

Chapter Three

CHINA AND "ORIENTAL DESPOTISM"

The present chapter is divided in subject matter between the origin of the state in prehistory (Section 2) and the Chinese imperial despotic state of history (Sections 3-6). Despotism is differentiated into pre-historical domestic despotism and historical political forms of despotism. The origin of the state is discussed both in light of a possible social contract intentionally negotiated by the ruled and rulers (as discussed by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the seventeenth century) and in the light of Darwinian evolution.

Human history is described by Hegel as a story of freedom taking its start from the potentially most oppressive despotism, domestic despotism (Section 2). The ancient China that left its mark on world history was not a collection of city states like ancient Greece, but was an imperial state in which one city, by its conquest of others, becomes a capital. What distinguishes the Chinese emperor is that the leader of the conquering city is presented to the other cities of the empire as a divine father figure (Section 5). The view of China as such an "Oriental despotism" can apparently be supported by quoting from the philosophy of Confucius, by far the most influential Chinese philosopher (Sections V, VII).

However, the so-called despotic character of China, we shall conclude, in fact results from applying a Western concept of despotism as *repressed individualism* (Section VI). China viewed from the inside is a *traditional* but not *despotic* culture. The relative absence of individualism is not widely perceived as repressive by the Chinese. A different, communal concept of the human person prevails. Whether the non-Chinese, Western view of China as despotic is objectively accurate seems to depend on how deeply the aspiration to individual freedom is rooted in human nature, despite Chinese culture. Hegel believed the aspiration to freedom to be universal, and so do those Chinese today to struggle to use the internet freely in the state of state repression. This introduction to philosophy in its fundamental thesis agrees. The best way to understand a culture is thus not always to understand it as it understands itself. The present chapter concludes with a brief section on contemporary China (Section IX).

1. "Political Despotism" in China

In the Far East, especially in China and Confucianism, we find a type of *panentheism* as a justification of "earthly despotism." The emperor, enjoying the *Mandate of Heaven*, protects his subjects against disaster. Heaven itself (*t'ien*) is conceived as embracing earth in general and human society in particular as an impersonal power. It does not transcend them like the heavenly kingdom of the personal Lord worshipped the Western *theistic* of orthodox Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the West Heaven is beyond earth, but in China earth, like everything (*pan*) is in (*en*) God (*theos*).



Encyclopédie Encarta, National Maritime Museum/Dorling Kindersley



Encyclopédie Encarta, Paolo Uccello/The National Gallery, London/Corbis

The dragon illustrates the difference between China and the West. In the East (the land of the rising sun, which is what “Japanese” means in Japanese, the “morning land” in German: *das Morganland*), the dragon unites features of both heaven (e.g., a fire eating head directed to the sun) and earth (the serpent). As such, it is good. The first dragon above, from China, was the emblem of the emperors. Earth insofar as it is included in heaven is good. In the West (the land of the setting sun, *das Abendland* in German), the dragon is evil, but doomed by heaven to destruction as in the above depiction by Uccello of Saint George slaying the dragon.

Imperial China makes political use of a *religion of magic* to reinforce loyalty to the emperor

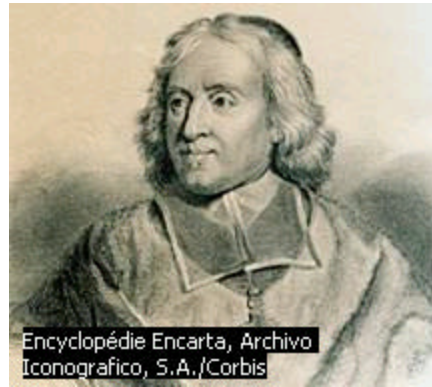
viewed as a magician. By the use of magical rituals divine emperorship promises us security in the world, not escape from the world. But an emperor's failure to fulfill this promise, the failure of his magic, may lead either to a pantheist escape from earthly lordship (see Chapter Four on India) or a theistic transcendence of it (see Chapter Five on Israel). Yet, logically, trust in human protectors precedes both pantheistic and theistic solutions proposed by India and Israel. Divine kingship lies in our own pre-theistic past in the ancient Near East. The Pharaohs of ancient Egypt were divine kings. As explored in the present chapter through Far-Eastern examples that have disappeared only recently, divine kingship remains a partial key to our own identity. The East retained an option which the West once knew, but which it abandoned. From this perspective the East is a museum of West's own origins.

In the last century European historians mistakenly believed that China was the oldest, and not just the longest surviving, of world civilizations. They were misled by China's own historians, whose traditionalism led them to look to the original and most ancient stage of Chinese history for a model for the present. Since the historians of imperial China could not believe that the Chinese Golden Age was an age of political disarray, they projected contemporary ancient kingdoms into successively more remote and thus more honorable pasts. In this way, they could retain the belief that China was originally a full-blown and unified empire.

Today we know that China, though perhaps the longest continuously existing civilization, is not the oldest. Egypt is older. Historians date the beginning of the first Chinese dynasty not much before 2000 B.C.

Imperial China certainly does not represent the first form of the state. *City states* are logically earlier than *imperial states* that comprise provincial as well as capital cities. An imperial state, whether in China, India, the Tigris-Euphrates, or Egypt, is constituted by the conquest of one city state by another in a river valley. In Imperial China patriarchy became political, no longer merely domestic as it already was in pre-history. But the emperor who established his power over culturally foreign cities doubled as a kind of magician, supplementing purely *patriarchal authority* with a claim to cosmic *priestly authority*. Patriarchy authority no longer sufficed because the family of conquered city states was artificial. The sowing of the first seed by the emperor every Spring magically assured the harvest.

The *social contract theories* of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1678) and others provide a possible model for understanding the origin of imperial states. Hobbes suggested that states arose by fear for one's life and possessions in a lawless, pre-social *state of nature* in which the natural selfishness of human nature flourishes. All are at *war* with all, since no one can be sure of not being attacked tomorrow:



Thomas Hobbes

[The STATE OF] NATURE hath made men so equal, in the faculties of the body, and mind; as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend.... From this equality of ability arises equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies.... From this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself... except... by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can.... in the nature of man we have three principal causes of quarrel: first competition, secondly diffidence, thirdly, glory.... Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them in awe, they are in a condition which is called war, and such a war, as is of every man, against every man. For war, consisteth not in battle only, or in the fact of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend battle is sufficiently known....

Whosoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such a condition there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation... no arts, no letters, no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.... yet in all times, kings... are in continual jealousies... having their weapons pointing... and continual spies upon their neighbors; which is a posture of war. But because they uphold thereby the industry of their subjects, there does not follow from it, that misery, which accompanies the liberty of particular men [in the state of nature]....

The only way to erect such a common power, as may be able to defend them [men] from the invasion of foreigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort, as that by their own industry... they may live contentedly, is to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men.... as if every man should say to every man, "I authorize and give up my right of governing myself, to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give thy right to him...." The attaining to this sovereign power, is by two ways. One by natural force, as when a man maketh his children, to submit themselves; or by war subdueth his enemies..... The other, is when men agree amongst themselves, to submit.... This latter may be called a political commonwealth. (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 98-102, 129-33)

We get an idea of what Hobbes is talking about in his theory of the state of nature by recalling conditions of insecurity in certain neighborhoods of large *American cities* today. We get an equally contemporary idea of it by reflecting on *international relations*, in which no sovereign nation can be sure that it will not be attacked tomorrow.

On Hobbes' theory, the origin of the nation-state was rationally negotiated to end such insecurity. All arms of self-defense were handed over to a single individual selected to be monarch. He maintained law and order and protected the rest. Today there are urban enclaves within nation states where those states fail

to function as intended. Moreover, today no monarch can guarantee security in any single nation state. The long reach of modern weapons penetrates the defenses of nations far more easily than in Hobbes' time. Hobbes' argument for a *nation state* with a monopoly of arms thus today tends to become an argument for a *world state*.

