‘The Middle Kingdom on the High Seas’: On the Value Crisis of Modern Chinese Society


Abstract
Against the background of current transformation processes of Chinese society in the course of modernization and globalization, the paper argues that there is a value crisis in contemporary China. We suggest potential solutions for the educational field in order to bridge the gap between ‘incoming’ Western values and ‘internal’ traditional Chinese values. In a first step, several studies from the field of health communication are presented, including the psychology of “cold-nest” children of migrant workers, that suggest the value crisis is associated with a number of serious societal and cultural problems in China, such as an alarming rise in mental health problems among young people, ranging from children to college and university students. Secondly, Western values of Enlightenment thinking are contrasted with the spiritual heritage of Confucianism. Finally, we suggest how the value conflict can be overcome by (i) engaging in civilizational dialogues, (ii) by formulating universal values and by (iii) adopting an integrated value system in the practical education of values.

Keywords modernization process, China, value crisis, health, illness, universal values, education

1. CHALLENGING CONFUCIAN VALUES

The rapid modernization sweeping over China for the last few decades has led to profound transformations of traditions, rituals, and daily life practices in Chinese society. The value system of Confucianism with its ‘holistic’ orientation and its focus on the collective rather than the individual provided the integrity of Chinese society for many centuries. But Confucianism has also provided orientation for many other zones in East Asia outside Mainland China, including Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, areas which Confucianism spread to between the 10th and 13th centuries. Reischauer speaks of core characteristics such as group solidarity, strong work ethics, and the thought/ideal of political unit that have served as a strong bond between the East Asian countries China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. In addition, Confucian political ideology also has provided ethical orientation for family culture, economic culture, and merchant ethics.

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in Taiwan, Hongkong, Macao, and Singapore. According to Tu Weiming, there is a specific East Asian modernity under the influence of Confucian traditions, with basic features such as duty-consciousness, public-spiritedness, group orientation, network capitalism and soft authoritarianism.

Confucianism in China is still visible in China’s agriculture-based economy, in the family-centered social structure, and in its paternalistic polity. However, throughout the 20th century, Confucian values have been heavily attacked, ranging from Chinese intellectuals of the 4th May movement in 1919 who rejected traditional spiritual values for their backward orientation in favor of a rather materialistic path to Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms in the 1980ies. By that time, Chinese intellectuals and political officials have started to revive Confucian thinking and teaching, but with limited success due to the powerful economic forces that led to profound social transformations.

Since China has become part of the international economic system and of the global community within the last two decades of the 20th century, traditional Confucian values have been even more challenged by Western values such as the separation of the mind from the body, instrumental rationality, capitalism, and individualism. Underlying this clash of values are the phenomena of intensive industrialization, free trade, and urbanization, which have brought about new migration patterns from rural areas to megacities with millions of inhabitants, conflicts between the rich and the poor, as well as demographic, epidemiological, social, and ecological changes. In addition, new forms of engagement via new media channels, a struggle for influence, and the active participation of citizens in public debates have challenged the agenda setting of traditional media outlets and the policy making of the Communist Party.

2. CLASH OF VALUES

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4 It should be noted that, despite the mentioned influence, some scholars, as Huntington points out, “recognize Japan as a distinct civilization which was the offspring of Chinese civilization”. However, Huntington does not consider Japan to be a Confucian country. S. P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York, 1996), p. 45. In contrast to him, Reischauer, during the 1970ies, regards the Japanese as the only ones to whom “the notion of a special community of East Asian nations have much appeal”, as compared to the East Asian countries of China, Korea, and Vietnam. Reischauer, “The Sinic World in Perspective,” p. 3.

5 For further information on the newly evolving institutional form of network capitalism that is distinctive from Western economic theory, see: Max Boisot & John Child, “From Fiefs to Clans and Network Capitalism: Explaining China’s Emerging Economic Order,” Administrative Science Quarterly (Vol. 41, No. 4, Dec. 1996), pp. 600-628.


