Chinese and European Views of the Individuals and Society

Preliminary Remarks

"Chinese and European Views of the Individuals and Society" (code WT 11) is one of 49 workshops organized within the framework of the 2nd. China-Europa-Forum, held 3-7 October, 2007, organized by the 'Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le progrès de l'homme'.

The workshop will be hosted by Ghent University, and will take place on 4 and 5 October 2007. It contains four sessions: (1) China; presentation of the situation and the major challenges of the coming decades; (2) Europe; presentation of the situation and the major challenges of the coming decades; (3) What can be learned from the similarities and differences?; (4) How can the dialogue between China and Europe be consolidated?

Underneath text is meant to provide a general introduction to the theme of the workshop.

Defining the problem

The question how a Chinese individual views his European parallel and the behavior of this individual in European society, and how a European views Chinese society and each individual's position in this society, is mainly dependent upon two factors: (1) the perception of the roles of the individual and of society and their mutual relation in the own cultural sphere, i.e., the background against which the 'other' is perceived, and (2) the knowledge of and the empathy with which we regard the 'other' cultural sphere that determines the individual's and the society's behavior in that specific cultural sphere. It are these two elements that (1) determine the exactitude of our interpretation of the 'other', (2) will reveal the challenges in our mutual understanding, and (3) give us guidelines how at best to consolidate the future dialogue between Europe and China. It therefore is necessary to lay out the fundaments of the individual-society relation in both Europe and China.

The Individual and His Relation to Society

The question of the relationship of the individual to society essentially is the question whether the individual is thought of as having premises outside society, or, on the contrary, whether an individual only 'exists' within society. In this question, the fundamental difference between what became the European and the Chinese tradition respectively – traditions rooted in European and Chinese philosophy – is reflected.

This different social model only gradually developed. Scholarly opinion, while disagreeing on the number of scientific traditions that developed in the history of mankind – Frits Staal (1993: 16), e.g., is of the opinion that there are three such traditions: the West Eurasian tradition which includes the European and Islamic traditions, the Indian tradition and the Chinese; other scholars claim that there are only two such traditions: the Indo-Greek tradition and the Chinese – appears to agree that the rational tradition as is developed in China fundamentally differentiates from the European tradition.

Both the Chinese and the European tradition go back to around the 5th. century BC. In that period of Chinese history that is known as the Warring States (481-221 BC), a variety of philosophers tried to give an analysis of and provide a solution for the political and economical crisis of the moment. The different philosophical theories that were formulated, be they 'daoist', Confucian or Mohist, were thus rooted in practical concerns, and served the same goal: restoring good order in society by allocating to the individual his proper place and prescribing his proper behavior. Against this backgroud, knowledge in the Chinese tradition was essentially conceived to be skill-knowledge: "knowing (how) to." Around the same time in Greece, Aristotle (384-322 BC), as Plato (428-348 BC) had done before him, defined '*sophia*' as '*theoria*'. The concept of 'theoretical knowledge' was hereby opposed to 'practical knowledge,' i.e., knowledge relating to human (social) behavior. Theoretical knowledge was favored by Aristotle, however, for the sake of practice: it is the most useful kind of knowledge for practical aims, as this kind of knowledge requires an absolute abstraction of the practical aim (see Bowra 1958: 86). As this is the case in Chinese philosophy, also Greek '*sophia*' thus finds its aim 'in' the world; in Platonean and Aristotelian philosophy, wisdom is concerned with the practical lives of humans in society (see Dessein 2001: 101, 102).

When fifteenth century Europe unterwent the combined transfigurations of the Renaissance, the scientific revolution, the Reformation, and the rise of capitalism, this meant the final breakthrough of individualism. Such a development did not happen in Confucianist China. (Needham 1969 117, Needham 1974: 280-281).

The Chinese case

Chad Hansen (1985) describes Chinese society as characterized by a part-whole structure, whereby the 'parts' are the individuals, and the 'whole' is a certain social relationship this individual has with a greater construct, be it the family in narrow sense, the family in larger

sense, society as a whole. In a part-whole structure, each part is, by definition, part of something else. That 'something else' may, in its turn, be part of something still bigger. Moreover, each primary part, can simultaneously be part of different constructs. In such a structure, the relation of the part to the whole is not a single line of relationship, but a whole bundle of lines. As each of these lines represents a specific social relationship, with each of these lines, a separate behavioral code is connected.

To illustrate this kind of relationship, Fei Xiaotong (1992: 62-63) uses the metaphor of the concentric circles that appear when throwing a rock into the water. Each individual is at the center of the circles produced by his or her own social influence. Everyone's circles are interrelated, and one touches different circles at different times and places. In such a model, each interference of one's own circles with those of another individual represents a different kind of relationship. To each interference, a specific moral behavior is attached. Therefore, the Chinese pattern of social organization embraces no ethical concepts that transcend specific types of human relationships (Fei 1992: 74).