A Hobbesian argument for a world-state has seemed very strong on purely rational grounds for several decades. Yet no such world state exists, or is even imminent. The fear of being attacked is checked by the even greater fear of being attacked by the unchecked power of the world state itself. Yet the Hobbesian reasoning would be that attack on a nation state by alien powers is sooner or later almost a certainty, while attack on a nation's liberties by a world state is only a possibility. The better bet would thus seem to be a world state. But a good rational argument for an institution is not sufficient to realize it. This reflection tends to justify skepticism of Hobbes' suggestion that the first states arose by voluntary *contract*. It seems more realistic to suppose that they arose by *conquest*. Consider the following scenario:

There are two... opposed means whereby man... is impelled to obtain the necessary means for satisfying his desires. These are work and robbery.... This will be our key to an understanding of the development... of the state; and since all universal history heretofore has been only the history of states, to an understanding of universal history as well.... primitive peasants are totally lacking in that warlike desire to take the offensive which is the distinguishing mark of hunters and herdsman.... the occupation of the peasant does not make him an efficient warrior.... he is sluggish of movement and slow to come to a determination, while huntsmen and nomads... develop speed of motion and swiftness of action.... The nomad [herdsman] is the inventor of slavery, and thereby has created the seedling of the state, the first economic exploitation of man by man. The huntsman carries on wars and takes captives. But he does not make them slaves; either he kills them or else he adopts them into the tribe....

The idea of using a human being as a labor motor could only come about on an economic plane on which a body of wealth has developed, call it capital, which can be increased only with the assistance of dependent labor forces. This stage is first reached by the herdsman.... In the genesis of the state, from the subjection of peasant folk by a tribe of herdsman..., six stages may be distinguished.... The first stage comprises robbery and killing in border fights.... Gradually, from this first stage, there develops the second, in which the peasant... has accepted his fate and has ceased every resistance. About this time, it begins to dawn on the consciousness of the wild herdsman that a murdered peasant can no longer plow.... *The moment when first the conqueror spared his victim in order permanently to exploit him in productive work, was of incomparable historical importance. It gave birth to nation and state....* The third stage arrives when the "surplus" obtained by the peasantry is brought by them regularly to the tents of the herdsman as "tribute".... the peasantry is relieved entirely from the little irregularities connected with the former [violent] method of taxation.... The fourth stage... is of very great importance, since it adds the decisive factor in the development of the state,... the union on one strip of land of both ethnic groups [peasants surrounding the herding camp become a permanent fortified city]....

The logic of events passes quickly... to the fifth stage.... Quarrels arise between neighboring villages and clans, which the lords no longer permit to be fought out, since by this the capacity of the peasants for service would be impaired. The lords assume the right to arbitrate.... The necessity of keeping the subjects in order and... maintaining them at their full capacity of labor, leads... from the fifth to the sixth stage, in which the state, by acquiring full intranationality..., is developed in every sense.... The two groups, separated to begin with, and then united on one territory, are at first merely laid alongside one another, then scattered through one another like a mechanical mixture... until gradually they become... a chemical combination. They intermingle... in customs and habits, speech and worship. Soon the bonds of [blood] relationship unite the upper and lower strata. (Franz Oppenheimer, *The State*, 1909).

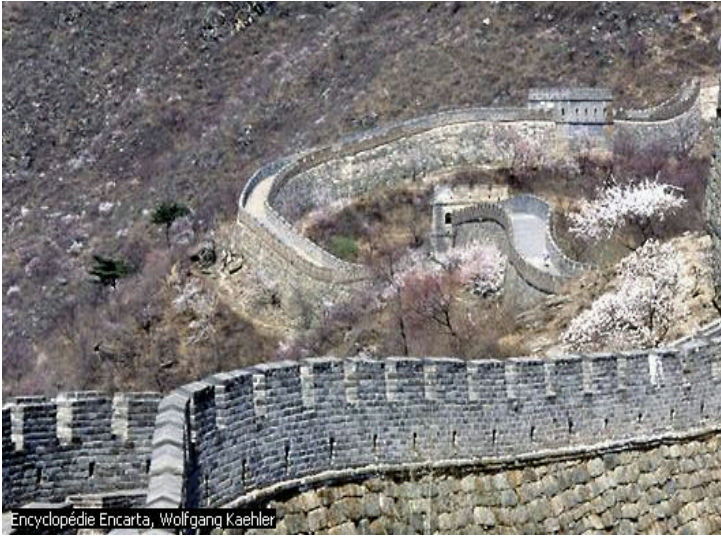
The kind of state of which Oppenheimer is talking here is one in which different classes have two very different economic bases: agricultural and pastoral. If a state is defined by a ruling class, an even earlier state might occur when farmers who control the water supplies rule over other farmers, so that both rulers and ruled enjoy the same agricultural economic base. Contemporary anthropologists suppose this to be the

case. Yet such states seem to be *pre-historical states* rather than *historical states*. History as the history of states is the history of historical states. Roughly, historical states employ historians. In a very real sense, history writing creates objective history, it makes events historical.

When rulers and ruled are of different economic classes, the rulers view themselves as essentially superior, not merely as the lucky possessors of wells. If the rulers are herders, their mobility and speed gives them essential military superiority over the peasants who are ruled. This superiority equips them to extend their rule over new conquests, and thus to create more vast states than farmers could ever create over other farmers. It is these larger historical states that employ historians in an attempt to reinforce rule over inferior classes not only by imperial magic but also by the prestige of their historical acts.

We have contrasted *contract* and *conquest*, but successful conquest imposes its own contract. If the conquered prefer to live rather than die, they must accept a *protection contract* from the conquerors. Yet there is a difference between such a "protection racket" and the Hobbesian social contract. The Hobbesian contract arises from the initiative of individual subjects who elect a monarch. They have the alternative of remaining in the state of nature without, for the most part, any immediate threat to life and limb until a more suitable monarch is found. Hobbesian negotiators are not terrified into sameness before the immediate threat to survival. Oppenheimer's "contract," by contrast, is initiated by the herding tribe, and it immediately imposes the submission of the farmers with the only alternative being immediate death. The city state emerging from the conquest of farmers by herders levels terrorized farmers. An empire emerging from the conquest of cities levels terrorized cities. Cities were unified by the common threat of annihilation before their unity came to be maintained by the magic of an emperor priest. The Chinese tradition of communalism seems more compatible with Oppenheimer's view than with Hobbes' individualistic view of the state as something more optional.

In China diverse city states politically unified by conquest and religiously unified by imperial magic were unified economically by the *public works revolution*. Services (e.g., roads, irrigation, military defense) were provided which no single city could provide. Politically the emperor was cast as the father of the empire, and religiously this father was divine. Because China has been a prime example of despotic government the phrase "Oriental despotism" became current. The term advertised an Eastern suppression of individual freedom. Yet we have no reason to suppose that Far Easterners are essentially given to despotism (after all they are human), or that Far-Eastern culture is alone despotic. All developed civilizations, including those of the West, are built on a despotic basis, e.g., in Egypt and the ancient Middle East if not in China. At a certain level of abstraction, China gives the West an image of its own past.



The Great Wall of China as a public works project

Both Hobbes and Oppenheimer presuppose that the motivation in the origin of the state is selfish. Individual negotiate and submit out of a concern for their security. Yet the Confucian philosophy of human nature holds that human nature is essentially social. In other words, human nature contains original *other-regarding impulses* such as friendship that have not been derived by any calculation from *self-regarding impulses*. Membership in a state is no mere means to individual security but an end in itself, realizing one's social potential. In the following Aristotle expresses this alternative to the view of human nature as essentially or exclusively selfish found in Hobbes:

...the generality of men and the most vulgar identify the good with pleasure, and accordingly are content with the life of Enjoyment—for there are three specially prominent lives, the one just mentioned, the life of politics, and thirdly the life of contemplation.... The generality of men show themselves utterly slavish, preferring what is only a life for cattle.... Men of refinement... think that the Good is honor—for this may be said to be the end of the Life of Politics. But honor... seems too superficial..., since it appears to depend on those who confer it more than on him on whom it is conferred... to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem for man, for he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all of these? What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants [as well as man], but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth [--it is not the highest or peculiar function of man]. Next there would be a life of perception, but *it* also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one [other part], the other in the sense of possessing and exercising thought.... Now if the function of man is an activity of the soul which follows or implies a rational principle..., the human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete... this activity is contemplative.... this activity is the best (since not only is reason the best thing in us, but the objects of reason are the best of knowable objects); and secondly it is the most continuous, since we can contemplate truth more continuously than we can do anything. And we think happiness has pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities.... And the self-sufficiency [completeness] which is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a philosopher, as well as a just man or one possessing any other virtue, needs the necessities of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others is in the same case, but the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth...; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but he is still the most self-sufficient. (Aristotle, *Ethics*, Book I, Chapters 5, 7)

The Aristotelian (and Confucian) position does not contradict Hobbes's and Oppenheimer's theories viewed merely as theories of the origin of the state. Rather, it corrects a general theory of human nature. Hobbes' or Oppenheimer's theory of the origin of the state might hold true simply because human beings in their pre-historical formative stages may not yet exhibit their social potential. The state may first have to exist to make such an exhibition possible. For Aristotle to be political was at once to be polite.

