

# **A contemporary significance on Chinese traditional mode of thinking**

*He Xirong*

## **1. Raising of question**

Thinking, a major kind of method for people's conscious activity, that including ways of observing and mindfulness, is a effective mean for developing people and society. Specific thinking mode is formed historically. Therefore, because of different living environments, ways of practicing and cultural conditions, the east and west modes of thinking have appeared differently. In consequence their ways of knowing and practicing that directed by thinking are different. However, a judgment about which mode is better cannot be made, they are just different.

But, from China's defeat in 1840, the western technologies, institutions and thoughts had been the examples

learnt by Chinese. Many Chinese intellectual elite, like Gong Zizhen, Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, Hu Shi, Lin Yutang, Lu Xun, Liang Shuming, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao etc., have made comparative study between the west and China, and they had concluded that almost in every aspect China had felt behind the west. As a result, those derogatory terms, ignorance, naivety, senility, back, etc., had been equivalent to the name of China. Therefore criticism of Chinese people's characters and advocacy of revolution of thinking have been the fashion of that time.

128

May Fourth Movement is the first time of all Chinese intellectual elite's thorough rethinking to Chinese traditional culture. They make systemic criticism on Chinese traditional politics, economics and culture. The New Culture Movement, holding the doctrine of "overthrow Confucian and learn from the West," swept across the country. The new subjects, vernacular Chinese, simplified Chinese character, science and democracy, were known by masses quickly through the intellectual elite's advocacy. There is no doubt that Chinese people were enlightened and Chinese society was made progress in the above-mentioned movements, but some extreme thoughts, like "there's no need for young man to read Chinese books" (Lu Xun), "China is backward in everything" (Hu Shi), "abolish Chinese character" (Qian Xuantong) and "throw Chinese traditional books to toilet" (Wu Zhihui), also emerged. The situation was just as Hu Shi's saying in *The Chinese Renaissance*,<sup>1</sup> "there's revolt everywhere and tradition is

---

1 Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance: selected writings on Hu Shi*, Taiwan, Yuanliu Publishing House, 1986, v. 24, p. 179.

thrown away. The authorities and traditional faith are op-pugned...amount of cheap beliefs of anti-idol and new-worship are emerging.” To change Chinese mode of thinking and learn westerns, Yan Fu translated J. Mill’s treatise of logic in Chinese and introduced it to Chinese people. Because philosophy is the ground of the mode of thinking, so the later scholars also tried their best to learn western philosophies. Even until now, the criticism to Chinese tradition still concentrates in the criticism to Chinese mode of thinking, the representative issues are provided by Bo Yang and Chu Yu who think that the essential reason of China’s backwardness is the Chinese mode of thinking and Chinese must learn the western scientific mode of thinking to make progress. Bo Yang wrote a book *On Ugly Chinese* which claimed Chinese culture is a sauce urn culture. And Mr. Qian Hong had a lecture on “It must have an innovation for Chinese Thinking Mode,” he claimed that we should be trained by metaphysics. Chu Yu published a book in 2010, which is *The animadvert on Chinese thinking mode*, he indicated that the reason for China’s getting behind is traditional mode of thinking, and claimed that we should learn from the western mode of thinking especially scientific thinking mode.

129

However, the mode of thinking of one nation grounds itself deeply in its history, and it cannot be uprooted totally from simple advocacy of rejection and revolution. Therefore on the way to modernization, we find that Chinese traditional mode of thinking is losing but western mode of thinking is not established simultaneously. That means

Chinese people fall into embarrassment, “neither Chinese nor western” or “being Chinese and western at the same time.”

There have been many expositions on the differences between western mode of thinking and Chinese. For example, Chinese mode of thinking emphasizes in synthesis, entirety, induction, hint, implication, ethics, intention, intuition, imagery and circle, whereas western mode of thinking emphasizes in analysis, individuality, deduction, exactness, clarity, recognition, object, logic, demonstration and linearity. Chinese traditional thinking seeks common ground while keeping differences, but Western traditional thinking distinguishes from common ground. Just as Ludwig Feuerbach’s assertion, “the easterner sees unity without differences, whereas the westerner sees differences without unity.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, specific mode of thinking has molded in specific living environment of each nation and functions to solving existential problems, so one mode of thinking has its own rationality and is the motivation of formulation of a kind of national character. Nevertheless, it is objectivity that western mode of thinking or Chinese also has its own merits and shortcomings. For instance, from the positive view, Chinese traditional thinking is good at shaping an integral, systematic and active grasping for the world and things, and at the same time Chinese medicine, Qigong and

---

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Hegel critique of philosophy: selected writings on Feuerbach*, The Commercial Press, 1984, v. 1, p. 45.

