

A Survey of the Chinese Ideal of Life

Han I

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1. Introduction

What is the meaning of life? It is the eternal question to everybody. The question of the meaning of life has perplexed Chinese thinkers for a long time, and it has never been solved - naturally. If you are born and brought up within a favorable environment, you tend to follow the status without questioning. In the course of time only the contentments remain without the whys and wherefores. To understand the Chinese ideal of life one must try to understand Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Chinese humanism. It is for this reason that this paper is written.

In China, there is much wisdom in old writings of the ancients. It is important that in spite of its size, both in land area and population, China has retained an unbroken culture over thousands of years, although many elements in Chinese culture today were not found in ancient times, and many elements of those times are not found today. Chinese culture is all the better for it and richer too.

Culture is all embracing and covers everything that we do and profess, and even our thought processes. A culture will be poor and backward if it is rigid and unwilling to change or absorb the good and practical from other cultures. Chinese culture is rich and enduring precisely because of its practical wisdom and absorbing power. This is due to one very important characteristic of Chinese culture - Practical Wisdom.

2. The Confucian Outlook on Life

As is generally known, Confucianism has often been referred to as a Chinese religion. Actually, it is merely a practical philosophy of human relationship and conduct. Confucius (551 - 479 B.C.) did not even refer to himself as a teacher of all the things he “taught”. He merely said he was transmitting the teachings of the ancient sages. No doubt, he has propounded many theories of human conduct and behavior and forms of government. He collected some three thousand pupils during his travels after he had seen the futility of politics and corrupted governments of the time. Of these, seventy-two became famous. Confucius was a famous educator in his time, forwarded theories on politics, ethics, music, education, and funeral and wedding ceremonies. He lectured much, but left behind only one written work, *Lun Yu (The Analects)*, which was compiled by his disciples. He also revised *Shi Jing (The Book of Songs)*, the first collection of songs and poems in China, and during his later years worked on the history book *Chun Qiu (The Spring and Autumn Annals)*.

班 偉：山陽学園大学総合人間学部言語文化学科

Many social reforms and differing ideologies emerged in China during Confucius' time. Especially rationalism displaced primitive sorcery and religious and traditional ideas, laying the foundation for the development of Chinese culture. Confucian philosophy played a very important role in creating the Chinese view of life. Confucius used rationalist ideas to re-explain primitive culture. He applied the principles of ritual to daily life, emotions and political concepts, also promoted behavioral standards combined with kindness. When Fan Chi, a pupil of Confucius, asked the humaneness, he said, "It is to love others."(*The Analects*, Book 12-22)

Confucianism is a practical philosophy that molded Chinese culture. It had nothing to do with the spiritual world. When asked about spirits, Confucius said, "Respect them, but have nothing to do with them."(*The Analects*, Book 6-22) When asked about the question of death, his famous reply was, "If one does not yet understand life, how does one understand death?"(*The Analects*, Book 11-12) Even though ancestral worship would appear to be related to spirits, it is nothing more than the manifestation of an act of filial piety, to stress the importance of the perpetuation of the family, upon which the country is built and draws its strength. The importance and strength of the Chinese family as a unit is the foundation of the durability of Chinese civilization. A strong united family is the corner-stone of any stable society and country. Hence there is the standard Chinese phrase *guo-jia* literally meaning "country and family". The Chinese have never referred to "society" as we know it today.

Although Confucius did not refer to himself as a teacher of the doctrines he taught, it would be in order to refer generally to all the things he said as the "teachings" of Confucius. For the purpose of describing his teachings as a molding force of Chinese culture, it is sufficient to say that Confucius advocated that there could only be progress if people maintained a proper relationship between each other. The young must respect the old and the old must love the young; the inferior must respect the superior and the superior must be kind to those below them. A good government must be one run by people who can set an example for others to follow. Only in such a situation can there be stability and progress. Very succinctly Confucius molded this aspect of human conduct.

3. The Taoistic Outlook on Life

It has been pointed out that the Confucian outlook on life is positive, while the Taoistic outlook is negative. Many have referred to the teachings of Laozi (604 B.C. -) as Taoism, which is in fact a mystic cult which developed out of the teachings of Laozi influenced by native shamanism and other mystic cults. The teachings of Laozi, of course, have molded Chinese culture side by side with the teachings of Confucius.

Laozi was an aloof sage, but he professed a deep understanding of life and the universe. He was as great a thinker as Confucius, but Laozi dismissed the notion that taking a positive attitude towards politics was the way to bring order to the world. Instead, he believed a country would achieve stability only through noninterference.

