

The Coming Polyphony of East and West

by Dr. Patrick Ho

Dr. Patrick Ho, co-chairman of the China Energy Fund Committee and author of the Belt and Road Monograph 2016, delivered the following, slightly abridged remarks, entitled “The Belt and Road Initiative—and Corresponding Ideas in Chinese and Western Philosophy,” to a Schiller Institute conference in New York City on April 14, 2017. His remarks followed the opening presentation to the Dialogue of Civilizations panel by Helga Zepp-LaRouche on the second day of the conference.

Good morning, everybody. Mme. Helga Zepp-LaRouche, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it warms my heart to see, on a Friday morning, this day of Good Friday, that there are still so many of you here to learn about Chinese culture. It’s really fantastic.

We are here today to discuss how Chinese metaphysics has influenced the rest of the world. We will learn from history while also keeping the future in mind.

What is China? What is it that has held so many people together for millennia? What is “Chineseness”? What gives the Chinese the sense of what it is to be Chinese? Well, all you have to remember is three things: China is land. China is people. China is civilization.

China, the most populated country, has 56 races, each with a varying set of customs, habits, and living conditions. China is extremely diverse, very pluralistic, and very much decentralized. They are held together by a common written language and a set of cultural core

values derived from millennia of cultural legacies and civilization.

China is indeed in so many ways not like the West. It’s not primarily even a nation state where its people are defined by a political identity, but a *civilization state*, where its people are defined by a cultural identity. This helps explain why the Chinese place such a huge emphasis on unity and stability, the basis for the state

and the distinctive notion of family and social relations, and why they embrace ideas such as “harmony with diversity.” And unlike Europe, China never sought to acquire overseas colonies.

The Chinese state bears a fundamentally different relationship to society compared with any Western state. In China, the state, or the government, is seen as intimate, as a member of the family, a necessary good, rather than as in the Western discourse, a problem, a threat, or even an enemy of the people. For Chinese, the state is the embodiment of

the civilization as such: Its legitimacy comes from the cultural legacy and core values that it upholds and protects. So the legacy and legitimacy of the authority of the Chinese government does not come from the people. It comes from Heaven. And I’ll explain what Heaven is all about. Heaven means *morality*. So, it is ethics, it is morals, that give the government its right to govern.

A Second, Global Renaissance

Rather than fear what lies ahead, we Chinese are aspiring to a new and peaceful world civilization, based on principles of benevolence, respect, trust, equality,



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and continuing human advancement. This vision, driven by humanity's historic longing for peace and prosperity, is renewed by our appreciation that all of us on this Earth of ours share a common destiny, which each and every one of us has the responsibility to defend and to safeguard.

In many ways we can already see how the return of China to prominence has not only been good for China, but also good for the world. Economic: By lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, China has contributed to global prosperity. Philosophical: China's most significant contribution to the world will be intangible—its cultural wisdom, its metaphysics, its outlook on life and on the Universe, and its traditional values, a resource unique to China, rare gems formed by heat and pressure over immense periods of time. Few if any countries can claim the cultural longevity of China, and China's culture is vast and its traditions run deep. Indeed, it is the only one of the four ancient civilizations that has not been interrupted and is still in existence.

The re-emergence of Chinese culture will therefore help bring balance to global culture. The propagation and exchange will lead to a wiser, more thoughtful, and more creative global culture. As it has in the past, exchange will spur innovation and creativity, and cause a flourishing in science, arts, and humanities. It will lead to a second, global Renaissance.

The *Dao* and Sustainable Development

Let's go into a very important Chinese contribution to modern literature: the *Dao De Jing* by Laozi. It is considered the bible of Daoism. It's the book of profound wisdom and great learning, and it is the book that has been translated in the most versions second only to the Bible. *Dao De Jing*, together with *Yi Jing* [*I Ching*], provides the architectural framework for Chinese metaphysics and an indigenous religion.

The *Dao De Jing* has a long and complex textual history. Versions and commentaries date back two millennia, including ancient bamboo, silk, and paper manuscripts discovered in the 20th Century. The oldest discovered portion dates back to the late 4th Century B.C.E.

The received *Dao De Jing* is a short text of just 5,000 Chinese characters in 81 brief sentences. It has two parts, the *Tao Jing* and the *De Jing*.