Chinese health preserving all have important relations with the characters of Chinese thinking that emphasizing intuition, blur and dialectics. Whereas from the passive view, Chinese traditional thinking lacks the spirit of science and cannot formulate the scientific form of knowledge, so the western modern science cannot originate in China. The dual character of western thinking also represents itself clearly that reason on one hand has been the great impetus of modernization but on the other hand more and more restricts the integrated development of human being.

Because it origins from living activities, accompany with the changing of existence the mode of thinking should also change properly. It is not rational that use one thinking to object the other and abandon ones own mode of thinking to cater for an unfamiliar one. An either-or method should be avoided, because it results in the thinking of binary opposition that has been strongly criticized and abandoned by contemporary philosophies. Therefore what we have to do is clarifying the different aspects of one mode of thinking in order to grasp the ways of it occurs and progresses. The ground of this method lies in that, “man is the producer of his own notions, thoughts and so on (...), consciousness in any time is the aware being, and the being of man is his actual living process.”<sup>3</sup> This is the basic view of historical materialism by Marxism.

131

---

3 Karl Max and Friedrich Engels. *The German ideology*, People's Publishing House, 1961, p. 19.

## 2. *Zhongdao* as the Chinese traditional mode of thinking

Thinking of *Zhongdao* (中道, the middle road) is the common ground of thinking modes of integrity, blur and dialectics that are specific characters compared with western thinking mode. Western philosophy is the necessary “the other” to determine the traits of Chinese thinking mode. Binary thinking, making antithesis between subject and object, phenomenon and substance, reason and perception and so on, is the characteristic of mainstream of western philosophy, whereas there is no such pattern in Chinese traditional thinking. As mentioned above, Chinese thinking take *Tian* (天, heaven), *Di* (地, the earth) and human being as a whole and makes human being an important function. Human beings’ functioning importantly lies in the awareness of existence as an interactive process with environments that include nature and society. People should be “the heart of *TianDi*.” That means, world is taken as a life entity, and human being, the smaller life entity, should live properly in it. The proper existentiality is changeable and relative balanced. Because of changing of environments and emerging of new demands of people, balance is regularly broken. Therefore the importance of human being lies in the awareness of life, just as Lao-tzu’s saying, “He who knows others is wise, he who knows himself is enlightened, he who conquers others has physical strength, he who conquers himself is strong.”<sup>24</sup> A real wise and strong man should know himself better and win himself more

132

---

4 *The Lao Tzu*, Chapter 33, cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A source book in Chinese philosophy*.

than others. The attitude of self awareness should not only be taken by a person but also by a nation.

The purpose of self-awareness living is enhancing people's living equality and cultivating perfect personality. People could change their ways of living to attain the Dao (道, the way) and see their worlds much clearly. Such mode of thinking implies great vital energies. The long history of Chinese surmounting survival challenge, the flourishing of "Asian four little dragons" (Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) in the 1960's that holding Confucian doctrines and the big advance of China in recent thirty years could all be take as the examples of merits of such thinking, they are developing in adjusted ceaselessly.

The so-called thinking of *Zhong* or *ZhongDao* is constructed with three dimensions as follows.

133

The first is right, proper and impartial. The word "Zhong" (middle) emerged early in China and represented the central position of a mast in carapace-bone-script and bronze-script. The ancient meaning of this word is the vital part of a mast that ensures the mast's upright to make distant people seeing flags. So then "Zhong" have the meaning that grasping a proper point to stand up in an unbeaten state. The philosophical meaning of "Zhong," listening to both sides and choosing the middle course, has originated from this primitive meaning.