2. *Freedom: Pre-historical and Post-historical*

An ideology popular in the West is that civilization "goes West." According to the philosophical elaboration of the idea by Hegel, history originates in China, migrates to India, from there moves on to the Middle East, Greece, Rome, and then to northern Germanic Europe, until it finally jumps across the Atlantic to America. If the "world spirit" indeed follows the sun in this way, we might expect it to be preparing a gigantic leap across the Pacific back to China again! There is some historical basis for saying that Rome took over and further developed Greek civilization, or that the United States inherited the civilization of Europe. But there is no basis for saying that India developed the civilization of China. For the most part India and China developed autonomously. What borrowing did take place went from India in the West to China in the East rather than the other way around: no Chinese influence on India is comparable with the impact of Buddhism on China.

usqu'à la fin du IV^e siècle, le Japon développe une culture originale, tout en absorbant les influences

A l'école de la Chine



Le Shōsōin
Le trésor pour les objets d'art



Miroku

L'Évangéliste du Japon
Miroku, le Dieu du futur, le Christ



Le «Reliquaire aux scarabées d'or»

Trésor national, reliquaire en or et en bronze, fabrication japonaise du VIII^e siècle

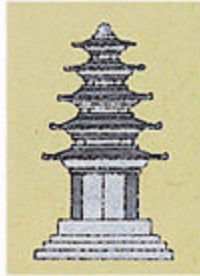
Le monastère de Hōryū-ji
Fondé en 607 par Shōtoku Taishi (573-622), il abrite la plus ancienne construction de bois du Japon



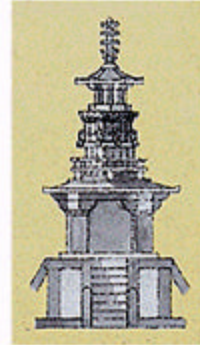
1. Sâricî, Inde (I^{er} siècle av. J.-C.)



2. Gândhâra, Pâkistân (IV^e siècle)



3. Pagode coréenne



4. Pagode coréenne (VII^e siècle)



5. Pagode du Yakushi-ji de Nara (Japon, VII^e siècle)



Ganiin

Chinoise d'origine (1650-700), elle est la première à franchir les mers, portée à jamais au Japon



Shōtoku Taishi (573-622)

Tout pour l'unité du peuple japonais, 645



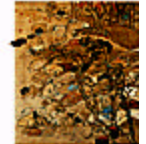
Respect de la nature

Les bois sont utilisés pour la construction



Voyage vers l'Orient

Le Japon s'ouvre au monde par le commerce



La route des ambassadeurs

Le Japon s'ouvre au monde par les ambassadeurs japonais lors d'expéditions officielles comme elles les relations avec la Chine au début

Du tertre à la pagode

Le tertre funéraire de l'Inde a donné sa forme au reliquaire bouddhique, ou *stûpa* (1-2). De plus en plus élaboré, le *stûpa* est devenu pagode à plusieurs étages (3-4-5).



La transmission du savoir

Le Japon s'ouvre au monde par le commerce

© Gallimard, Paris



From top to right, the evolution eastward of the Buddhist sputa in India (1st century B.C.) through China and Korea to the Japanese pagoda

The more defensible claim, we have held, is not that European civilization grew out of the civilization of China, but that it grew out of despotic beginnings somewhere. *Despotism* means rule over an individual by the external will of another individual. But what is despotism in world history? It is, to begin with, a political system in which only *one man* is explicitly recognized to be free: the despot himself. If individual human rights are the standard of moral progress in history, such progress depends on whether history then moves to a condition where *some* but not all are free, and finally ends in the universal freedom of *all*: the universal recognition of humans by humans.

Moral progress does not mean that the passage of time spells automatic advance toward the abolition of human suffering, that there is never any backsliding, decline, or fall into a "dark age." The first stage of prehistory—to which the "Garden of Eden" may be taken to refer—may have already approached "universal freedom." Imagine the freedom in a pre-patriarchal state of nature. Since there was no durable wealth when humans were food gatherers, there was no economic inequality either. Nor, without wealth, was there a need for servile labor. But then a fall into despotic servitude occurred. The need for servile labor emerges with the domestication of animals and the agricultural revolution. The patriarch with more land or a larger herd needs more help.

But the servitude of one man means the despotic rule by another. The transition from prehistory to recorded history presupposes economically the agricultural and herding revolutions, and sociologically an accompanying patriarchal despotism. Political despots, going beyond the domestic despotism of family fathers, creates recorded history (*subjective history* as the recounting of events). They do so by employing historians to record and transmit his achievements (*objective history* as memorable events). Human history, even if it advances toward universal freedom, is preceded by a tragic loss of such freedom. It is preceded by a *fall* into the tyrannical extreme of sovereign domestic despotism, which exposed all members in the patriarch's domain to his arbitrary will.

Freedom is only gradually recovered, initially through the cancellation of sovereign domestic despotism with the rise of sovereign political despotism. Political despotism at the hands of one's king is, no matter how despotic, less despotic than despotism under one's own father under the same roof. And, though it is pre-historical, we all know that it still exists today, though today individuals escape domestic oppression by entering the labor market or public service, things that did not exist in the earliest prehistory.

But history on the "story of freedom" model is not a circular movement which returns to the point from which it departed. The *post-historical freedom* toward which history moves differs from the *pre-historical freedom* from which it departs. The Golden Age does not lie in a pre-historical past, but before us as the culmination of history. The difference between the pre-historical freedom of the noble savage and post-historical freedom is the intervening reign of despotism. Bondage and servitude are the historical cross that humanity bears in order to be reborn in genuine freedom.

By accepting servitude, by learning obedience, *Aristotle* said one learns to command. One ultimately learns thereby to command oneself, to channel the flow of natural impulse. The discipline of obedience to a despot becomes self-discipline once the servant identifies with the despotic aggressor. Self-discipline can then become a freedom self-government in which the master's voice is no longer that of any real despot in the external world, but is a purely internal voice that is itself subordinate to enlightened principle. The earliest noble savage knows only the *freedom of impulse*, i.e., freedom of choice, of doing

what one wishes. Post-historical humans, according to the eighteenth century German philosopher *Lessing*, would learn the *freedom of autonomy*, the freedom of rational self-determination, of being a law unto one's rational self, not a law unto one's arbitrary will. Being determined by one's own arbitrary will, whim, or caprice is as much a form of bondage as being determined by an external master. For if one's will is arbitrary one never knows what one is going to do next, nor why. One is subjected to the governance of something frighteningly unpredictable.

3. *Despotism: Political and Domestic*

An aspect of political despotism which merits more attention is its connection with *patriarchy*, authoritarian rule by the family father. Most social scientists say *matriarchy*—except perhaps in certain male myths or nightmares. Matrilineal societies have existed, based on descent through the maternal line. But they were not matriarchal because they were not based on maternal control of capitalist means of production such as tilled lands or herds. Women in pre-history controlled gardens and small domestic animals such as chickens, but males domesticated larger animals and more extensive tilled lands. NOTE

Authoritarian despotic rule seems restricted to societies with a male-dominated patriarchal family structure. Patriarchy is found in nomadic pre-historical (pre-political) societies, e.g., among herding tribes. As an historical reality patriarchy becomes political, distinguished by its organization into a territorially fixed state. In a stable agricultural state, fixed to the land, a literate leisure class capable of historical record-keeping on behalf of an elite of patriarchal herders first emerges.