7 Ibid., p. 201.

2.1 The Phenomenon of Left-Behind Children

Urbanization, industrialization and migration have deeply impacted China’s family structure. The size of the migrant population rose from 6.6 million in 1982 to 245 million in 2013.\(^9\) The phenomena of parents who move to other cities for job opportunities and who leave their children behind has emerged. As the statistics below (Figure 1) illustrates, the number of children that are left behind by their parents has increased considerably within the last decade.\(^10\)

The light blue color in Figure 1 refers to migrant children who move with their parents to other cities, the dark blue stands for left-behind children. The number of left-behind children has more than doubled from 2000 to 2008. In 2008, there were more than 55 million children being raised by other people than the parents. According to the UNICEF-statistics shown in Figure 2, the number of left-behind children has increased to 69.7 million in 2010, with the majority of them being rural left-behind children.\(^11\)

On the one hand, the ideal of the family as the core unit and backbone of social stability is still prevalent in contemporary Chinese culture. On the other hand, market forces and urbanization force parents, mostly farm workers and migrant laborers, to move from the countryside to look for jobs and a more prosperous income in larger cities. They have to leave behind their children in their home town due to the discriminatory rules of the *hukou* system that prevents their children from receiving social welfare, health

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care provision and educational training outside the hometown where the family’s household is officially registered. Most left-behind children who attend primary (14.4 million) and junior secondary school (6.9 million) in 2013 came from economically underdeveloped western and central provinces, namely Henan, Hunan, Sichuan, Anhui, Jiangxi and Guangxi. This transformation of family life has deep social implications. Family structures and education models are in flux which in return affects the health and social skills of children.

2.2 Evidence from Health Communication

Several studies from the field of health communication may shed light on how the above mentioned social changes like migration caused by modernization affect the mental health of children and students. Against the background of the social phenomena of left-behind children, recent studies have aimed to understand its psychological effect on the left behind children who are being raised by the grandparents. College students are increasingly diagnosed with anxiety disorders. Their reasons are sometimes related back to the fact that respective patients had been left behind children. More and more studies are done with children who show behavioral or emotional problems. One of those analyzed teenagers who had been formerly hospitalized in a psychiatry with the help of art therapy. It came to the conclusion that the reason why those children are still suffering from emotional disorders might by a family conflict, without the author specifying them. Another study suggests that kindergarten children display aggressive behavior because they lack communication skills due to a previous lack of social interaction with other children and due to the fact that they had experienced some form (unspecified in the study) of violence.

A master thesis by Xiang mentions the social phenomena of the one-child family, of the single-parent family and that of left-behind children as causes of an increase in mental health problems. According to Xiang, modernization and the cities’ large demands on migrant workers give rise to the phenomena of left-behind children. This specific family constellation harms the mental health of the young and explains an increase in psychological problems of children and teenagers. Apart from the mentioned social factors, Xiang blames the education system, the pedagogical competence of teachers and the competitiveness among pupils and students for the rise in mental diseases among the young generation.

All those studies suggest that the value crisis is associated with a number of serious societal and cultural problems in China, especially an alarming rise in mental health problems among young people, ranging from children to college and university students.

The state has already recognized the problem and tries to tackle it, among other things by establishing institutions that provide social services to specific groups among the residents. Community services in several cities in China offer counselling to various target groups, among them parents and children who migrated to Shanghai, like the ‘Sunshine Community Youth Affairs Center’. As a network of youth affairs centers and sport centers it offers social activities like film and literature clubs or painting and dance classes since 2004. By 2015, more than 5000 participants were involved in the projects offered by that community service in Shanghai (Shanghai Sunshine Community Affairs Center 2015).

As one can see from this example and from the just mentioned health communication studies, traditional Confucian values like family cohesiveness are challenged by the current social transformation in Chinese society.

3. WESTERN VERSUS CONFUCIAN VALUES

If Western values and modernization processes in China have challenged the Confucian tradition, how can the different value systems by reconciled in a globalized world? Before answering that, let us first compare and contrast Western and East Asian value systems.

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19 Ibid.