He described the relationship between a ruler and his subjects this way, “I govern by doing nothing and the people will be civilized; I keep silent and the people will be honest; I remain idle and the people will get rich; I reject desire and the people will be simple.”(*Lao Zi*, Book 57)

Believing that all social conflict was rooted in desire, Laocius condemned petty fighting and internal struggles. Living in a time when dukes were constantly vying with each other, Laocius longed for the primitive way of life when people lived in harmonious communities. In his work *Lao Zi*, Laocius named *Tao*, means “way” or “path”, as the source of all life and the shapeless order of things, which a human being cannot actually observe. One of its maxims was, “Never be the first of the world” (*Lao Zi*, Book 67) for making one’s way in life, and advised the doctrine of “doing nothing” as a saving of energy and a method of prolonging life. It is not meant literally “inactivity” but rather no action that is contrary to Nature. In other words letting Nature take its own course. Laocius therefore regarded civilization as the beginning of man’s degeneration, and believed in a “government which does nothing” as the ideal government. With his mordant wit, he said, “Sages no dead, robbers no end.” (*Lao Zi*, Book 19) Laocius’ *Tao*, as a philosophical concept, was later understood as something absolute.

Laocius lived at the same time as Confucius, but was many years older. It is recorded that Confucius went to see Laocius to ask about *Tao*, and came back completely perplexed because he could not fathom Laocius’ depth of wisdom. When his disciples asked him what he had learnt from Laocius, Confucius could only reply that he knew fishes could swim and birds could fly. In other words he could not fathom Laocius, whose wisdom was too deep for him.

Confucius’ teachings molded human conduct and relationship, Laocius’ teachings, on the other hand, molded human character. Although he agreed with Confucius that only stability could bring about progress, Laocius stressed on the development or cultivation of good character. According to Laocius, all the troubles in the world, crimes such as theft, murder, robbery and war are due to people striving for things that they cannot get by proper means. If people do not go out of their way to get things which they cannot get by proper means, the world will witness a spontaneous peace and there will be no need for many laws. So there will be less interference with personal freedom and affairs of men.

Although a good government is essential, Laocius did not agree that a good government must be one where those who govern are people of exemplary character who can set an example for the people to follow. That was all theory he said. There are no such men in this world and even if there are it would be impossible for such “exemplary characters” to reach the people in a country the size of China. In this way Laocius was a more practical man. What was important in Laocius’ mind was that the masses should cultivate their character by following his doctrine that people should not strive for things they could not get. There will be fewer or no crimes committed,

and therefore the best government is the one which governs least.

In any case, Confucianism, through its doctrine of propriety and social status, stands for human culture and restraint, while Taoism, with its emphasis on going back to nature, disbelieves in human restraint and culture. Say it in another way, Taoism is the playing mood of the Chinese people, as Confucianism is their working mood. That accounts for the fact that every Chinese is a Confucianist when he is successful and a Taoist when he is a failure.

4. The Buddhistic Outlook on Life

The teachings of Confucius and Laocius have molded Chinese culture only in so far as human conduct in this mortal world is concerned. They have done this admirably, but they did not provide spiritual comfort to the Chinese mind. What happens after death was not answered by either Confucius or Laocius. It is a fact that all human beings need spiritual comfort, especially in times of trouble or distress. No mortal power can manage it. Stories about Buddha(563 - 483B.C.)and his teachings had come to China from very early times along the trade routes from India, but had not been able to make inroads into China because the time was not yet ripe and circumstances were not favorable.

It was not until the first century A.D. that the Chinese began looking for spiritual food and comfort which they could not find in Confucius and Laocius. It was a time of distress due to war and civil strife. Buddhism came to the rescue and gave the finishing touches to Chinese culture by providing spiritual food and comfort which could not be found in the Chinese way of life. The deep doctrines of Buddhism are for the high priests and learned monks to propound and explain. In simple layman's language Buddhism has provided the Chinese with the answers to their questions about death. Without going into the intricacies of high doctrine, the average Chinese laymen understand the simple doctrine of Buddha which says that all human beings are born into the world to suffer, die and be reincarnated. Therefore it is the duty of all to help reduce the sufferings of their fellowmen in this mortal world.

As there is usually too much pain and misery in this life to allow a perfect answer to satisfy man's pride, teleology is therefore carried over to the next life and this earthly life is then looked upon as a preparation for the life hereafter. By so doing they accumulate virtue or merit, which will enable them to be reincarnated into something better. What a wonderful doctrine and guide to human conduct! What a comfortable thought to those who perform good deeds, even though poor and lowly! This very doctrine has enabled many a Chinese to endure hardship, suffering and other vicissitudes in life because there is this spiritual food to enable them to look forward to a better life, if not in this, then in the next life. This fortifies the Chinese will to survive which we see in many parts of the world.