The mainstream of Chinese cultural tradition had formed itself in the process of conflict and fusion of Confucian, Taoism and Buddhist, and the thinking of *ZhongDao* is the common way. In the *Book of changes* Confucian

indicates that locating in “Zhong” is proper, that means avoiding extremes and at the same time not doing one thing and neglecting another. For instance, when emperor Yao abdicated the throne to emperor Shun, he told him “Yun Zhi Jue Zhong” (允执厥中, keep to the centre), and emperor Shun also told emperor Yu “Yun Zhi Jue Zhong” (允执厥中, keep to the centre) when he demised. In the orthodox passing, from emperor Yu to Tang, to Wenwang, to Wuwang, to Zhougong, to Confucius and to Mencius, the instruction “keep to the centre” was passed too, so this saying had been taking as an essence of Chinese cultural tradition. Confucius held the point that all things had their own extents and making the excessive and insufficient situations harmony was the middle course. He said, “Since I cannot get men pursuing the due medium, to whom I might communicate my instructions. So I must find the ardent and the cautiously-decided. The ardent will advance and lay hold of truth; the cautiously-decided will keep themselves from what is wrong.”<sup>5</sup> Excessiveness and insufficiency, the extreme tendencies of things or wrong tendencies, are objected by Confucius. For instance, one’s conducting himself is neither reaching for what is beyond one’s grasp nor having no ambition at all. Much strict or loosen administration should be rejected. In the book *Confucius’s precepts to his family*, he said that “tampering force with mercy is the harmony way of administration.” Later Mencius inherited Confucian saying, he said, “A great

---

5 *Analects*, 13.21, cf. James Legge, *The Chinese-English four books*.



artificer does not, for the sake of a stupid workman, alter of do away with the marking line. Yi did not, for the sake of a stupid archer, change his rule for drawing the bow. The superior man draws the bow, but does not discharge the arrow. The whole thing seems to leap before the learner. Such is his standing exactly in the middle of the right path. Those who are able, follow him.”<sup>6</sup> *ZhongDao*, right in there, needs people’s searching and practicing, that means people should adapt the middle course but not the middle course adapts people.

In Taoism, Lao-tzu also said, “Much talk will of course come to a dead end. It is better to keep the center (*Zhong*).”<sup>7</sup> *Tao* is the central notion in Lao-tzu’s thinking, but *Zhong* is the way of grasping *Tao*. The meaning of *Zhong* is grasping unchanging thing in changing things in order to deal with different matters. An important methodological principle of thinking of *ZhongDao* is avoiding extremes and one-sidedness, so in Lao-tzu’s thinking there are many discourses on “things turn into their opposites when they reach the extreme.” Chuang Tzu also applied thinking of *ZhongDao* to solve life issues. He said that the humanness and handling affairs should “grasp one to deal with many” and “take the middle course to attain harmony.” Then he took the story of dismembering an ox as skillfully as a butcher as an example to explain “Pursue a middle course as your principle.” That

---

6 *The Works of Mencius*, 13.41, cf. James Legge, *The Chinese-English four books*.

7 *The Lao Tzu*, Chapter 5, cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A source book in Chinese philosophy*.

means ZhongDao is the way of preserving one's life. In the view of Buddhism, ZhongDao is the highest truth avoiding extremes. At the same time it is the standard of behaviors, the only way of emancipation through cultivating.

Chinese Buddhism also regarded ZhongDao, be divorced from two sides, as a ultimate goal and a conductive rule. The Middle School (The Madhyamika, created by Nagarjuna) opposes the extremeness, which influenced China a lot.

The three schools, Confucian, Buddhism and Taoism, as the main streams of Chinese traditional culture, all think in the way of ZhongDao. This fact has laid philosophic foundations of Chinese mode of thinking.

136 As a consequence of the above, the difference between thinking of ZhongDao (the Middle Road) and thinking of dualistic opposition could have been clarified. The former emphasizes harmony of multi-elements and avoiding extremes. ZhongDao and the similar thinking of *ZhongYong* (中庸, the mean) and *ZhongHe* (中和, neutralization) together constitute the core of Chinese traditional thinking. They also have become the rich sources of Chinese wisdom and deeply influence the attitudes of lives of Chinese people. This kind of thinking provides a much broad horizon of possible findings. That means proper adjustment and right ways become possible.

