

ASIAN WISDOM IN A GLOBAL AGE

Hu Yeping

The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, Washington D.C.,
USA

Abstract

This paper examines the process in which wisdom is developed in a culture or civilization, not only through the internal development of its tradition, but by its openness to influences outside of itself. Special emphasis is paid to China and its assimilation of the influence of Buddhism. It shows how Buddhism was assimilated but transformed into a particularly Chinese character, and Chinese culture was influenced by Buddhism. This suggests that such a process between tradition and openness allows for hermeneutic reflection upon one's own culture, and opens the possibilities for dialogue between cultures.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้จะตรวจสอบกระบวนการซึ่งภูมิปัญญาพัฒนาขึ้นมาในวัฒนธรรมหรืออารยธรรม ที่มีใช้การพัฒนามาขึ้นจากภายในประเพณีของวัฒนธรรมเองเท่านั้น แต่ยังรวมไปถึงการเปิดกว้างยอมรับอิทธิพลจากภายนอกอีกด้วย บทความนี้จะเน้นไปที่ประเทศจีนซึ่งยอมรับอิทธิพลของพุทธศาสนาและจะแสดงให้เห็นว่าจีนรับเอาพุทธศาสนาเข้ามาและแปลงโฉมให้มีลักษณะเฉพาะอย่างไร และพุทธศาสนามีอิทธิพลต่อวัฒนธรรมจีนอย่างไร นี่แสดงให้เห็นว่ากระบวนการพัฒนาระหว่างประเพณีและการเปิดกว้างยอมรับอิทธิพลภายนอกเปิดทางให้กับการไตร่ตรองตีความวัฒนธรรมของตนเอง และยังเปิดทางให้กับความเป็นไปได้ในการสานเสวนาระหว่างต่างวัฒนธรรมอีกด้วย

Philosophy and Wisdom

All know that etymologically ‘philosophy’ means “love of wisdom” in the Greek language. Why do we need to love wisdom; why not something else? And what is wisdom; whence does it come? What insights can it provide and how can we apply these in the real or actual life-world?

Aristotle distinguishes wisdom into two kinds: philosophical wisdom and practical wisdom. The former is “the formal cause of happiness”; the later “ensures taking proper means to the proper ends desired by moral virtue”.¹ In other words, wisdom is concerned with something ultimate. It is not just about scientific knowledge or about how to acquire general knowledge in a wise manner; rather it is to know the truth about the general principles of the world and to pursue the truth as such. It studies the ultimate reality, causes, and principles underlying being and thinking in its many aspects and different manifestations. Hence, philosophy based on wisdom is an attempt to discover the fundamental principles of the reality in a systematic and scientific way. It derives from reality, upon which it reflects, and to which it returns. Without wisdom philosophy would lose its fundamental significance.

Chinese Wisdom

In Chinese ‘wisdom’ is written in two characters 智慧, which mean respectively the knowledge of the sun and the harvest of the heart. The knowledge of the sun indicates the search for the ultimate truth. The harvest of the heart symbolizes the realization of goodness. The two dimensions are united in an aesthetic harmony. Without either wisdom could not be understood in its full meaning. The mind and the heart must work together in the formation of wisdom and to apply true knowledge and the good will in creative human action in the world.

In the Chinese tradition the heart is seen as the place where people think and feel. It contains Logos and Eros, and holds the concepts of consciousness and conscience. It does not feel merely sensual objects at a material level; rather focuses upon the cultivation of the self or the soul

by acting morally both in private and in public in order to achieve the perfection of sagehood. The importance of the heart is its ability to have a special kind of thought that makes sense of purpose in life and the ultimate end for human destiny. Hence, the cultivation of the heart has the highest signification for one's entire life journey. "These three unities of man and heaven, of thought and action, and the unity of subjectivity and objectivity are the questions for 'truth', 'goodness', and 'beauty'".²

However, the emphasis of the Chinese understanding of wisdom is upon the harmony of the mind and heart, which express profoundly the interrelationship between Heaven, Earth and Man. Knowledge of the Sun is always through the grounded human heart, full of life and creativity. Wisdom as the cumulative reflexion of life lived by the people expresses the excellent understanding and rich insight of what people face everyday through their thinking and feeling. Thus, each wisdom inherently integrates its particular culture or civilization as the foundation of its philosophical reflection. Thus, Chinese wisdom is characterized by the heritage of Chinese culture and civilization evolved through its long history, as is true also of Indian, African, Islamic, Greek, and Western philosophy. Each mode of thinking and feeling reflects the essence of the cultural tradition – and this is true notably of Chinese philosophy.

