.

Both eastern and western philosophers would agree - in contrast with the common neoliberal belief - that the accumulation of external goods to sustain life will not bring the expected 'good life'. If the purpose of life is to attain a good life (and its resulting subjective feeling of 'happiness'), both cultures admit that having external goods is not only necessary but also good in as far as they are desirable for most people, but they hasten to add that external goods alone will not lead to a fulfilling life. Both Mencius and Augustine insist that attention has to be paid to a transcendent dimension, to seeking 'the Truth': a 'moral truth' in China, a speculative knowledge of the Divine in the Christian tradition. Both approaches want to achieve a kind of transcendent life either by unification with an external source (God) as in Christianity or by following an immanent way to develop our *Xin* through *Li* and *Yi* and achieve the Chinese idea of *Tian*. This paper does not allow me to further elaborate this transcendent aspect of the purpose of life, but I want to remark here that for a western eye it is surprising that modern Chinese dialectic materialism (of a 'sinicized' Marxism) concentrates mainly on the distribution of external goods with little or no attention paid to the transcendent aspect (in the broad meaning as 'a spiritual life' in general) whereas this has been the keystone of Chinese civilisation for more than two thousand years. I will come back on this when discussing the political structuring of our societies.

If the way to a good life is a combination of external goods and the pursuit of "the Truth", and if the way to the Truth has, next to the transcendent aspect, the task of becoming a 'good person', let us turn to this second aspect. The Chinese idea of a good person is to become a *Jun-zi*, a 'true man'. It is remarkable how much attention both Confucius and Mencius are giving to this idea of becoming a *moral* person as a way to serve Heaven, *Tian*. And to know "Heaven" is for Mencius the ultimate purpose of life. The person who attained 'Truth' is a *Jun-zi*, a superior being close to the transcendent being of *Tian*. In contrast with the western focus on rationality, Chinese tradition puts the focus on the *morality* of a person. And since no person is perfect, (in Chinese words 'there is not enough of *Tian* in the person, i.e. his *Xin* is not yet good developed), education is the key. But contrasting with the western focus on rationality, in Chinese culture education has first to concentrate on morality and only then on scientific knowledge.

Again, this primacy on moral life seems not to be in line with the Maoist version of the Marxist doctrine with its primacy of phenomenological perception as the basis for rational knowledge via concepts and logical conclusions. Neither it corresponds with western opinion of the rational man who gets ‘insight’ in his moral conduct through scientific knowledge. Remarkable furthermore is that in ancient Chinese writings this idea to become a moral person was in the first place meant for kings and rulers: first comes morality and personal integrity and only when this is achieved a person can rule others. This is certainly a high moral principle that, when applied to world leaders today, not all of them would survive the test.

1.1. Western Transcendence.

Where does that bring us in our quest for a good life? Since the notion of a good life is based on what a culture sees as valuable in a specific temporal/spatial moment in history, we have to focus on the differences between East and West. The individual accumulation of external goods seems prevalent today in western cultures. However, in spite of the decline of the status of transcendence since the beginning of secularisation from mid 17th century, there is still a general although vague feeling among common people in the West that there must be ‘something else’ to life than just the materiality around us, a feeling which is according to some scholars opening doors to ‘new forms’ of transcendence. Responses to this malaise of the immanent do not need to come exclusively from the world of transcendence according to Charles Taylor and other contemporary scholars.

But how to find a ‘deeper’ meaning in life if we do not want to “take the jump” into religion? According to Taylor we can also find a kind of transcendence in working towards a better world or in a new way of looking at nature which he formulates as: “... the project of creating a new world of justice and prosperity. And similarly, without appeal to religion, we can seek to give resonance to the everyday, to nature and the things around us”.² Also Luc

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pag. 310.

Ferry³ refers to a horizontal transcendence replacing the traditional vertical transcendence of Christianity in such a way that the Greek *philia* (as the love within a family and among friends) can be seen as the centre of our natural empathy (just as David Hume did), a feeling that can be extended into ever widening concentric circles encompassing the community, the nation, the world and finally reaching out towards all humankind along the lines of the traditional Christian *agapè*. This, according to Ferry, is a natural connecting power inside each of us, a potential power which governments should use to stimulate community life since this is a necessary part of leading a good life.