There are many possible translations of the book's

title. *Dao* or *tao* is the pivotal and defined term in ancient Chinese thought. The common translation is "The Way." You all know what is "The Way." You read in the *Gospel According to St. John*: "He is the Way." "Way" resists definition in English. We can do very little more than just offer mere synonyms that are neither as familiar nor as broad in application. Typically, we would use "way" to explain terms such as "course, method, the manner, mode, means, practice, fashion, technique," and so on.

In Chinese the character *dao* is part of the doctrine or truth or principle or law, and of course, ethics, reason, religious, orthodoxy, thank, apologize, tell, explain, inform, and so on. These are all *dao*.

A more concrete translation of *dao* is the "the road" or "the path." Throughout Classical texts *daos* are spoken, heard, forgotten, transmitted, learned, studied, understood, misunderstood, distorted, mastered, and performed with pleasure. Different countries in historical periods have different *dao*.

This term, however, has special meaning within the context of Taoism, where it implies the essential, unnamable process of the Universe. *Dao* really means the entire Universe. A lot of people say *dao* is a Supreme Being. Whether it is a Supreme Being or not, nobody knows. It is that thing that runs everything.

So the first line of *Dao De Jing* is, "The *dao* that can be described is not the true *dao*. The true *dao* cannot be described or comprehended by humans. It is so vast, so superlative, so magnificent, it is beyond our imagination, beyond human description, beyond words, and beyond comprehension."

So *dao* means virtue, personal character, inner strength, virtuosity, integrity, and so on. The semantics for this Chinese word resembles English "virtue," which developed from the Italian *virtù*, an archaic sense of inner potency or divine power, as in the healing virtue of a drug, to the modern meaning of moral excellence or goodness.

Combined with the compound word *dao de*, the meaning of *jing* is canon or great book or classic, but *dao* means the virtue of the system itself. *De* is the implementation of this virtue, it's how we embody this virtue, how we live up to this virtue. So *de* is a way of living, it's something we can practice, something that can be seen and felt, whereas *dao* is something to aspire to and not to be known. Thus *Dao De Jing* can be translated as *The Classic of the Way's Vir-*

tues or *The Book of the Way of Virtue*.

Work has been underway to apply the wisdom of *Dao De Jing* in addressing modern-day problems and difficulties in life. The book may yield clues to a sustainable lifestyle, which is paramount in underpinning all initiatives leading to reaching the 17 targets of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals rolled out by the United Nations.

We must inspire responsibility in those who are affluent. We should live in a sustainable lifestyle; that is: use what you need but not what you want, because what you want, what you desire is limitless, it has no meaning. Human desire sees no satiety, it cannot be satisfied. We should be careful in consumption—use resources efficiently, sparingly, responsibly, and be smart—and oppose excess and extravagance.

Eastern and Western Core Values

Let us now go into the crux of how East and West cultural core values can blend together.

The Renaissance brought humanism into a European society previously dominated by the Church. But whereas Western humanism centers on the self or individual and emphasizes individualism and other specific values, Eastern humanism not only focuses on the human relationship, which thereby prescribes the essence of the Chinese person, but on the entire holistic makeup in which humanity is part and parcel of the overall arrangement.

Chinese culture is dominated by Confucianism, which centers its principles on the ancient religious foundation of Daoism. While establishing the social values and ideals for the traditional society, Confucian philosophy presupposes three biospheres of human interactions: Heaven, Earth, and Humans. And man must find peace in all three biospheres.

For the Man-Man biosphere, Confucius emphasized proper conduct in one's social relations, because it is in the company of others that man reaches his ultimate



Statue of Confucius at Confucian Temple in Shanghai, China.

fulfillment. This code of behavior is called *li*, which Mme. Helga just referred to, the social and ethical norms that guide people to do the appropriate things at the right time, in the right place, manifesting respect and kindness. It's something like etiquette.

The most important of all virtues is benevolence, *ren*, which is love of fellow humans, a sense of compassion based on the dignity of human life and great self-respect. We cultivate *ren* by putting ourselves in the position of others, and treating them as you wish them to

treat you. Confucius said, "Do not do to others what you would not like others to do unto you." And "Do unto others what you want others to do unto you." So benevolence means the practice of these two golden principles, which not only can be found in the Chinese literature of Confucianism, but also in the Bible, in the Quran, and in sacred texts of almost all religions. And these two golden principles have a universality that permeates all world ethical, cultural, and religious traditions throughout the ages.