Culture and Wisdom

Philosophy is neither a mere ideology, which groups a set of ideas or beliefs to form a certain political, economic, or other system, nor a sole scientific system, which responds functionally to a related group of components in a systematic way according to a scientific method. Beyond these philosophy founded fundamentally on wisdom is a reflection of people's life and attitude toward the reality; thus it is embedded in culture and civilization.

Each culture comprises an adequate inner structure and a dynamic formation for its particular people in the particular time and space. Culture is not merely an anthropological issue, but is rather about the cultivation of the inner self. Any group of people must establish a pattern or style of life through accumulated experience in living together in their

particular setting. Through this experience a people learn what promotes life and what destroys it, how to correct errors and how to respond to catastrophes. More deeply they gradually discover what is of value and worth seeking in life. Their concern is with the meaning of life, the exercise of their freedom and creativity, and the future of their children and grand children. As they order their preferences for modes of relationships and give priority, e.g., to harmony over competitiveness or vice versa, they develop a ranking of values. To this corresponds a distinctive set of virtues, strengths or capabilities. Together these constitute what is called a “culture”, that is a way of cultivating the soul, of living together and raising the next generations with their rich insight and profound spiritual intuition, namely their own wisdom.³

Hence, culture focuses upon the creative spirit of a people and their ability to work together to build all dimensions of life – material and spiritual, economic and political, scientific and artistic – into a harmony with beauty and unity, and to share deeply in meaning and values. “Culture is a renewal, a reliving of origins in an attitude of profound appreciation. This leads us beyond self and other, beyond identity and diversity, in order to comprehend both”.⁴ For that reason cultures and civilizations “survive political, social, economic even ideological upheavals”.⁵ They are not stagnant but open-end and on-going, responding to human challenges, adapting to new situations and progressing both horizontally and vertically. In recognizing the external, objective and physical, they take one still deeper into the internal, subjective and spiritual where the unique identity of persons is in continual evolution. It is precisely in this context that philosophy plays its significant role in reflecting the development of human history and human culture in facing various challenges.

Today’s global age, philosophy is facing a new challenge, that is, how to understand different peoples, cultures and religious beliefs. Are we destined to conflict as Samuel Huntington warned,⁶ or is it possible to have mutual understanding, sincere dialogue and even active cooperation among the different peoples and cultures? As philosophers we must think seriously and carefully together in order to draw upon the profound insights of our proper wisdom for the peaceful coexistence of all civilizations. Thus, wisdom is no longer an enclosed product of one narrow way

of understanding one's particular life, rather must become a shared knowledge and insight for the whole humankind. This is our challenge as philosophers in the 21st century.

The Integration of Two Civilizations

During the process of the formation, selection, transformation and adaptation each culture preserves its wholeness and irreducible identity, while under the influence of other cultures it differentiates itself from them in various forms. Each culture as an integrated whole of its own "space" in human history is capable of continuing to expand its inner potentialities by engaging new forms emerging within and without. In particular, I would like now to test and illustrate the possibilities of dialogue and cooperation and integration between different cultures and civilizations by studying how Buddhism, which came from India, managed to become an integral part of Chinese civilization and how the two were not destroyed but reinforced thereby.

Buddhism was first introduced to China from India and Central Asia sometime during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.). The Emperor of Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty (58-75 A.D.) sent an envoy to the Western land to seek the Buddhist teaching and invited two Indian monks to establish a Buddhist monastery in China.⁷

During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Buddhism was considered a part or companion school of the native Chinese Huang-Lao Daoist teachings and practices; it did not have much influence due to the other prevailing traditional Chinese philosophy: Confucianism. With the downfall of the Han Dynasty and the chaotic period which followed, China was divided into two regions, both of which were looking for something new to enhance their governing power. Interest in Buddhist thought spread to different regions of China and was accepted by the ordinary people as well as by governing officials and rulers.

Borrowing ideas, concepts, rituals, terminology, meditative disciplines, institutional structures and literature from one another and reshaping and adapting itself in a more attractive and friendly manner, Buddhism became part of the cultural mainstream together with Confucian-

ism and Daoism in China. After several centuries of evolution and assimilation it began to develop distinctively Chinese forms such as: *Pure Land Buddhism* began by Hui Yuan (334-417), *Chan (Zen) Buddhism* founded by Hui-neng in 700, and *Tien Tai Buddhism* founded by Chih-I (538-597).

Professor Tang Yijie of Peking University is the son of the great Buddhist scholar, Tang Yongtong, from whom he learned this history even after such teaching had been officially suppressed. He devoted much of his life to studying how Buddhism was introduced and accepted into China and analyzed this in detail in his work entitled *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese Culture*.⁸ He illustrates especially how this was done during the Wei and Jin dynasties and the North and South dynasties; how it became one of the most significant causes for the major philosophical transformation in China; and how it eventually became an integral part of the Chinese thought. For this he gives the following three points: (1) adaptation of the tradition, (2) enrichment and intensification of the tradition, and (3) the excellence and value of the contribution.