We may now state the concept of political despotism in a more illuminating way. A despotic state, in the West or the Orient, today or hundreds of years ago, is modeled on the patriarchal family. The idea of the patriarchal family is transferred to the political level and applied to the state. The despot assumes the father's position in relation to the people, as if they were underage children. The despotic state is a primitive form of the state in part because what distinguishes this state from the more ancient institution of the family is not yet clearly developed. As often is the case, what is new and unfamiliar is falsely modeled on what is old and familiar.

To understand more the concept of political despotism we look at the patriarchal family on which it is modeled. The patriarchal family as such assures no rights to the children or wife. Unless the state chooses to intervene, the father has a right to do what he pleases with members of his family, even killing them. The state itself is modeled on the patriarchal family. It is too much like the family to *guarantee* protection of the children and wife from family fathers. A despotic state is an imitation family, the despot an imitation patriarchal father, and his subjects imitation children. The despot may decide to exercise his right to protect subjects from their biological fathers. But he has no obligation to do so, and his subjects have no legal rights.

A *legal right* is a judicially protected claim to some freedom of action, to some freedom from interference by others. There are rights enjoyed by adults which children do not naturally have, since they do not know how to stake out claims upon others. Despotism means treating even adults as children without rights. At the other extreme is a state in which all individuals, even children, are raised to the level of adults with legally protected individual human rights (e.g., the modern Western liberal state). Despotism models the state on the family. The opposite is to remake the family in the image of the (non-despotic) state,

a political society of adults, so that even babies have putative (imputed) rights that are claimed by the state on their behalf until they grow old enough to make such claims themselves.

An often-noted difference between East and West is that the family is a far stronger, more closely knit institution in the East. Yet to model the state on the family is to limit the sovereignty of the family in the East as well. The patriarchal family in patriarchal states of the Far East is a mellowed, reformed version of such a family in its original form. But such states show the hold which the idea of the patriarchal family still has on their populations. Chinese ancestor worship reflects a deeply ingrained respect for age and, in particular, for one's own parents. A traditional Chinese son would certainly hesitate to put his parents in a nursing home. Some poor parents in Far Eastern cultures very recently have sold their own children into bonded labor or even prostitution, and in such cases reverence for age does not seem to be matched by an equal reverence for the young. Yet a traditional Chinese parent who could afford otherwise would not likely put his son out on his own at age eighteen with a handshake, a pat on the back, and a hundred-dollar bill. The American family, with its paper routes and savings accounts for each child, sometimes seems a temporary affair, a kind of training in financial self-reliance.

In the West we see in a number of ways (e.g., prenuptial agreements) how the model of the business world, what Hegel called civil society, insinuates itself in the family and modifies parent-child and husband-wife relationships. Some believe that business relations have no place in the family, that they undermine natural bonds of trust and love. But the family must be undermined if individual freedom (e.g., the freedom of job choice or marriage) is to be protected. It may not be possible to have both maximal individual rights and maximally strong family bonds. Another name for what is called "strong family ties" is "despotism." Yet many great security in despotism.

4. *Chinese Emperor Worship*

China has been a land of enviably strong family ties, not a traditional land of individual freedoms. The individual won independence from his father only by falling into dependence on his emperor. The religion of China centers around the emperor, the priest-magician-ruler who functions as a paternalistic intermediary between the cosmos and his people. In a well-ordered society the people subject themselves to the emperor, and the emperor subjects himself to the law of the cosmos (heaven—*t'ien*). The emperor secures the prosperity of the empire in part by moral example. But popular superstition attaches importance to magical rites and sacrifices. The emperor is the *Son of Heaven*. But natural disasters such as floods or invasions are a sign that the *Mandate of Heaven* has been withdrawn due to some failure in his conduct.

The emperor's relation to Heaven is thus ambiguous. On the one hand, he enjoys magical powers over the cosmos, and the Chinese state religion to this extent resembled the pre-historical religion of magic discussed in the previous chapter. But, on the other hand, he can exercise such power only if he makes himself into a mere instrument of Heaven. And to this extent the Chinese state religion resembled the pantheistic Hindu religion of *substance* to be examined in the next chapter. Heaven here appears as the sole substantial reality, and the emperor is merely an accidental vehicle for the expression of its cosmic power.

5. *Confucius*

The emperor worship we have just described merges with Confucianist philosophy as the

philosophy of imperial China from the Han dynasty of the second century B.C. to the revolution of 1911. The chief support of this official philosophy was the Mandarin class of literate civil servants. This class may well have evolved out of an earlier priest class. Confucius himself (551-479 B.C.) was contemptuous of the superstition and magical practices of the lower classes. He rationalized the primitive animistic world view inherited from the past: in the place of personal nature gods he saw mere abstract forces of nature, all ultimately encompassed under the cosmic concept of Heaven.



His rationalistic denial of any animistic spirit life of nature may reflect the growing will of the governing classes to control nature technologically (for example, dikes, irrigation) without magic. The *public works revolution* forms the economic basis of political despotism.

But Confucius' main interest was ethical and practical rather than cosmological and theoretical. He lived in a time of political disunity in China, and sought a way back to social order. His solution was an *elitist* view of natural human ability, combined with an *egalitarian* belief in the merit of work. He proposed that political rule is merited by *virtue* rather than inheritance. This principle helped China inaugurate a *civil service* system, with *competitive examinations*, centuries before the West. China inspired the admiration of the French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778):

I shall not here examine why the Chinese, who arrived at the knowledge and practice of everything that was useful in society, did not go as far as we do at present in the sciences.... they brought morality to perfection, which is the first of the sciences. Their vast and populous empire was already governed like a family, whose monarch was the father.... Their religion was simple, wise, august, free from all superstition and all barbarity.... The Chinese emperors themselves offered to the God of the Universe, to Chang-ti, to the Tien, to the principle of all things, the first fruits of their harvest twice a year, and even of those harvests which they had sown with their own hands. This custom was kept up for forty centuries, in the midst of revolutions, and even the most horrid calamities.... Their Confucius framed neither new opinions nor new rites. He neither pretended to be an inspired man, nor a prophet. He was a magistrate, who taught the ancient laws. We sometimes say, very improperly, "the religion of Confucius"; he had no other than that of the first sages; he recommends nothing but virtue, preaches no mysteries; he says, in his first book, that in order to learn to govern, we should pass our whole life in correcting ourselves; in the second he proves that God has graven [engraved] virtue in the heart of man; he says that man is not born wicked, and that he became so by his own fault. (Voltaire, *Phil History* XVII).

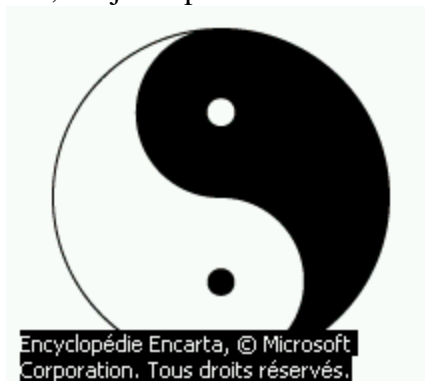
Confucianism preceded Europe in substituting an *aristocracy of virtue* for the traditional *aristocracy of birth*. Plato, in his doctrine of philosopher kings, made a similar proposal in the West, but it remained without effect.

The virtue of Plato's philosopher kings, as we saw in Chapter Five, was intellectual. It was wisdom. Confucian virtue has a strongly social element. By virtue (*li*) Confucius meant politeness or etiquette, not just morality in the Western sense. Virtue kept society functioning smoothly. This has led to misunderstanding between the Chinese and Westerners. Westerners have considered the Chinese double-faced because the West fails to see the ethical dimension of the politeness of showing respect for others by showing respect for their beliefs. Westerners often rate honesty more highly than politeness. Honesty shows greater respect for the other's rational power to correct beliefs. Honesty in dialogue expands the evidence each has in the reassessment of belief.

From the Confucian viewpoint, however, there is even wisdom, not just practicality, in politeness. It is not Plato's intellectual wisdom of seeing the changeless truth and then imposing it if possible on a changing world. Rather, it is the wisdom of seeing that nothing *finite* is *infinite*. Only the infinite is infinite. Neither the missionary with whom one politely spoke yesterday nor the Communist, with whom one politely speaks today is, as such, *t'ien*, the infinite. Yet each in its own time is a finite manifestation of the infinite.