20 Shanghai Sunshine Community Affairs Center (上海市阳光社区青少年事务中心), 2015.
3.1. Western Values

At the level of individuals, since Ancient Greek times, a strong tradition in Western thinking has been that of mind-body dualism. This Platonic tradition merged with Christianity’s idea of dualism between the soul and the body as this religion spread throughout Europe. Roughly, this dualism corresponds to the distinction between ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’. Throughout the (early) modern period (1450–1750), a number of factors, e.g. Descartes’ philosophy and the Scientific Revolution, consolidated this dualism. This dualism corresponds to a promotion of reason and rationality over emotions and sensibility, and of ‘mind over matter’. During the 17th and 18th centuries, some European Enlightenment thinkers in the field of health communication emphasized the interrelatedness between emotions and mental diseases as well as the knowledge-constitutive function of emotions, but mainstream discourse proclaimed the hegemony of reason. At the level of society and citizenship, in Tu Weiming’s view, the rule of law and civil rights have fundamentally characterized European modernity as well.

3.2 Confucian Values

The philosopher Tu Weiming gives a concise account of the main features which characterize East Asian modernity under the influence of the Confucian tradition. Firstly, in contrast to the European mind-body dualism, there is no split between mind and body, spirit and matter or animate and inanimate nature in traditional Confucian thinking. Tu Weiming puts it into the following way: “The modern West’s dichotomous world view (spirit/matter, mind/body, physical/mental, sacred/profane, creator/creature, God/man, subject/object) is diametrically opposed to the Chinese holistic mode of thinking”. Secondly, solidarity as another Confucian value is a civilized mode of conduct in social interaction. Thus, civil behavior is not, as it has been since the beginning of European modernity, primarily based on law, but on the cultivation of virtue. Thirdly, Confucian society can be depicted as consisting of a micro-level, the population, with the family as its basic unit, and a macro-level which is the state with its rules, laws and norms. Fourthly, the state is regarded as an enlarged version of the family: whereas the family has to cultivate its members to secure its stability, the state has to provide the corresponding economic development of the society to secure the stability of the families. That’s why the private matters of the family are a genuine public interest. Fifthly, education as another central value focusses on character building as its primary goal. Finally, self-cultivation of the members of society has a


regulative function for the family, the governance of the state and peace.

3.3 Compare

The Western value of mind-body/spirit-matter dualism stands in stark contrast to the holistic world view of Confucian culture (1). It is also alien to Confucian thinking with its value of public-spiritedness to regard humans as rational animals who pursue their self-interests for profit-maximization, although recent phenomena in Chinese society like consumerism, materialism, brutal competitiveness and egoism might point in the direction of Western socialization (2). Whereas Western culture praises individual initiative, self-promotion and the braveness to state your own position strongly, Confucian values focus on the collective well-being, collective goals, harmony and social order so that it is not regarded as appropriate to state your position directly or to verbalize your inner emotions directly during social interactions (3). Thus, depending on the cultural value of individualism versus collectivism, the communication styles – low-context communication style (explicit) versus high-content communication style (indirect and implicit meanings) – are distinct as well (4).24

Whereas Western culture relies on the rule of law, collective cultures (have to) rely on the concept of social solidarity (5). Whereas individualistic cultures value personal freedom and liberty, Confucian culture values equality and distributive justice (6). Whereas individualistic cultures praise privacy and the existence of a civil society, private and public matters are interrelated in Confucian societies (7).

Both value systems, for example the Confucian spirit of self-cultivation, family cohesiveness, social solidarity and the Western value of law and of a critical public discourse, can provide a meaningful reference point to both China and the West.

4. BUILDING BRIDGE TO TACKLE VALUE CRISIS

4.1 Civilizational Dialogue

In order to build a bridge between those (opposing) values, we need to understand that values differ according to the cultural context. We need to engage into a dialogue in order to learn more about the specific values that hold a given society together. Instead of a ‘clash of civilizations’ between the East Asian, Western, Orthodox, Hindu or Islamic world,25 the different countries in a globalized world should engage in a civilizational dialogue, as suggested by Tu Weiming, in order to understand the “radical otherness” of different cultures. The first prerequisite for establishing such a dialogue is the willingness of Western countries to switch their role of a teaching to a learning culture. The second prerequisite is to leave behind the wrong notion of regarding tradition as unmodern. Instead, local knowledge and traditions should be taken into

