

Chinese Psychology of Religion in an age of Perplexity

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In this age of rapid modernization, our attitude toward things traditional is becoming increasingly ambivalent. This ambivalence is reflected in the two terms that we use to refer to our traditions—culture and religion. When it comes to culture, we are nostalgic—we are ever eager to claim our culture as if our origin or roots is at stake. When it comes to religious traditions, however, we may be eager to discard like a pair of old slippers certain ancient “superstitions” for fear that they clog the wheels of progress. Confronting this typical ambivalence of our times, I suggest that complex problems can be addressed only by complex thinking, which in the present context would be to embrace all the ambivalence we may have toward our traditions. This can be done by reiterating the insight of Geertz (1973) and many others that culture and religion are two sides of the same coin. On this view, the challenge for Chinese psychology of religion lies in negotiating between two conflicting cultures—the traditional world in which religion plays a central role, and the modern secular world in which religion seems to be the fifth wheel.

Indeed, the modern life is fraught with such conflicts. To mention just a few, the core of Chinese religion/culture is emotion as symbolized by the heart, whereas the sexiest organ in the secular world is the head which symbolizes cool reason. Morality lies at the core of Confucianism, whereas neutrality and utilitarianism define the moral landscape of secularism. Epistemologically, both Confucianism and Daoism inhabit a sympathetic universe, in which empathetic communion between humans and spirits is as feasible as that between close friends. By contrast, the modern secular world inhabits a mechanistic universe in which determinism reigns supreme, as evidenced by the prevalent tendency in mainstream psychology to explain emotions in terms of biology and the brain science. The difference between traditional Chinese culture and secularism may best be illustrated with a contrast and comparison between harmony and democracy.

The Chinese notion of harmony envisions the collective life as an organic whole that inhabits a shared private space in which feeling-based rationality serves as arbiter for all matters, similar to the way family members resolve their conflicts. Democracy, by contrast, inhabits a public space of strangers, who depend on law and debate to resolve conflicts of interest. Here we have a contrast of two kinds of collectives: Harmony envisions a community that is based on the relational self who forms a network through emotional resonance and attunement. Democracy, on the other hand, is a quasi-community that relies on constructed collective identity such as political parties and national identities. In a word, the contrast between these two collectives is that between “weness” and “we are.” The modern secular world is rife with

identity politics fueled by the “we are” type of collective such as nations and states. Nationalism and other identity-based collectives will only perpetuate cultural clashes and wars around the globe (de Rivera & Carson, 2015). According to Macmurray (1977), the hope for world peace may lie in transcending personal and group identities to form a global community based on “weness”—an affect-based, not identity-based, community. To this global community of tomorrow the Chinese have much to contribute with their notion of harmony, provided that in the meantime they do not get lost on their way to modernity as they steer between the Scylla of their religious traditions and the Charybdis of modern secularism.

Are harmony and democracy choices exclusive to each other like the proverbial fish and bear’s paw? Contrary to Mencius, I believe that we can have both delicacies. Based on the analysis in my book *Understanding emotion in Chinese culture* (2015), I argue that all cultures need both the heart and the head, or symmetry (undifferentiated wholeness) and asymmetry (difference and differentiation), except that cultures differ in their emphasis and proclivity such that Chinese culture privileges symmetry and modern secularism asymmetry. I believe that the more we have a deep understanding of cultural differences along the divide between symmetry and asymmetry, the better we stand a chance of taking advantage of both worlds-- the traditional and the modern. Toward this goal, I propose a few research agendas along the following basic dimensions of religion:

- **Affect:** This research project will cover the Confucian notions of *ren* (human kindness), *the unbearing mind*, *teng* (heart-aching love), and so on. Research questions include: How does the Confucian emphasis on the vulnerability of the human heart to the suffering of others differ from attachment theory which renders relationship a matter of personality traits; and whether the Confucian notion of human relatedness holds the potential, better than cognitive categorizations (such as individual and group identity), to serve as a building block for the global community of tomorrow?
- **Morality:** This research project investigates the pantheon of religious Daoism to shed some light on the Chinese moral landscape. Characteristic of symmetry is the holistic thinking of Chinese culture, in which there is no discontinuity between gods and humans, nor is there separation between religion and state. For instance, quite a few magistrates in history were canonized as gods in religious Daoism, where every aspect of life is under the scrutiny of deities who reward or punish in accordance with a comprehensive code of ethics. Decoding this ancient virtue ethics may shed some light on the Chinese moral landscape of today.
- **Ontology:** As can be predicted from the Chinese emphasis on symmetry, ontological parity lies at the core of the Chinese vision of a sympathetic universe, in which intimate mind-to-mind transactions between gods and humans give rise to the lore of “*gan-yin*”

(divine intervention in response to piety). Investigation of such folktales in the popular piety of both Buddhism and Daoism can contribute to the ongoing research, in cognitive psychology, on the phenomena of mind-perception .

- Epistemology: Harmony is the root metaphor of the good life for the Chinese. This research project investigates the epistemological foundation of harmony in terms of symmetry to shed some light on its difference from democracy which capitalizes on asymmetry.
- Chinese religions of foreign origins: This project investigates Buddhism and Christianity in terms of their capacity to open up new horizons that lie outside the orbit of the symmetry-based cosmology of Confucianism and Daoism. For instance, the Buddhist notion of nothingness opens up a new problem space beyond the phenomenal world of existence that is the preoccupation of Confucianism and Daoism. Similarly, Christianity takes one beyond the comfort zone of symmetry with its multiple ontological gaps and discontinuities between God and nature, church and state.