To follow the path of virtue in China meant to maintain five essential ethical relationships in repair: (1) to the love of the *father* corresponds the piety of the son; (2) the protection of the *ruler* is balanced by the obedience of the subject; (3) the benevolence of the older *brother* is matched by the respect of the younger brother; (4) the justice of the *husband* is met by the obedience of the wife; and (5) the faithfulness of one *friend* to a second calls for the favor of the second. Only one relationship, friendship, is non-patriarchal.

Balance is so basic to Chinese culture that the religion of China has been called the *religion of measure*. The idea has cosmological significance in the Chinese distinction of *yang* (one, active, masculine, spiritual, heavenly, symbolized in black below), and *yin* (two, passive, feminine, earthly, material, symbolized below in white). A *dynamic equilibrium* exists between these opposed forces. Each calls forth the other. Heaven is superior, and yet impossible without earth. Each, as symbolized by the dots, is present in the other. Heaven embraces earth. It is the whole, not just a part.



The concern of the Confucians was chiefly ethical. Despite his own rationalism, Confucius wished to preserve traditional ritual, interpreting it as an external symbol of virtue rather than as magic. But belief in magic did not disappear among the masses. The emperor put the popular belief in magic to political use in maintaining the social order.

The following excerpts give the spirit of Confucian philosophy, and of the civilization it inspired. Like Aristotle, Confucius identifies happiness and beauty with harmony, and interprets harmony as cosmic as well as individual. But Confucius champions a Chinese harmony of subordinating oneself to legitimate authority, not an Athenian harmony of an equal participation of the parts.

...`He who lives a filial and respectful life, and yet who is disposed to give offense to those above him is rare; and there has never been any one indisposed to giving offense to those above him who yet has been fond of creating disorder... are not filial respect and devotion and respect for elders the very foundation of an unselfish life?'

`When nature exceeds training you have the rustic. When training exceeds nature you have the clerk. It is only when nature and training are proportionately blended that you have the higher type of man'.

`The master would not discuss prodigies, prowess, lawlessness, or the supernatural.

`Virtue is denial of self....'

`When the man of noble mind unfailingly conducts himself with self-respect and is courteous and well-behaved with others, then all within the four seas are his brothers....'

`I can try a lawsuit as well as other men, but surely the great thing is to bring about that there be no going to law.'

`If a ruler is himself upright his people will do their duty without orders; but if he himself be not upright, although he may order, they will not obey.'

`A wise man, in regard to what he does not understand, maintains an attitude of reserve. If terms be incorrect, then statements do not accord with facts; and when statements and facts do not accord, then business is not properly executed. When business is not properly executed, order and harmony do not flourish; when order and harmony do not flourish, then justice becomes arbitrary; and when justice becomes arbitrary the people do not know how to move hand or foot. Hence whatever a wise man denominates he can always definitely state, and what he states he can always carry into practice....'

`He who does not occupy the office does not discuss its policy.'

`The higher type man is modest in what he says, but surpasses in what he does.'

`He who demands much from himself and little from others will avoid resentment.'

`The noble man is pained over his own incompetency, he is not pained that others ignore him.'

`A man can enlarge his principles; it is not his principles that enlarge the man.'

`To err and not reform may indeed be called error.'

`I have spent the whole day without food and the whole night without sleep. It is of no use. It is better to learn.'

`The wise man is intelligently not blindly loyal.'

`He upon whom a Moral duty devolves should not give way even to his Master.'

`In teaching there should be no class distinctions.'

`When good government prevails in the Empire, civil ordinances and punitive expeditions issue from the Emperor. When good government fails in the Empire, civil ordinance and punitive expeditions issue from the nobles. When they issue from a noble, it is rare if his kingdom not be lost within ten generations.... When there is good government in the Empire its policy is not in the hands of ministers.... And when there is good government, the people do not even discuss it.' (Confucius, *Analects*, Soothill edition, 121-855)

From the standpoint of individual human rights as understood in the West, Confucius may be criticized. The refusal to give offense for fear of disturbing social harmony limits free dialogue and discovery. Submersion of the individual in the group discourages the criticism of tradition. Litigation is criticized by Confucius as unnecessary under wise government. The assumption that some enjoy superior wisdom, and that their rule would eliminate discussion of public policy by the governed, supposes a questionably clear separation between the wise and unwise. The wise are known by both the wise and the unwise to be infallible, and thus to be beyond criticism by the unwise. Often it is supposed that this thinking is due to twentieth century Chinese Communism. In fact it is more ancient by thousands of years. Others have supposed that it is peculiar to the East, whereas we find its main features also in Plato (Chapter Six). Yet

the belief that a minority is born with a greater capacity for wisdom than the people has been more uniformly upheld in the East than in the West.

The second best-known Chinese philosopher is Lao Tse, and older contemporary of Confucius. He was perhaps the first “back to nature” philosopher. Where Confucius sought to overcome civil strife while remaining in the city itself, by creating a political ethic, Lao Tse advocated an escape from the city and return to nature. He had a strong influence on Chinese art, especially in the Tang and subsequent Song Dynasties. Nature or *Tao* was not for Lao Tse a collection of separate things and elements. It was a single tranquil force pervading and enveloping everything. In Taoist-inspired painting it is often symbolized by enveloping clouds. The Taoist mystic is sometimes represented meditating on a mountain slope next to his hermitage.



Lao Tse, 6th Century BC



Ma Yuan, Song Dynasty

6. *Is China Really Despotic?*

Some Western philosophers have supported a view of China as a despotic state by documenting a lack of individual freedom in China. They mention the Chinese practice of attributing accomplishments to *parents, ancestors*, and ultimately the *emperor*. Second, there is the practice of *corporeal punishment*, suggesting that the Chinese relate to social authority as external and are insensitive to conscience. We also note the practice of *punishing unintended deeds*, suggesting that the Chinese are unaware of intention as distinct from results. The custom of punishing *an individual's relatives* for his misdeeds suggests that the Chinese believe in collective responsibility and are unaware that responsibility lies in the soul of the individual.

To maintain the image of China as a stagnant despotic society, we must belittle such Chinese

inventions as paper, porcelain, the printing press, and gun powder. We must argue that there is a lack of individual theoretical curiosity in China. Such a lack has been seen in the *hieroglyphic language* of the Chinese: the characters of Chinese seem to channel thought into pre-established patterns by providing ready-made composite pictures of reality.

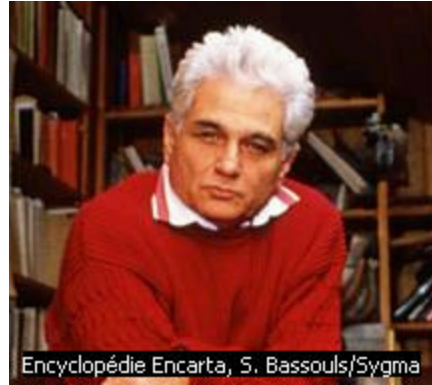


Construction from left to right of the Chinese character meaning "eternal". In principle a hieroglyphic character resembles what it refers to. Thus the character for "man" contains strokes which meet as legs with a single stroke above symbolizing the torso. To write Chinese is thus to paint. But the depiction is so stylized that for the most part Westerners would not know what they depict from the characters alone.

It is easy to exaggerate the absence of individual freedom or inwardness in China. Chinese civilization is not merely the Confucianist state philosophy. Alongside official Confucianism, individualistic and even anarchistic tendencies existed, especially between dynasties. The view that China is despotic has been influenced by *Jesuit missionaries* from the seventeenth century, at a time in Chinese history when despotism was prominent. The *Mongolian occupation* of China during the fourteenth century left an imprint on the *Ming* and *Manchu* dynasties. But despotism did not go uncontested. Chinese history is strewn with periodic, if unsuccessful *peasant uprisings*. When we identify Chinese thought with Confucianism we fail to recognize that private Buddhist, Taoist, and later Christian convictions were also tolerated. The very possibility of private convictions shows that imperial China was not totally despotic.