1.2. The Chinese Way to Heaven.

In spite of the dialectic materialism and westernisation in contemporary China there still seems to exist a strong ‘moral order’ in Chinese society emphasizing the value of family life, the living together, the community and its old traditions. Developing a moral attitude, expanding the moral sprouts in our *Xin* is the way to the truth of *Tian*, reaching out to the vital energy of *Qi*. Interesting for western scholars are the steps of this dynamic process. First making the right choice of will between the external goods and the authenticity of our *Xin*. Then a return to our inner self and freedom by controlling our desires which will lead to an everyday practice in our lives because *Qi*, the source of everything under the sky, will be running in us like ‘a flood of water’. Practising the symbolic rites and virtues of *Li* helps cultivate morality. This might be translated in the western tradition of individuality as taking care of oneself, one’s body, one’s mental and physical health.

Next to the rituals of *Li* that enhance balance and bring inner peace, our second component, *Yi*, that can be translated as an attitude of righteousness and fairness to everything surrounding us, will enhance our *Xin*. And once a praxis of taking good care both of ourselves and of the direct world around us becomes a natural part of our daily life, we can extend this attitude to the whole world. This sounds similar to Hume’s widening of empathy through concentric circles and Ferry’s extension of *philia* to *agapè*.

³ French philosopher Luc Ferry is making a clear distinction between Eros, *Philia* and *Agapè*. He connects Eros (Plato) with passion and the ‘absence’ of the Other. *Philia* (Aristotle) rejoices the existence of the Other as such. *Agapè* is the universal love for your neighbour as presented in the Gospels. See Luc Ferry, *L’Homme-Dieu ou le Sens de la Vie*.

In Confucianism, perfecting the world starts with perfecting oneself. This is not so different from western culture. Here I want to point out that Christianity has been a dominant but not the only source of influence in western thinking. Perfecting oneself to lead a virtuous life has been an important subject at the various classic Greek philosophical schools long before Christianity. It seems that today both China and the West are trapped in the same ruse, being blinded by the possibility of instant satisfaction of every desire, pursuing a constant stream of ever stronger sensory stimuli but leaving an uneasy emptiness and meaninglessness resulting in stress, burnout and growing suicide numbers. Assuming that constraining our desires and perfecting our human nature is a way to a higher state of life and to the happiness all human beings are pursuing, then how to translate that message in the actual neoliberal paradigm of a direct causal relation of the maximization of external goods leading to more happiness? Since providing the capabilities to its citizens to actually lead a good life is the only purpose of society, we will have to investigate which structures and institutions will respond best to this challenge.

1.3. Education

Confucius, Mencius and Saint Augustine have pointed out that more is needed to lead a good life than the accumulation of external goods. Also Aristotle focuses in nine out of the ten books of his Nicomachean Ethics on the importance of virtues like justice, a good character, friendship and self-control, virtues necessary to live with others in a society. It is amazing that around the same time more than 10.000 km to the east the same ideas on moral conduct were developed.

If a moral attitude can be learned and practised, then education is important. Both ancient Greek and Chinese cultures see education as a key to enhance morality with Mencius focussing more on self education to make us moral persons, a condition for a harmonious society. That means that to achieve a good life, citizens need the right structures and institutions that give them the freedom to choose the life they want to live. These structures and institutions will differ depending on the backgrounds and cultures of a given society and will have to change when the objective conditions are changing. What kind of societies do we need and would they have to be different between the West and China? Would that mean that

we should stimulate citizens to look at specific ways that lead beyond the pursuit of pure materiality? In how far can or should the State intervene to show their citizens the way to a good life away from materialism, without limiting their personal freedom to chose the life they want? It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the interesting discussion whether it is possible to draw a list of “what is already certainly and objectively good”, i.e. can we establish a substantial list of conditions that have to be fulfilled to lead a good life? I just want to point out here that, together with scholars like Elisabeth Anderson and especially Richard Arneson⁴, I believe that working on such a list of what is necessary to lead a good life is possible - admitting that such list will never be final nor complete or fixed – and that these requirements are universal. If, by example, friendship and a good health rank higher on a list of the good than eating cake (example by Arneson), we can start drawing a list of what is certainly already good. Assuming that minimum conditions to lead a good life are universal, how do societies organise themselves in view of their different historical and cultural backgrounds?