Regarding Man-Earth interactions: We are ultimately linked to all life on Earth, and therefore must treat our environment with respect and care. Man's obsession with development and growth—and particularly still more things to give us greater convenience, pleasure, and comfort—contradicts all teachings against extreme greed and the principle calling for moderation. Whereas Western civilization often regards nature as an object for eventual conquest, the Chinese treat nature with great reverence and respect. Chinese are appreciative of nature, because humans and Earth, as part of nature, are deemed to be one entity. Such a world outlook raises up a civilization with a sense of tolerance in pursuit of coexistence and harmony. A pinnacle achievement in life is to be One with Heaven.

It is because of Confucius' teaching that the primary concern is humanity and the interrelationship between people; Confucianism has only a general description or

mention of Heaven or God, leaving a large amount of room in the spiritual realm for Chinese people to learn from the other civilizations and religions, such as Buddhism from India, Islam from the Middle East, Christianity from the West.

And perhaps for that reason Chinese culture, and thus religion, is a very tolerant one, being a culture and religion of infinite possibilities and capable of accommodating all and any Supreme Beings. Chinese will seldom engage themselves in arguments about whose God is the true God and whose isn't one, or whose is a better God. Chinese, unlike other cultures of monotheism, do not have the burden of being self-ordained missionaries, defending one religion by attempting to convert everybody else to a particular religion. Perhaps Chinese regard Heaven or God as so supreme and magnificent that it is beyond description and definition by humanity, and unlimited possibilities and imagination exist with this Heavenly statement in mind.

Instead, Chinese focus on the interfacing layer between the spiritual sphere and the material world, which can be explained as a network of social and interpersonal relationships between man and his inner self, man and his surrounding environment, and man and his fellow men.

Therefore, any type of belief or religion can easily blend into the Chinese spiritual world. But for it to be practiced by the people in the local communities, it has to be filtered through the Confucian network of traditional and social relationships and be "Sinicized," or interpreted with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, when Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, or Judaism was introduced into China, it was customized with local interpretations and was blended in with the domestic practices of Chinese society.

A 'Heart-Centered,' Harmonious World

From a material-life-dominated world to a heart-centered, harmonious world, change is itself eternal. That is what the book *Yi Jing* told us.

Some analysts believe that a large number of social problems emerged because of the collapse of traditional values and a lack of spiritual life. To write a prescription for contemporary society, one has to review the development of human civilization and the social value system. And a "heart culture" of Confucianism is the right way to solve these problems.

The process of human development might be broadly divided into four stages, both individually and collectively as the whole of humanity is concerned. The four stages are material needs, spiritual needs, individual needs, and collective needs or altruism.

In the earlier stage of society, humans pursued the improvement of material life and the establishment of a property system as the ultimate goals. These goals met the physiological and safety needs at the lowest level of existence in the hierarchies of need. In the material-dominated agricultural society, the core values were industriousness, thriftiness, simplicity, honesty, and adherence to the law.

After having solved the problems of food, clothing, and safety, humans began to think about the next level of requirements and needs and demands, which is social—asking for love and belonging and esteem, asking for self-respect. The theocratic system in medieval Europe and the Chinese imperial system of the Zhou Dynasty both formed feudal societies which believed in God and Heaven. But the core values of this period emphasized hierarchy, worship of Heaven and ancestors, loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness.

Renaissance Individualism

The Renaissance removed the shroud of theocratic gloom over Europe, emancipated the mind, called for freedom, inspired creativity, and enlightened the next generations. It also translated the God-worship culture into a human exploration culture. These represented a human turn to a higher level of needs, of self-actualization through individualism. This culture, encouraging subjective innovations and calling for individual freedom, achieved the release of humanity, accelerated the emergence of capitalism, laid a foundation for science, and established the rule of law. It also introduced individualism into philosophy, shaped the modern, people-oriented society, and generated the modern ideas of freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, equality, and fraternity.

Humanism, however, was distorted by individual desire. The absence of constraint from traditional religions and moralities ultimately led to the alienation of human nature.

To solve the problem of today's society, it is not enough to depend only on what the West has achieved. We need to move from the individualistic, people-oriented human culture, to an altruistic, heart-centered

human culture. Since ancient times, “heart culture”—loosely interpreted as *ren*, or in Greek the word is *agapē*, broad love, unconditional love—has occupied an important position in Chinese culture, one that plays a key role in keeping Chinese culture different from Western culture.

Confucius said that “one needs to cultivate individual moral character—keep the family in order, run the country well, and bring peace to the world, but first and foremost, one needs to rectify the heart.” That also means to purify the heart. To rectify the heart means you have to set your heart right and proper.