The falsehood of this claim is also shown by the office of *ombudsmen* (official overseer) who criticized even the emperor. Moreover, there is a tradition of *lyric poetry* in China which reflects individual freedom of feeling and expression. Yet, for all this, China might remain *predominantly* despotic, at least by the standard of Western human rights theory. In Chinese lyric poetry the individual seeks anonymous release from individuality in the arms of nature, not the cultivation of individual fame.

The claim that China is predominantly despotic has recently been put to a further test by the French philosopher *Jacques Derrida* (1930-). The concept of despotism, submission to external authority, is more Western than Eastern, he suggests. He holds that it is related to Western notions of supernatural (or at least mysterious) authority that are absent in the East. China makes no theistic distinction between nature and the supernatural. The examination of his views on Chinese writing; in particular, will serve as an introduction to some of his central ideas as well as deepen our reflection China itself.



Jacques Derrida

Derrida suggests that China is in one sense less despotic than the West: the Chinese language frees one from the external authority of supernatural voices. Of course not all speakers are supernatural. Yet they are all inscrutable and mysterious. Speaker meaning is *private*. It depends on private speaker intentions. As long as all speakers have equal authority, there is nothing despotic about the authority which anyone enjoys over his or her meaning. From the perspective of the Western human rights doctrine, your authority over determination of what you mean as a speaker may be your last protection against the oppressive despotism of higher authorities beyond or above you.

Speaker meaning is presumed in the West to be clearest to the original speakers, and next to their immediate hearers. Thus *hearer meaning* is a close second to speaker meaning as a means of access to the true objective meaning of words, or of a text. But speaker meaning is obscured as the voice of the original speaker eventually falls silent, and its echoes in the recollections of living hearers also eventually vanish. Objective meaning in its original concreteness is thus inevitably lost, and attempts to reconstruct it after the fact result only in approximations. Interpretation never achieves objective understanding of the original meaning. That meaning was fully present only to the speaker's mind, and the interpreter's mind and perspective are always *different*. In the course of time meaning is disseminated and modified by the variety of interpretive perspectives.

Despotism arises only with the privileging of speakers. God is the most obvious example, but in a moment I shall suggest that Plato or any other cultural icon is also an example. We may grant that God's despotism may be enlightened despotism. But it is still despotism as long as the supernatural light of the divine mind stands opposed to the darkness of the natural human mind. The Mosaic law tells us what to do. Revelation may tell us what to believe. But if neither gives us the whys and wherefores, their authority remains external and despotic. However the authority of the Chinese emperor as the son of heaven is ultimately non-despotic. For the mystical intuition we have of heaven (*t'ien*) in its inner identity with to earth, its opposite, is within the natural grasp of the human mind.

Western *phonetic language*, Derrida reminds us, by its very nature subordinates writing to speech. For the ultimate units of Western *alphabetic language* refer to sounds in the spoken language, not to things outside language as do the characters or simple units of the Chinese language. This primacy of spoken over written language in the Western tongues—they are tongues, not scripts—has made irretrievable individual speaker meaning the model of true meaning. It has thus encouraged skepticism about the meaning and hence truth of written statements:

[according to the speech-centered Western tradition] writing itself, in its non-phonetic [ideographic] moment, betrays its life. It menaces at once the breath, the spirit, and history as spirit's relation with itself. Cutting breath short, sterilizing or immobilizing spiritual creation in the repetition of the letter, in the commentary..., reserved for a [scholarly] minority, it is the principle of death.... It [writing] is to speech as China is to Europe.... we have known for a long time that the largely non-phonetic scripts like Chinese or Japanese included phonetic elements very early. They remained structurally dominated by the IDEOGRAM [picture]... and we thus have the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside all logocentrism [i.e., all domination by original SPEAKER MEANING and the spoken word--by the *logos* in Greek]....

'There is no reason for believing that in antiquity speech in China had not the same efficaciousness as writing, but it was possible for its power to be partially eclipsed by writing. On the contrary, in civilizations where writing evolved towards syllabilization and the alphabet early enough, it is the word which concentrated in itself, definitively, all the powers of religious and magical CREATION. And in fact it is remarkable that in China this strange valorization of speech, word, syllable, or vowel, attested in all great ancient civilizations from the Mediterranean basin to India, is not encountered.' [Gernet]

It is difficult not to subscribe to this analysis globally. Let us note however that it seems to consider the 'phonetic analysis of language' and phonetic writing as a normal 'outcome', as an historical *telos* [endpoint] *within sight of which*, like a ship steering to port, Chinese script had to a certain extent run aground. Can it be thought that the system of Chinese script is a sort of unfulfilled alphabet?... Should one not stop considering [anonymous] writing [and the accompanying tradition of anonymous but subtly creative readings, of reader meaning] as the eclipse that comes to surprise and obscure the glory of the word [as spoken and heard]?.... all clergies [East and West], exercising political power or not, were constituted at the same time as [the permanence of] writing.... strategy, ballistics, diplomacy, agriculture, fiscality, penal law are linked in their history and in their structure by the constitutions of writing. (Jacques Derrida, *Grammatology*, bracketed explanations added)

The difference between the Chinese non-phonetic tradition and the Western phonetic tradition is illustrated by contrasting the Chinese relation to *Confucius* with the Western relation to *Plato*. If there is a philosopher in the West with the stature of Confucius, it is Plato. Alfred North Whitehead said in the twentieth century that all Western philosophy was a series of footnotes on Plato. Yet the difference between Europe and China is seen in the way the two cultures approach an understanding of its most eminent thinker.

We feel strongly that the ideal understanding of Plato would include sitting at his feet, hearing him directly, talking with him. He is said to have had given a secret oral teaching in his academy. Authentic meaning is original speaker meaning, in a context where the live speaker can reply and correct our misunderstandings. Such an understanding of Plato is no longer possible. So we must make do with second best—his written dialogues. These dialogues, which refer back to his original speech and which put that speech in question without reply, are our only way of reconstructing at least something of it.

Compare this to Confucius studies in China. No one doubts that the historical Confucius actually lived. However, the primacy of written over spoken language has caused relative indifference to what Confucius' secret teachings or original speaker meaning may have been. A written picture-language like Chinese is not parasitic on spoken language. Referring directly to the world outside language, it pictures the things and people of that world in a highly stylized manner. The written Chinese language unites the literate population of China. Without being standardized by any phonetic written language, the spoken language of one province may even be incomprehensible in another.

In this situation of the Chinese, variable *reader meaning* assumes the authoritative role played by speaker meaning in the West. Confucianism is embodied in commentaries piled on commentaries down through the generations. There is nothing second best about this tradition of interpretation. The Confucianist tradition has been more alive in China than the Platonic tradition in the West. Confucius is constantly invoked, but as an occasion for new and creative readings of tradition. The original intentions of Confucius are not precisely known, but they are not an object of great nostalgia. Plato is an irretrievable mystical authority external to us. The spirit of Confucius lives in the Chinese customs and character.

Confucius is not an inscrutable Moses-like or even Plato-like external authority. He sometimes teaches by puzzle and paradox. But he has no supernatural or secret wisdom or law to hand down or with which to tantalize us. The very concept of *despotism*, based on the idea of privileged external and unverifiable authority, is Western. It cannot be applied by the Chinese to themselves unless they are viewed through Western eyes.

Derrida understands the fundamental human right, freedom of thought, to be a right to *deconstructive thought*, to creative reconstruction and re-interpretation of traditional texts. In this sense the Chinese have exercised and continued to exercise individual human rights. They have never claimed that Confucius or any philosopher ever enjoyed the *total presence* of heaven in any way similar to that in which Plato is believed to have enjoyed the total presence in *intellectual intuition* (super-sensory intuition) of the One, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful (see Chapter Six). By creative re-interpretation even governmental edicts acquire a personal and less oppressive meaning and application in the lives of the Chinese. Communism can be deconstructed to mean capitalism. The texts and political authorities of the past are not destroyed, rather they are deconstructed. Continuity with the past is maintained through discontinuity.