Buddhism has conquered China as a philosophy and as a religion, as a philosophy for the scholars and as a religion for the common people. Whereas Confucianism has only a philosophy of moral conduct, Buddhism possesses a logical method, a

metaphysics, and a theory of knowledge. In Chinese, Taoism and Buddhism, these two opposite attitudes are called “entering the world” and “leaving the world”. Sometimes these two points of view struggle for supremacy in the same man and at different periods in his life.

5. Chinese Humanism

The three molding forces, described in very simple terms, have produced a culture of humanism which has made the Chinese way of life intensely practical and philosophical, or the Chinese would not have survived the vicissitudes through the centuries in their own country and in their adopted lands. The great principle of Universalism enunciated by Confucius holds good for all times and it is no wonder that he is given the title of “Model Teacher for Ten Thousand Generations”. The principle of Universalism is the ideal which everyone is striving for.

To talking about what are the human values, Confucius stated the following: “When the great principle of Universalism prevails, the world will become the common property of all; the people will elect men of virtue, talent and capability; they will act in good faith and friendship. Thus men will regard not only their own parents as their parents, nor treat only their own children as their children. Provision will be made for the aged till their death, employment given to the able-bodied, and means for self-development given to the young. Widows, orphans, the childless, the disabled and the sick will all be supported by the State. Every man will have his rights; and every woman her home. Everyone will value wealth, but no one will keep it only for himself. As a result selfish scheming will disappear, and with it the occasion for robbery and revolution. Perfect security will prevail everywhere. This is what I call Universalism.” (*Record of Ritual*) Confucius’ principles were consonant with high ideals like this. It has been pointed out that a typical Chinese intellectual is usually a mixture of Confucianist, Taoist and Buddhist.

This enunciation embodies, too, the doctrines of Laozius in the cultivation of personal character to ensure a crimeless society. It is therefore no wonder that quite unconsciously, a Chinese follows Confucius in his dealings with his fellowmen by maintaining a proper relationship; follows Laozius in trying not to strive for things that he cannot get, thus cultivating his personal character; follows Buddha when he thinks of his future life after death, thus performing good deeds during his lifetime. Of course, the humanizing of knowledge is not an easy thing, but everyone can cultivate their mind by reading many books.

This is a wonderful way of life which some Westerners cannot understand - how can a person follow the teachings of three teachers who have always been regarded by many Western and even Chinese writers as the founders of the three religions of China - Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism? The fact is that they are not religions, and that is why the Chinese can follow all three teachings, each for one aspect of his life. This foundation of Chinese culture has made the Chinese intensely practical and given them great power for absorbing all things that are good and beneficial, irrespective of

their origin. Chinese culture has survived and has been enriched by this power.

6. The Happy-Go-Lucky View of Life

We have seen how the early molding forces of Confucius, Laozi and Buddha have produced a culture that is practical, moral and full of common sense. It is a precept of contentment. Being practical the ancient Chinese demanded no more than a roof over his head, food to eat, and water to drink. These three being the bare necessities of life, the many thousands of years of Chinese civilization have amassed a very large volume of writings by scholars and thinkers on these three things, their philosophy and enjoyment. The term "ideal of life" is ambiguous. The Chinese ideal of life, however, has a very definite meaning. It implies, first a just conception of the ends of human life; secondly, a complete devotion to these ends; and thirdly, the attainment of these ends by the spirit of human reasonableness.

The Chinese humanists believe they have found the true end of life and are conscious of it. For the Chinese the end of life lies not in life after death, for the idea that we live in order to die is incomprehensible. The true end, the Chinese have decided in a singularly clear manner, lies in the enjoyment of a simple life, especially the family life, and in harmonious social relationships. The Chinese ideal of life is drunk through with this sentiment. It is an ideal of life that is neither particularly ambitious nor metaphysical, but nevertheless immensely real. It is a brilliantly simple ideal, so brilliantly simple that only the matter-of-fact Chinese mind could have conceived it, and we often wonder how young people of today could have failed to see that meaning of life lies in the sane and healthy enjoyment of it.