24 Julia Wood, Communication Mosaics. An Introduction to the Field of Communication (Belmont, California, 2006), p. 162.
account to understand phenomena caused by modernization and globalization.\(^{26}\)

4.2 Universal Values Revisited

Whereas Tu Weiming emphasizes the gap between the “Enlightenment universal values” (instrumental rationality, liberty, right-consciousness, due process of law, privacy, individualism) and “Asian universal values” (sympathy, distributive justice, duty-consciousness, ritual, public-spiritedness, group orientation),\(^ {27}\) which he holds can only be bridged by engaging into a civilizational dialogue to foster mutual understanding and respect, we suggest an additional approach that goes beyond Tu’s idea of exchanging our different national perspectives on values.

All civilizational cultures need to come to an agreement about a set of universal values that provide an ethical orientation in a globalized, intercultural and increasingly technologically connected world. The Western and Confucian values outlined above have primarily served political, economic and social goals in the course of modern human history, but largely neglected ethical goals. For example, the rule of law in modern Europe or civility and duty-consciousness in Confucian societies has primarily served the stability of the state. In addition, instrumental rationality and profit-maximization in Western countries have mainly contributed to fostering a system of liberal market economy and free trade. So the contrasted values seem merely political or economical in their nature, or at least in their effects. Instead, we suggest an ethical approach to formulating a set of universal values that might help to solve the current value crisis – both within and outside East Asian culture.

First of all, observe that one can distinguish between claiming that a candidate for a ‘universal value’ is universally (generally) held and claiming a candidate ought to be universally held irrespective of whether or not it in fact is so. One might call universal values in the first sense ‘empirically universal values’ and universal values in the second sense ‘true universal values’.\(^ {28}\) A lot of cross-cultural research has been done in psychology in an attempt to determine empirically universal values. Schwartz, for example, conducted studies which included surveys of more than 25,000 people across a total of 44 countries.\(^ {29}\) Based on these studies, he argues that there are 56 specific empirically universal values. This of course is a rather large number for practical purposes, but they fortunately fall into just 10 types: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and

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\(^{26}\) Tu Weiming, “Implications of the Rise of ‘Confucian’ East Asia,” p. 209.

\(^{27}\) Tu Weiming, “Implications of the Rise of ‘Confucian’ East Asia,” p. 207.

\(^{28}\) cf. the paper of Tran in the present volume. Ngoc Them Tran, “Values Research and Education by Yiology-Systemic-Typological Method in the Context of Integration” (Present volume, 2015).

Another important example of this kind of research comes from the field of positive psychology, specifically in the work of Park, Peterson, Seligman & Steen (2005)\(^\text{31}\) as well as Peterson and Seligman.\(^\text{32}\) These psychologists speak of ‘character strengths’ and ‘virtues’, arguing for a classification with six ‘core virtues’ made up of 24 character strengths, but these correspond, more or less directly, to universal values. One of the criteria for something being a character trait is that it be ubiquitous in the sense of being widely recognized across cultures. So the values, character traits and virtues correspond to (empirically) universal values. Briefly, the six core virtues, along with the 24 character traits behind them, are as follows: wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiousity, ability to think critically, love of learning, having a wise perspective on matters); courage (bravery, perseverance, honesty, enthusiasm); humanity (love, kindness, social intelligence); justice (teamwork, fairness, leadership); temperance (forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation); transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality).