(1) *Adaptation of the Tradition*. In Han dynasty when Buddhism was introduced into China it attached its teachings to the Daoshu (Daoist teaching) at the time. The main theme of Buddhism was about the immortality of the soul and spirit and about cause and effect.

Very similar themes were being discussed in the traditional Chinese thought. Similarly the Hinayana method of *Chan* meditation (*dhyana*) was very close to Huang-lao School of Daoism and Immortality (*Shen xian jia*) School. In the Wei and Jin dynasties the Buddhist *prajna* teaching became popular because of its attachment to Daoist *xuanxue* (Daoist metaphysics). Particularly, by examining in detail “exalting nothingness (*gui wu*)” and “taking nothingness as the origin (*yi wu wei ben*)” of Daoists He Yan (190-249) and Wang Bi (226-249) and Buddhist Mahayan *prajna* Kong Zong (emptiness school), Professor Tang Yijie displayed that: at first Buddhism was grafted on the body of earlier Chinese thought and did not have great influence. Only gradually did Buddhism gain popularity. It found the Chinese cultural tradition to be by nature conservative and thus able to resist the cultural influences from without. In that sense, what was newly imported had to be grafted onto what proceeded and the

elements in the foreign culture which were similar would take hold first. Only after would the innovations infiltrate and transform the original culture.

A foreign culture must adapt itself to the requirements and demands of the existing culture and be grafted onto its body. Those elements of the foreign culture which are relatively close to or resemble the existing culture, will be easier to be propagated; only then, will it be possible for the various parts of the imported culture gradually to penetrate the original culture and exert some of their own influence, until eventually the imported culture begins to transform and modify the original culture.⁹

(2) *Enrichment and Intensification of the Tradition.* In Wei and Jin dynasties the theme of ‘being’ and ‘nonbeing’ was pervasive in Daoism. By analyzing in detail the development of *xuanxue* (Daoist metaphysics) on “valuing nothingness or nonbeing (*gui wu*)” of Daoists Wang Bi and He Yan and Guo Xiang’s idea on “exalting being (*cong you*)” with the similar teaching in the doctrine of the Kong Zong (emptiness school) of Buddhist *prajna* teaching on “not real non-existence” Professor Tang Yijie concluded that the potentiality for assimilation was greater as the new culture approximated a potential aspect of the evolution of indigenous culture. This was because the element of continuity in evolution, namely, that the new culture could take root if there was a corresponding potential in the original culture. In time the new culture could become an active and lively element in the indigenous culture and have a strong effect on its development.

Why was such a development possible? One may ascribe it to the demands or requirements of the heritage or continuity of cultures as they came into contact with one another. As long as the development of a culture is not drastically interrupted, what follows must be the product of a continuous evolution from what preceded it. The development of preceding ideas often would contain several

possibilities, and the idea(s) which would continue to be developed, representing the subsequent parts of the development, would be bound to take the shape of one or another of these possibilities. If an imported culture can, on the whole, adapt or conform to a certain aspect of a potential or possible development of the original indigenous culture or fit into a trend or tendency of one of the possible developments, not only will it be itself developed and thus exert relatively great influence in itself, but it may even become directly a component part of the original culture and perhaps even to some extent alter the course of the development of that original culture.¹⁰

(3) *Excellence and Value of Contribution.* An analysis of Kong Zong (emptiness school) of the Buddhist *prajna* teaching on “not being and yet not non-being (*fei you fei wu*)” clearly demonstrates its higher level of reasoning and analysis in terms of Wang Bi and Guo Xiang, and the strong influence of Wei Shi Buddhist teaching (*Vidjnana*, or Consciousness Only School) introduced by the Monk Xuan Zang in the Tang dynasty. Professor Tang Yijie notes that “it was after the baptism of the introduction and assimilation of *prajna* philosophy introduced from India that the idealist philosophies of Chinese tradition became themselves a truly influential and meaningful system of thought”.¹¹ In order for the potential element of the new culture to be realized on a lasting basis it would need to achieve a higher level of development than the indigenous culture in order to serve as a stimulus and have impact on the original culture. Despite its superiority in some aspects, however, the new culture must still subject itself to the old and fulfill two prior conditions.