The second character of ZhongDao is *Yi* (义, righteousness). That means proper and reasonable: in proper time one takes a proper method to attain the best result. When Confucius talked about how to become a gentleman, he said, "When the person in authority is beneficent without great

expenditure; when he lays tasks on the people without their repining; when he pursues what he desires without being covetous; when he maintains a dignified ease without being proud; when he is majestic without being fierce,”<sup>8</sup> “being expressive of enjoyment without being licentious, and of grief without being hurtfully excessive”<sup>9</sup> and “The superior man is dignified, but does not wrangle. He is sociable, but not a partisan.”<sup>10</sup> These are not only standards of people conducting, but also standards of administrating country.

To grasping proper method should also pay attention to *ShiZhong* (时中, taking a proper time) and *Quanbian* (权变, acting according to circumstances). “ShiZhong” means taking way of Zhong in right time. The notion of time was brought into by Confucius here. In his opinion, there is no abstract Zhong, and presence and historicity are characters of Zhong. That means taking way of Zhong should apply in a flexible way and take actions that suit concrete circumstances. “Quanbian” (权变) is changing, but not without principle. That means grasping right way in concrete changing circumstances. “ShinZhong” and “Quanbian” include judgments of value and arts of administration in follow ways: following a comprehensive assessment, advances with the times, seizing the opportunities and finding something new in what is old. In Mencius’ view, ZhongD-ao’s concrete application is solving the problem of what the

---

8 *Analects*, 20.2, cf. James Legge, *The Chinese-English four books*.

9 *Analects*, 3.20, cf. James Legge, *The Chinese-English four books*.

10 *Analects*, 15.22, cf. James Legge, *The Chinese-English four books*.

relation between principle (Jing) and changing (Quan) is. Changing should come from principle. If persisting in principle and neglecting concrete circumstances, changing becomes impossible and the real Zhong cannot be accessible. In his book, Mencius took story of “saving sister-in-law falling into water” and “Shun (an emperor) saves his guilty father” as examples to interpret the problem solving of relation between principle and changing. Also we can take Confucius’ Ren (Humane) as an example. There are many statements in *Analects* about Ren, but there is not a statement could be taken as the definition of Ren. Many people consult Confucius in Ren. Their questions have been born in different status. So Confucius’s responding is special and indicative. To generalize the definition of Ren cannot be in the right way. Such intentions could also be found in Daoism and Buddhism. Therefore, the essence of Zhong-Guan is not only practical but also concrete.

138

The third character of ZhongDao (the Middle Road) is unity of oppositeness and interdependency. *The book of changes* said, “The Yin (阴) and the Yang (阳) make up the Dao.” That means all things in world are pairing, transformation between Yin and Yang and coexisting in harmony. According to the records in “*Book of changes*, Copulative part 2,” early in Chinese high antiquity people “Looking up, he observe the pattern of the Tian (天, heaven); looking down, he examine the order of Di. (地, the earth),” “changing according TianDi to go under the way of Tian-Di.” The meaning of ZhongDao, acting according to Tian-Di, has initiated here. Confucius also said, “Am I indeed

possessed of knowledge? I am not knowing. But if a mean person, who appears quite emptylike, ask anything of me, I set it forth from one end to the other, and exhaust it.”<sup>11</sup> This is the description of Confucius’ searching ZhongDao. The saying in *The doctrine of the mean*, “so raise it to its greatest height and brilliancy, so as to pursue the course of the Mean,”<sup>12</sup> has the same meaning.

All things are motivations including contradictions. These contradictions are unities of oppositeness and in a process of balance. Once the balance is disturbed, things would go on extremely. Therefore to keep things properly, man has to go in a right way (ZhongDao). Confucius said that, “Where the solid qualities are in excess of accomplishments, we have rusticity; where the accomplishments are in excess of the solid qualities, we have the manners of a clerk. When the accomplishments and solid qualities are equally blended, we then have the man of complete.”<sup>13</sup> He also said, “While respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom.”<sup>14</sup> Saying in a modern language is keeping two sides and abounding one side.