2. Structuring Society.

In this second part I will compare some aspects of contemporary Chinese and Western ideas on organising society in view of their only purpose: to provide their citizens the capabilities to lead a good life for reasons they value.

2.1. A Chinese version of Marxism

Classic Marxism focuses on praxis rather than on theory, i.e. on ‘production’ as the foremost source of knowledge, downgrading the importance of separate theoretical knowledge.

Whereas Marx’s analysis is mainly economic in character, Lenin focuses on political action.

And where Lenin’s analysis is the prominent subject in Mao’s essay ‘On Practise’, the separation between praxis and theory is again less clear in Li Da’s comment on Mao’s ‘On

⁴ Richard Arneson is professor philosophy at the University of California, San Diego, USA. He argues that under capitalism, most exchanges have ‘an inherently exploitative character because the benefits end up in the hands of those who do not need it’ as quoted in Wikipedia under the lemma Arneson.. For his essay ‘Two Cheers for Capabilities’, see the bibliography.

Contradiction' lecture of 1937. The basic ideas follow Marx's historic materialism with a so-called bourgeois manipulated spiritual 'Superstructure' that has to be eradicated and replaced by the proletariat's own views based on praxis and on production. However, Li Da draws attention to the importance of formulating a new (theoretical) 'Concept of the World' that conforms with the proletariat's interests. Consequently, a necessity for him is formulating a correct theory without which any action will lack coherence and guidance. However, the danger is that any such theory will (again) fall into an idealist structure if not based on practise, hence the importance to start with the daily reality of production.

Problematic to me is the idea that *all* existing and traditional spiritual views, cultures and philosophies are by definition bourgeois in their totality, not distinguishing into what may be valuable as such and what has only be misused by a dominating class. A radical revolution may be the most effective way to reach a classless society but it will cause considerable 'collateral damage' which will only be visible after the dust has settled. Moral thoughts that have regulated Chinese society for over two thousand years may indeed have been embedded in a feudal or capitalist society to the detriment of the majority of the people. But that is not an argument against the value of the ideas as such. If the praxis was wrong, then this application of ideas does not prove the wrongness of the ideas as such. If a specific moral attitude, e.g. practising *agapè* or becoming a Jun-zi, has been seen in Western and Chinese traditions as an integral part of a way to a good life, then there is no reason why this should not be integrated in a newly structured society based on the needs and wishes of the people. A new 'people's spiritual superstructure' can profit from the wisdom and lessons of the old masters, enriching the revolutionary discourses with a moral dimension which is needed to lead a good life within a community. The Confucian idea that e.g. education has first to pay attention to our social and moral capabilities and our skills to live with others and only then focus on the accumulation of scientific knowledge is of great importance. Any society that denies or reverses this wisdom and neglects or underestimates the importance of personal attitude and of moral education will end up in a new stratification of classes.

2.2. China today.

Today China is facing new post-revolutionary issues with the appearance of new classes having their own 'superstructures' of ideas and philosophies aimed to justify the existence of their own elitist way of life. The challenges of Deng Xiaoping were different in the eighties of the previous century. His essays and discourses were focussed on the acceleration of economic growth and enhancing the lot of the massive numbers of rural poor. His challenges and issues were in the economic field, resulting in unique Chinese proposals to integrate market capitalism in a communist political system. In his vision, market capitalism will never take over Chinese socialist structures as long as the public sector is the dominating power in the country⁵. His approach has been economically successful with double digit GDP growth figures over more than a decade.

But together with the market economy, a sleeping virus may have slipped inside the Chinese structures, a virus that wakes up when the economy's natural cycle changes. According to French scholar Thomas Piketty who analysed the tax and wealth records in Western Europe and the USA from 1700 until today, inequality rises dramatically in *all* countries when the economy passes from a developing stage to an advanced economy as is happening in China today. This is not visible as long as the growth rate of GDP surpasses the return on capital. However, the new economic law he formulates, " $r > g$ ", is convincing: when the average return on capital (" r ", say 5%) is higher than the growth (" g ") of GDP (as in most countries, except China, India and a few others), the formation of a small but extremely wealthy class against a massive poor majority - while reducing the middle class along the way as is happening the West - is inevitable and there is no natural limit of this accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few. For Piketty, unchecked capitalism leads naturally to an ever widening gap between a few superrich and the masses of poor serving them, resulting in a political destabilisation and eventually to a revolution. At the same time, recent figures of the OECD⁶ show that those citizens living in more equal societies like the Scandinavian countries are the most satisfied with their lives.