It is plausible that these virtues and character strengths are universally acknowledged. Park, Peterson, Seligman and Steen report how the test for them – the so-called Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) – has been administered to individuals in 40 countries.\(^\text{33}\)

So we have two lists of empirically universal values. We shall select from them four values ‘directly’, according to whether they meet the following three criteria: they should be (i) ethical, rather than political or socio-economic, (ii) correlated with reduction in ‘clashes’ and conflicts between different ‘civilizations’, and (iii) lend themselves to value education, that is, their teaching and cultivation in the educational system. We choose wisdom, benevolence, gratitude and appreciation of beauty. However, in the context of promoting the urgent need for civilizational dialogue, we also need values that focus on overcoming conflicts and clashes, so to speak – that is, values that meet criterion (ii) above very obviously. Neither of the two lists as they stand includes any that do. We suggest respect and tolerance. Thus, our own list looks like this:

\[^{30}\] Schwartz, “Are there Universal Aspects in the Structure and Contents of Human Values?”
\[^{33}\] This was with the English-language version of the test, which obviously is a limitation. However, Shimai, Park, Peterson & Seligman (2007) successfully applied a translated version of the VIA-IS to a sample of young adults in Japan. Otake Shimai, N. Park, C. Peterson & M.E.P. Seligman, “Convergence of Character Strengths in American and Japanese Young Adults”, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (Volume 7, 2007), pp. 311-322.
1. *Wisdom and Knowledge* – cognitive strengths that involve acquisition and use
   of knowledge.
2. *Respect* for uniqueness of individuals, communities and nature.
3. *Tolerance* towards different ways of living and mentalities, cultural, religious,
   ethnic, gender, age and social groups.
4. *Benevolence* – interpersonal strength that involve tending and befriending
   others.
5. *Gratitude* – being thankful for good things that are commonly taken for granted.
6. *Appreciation of Beauty* (of nature and art/artefacts) – appreciating beauty, and
   excellence in various areas of life, from nature to art, from small everyday
   experiences to grand events, from mathematics to science.

We believe that these six ethical values can be adopted – to a greater or lesser extent –
by any cultural, socio-political and economic system in the world, and that they should
be. In other words, we believe they are true universal values.

### 4.3 Integrating Universal Values into Educational Systems: Some Preliminary

Thoughts

In order to integrate these ethical values into the education of values, specific
competences need to be fostered first.

1. Wisdom & knowledge. This value relies on cognitive strengths that lead to the
   acquisition and use of knowledge.
2. Fostering the attitude of respect requires an understanding of oneself as well as
   emotional and social intelligence to understand other people and to judge social
   situations
3. In order to promote tolerance, an ethnocentric bias, that is the belief that one’s own
   culture is superior to others, should be avoided in favor of appreciating diversity
   and appreciation of cultural diversity.
4. For benevolence compassion and mindfulness is required.
5. One important prerequisite for gratitude is modesty.
6. To recognize the beauty within people and in the social world and nature, the
   competence to appreciate the aesthetic value of nature and artefacts (*aesthetic
   education*) needs to be acquired.

In order to teach those competencies at schools and universities, one might use teaching
methods along the following lines:

1. Much traditional education (primary, secondary, tertiary) across many cultures of
   course already develops knowledge in the students belonging to its educational
   systems. However, wisdom, unlike knowledge, is quite dependent on the students
   concrete life experience and as such is difficult, if not impossible, to ‘transmit’ from
   teachers to students. But at least a good start at it can probably be made in
   encounters with the wisdom fond in the great philosophical and spiritual traditions
   of the cultures in case. In any case, it is clearly necessary to emphasize student-
centered and inductive learning for the teaching of wisdom. This same holds when it comes to installing in students some or all of the other character strengths mentioned by Peterson and Seligman as constitutive of this value, e.g. creativity and curiousity.

2. Fostering the relevant humanities (liberal arts) and the discipline of psychology can help to increase self-understanding, self-reflexivity as well as emotional and social competence in order to promote the value of respect.

3. In order to promote tolerance and intercultural competence, other culture’s wisdom shall be taught by using foreign literature and philosophy studies, by doing cross-cultural media analysis and by building up exchange programs at schools.

4. Contemplative and meditative techniques that can be taught at schools and universities to acquire mindfulness and ‘loving-kindness meditation’ as a technique to teach compassion.

5. Role plays at schools and universities can help pupils and students to understand different social roles within the stratum of a given society.

6. Aesthetic appreciation can be mediated by art teachers who take students to exhibitions, who motivate them to produce art by themselves and who invite artists into the classroom.

Such universal ethical values can help to cope with the current value crisis in different Asian societies and can help to promote international and intercultural relations.

Figures

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

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