However, it is hard not to interpret Derrida as a relativist in the bad sense. He equates the meaning of a text with with open series of possible creative re-interpretations. There is never anything fixed and closed about the meaning of a text. This goes contrary to the concept of scientific meaning; the meaning of a scientific text. It is surely somewhat odd to say that the meaning of “Water is H₂O” is contained in all the the possible deconstructions or creative re-interpretations of the statement; or, as Derrida also suggests, that the statements focal meaning is contained in the *margins* of that meaning.

What Derrida calls “meaning” seems not to be meaning at all. What concerns him seems to be, rather, the *relevance* of the statement’s to all those whom the statement influences. Thus “Water is H₂O” within current atomic theory has a fixed meaning for chemists, and if atomic theory is true its fixed meaning is quite absolute. But poets who hear the statement and who are influenced by it may find its relevance to lie in a very different fact. Thus it might lie in the alleged fact that water with all its symbolic power—Freud views water as the enveloping oceanic mother—is reduced to a quantitative relationship.

Derrida thinks that China is closer to a correct understanding of meaning than the West. Suppose he is right in viewing the Chinese as *deconstructionists* but wrong (as I have suggested in the previous paragraph) in asserting the deconstructionist theory of meaning. The consequence would be that the Chinese lack an appreciation of the possible objective scientific *meaning* of statements. They thus also would lack appreciation the objective *truth* of statements, which would be the truth of the fixed *propositional meaning* of the statements.

The result would be that what Derrida calls *logocentrism*, which privileges speaker meaning, would be re-instated. Logocentrism means that the speaker's rational, conscious intentions can have full control of the meaning of statements. Your statements often do not mean what you say they mean. For example, they can be incoherent or contradictory upon analysis. But they *can* mean what you say they mean. Speech becomes a quest for the total presence of objective truth that in all its particulars will surely never arrive. Yet that need not make the quest useless, since it may produce ever closer approximations. We shall return to these concepts in the next section.

Suppose for a moment that Derrida is right, and that all alleged objective original speaker meaning is eroded by the very tradition of writings which it generates. Suppose that all individual claims divorced from their original context in speech become indefinite. A support for individual human rights is then lost. An individual right begins with the act of staking out a claim by a physical gesture, or by the performance of a first-person act of speech or writing (e.g., "This is mine!"). The Chinese tradition of anonymous third-person written commentary, with first-person statements only quoted in third-person discourse, distances the reader from the insistent authority of audible individual voices from the past.

But this tradition also obscures claims by individual present-day speakers. Such claims are heard only as filtered through traditional codes and the recreation of such codes by contemporary writers and readers. Speakers make only those claims that traditional codes of etiquette (what the Chinese call *li*) and respect for paternal authority allow. Since this tradition is embedded in character, a conscious choice between submission to despotism and individual human freedom from external authority is evaded. Creative reconstruction of tradition is always in competition with the conformity of tradition itself. The Chinese may be so polite that you do not know that they are disagreeing. Every historical tradition places limits on the innovation it allows. Since the last century a see-saw battle has gone on in China between Westernization and Confucianist traditionalism.

The right of creative re-interpretation is exercised privately in the mind of the reader. It is not the kind of *public right* that can easily be violated, since others may not even know that you are exercising it. Since the repression of student protests in Beijing in 1989, China has shown again its suspicion of publicly expressed individual rights. It has viewed them as decadence, not moral progress. The traditional Chinese language has no word for individual *rights*. Confucian culture is based on *duty* and gratitude. One deserves nothing, and whatever one accomplishes or has one gratefully owes to ancestors, tradition, society, the emperor, and/or heaven. Everyone has the same center and source of strength in the social or cosmic whole. The Confucian commentator is the vehicle by which the tradition writes and rewrites itself. He claims no right to the product of his efforts. This frame of mind discourages the desire to be different just to be different. It counters the tendency to litigation, grievances, self-pity, envy, petty jealousy, and resentment which are so widespread in the self-centered Western culture of individual rights.



The goddess of democracy constructed by student demonstrators in Tian'anmen Square, Beijing, China, 1989

7. *Thought, Language, and Reality*

The Chinese language puts in focus an important question of *metaphysics*, namely, the relation of reality to language in general. Influential philosophers in the last two centuries (beginning with Immanuel *Kant*) have argued that our view of the world is determined by the universal structure of the system of *thought* that we use. Others have argued, in a similar vein, that our world-view is determined by the structure of the *language* we use.

If either position is true, our view of the world is not determined by logical reasoning based on evidence. Metaphysics, the attempt to determine the nature of reality, gives way to reflection on ourselves. It does not inquire into the nature of reality; it describes the way we must view the world if we think or use language the way we do.

It may be suggested that our basic *conceptual system* serves to give us *orientation* in the world. It orients us within a world of *enduring but changing material things*, in relation to which we are located. (You are east of China, west of Europe, etc.) If we are not to become disoriented, we must view the world as consisting in things that speakers cannot only identify but *reidentify* at different places at later dates. You orient yourself coming out of the theater by rediscovering your car which you left in a particular spot upon entering.

It can also be argued that a *particular language*, beyond any universal human conceptual scheme, determines one's particular view of reality. The Chinese language, we have seen, is basically a non-phonetic or written language. Speakers and hearers literally enter into phonetic languages like English or German: they enter into the *grammar* of these languages in their roles as first and second persons, i.e., as speakers and hearers. Persons enter only accidentally into a non-phonetic language like Chinese: they enter Chinese *vocabulary* (but not its grammar) through being pictured. The verbs of phonetic language refer explicitly to grammatical speakers and hearers. The pictures of the Chinese languages refer to writers who are grammatically absent from the Chinese. These hieroglyphs or pictures contained in Chinese characters

essentially refer only to things and persons in the world beyond language. They are in part *natural symbols* determined by the form of what they picture, and in part *conventional symbols* determined by tradition.

The world viewed through the Chinese language does not consist *essentially* in speaking persons and changing things as in phonetic languages. Phonetic languages like English divide the world essentially (grammatically) into *speakers* who who are addressed, who are referred to, and who refer to things as well as other persons. Sometimes these things are not visible (e.g., the "it" that rains), and even if visible their properties are not always visible (e.g., the invisible brittleness of a visible vase). The symbols of the Chinese language rather refer to recurrent forms on the visible sensory surface of things.

The twentieth century American philosopher of civilization *F.S.C. Northrop* notes that the grammar of subject-predicate Western languages imposes on the world a structure of largely invisible interacting things underlying what is immediately experienced. The picture symbols of the Chinese language, on the other hand, refer only to what is immediately experienced. Thus "man" in English refers to no particular visual form but to anything with the abstract function of being a rational animal (Aristotle). By contrast the original Chinese symbol for man refers to a particular visual form.

The Easterner...uses bits of linguistic symbolism, largely denotative [serving to refer], and often purely ideographic [pictorial] in character, to point towards a component in nature which only immediate experience and continued contemplation can convey. This shows itself especially in the symbols of the Chinese language, where each solitary, immediately experienced local particular [object of experience] tends to have its own symbol, this symbol also often having a directly observed form like that of the immediately seen item of direct experience which it denotes. For example, the symbol for man in Chinese is 人, and the early symbol for house is 宀.... Sentences, furthermore in Chinese are constructed by setting such purely individual symbols the one after the other in columns in the order in which the items which they denote in immediate experience are associated. (Northrop 316)

Western languages imply continuing underlying things, but even Chinese implies recurring immediate sensory forms designated by the basic symbols of the language. It could be argued that every visible sensory form of a house or human being is unique, so that the suggestion of an exactly recurring sensory form is false. Northrop holds that the form house is in each occurrence modified by associated forms in the context. But it is doubtful if all the associated forms which make a given form unique could be communicated even by Chinese as Northrop suggests:

Each stroke and character having its own independent purely denotative, immediately experienced referent, these strokes and their compounded characters being associated merely as direct experience in a given particular instance happens to associate them, the Chinese language gains a superlative degree of fluidity, a capacity to convey the unique particularity, nuance and precisely refined richness of the specific individual experience.... (Ibid. 318)

Let us grant that there is no essential form of house or man, however qualified, which recurs unchanged in different situations. Then Chinese symbols and communicable finite combinations of symbols might come very close to communicating unique experience, but would not do so exactly. Yet there is no reason for thinking that someone who only writes and speaks Chinese would be incapable of understanding this argument. (Similarly, those who speak an English full of nouns referring to enduring and changeable things have understood the philosopher *David Hume's* (1711-76) arguments that the world consists not in

purely theoretical, non-observable things in interaction but in momentary sense impressions.) Quite generally, we seem capable of discussing and even adopting a view of the world which is inconsistent with the one which our language expresses.