What I want to point out here is that when the accumulated capital (not the income) of the wealthy is not properly redistributed to the less fortunate to create a more equal - but not

⁵ There may be a lot of truth in this statement as we see that one of the major problems of capitalist countries today is that their public wealth is insignificant compared to total private wealth. In 2012, of the total national capital of Britain, 99% was private capital; in France this was 95%. Source: Piketty, pag. 125.

⁶ Organisation for European Co-operation and Development.

an egalitarian - society, social issues will arise. And this is especially true for inherited wealth which gives descendants of the wealthy an unfair advantage. I am not certain that the spiritual heritage of the old Chinese masters based on morality and family values will be strong enough to resist these new challenges ahead. When the Chinese implement their version of Marxism - that dialectics are never finished and have to adapt constantly to the ever changing realities of production, of concepts, judgments and knowledge - then their political system may prevail and guide the economic development to the benefit of all. But it may be a better survival strategy to project the inevitable social challenges of growing inequality in China in the near future and take the necessary equalising measures right now. China has to redistribute wealth reasonably among all citizens as to avoid the rising gap between rich and poor which is at the basis of the crises of liberal economies as we have seen over the last decennium. As Ezra Vogel summarises in the last pages of her impressive book on Deng Xiaoping: “Chinese leaders will have to look beyond fast economic growth for legitimacy and accelerate progress on some of the issues that the public is most concerned about: reducing corruption and inequality, providing a reasonable level of medical care and welfare, and finding a way to show that public opinion is being respected in the selection of officials.”⁷ Of all these recommendations, I believe that reducing inequality is the most important key to open the other doors to a society where all citizens have equal opportunities in their pursuit of a good life, for reasons they value. There is no reason why China should turn to the western version of a good life when it is obvious that the accumulation of materiality is a false prophet, perfectly disguised as Paradise.

Conclusion.

Western civilisation comes to the point where there is a general feeling of ‘unheimlichkeit’, the unique German word for ‘un-hominess’, a vague uneasiness that we cannot describe, a general feeling that something is wrong in spite of our material welfare, education, healthcare and social security from birth to death. The reasons may be many but have certainly to do with the growing inequality and with the lack of a transcendent window in life.

⁷ Ezra Vogel, 2013, page 713.

It would be incomprehensible that China would not see that a pursuit of a good life through the pure accumulation of external goods will lead to the same inequality and social tensions as we see in western cultures. Unchecked capitalism will not only lead to a widening gap between rich and poor giving way to social injustice and unrest and will potentially undermine the existing political structures in the West and in China. It will also lead their citizens *away* from a good life, the only purpose of the existence of a state.

And even if a transcendent opening to life is just a spiritual illusion, it may be helpful to learn from the old Chinese masters how the attention to education, to a correct attitude and to morality will shape a healthy society. As we read in Chung-yung: "Morality is not only a means of preserving the community; it is also the very reason why the community is worth being organised in the first place".⁸ What we want is a society where all citizens have the freedom and the capabilities to reach their own version of a good life in harmony with the others. And that, we have seen, is the most important 'raison d'être' of any political structure. It remains to be seen if China can find that balance between a fair distribution of external goods and the ancient master's view on morality. If, as I believe, both are affecting each other like a tightly woven pattern and since fairness cannot exist without a proper moral attitude, I believe that education plays the ultimate key role in this transformation.

Balancing Chinese traditions with the benefits of capitalism and with the newly found Chinese identity but without losing the grip of the party will be one of the major challenges of the new leaders under president Xi Jinping. This delicate balancing act is the most important political experiment on the planet, putting China on one of the most crucial crossroads in its history. The choices made today in Beijing will have an enormous impact on billions of people in the coming decades, and not only in China.

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⁸ Chung-yung, pag. 84.

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