

Seeking for the philosophical roots of the traditional European and Chinese view of the individual and his relation to society

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

The Chinese philosophical tradition goes back to its formulation in those periods of Chinese history that are known as the Spring-and-Autumn Period (722-481 BCE) and the Warring States Period (481-221 BCE), when 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 Confucian, Mohist, Legalist, or Daoist, 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 appropriate behavior. In economical terms, the different Chinese philosophers aimed at the *status quo*: China has always been an agrarian society in which subsistence level living was the lot of most of its people. This is the result of a natural increase of the population, confronted with the limited possibilities of economic growth that characterize an agrarian economy. In such a situation of constant threat of economic shortage, the nucleus family became the only insurance against the interests of other nucleus families and against the state at large, whereby each nucleus family tends to stick to managing its own business only. This attitude helps to explain why Confucianism, characterized as a value system that places constraint on the expression of individual desires, and that sponsors group sharing of limited resources, became the predominant philosophy for ordering the Chinese state. The Confucian state leaves welfare for the nucleus family to manage, and sees concentration of people’s loyalty on the family as a means to stabilize the state at large. Moreover, the Confucian ruling class controlled entry into their ranks through the Confucian education system. This ossified the social stratification that was further enforced by such Confucian practices as filial piety, an attitude that is linked to the traditional ancestor worship that has become identified with Confucianism. By definition, ancestor worship takes the kinship group as paradigm of social order. Social relations that exist between the living are hereby lifted beyond this world, into

the realm of the deceased who have the potential to interfere in this world. The thus pacified Confucian state is seen as part of a natural cosmic order, with which humans cannot interfere. All this explains why traditional Chinese society should rather be characterized as holistic, not as individualistic.

As this is the case in Chinese philosophy, also in Platonean (428-348 BCE) and Aristotelian (384-322 BCE) philosophy, wisdom is concerned with the practical lives of humans in society, and finds its aim 'in' the world. In Europe, however, a first fundamental shift was brought about by Augustinus (354-430). Taking the birth of Christ as focal point of history - Christ having died for the sins of human beings, Augustinus replaced the cyclical interpretation of time that had characterized Greek antiquity, with a linear time model. This model is divided in three time periods: the period from Adam to Moses; the period from Moses to the birth of Christ; and the period from Christ to the end of the world. The resurrection of Christ is the endpoint of this linear interpretation of time. By consequence, life on earth is untrue; humans are alienated from themselves and will only return to themselves in the transcendent empire of God. Another important consequence of Augustinus's view of history, apart from rendering life on earth without value, is its universalistic character: all human beings suffer the same lot. All human beings are created by God, and they thus all have the potential and the possibility to turn to the right religious belief. When the salvation of man is part of a divine plan, then all humans are summoned to take part in this divine plan and should, hence, become part of the ecclesiastical community. Profane life is not meaningful *an sich*, but is only meaningful in its transcendental function.

Starting from the middle of the 15th century, the shift from scholastic thinking to Humanism and Renaissance set in: the development of physical sciences revealed that both time and space are endless, and thus challenged the Augustinian view. This prepared the way for the thinking of the period of Enlightenment, with a renewed emphasis on the physical and sensual world. One important consequence of this was that man was seen as a creative actor in history. Personal freedom was understood to be a universal value, and the necessary requisite for man to act creatively. Along with the combined transfigurations of the Renaissance and the scientific revolution, came the Reformation and the rise of capitalism. Max Weber argues that, whereas Confucianism wants to preserve the *status quo*, therefore concentrating the individual's attention to the family and regulating his social behavior by means of a moral code, Protestantism advocated that trust in men could endanger the soul, and provided the individual with a direct access to God. The restraint of the family bonds cast off, the individual could strife for personal wealth.

When, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping declared that getting rich is glorious, this above all announced a new era of economical personal freedom. As this development required the gradual abolishment of the guaranteed all-encompassing social security system of the previous period, Deng's appeal to 'become prosperous' also was an appeal to take responsibility for one's own welfare. At first sight, this may appear as a Copernican transformation indeed; at second sight, however, a tendency towards a greater 'individuation' of society set in already in imperial China. After the, in respect to individual and social emancipation, abortive social innovations starting in the Song Dynasty (960-1271), in particular one moment has been of crucial importance for the development of a more individualistic society: After the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), and especially in the 1890s, the traditional Chinese context changed dramatically. In this sense, Deng's appeal to 'become prosperous' can be interpreted as connecting to the social developments that characterized the final decades of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), and as, as such, implying a re-appraisal of the individual.

The Chinese individual of the end of the 20th, beginning of the 21st century thus finds himself in a transformative era. From a traditional focus on accumulation of family wealth – especially in the beginning period and with regard to 'Chinese capitalism' among the overseas Chinese – Chinese capitalism has developed into a more strict 'individualistic' tendency. The first exponent of this growing individualism in a context of liberalization is seen to concern an individual's economical activity.