The metaphysical redescription of the world as conveyed by our ordinary language is of course always debatable. Nonetheless, the theory which describes the world accurately, on the basis of good argument, need not be the theory required by any universal conceptual system, or by the particular language one uses. The conceptual system we use may *refer under a false description* to a world which we, as philosophers, may describe under a more nearly true description. A conceptual system of persons and things may be valuable, as we have said, in providing orientation. We may thus use it even if it does not serve to refer accurately to any facts. "Persons exist" (like "The sun sets," as contrasted to the *strongly true* "The earth rotates") successfully *gets at a fact* even without *getting it right*. It is, we may say, at least *weakly true*.

The Chinese may often use their language, as Northrop suggests, for aesthetic purposes, referring to the world to savor more closely aesthetic individual experience of it. But in other situations they may mentally refer to the same world for the purpose of orientation in terms of persons (speakers) and things. And they may do so even though their language may not be as well adapted to this purpose as, say, English. Thirdly, they may, in still other circumstances, refer to the world under a description intended as a scientifically or metaphysically correct statement of it. (But this third language use by the Chinese would Derrida's notion that the Chinese are merely deconstructionists.)

A student of metaphysics can reject descriptions of the world current in his or her language or conceptual system. But that does not oblige the student to deny that this language or conceptual system successfully refers to facts for some good purpose beyond their correct description. The preservation of ordinary language and conceptual systems for purposes of orientation allows exploration of the possible accuracy of world views that are not expressed either by ordinary language or by the conceptual system of commonsense.

8. *The Confucian Work Ethic*

The world-view supported by the Chinese language, without the fundamental importance of the first-person found in European languages, lends support to what may be called the *Confucian work ethic*. It is an ethic based on team work and team spirit rather than on individual competition. In English everything that is said, even if it is apparently in the second or third person, is implicitly preceded by "I say that..." or "We say that..." Second and third person discourse seem reducible in the end to autobiographical first person discourse. In Chinese, the individual speaker and his or her claims, which we have seen to be accidental to non-phonetic language generally, yield to the force of tradition. What is fundamental is Chinese is the narrative or descriptive third person discourse. The speaker loses him- or herself in what is described or recounted. This self-loss contrasts to the so-called *Protestant work ethic* of the self-absorbed, self-made individual of Western culture.

It is possible that all the important inventions which one individual working alone *could* invent *have* already been invented, and that economically the future lies with the East and the Confucianist work ethic. China has traditionally been the *role-model nation* of the Far East. Its assumption that the individual person

is not autonomous but is rooted in a larger whole, has greatly influenced surrounding nations, such as Japan and Korea

Both Japan and Germany fought World War II under totalitarian regimes. The state failed the Japanese and in doing so called into question emperor worship. However, the traditional imperial state was frequently replaced in Japanese loyalties by large corporations operating as quasi-totalitarian mini-states for their employees. The post-War German generation responded differently. One employee in the 1970's, asked if he worked for Bayer, snapped back that he worked *at* Bayer *for* himself. This difference seems symptomatic of the difference between the Far East and the Western culture, at least in Western ideology. Western reality has been less individualistic than this ideology would suggest. Conformism is strong in the West as well as the East. Yet ideology supporting individual human rights in politics and cultural experimentation is not insignificant.

Even if it has never been "despotic" as the West may have wrongly supposed, the Far East provides the strongest challenge to the idea that history is the story of individual human rights. The challenge is not chiefly economic. At a deeper level it is moral. Though the Eastern ethic of duty and gratitude promotes immediate oneness with the social and natural whole, it does not do justice to the quest for truth to which all human beings are committed as rational beings.

As for the economic challenge, whether it continues to grow depends on whether Japan and other Far Eastern countries become *individual consumer societies*, not primarily economies based on the production of individual consumer products for export. If they do become individual consumer societies comparable to the West, the identification with the social whole can be expected to decline in the race for individual consumption.

9. Mao Tse Tung

The twentieth century saw the end of imperial China. The revolution led by Mao Tse Tung was, in its original inspiration, a revolution against the Confucian ethic of respect for traditional authority. Given China's weakness relative to the West in the nineteenth century, this ethic delivered China into foreign hands. The anti-Confucius campaign in China (1973-1974) before Mao's death was essentially consistent with the original inspiration of Maoism. Mao appears, paradoxically, as an anti-Western Westernizer. He introduced the sense of individual dignity, along with the Western ideology of Karl Marx, into China to enable China to defend itself against the West. A decisive turn in Mao's own life as a young man was his rebellion against physical punishment as imposed by his father:

At the time my father was a middle peasant he began to deal in grain transport and selling.... After he became a 'rich' peasant, he devoted most of his time to that business. He hired a full-time farm laborer, and put his children to work on the farm, as well as his wife. I began to work at farming tasks when I was six years old.... I began studying in a local primary school when I was eight and remained there until I was thirteen years old. In the early morning and at night I worked on the farm. During the day I read the Confucian Analects and the Four Classics. My Chinese teacher belonged to the stern-treatment school. He was harsh and severe, frequently beating his students. Because of that I ran away from the school when I was ten. I was afraid to return home for fear of receiving a beating there, and set out in the general direction of the city.... After my return to the family, however, to my surprise conditions somewhat improved. My father was slightly more considerate and the teacher was more inclined to moderation. The result of my act of protest impressed me very much. It was a successful 'strike'.... There were two 'parties' in the family. One was my father, the Ruling Power.

The Opposition was made of myself, my brother, and sometimes even the laborer. In the 'united front' of the Opposition, however, there was a difference of opinion. My mother advocated a policy of indirect attack. She criticized any overt display of emotion and attempts at open rebellion against the Ruling Power. She said it was not the Chinese way. But when I was thirteen I discovered a powerful argument of my own for debating with my father on his own ground, by quoting the Classics. My father's favorite accusations against me were of unfilial conduct and laziness. I quoted, in exchange, passages from the Classics saying the elder must be kind and affectionate. (Quoted by Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China*)

But Mao is not merely a Westernizer. Despite Western ideological influences, the Maoist revolution did not bring respect for individual public freedoms to China. The cult of personality surrounding Mao himself bore a resemblance to the traditional cult surrounding the emperor. (Yet even some Western leaders combine charismatic personal power with individualistic human rights language.) In China the decision in favor of the discipline of rapid economic development seems to have forced the country to fall back on bureaucracy and respect for tradition, forsaking individualistic Western ideology as the country awaits future consumer abundance much as it once awaited communism.

Summary Chapter Review

This chapter has explored traditional China as an example of the divine kingship. It was concluded that whether China is "despotic" is a complicated matter. In part it depends on whether human beings, as probable, are distinguished by individual aspirations of which they may be unconscious, and which China represses. It may also depend on whether the Chinese, as is doubtful, really appeal to a humanly unintelligible supernatural authority comparable to the God of Moses. If Derrida is right, may also depend on whether the Chinese, as seems likely, are able to get around despotism by creative re-interpretations of the edicts or speech acts of government.

Heuristic Thesis of the Chapter

Suppose there is a universal conceptual system with which all humans in practice think. This conceptual system is commonly thought to divide into persons and things or bodies (P.F. Strawson, *Individuals*, 1969). However, our freedom as students of metaphysics to pursue evidence that the world in fact satisfies a very different description remains in tact. The description of the world which we assume in practical life (e.g., "The sun sets") need not be the one by which we claim to describe it accurately ("The earth rotates").

Similarly, suppose there is a particular language, such as Chinese, which determines the way in which people consciously think in particular cultures. Thus Chinese may lead us to think of the world as a field of essentially enduring sensory forms which harmoniously interact. That language may be *used* in the culture without preventing members of the culture from appreciating the evidence for other descriptions that are not used but are intended merely to be correct. Thus metaphysical exploration is restricted neither by any universal human conceptual system, nor by the particular language one used in one's national culture.