In Chinese philosophy, it especially were the Confucianists, with their emphasis on strict social division, who stressed these different grades of relationship, and the different kinds of moral behavior that are appropriate to it. An individual's behavior, however, is not simply a function of his social roles. Individuals possess a potential moral autonomy. When they develop this potentiality, they can increase their value in society. This is because, in their emphasis on self-cultivation, the Confucians have in mind a transformation of the person as a whole. Such a person stands in a fourfold relation to society: (1) he knows social distinction, (2) he has to observe traditional norms that govern people's behavior by virtue of social position (it is through participating in this social order and letting oneself be shaped by it that one becomes fully human), (3) his human relations are directed toward other human beings who are equally formed by the same social order, and (4) his cultivated character will have a transformative effect on other human beings. One's own self-cultivation thus will have a transformative effect on other things, and such effect is itself a measure of one's progress in self-cultivation. Society thus both is the inspiration and the aim of an individual's existence (See Schwartz 1985: 113; Shun 2004). The value of an individual is measured by his value for society, and the way to go beyond oneself and reach out to the world is to extend oneself circle by circle (Fei 1992: 67).

Also daoist philosophy shows to be indebted to this part-whole concept. The *Daodejing*, e.g., explains that '*dao*' gives rise to one, one to two, two to three, and three to the ten thousand things. In reverse order, this means that the ten thousand things, the parts, are

part of the three, the two, the one, and, eventually, the ultimate whole that is '*dao*'. When Zhuangzi urges us to return to the 'natural state,' he does not intend that we should focus on human individual subjectivity. Rather, the urge to return to the 'natural state' reflects the awareness that the individual is only part of the 'whole,' and is inspired by the fact that human beings, in their behavior, are shaped by the social environment in which they behave (see Hansen 1985: 52).

This explains why Chinese society should rather be characterized as holistic, not as individualistic. Chinese political actors will tend to construct holistic or nonindividuating models of society and social process (Hansen 1985: 48). In a holistic society, the own relation to society naturally also involves someone else's relation to society. In such a situation, society at large and the state cannot be conceived of as neutral (universal) constructs from which an individual derives universal rights which he can legitimately claim.

The European case

In contradistinction to the part-whole relationship that characterizes Chinese society, European society is characterized by a many-one relationship, whereby the 'many' are the separate individuals, and the 'one' is the society (Hansen 1985). In a many-one relationship, each individual has the same type of relation to the one. In this sense, the individuals are interchangeable. The social consequence of such a relationship for the individual is that, as it is not his relationship to the one that constitutes his uniqueness, his uniqueness lies in his individudualistic self. In other words, a many-one relationship is characteristic of an individualistic society. As mentioned above, this accentuation of the individual is a rather recent development (see Lukes 1973).

In the West, people attach themselves to preexisting organizations, and then, using that organizational structure, establish personal relationships with other individuals who are equally member of that same structure, or with individuals who are no member of that specific organization. All personal relations are determined by who is in and who is not in a certain organizational structure. That is to say, the fundamental concept of morality is, in the West, built on the relationship between the organization and the individual.

In a Western society, an individual who joins an organization always keeps his individual rights. Each member's relation to that organization is the same, if not, these differences are agreed on before becoming member. (See Fei 1992: 61-62). In a context in which an individual's social behavior is self-contained and motivated by self-interest, and in

which individuals are mutually interchangeable, individuals can legitimately claim their individual rights in neutral courts that judge within the framework of laws issued by a neutral state. Whereas in China, the boundary between private and public has never been clear, the European state is an organization that creates distinct boundaries between the public and the private.

West meets East

We can discern two major moments that are crucial for the development of contemporary Chinese culture: the end of the Qing dynasty and the reform movement in Chinese economics and politics starting at the end of the '70s of the 20th century. Peter Zarrow (2002) claims that, where in the traditional Chinese society, the private realm was highly regarded as a residual category, left over after the public sphere was defined – in this resembling ancient Greek or Roman society, after the Taiping Rebellion, and especially in the 1890s, the traditional Chinese context changed dramatically. Those gentry who, given the collapse of the Qing state, had no hopes of official employment would be separating family from state in order to give ultimate devotion to family (and perhaps more attention to local communities), while those who did become officials would be pursuing their ambitions by displaying their ultimate loyalty to the state, and thus separating family from state as well.

The reform movement since the '70s of the 20th century to an ever increasing degree means that China is becoming part of the world economy and politics that are arranged and governed through international organizations that are structured according to the many-one dichotomy. This means a major challenge for (1) Chinese policy makers and Chinese society at large who have to rethink their traditional structures, and for (2) European policy makers and society for who – lacking the knowledge of and the empathy with the traditonal Chinese structures – the adaptation of China to the world system often appears to be too hesitating and too slow. The fact that, in recent years, the growing importance of China in world economics and politics seems to go hand in hand with a 'renaissance' of Confucianism (see Guo 2004) further confuses European minds.

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