Therefore, the core of ZhongDao, the Chinese traditional mode of thinking, is a notion of Du (度, degree, consideration, measure). People who think in this way change existential-

---

11 *Analects*, 9.8, cf. James Legge, *The Chinese-English four books*.

12 *The doctrine of the mean*, Chapter 27, cf. James Legge, *The Chinese-English four books*.

13 *Analects*, 6.18, cf. James Legge, *The Chinese-English four books*.

14 *Analects*, 6.22, cf. James Legge, *The Chinese-English four books*.

ities properly according to the concrete circumstances to get into situations of peace and harmony.

### **3. The contemporary significance of thinking mode of ZhongDao**

140 It has been many controversies on how the traditions should be treated, but it is clear that off the ground of tradition innovation cannot be made. It seems to me that the advocacies of revolution of thinking and reforms of mode of thinking represent the deep reflections on the limitations of traditional thinking and worries of blocking of people's integrated development. Actually, "the integrated development of people" should be advocated direct. Because the mode of thinking is still a kind of abstracting, and the integrated development of people should include all kinds of activities of innovation of human being.

According to the thinking of ZhongDao, the deviation mentioned above should be adjusted through transformation of thinking modes of people, both easterner and westerner. The reason of this transformation lies in the fact that the deviation of people's thinking has occurred and the circumstances have changed. The two facts are actualities now. On one hand, the deviation of thinking of Chinese people from early modern time has created a situation of "neither Chinese nor western." On the other hand, it is much essential that the existentiality of science is decisive today and the meaning of human lives has been enriched unprecedentedly, and facing this reality the relevant existentialities cannot be abolished. In Chinese traditional

thinking, the lack of scientific thinking has caused the advocacy of science in the May Fourth period. The tremendous development of science and technology in China, the emergence of many excellent scientists and taking science and technology as the primary productive force, have occurred in this context. But because of the inertia of traditional thinking, the scientific thinking should be consciously insisted. Therefore, the thinking of ZhongDao could play an important role here. But we should also be aware that scientific thinking is not the only effective thinking. So the intuitive and organism characters of Chinese traditional thinking should also be made full use of by us. This is the demand of concrete variable lives. The harm of scientism, the consequence of extreme development of scientific thinking, should be rejected by us.

**141**

At the same time, the competitive spirit, fair spirit, contract spirit and equality spirit, which are accompanied by market economy, are insufficient in Chinese traditional thinking. People must establish these through learning and changing. In fact, the process of China's opening and reforming is the process of changing thinking. For examples, the great discussion on the truth in the 1980s and the disputation about universality and generality in recent years are the representation of such process. Chinese people's abilities of accommodating also embody in this.

Globalization and spreading of western notions provide us a reference system. Therefore awareness of drawback of our thinking becomes possible. Micheal Foucault deems the modernity as "an attitude," which relates to a

kind of thinking mode and a kind of acting mode. Such kind of mode could also be understood as a time spirit that relates with actuality. It is very clear that the modernization of thinking mode could be the most important constructional factor of modernity. Therefore we have to supply our thinking to meeting the requirement of modern society. This is on the ground of tradition, but not to abound it. Not only for Chinese, but also for westerners, this is an urgent task.

142 Every nation is facing the challenge of transforming thinking mode in the globalization today. Radical changes of people's ways of living have taken place in the development of science and technology, especially the development of information technology. At the same time, the transformation in mode of thinking has also occurred, in which the Multi-dimensional interaction and the open innovation are the main tendencies. That means people should search balances between integrating and analyzing, logic and intuition. Therefore in the background of comparison of Chinese and western modes of thinking, revaluing the merits and deficiencies of the both and creating an active wisdom to solve problems are the missions and responsibilities of us today.

Today our discussing on the value of Asian culture could be very significant. The domination of western culture in recent centuries should be overthrown. In fact, even in the West, many people of insight have began reflecting their own culture and finding new sources in the East. In order to remain one nation's own identity without assimilation of



western culture, people should sort out their own cultural heritage immediately. If so, the effective communications between different nations and contributions to world harmony could become possible.