The Chinese roof suggests, therefore, that happiness is first to be found in the home. Indeed, the home stands for the Chinese people as a symbol of happiness. The importance of the family has dictated how the Chinese should live. Here we see a direct transition from the family to the state and the successive stages of human organization as evidenced in Confucian teaching: "If you want to rule the state, first put your house in order; if you want to put your house in order, first cultivate yourself morally; if you want to cultivate yourself morally, first put your heart right. To put your heart right, you must be sincere." (*The Great Learning* 4) These precepts are contained in the Confucian classics, it is quite common to find in Chinese society that even the untutored or illiterate are capable of quoting this logic, because Confucian teaching have permeated Chinese life through the ages.

A traditional society has therefore evolved with the family as the strong basic unit wherein the relationship between individuals, men and women, young and old, is fundamental, following the Confucian precept of proper relationship. From an early age, a child was taught that there are five fundamental human relationships which must be maintained on a proper basis for a stable society and therefore a peaceful and orderly country or world. They are 1. Between husband and wife; 2. Between father and son (parents and children); 3. Between brothers (brothers and sisters); 4. Between sovereign and subjects, and 5. Between friends. There is no human relationship other

than these five, except that between teacher and pupil. According to Chinese tradition, it is indeed similar to that between parents and children.

The difference between China and the West seems to be that the Westerners have a greater capacity for getting and making more things and a lesser ability to enjoy them, while the Chinese have a greater determination and capacity to enjoy the few things they have. This trait, our concentration on earthly happiness, is as much a result as a cause of the absence of religion. For example, Tao Yunming(365 - 427), a noted poet during the Eastern Jin dynasty, described an ideal society in his writing *Taohuayuan Shi*(*A Poem of the Land of Peach Blossoms*). Taohuayuan is a beautiful land inhabited by honest, industrious people. Work is filled with happiness. Nature and humanity cooperate. Tao Yunming used sarcasm and criticism of the world around him to describe his ideal. This utopia has been the admiration of Chinese people since ancient times.

The aim of the Chinese classical education has always been the cultivation of the reasonable man as the model of culture. An educated man should, above all, be a reasonable being, who is always characterized by his common sense, his love of moderation and restraint, and his hatred of abstract theories and logical extremes. Common sense is possessed by all common people. The academic scholar is in constant danger of losing this common sense, since he is apt to indulge in excesses of theory. So the reasonable person should avoid all excesses of theory. According to Confucius, a true gentleman shall understand and love the truth, goodness and beauty in the world.

On the other hand, the modern world, with its over-development of machinery, has not taken time to ensure that man enjoys what he makes. The glorification of the motorization in today's China has made man forget that one can live a very happy life without car and drive, and that in twenty years ago many Chinese people had lived to comfortable old age and made important work with their bicycle. As a consequence of motorization, the air of cities has been poisoned by exhaust fumes from cars; air pollution is a serious problem in many cities today. The fact is that the machine is made for man and not man made for the machine. Whatever social and economic changes have come about over the centuries as a result of so-called modernization, it is quite clear that human lives cannot be divorced from having peace of mind.

There is no doubt that the Chinese are in love with life, in love with this earth, and will not forsake it for an invisible heaven. They are in love with life, which is so sad and yet so beautiful, and in which moments of happiness are so precious because they are so transient. It's just as a Chinese proverb says: "Compared with superiors I have less; compared with inferiors I have more." That is to say happiness consists in contentment. For after all, the sum of all human wisdom and the problem of all human knowledge is how man shall remain a man and how he shall best enjoy his life.

7. Conclusion

These reasonings about the ideal or the meaning of life seem abstract and of difficult understanding, it is a marvel that so many wise and profound sages can

interpreted them so often. The fact is that the Chinese ideal of happiness was not the “exercise of one’s powers along lines of their excellence” as was that of the Westerners, but the enjoyment of this simple life, together with the harmony of social relationships.

In this paper I have tried only to communicate my opinions, which I have arrived at after some long and painful thought and reading and introspection. From the day I was old enough to understand and to be taught what was the right thing to do, till today I am living a life around which Japanese culture revolves unceasingly, I have learnt a lifetime of human values in Chinese culture many of which are common to Japanese culture. I have been away from home country for twenty-three years. Many things have happened since on China, but the basic qualities of Chinese character and mores are still there. The Communist Government may try to destroy them, but the Chinese people have always outlived their government.

Needless to say, the practical wisdoms and many others mentioned in this paper are not the monopoly of Chinese culture. Although they are expressed in a certain way in Chinese books or traditions, they are also found in the writings of other cultures, especially in those of Japanese culture. Human values are much the same among civilized people who behave in much the same way all over the world. It is therefore very important that the end of all knowledge is to serve human happiness.

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