For a new culture, even one with a relatively higher level of development in reasoning, to have a great and long-lasting impact on the country [nation or region] to which it is introduced, it not only would have to subject itself, nonetheless, to the limitations of the political and socio-economic conditions of the host country, nation, or region, but it must also be in possession of the first and

second sets of conditions described in the afore-discussed sections. This is particularly true of cultures, especially if the original culture did not experience an abrupt and radical interruption, or if such an interruption was not to be caused by the introduction of the new culture. Only in such a way could the new culture affect the original culture in a profound and long-lasting way. Without these conditions, no matter how advanced or superior the imported culture may be, it would be difficult for it to strike roots into the soil of the host country and over the long run exert any deep influence.¹²

From the three points outlined above, Professor Tang Jijie concludes that

The introduction of Buddhism from India to China in early Han Dynasty and its subsequent development illustrate that the tendencies in the development of current world cultures manifest the dichotomy of conflict and harmony between and among many different civilizations.¹³

Indeed, after the Cold War, culture has replaced political and ideological power in the world order. Peoples are knit together by blood lines that connect families genetically and by fundamental beliefs which coordinate their outlook on the world and hence their responses to its challenges. “What ultimately counts for people is not political ideology or economic interest. Faith and family, blood and belief, are what people identify with and what they will fight and die for”.¹⁴ Especially religion has become increasingly crucial for “shaping the identities of people and aligning the states”,¹⁵ and the foundation on which the great civilizations rest. Cultures, then, as meaningful entities are the way in which people see, experience and respond to reality.

Hence, from Professor Tang Yijie’s examination of the introduction and development of Buddhism into Chinese culture we learn that the increasing frequency and intimacy of the intercultural encounter and exchange in this global age and the propensity for mutual interaction and

influence, can be harmonious and that mutual assimilation is possible and even promising.

Conclusion

The integration of Buddhism with the Chinese culture and others such as Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, etc., makes manifest the possibility of dialogue of Asian civilizations. It does not presuppose an homogenization in a universal whole, but rather distinguishes as unique Chinese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhism, and so on. But relating each together on the basis of its own cultural identity can create a unity that is much richer and broader way than anything known thusfar.

However, there is also a tendency for civilizations to clash in hostility, hatred, and chaos. And there is a possibility that cultures could constitute walls dividing us in isolation, alienation and confrontation, like the Berlin wall in the past and the wall between Israel and Palestine at present. If we transform that danger of clash into dialogue or cooperation, and if we break the wall to a greater openness, we will have new and positive possibilities for our families, societies and civilizations. This grounds a hope for the future of our people, our nation and our globe. A common humanity needs a humane approach with unique experiences and the rich resources of its cultural tradition.

Wisdom in general, Asian wisdom in particular, is something “classical” which contains the profound meaning of “a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and is independent of all the circumstances of time”, or “a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other age”.¹⁶ In order to have a good understanding of the past one needs to create a “fusion of horizons” between now and then, and the different life experiences of the many peoples. One must reflect critically upon the pre-judgments and gain critical distance from the prejudices so as to be ready to open for new encounter or new understanding for the future readings and applications, for understanding cultural tradition is an open-ended and progressive “hermeneutical spiral”. Hence, wisdom enables us to read our cultural traditions hermeneu-

tically, rather than in a closed fundamentalist manner.

In sum, Asia as a continent has its rich natural resources, as a geopolitical structure it has its strategic importance, and as a civilization it has its long and profound history and cultural tradition. As Asians, we share spiritual values, historical heritages and religious sentiment; we have similar concerns for family values, social harmony and sympathetic compassion; and we use our knowledge and wisdom to search for *sat* (existence), *cit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (bliss), to behold the true, the good and the beautiful.

No man is an island. Asia does not exist alone in this globe; Asians do not live alone in this world. We must share our wisdom with other peoples and contribute our competencies to the whole humankind in this global age.

The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy

huy@cua.edu

www.crvp.org

Endnotes

¹Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated with Introduction by David Ross, revised by J.L. Ackrill and L.O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 154.

²Tang Yijie, *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1991), p. 144.

³See G.F. McLean, *Hermeneutics for a Global Age: Lectures in Shanghai and Hanoi* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2003).

⁴Ibid., p. 42.

⁵F. Braudel, *History of Civilizations* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 35.

⁶Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

⁷“Prince Ying of Chu State (the brother of Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty) has been reciting the refined teachings of Huang and Lao (the Yellow Emperor and Laozi are together revered as the founders of the Daoism) and has worshiped at the benevolent shrine of Buddha. He has undertaken to cleanse himself and has fasted for three months, observing his vows to the gods. He has repented and

should be considered to have expected any crime he may have perpetrated or any suspicions he may have provoked. He is now, by way of atonement, submitting his property to add to the grand fete of the Upasaka and to the glory of the temples of Buddha". Tang Yijie, *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1991), p. 90.

⁸*Ibid.*, Chapter IX.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁴Huntington, p. 43.

¹⁵Huntington, p. 47.

¹⁶Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 256.