Xunzi said, “The heart decides one’s Being.”

Dong Zhongshu, another scholar, said, “The heart is essential to one’s body.”

Zhu Xi said, “The heart dominates.”

Wang Chuanshan said, “In one’s body, the heart is before everything.”

Wang Shou-ren said, “People are the heart of the Universe and the heart is the lord of the Universe.”

The “heart” in Chinese is a collective consciousness and is frequently taken to mean the “soul,” the interconnection among human beings that connect one human being with another, and with nature and with the ultimate being itself.

Conscience, which is the heavenly principle, already exists in one’s heart. As long as one is trying hard to cultivate the heart, conscience will not be blinded by lust, and will finally achieve the unison of knowing and doing. And these indicate that the heart rules the relationship between the body and the mind.

How East and West Come Together

The world is now slowly transitioning from a competition of hard power to a contest of soft power, Confucianism’s teaching that tolerance fosters greatness is a means to hold the world together with virtue, and its long historical heritage of heart culture is the cultural fountainhead of Chinese soft power. The Chinese understand peace as something internal. It starts within every one of us and should be cultivated and nurtured. Before undertaking such a pursuit, we must first set our minds in order and then ensure that our purpose is sincere, so that our quest for wisdom can become complete through a careful discernment of nature. Thus, wisdom is achieved.

Acquiring real self-discipline will yield harmony within the family, paving the way to good governance

and global peace. This is Confucius’ utopian vision of peace. Peace on Earth begins with finding the inner peace inherent in every one of us. We must be at peace with ourselves before we can be at peace with one another. Peace comes from within, not from yonder. For peace to prevail on Earth, let peace first prevail in us, in our hearts.

So let us find peace by loving one another as we love ourselves, and by respecting and loving one another’s country, as we respect and love our own country. Chinese traditional cultural core values are established and time-tested while undergoing twists and turns throughout history. These values are modified and adapted to different times and contexts, and yet are made applicable to solving the problems of the present time. In different eras and locations, the manifestations and application methods could vary, but the underlying core values and principles remain steadfast and sustained.

Ever since the mid-19th Century, the Chinese people have been looking forward to a modernized China with a Renaissance of Chinese culture. We believe that the values of East and West are not incompatible. Instead they constitute a set of values at two ends of the spectrum, just like the *yin* and *yang* of *T’ai Chi*. A combination of Chinese and Western cultures and Chinese modernization will lead to a second Renaissance of humanity. Western and Eastern emphases of core values appear to define the latitude of interpretation: Individual with Community; Rights with Obligations; Freedom with Responsibilities; Achievements with Sacrifices and Commitments; Competition with Alliances; and Diversity with Harmony. The two sets of values operate with one another as two opposing principles in nature, complementing and supplementing one another.

The Polyphony of *He*

By combining the strength of the East and the West we can make possible a multipolar world order for the modern century, and achieve the ultimate Chinese core value of *He*, meaning “harmony.” *He* means peace, calm, sum and summation; a draw, meaning no winners, no losers—mix and blend so as to become indistinguishable one from the other. It is also a process of achieving commonality in the face of diversity. All the different elements, each with its own characteristics, work together for a common cause, and in

the end the synergy produces a new collective energy that surpasses the glory and splendor of its parts in sum total.

Through this very powerful process of *He*, Chinese culture has been able to assimilate all the different cultures of its foreign invaders and conquerors, ultimately rising over them with a superior and richer and more forgiving system. And *He* is indeed the central pillar of Chinese soft power in its core value. *He* means harmony. As Helga just said earlier, what is harmony? If everybody is singing the same tune, it is not harmony, it's called unison. If everybody sings the same notes, plays the same instrument, produces the same melody, that's not *He*, that's unison. That's everybody becoming the same. It's not interesting.

What is polyphony? Polyphony means there's har-

monization—everybody playing a different tune, everybody playing a different note, but together it sounds beautiful! That's harmony. It's everybody playing a different tune, but yet, all those different tunes conform to a certain mode of thinking, meaning everybody plays to the conductor's baton. If everyone plays a different tune, and at different times, and in different places, it would not be harmony; it has to be orchestrated, differently, but the same. That is called harmony.

Therefore, this Renaissance of Chinese culture is not simply for China or the Chinese nation. New elements will be injected into global civilization, paving the way for a second Renaissance, for the entire human race. This second Renaissance brings about a new dimension to define an awakened generation of humanity.