

Interview with Tu Wei-ming

Harvard philosopher Tu Wei-ming is the most famous advocate of the Confucian tradition outside China. Anja Steinbauer talked to him in Boston.

Professor Tu, could you give our readers an idea of where your philosophical interests lie?

When I first came to the States to study philosophy in 1962, to my great surprise, at the Department of Philosophy at Harvard, the three areas I considered particularly close to my heart were not recognised as important areas of philosophical enquiry, namely aesthetics, ethics and philosophy of religion. Ever since then I've worked in quite a number of areas, like religion, comparative religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion, or comparative Asian philosophy and especially the development of Confucian philosophy as a living tradition rather than just as a historical phenomenon. All these efforts are very much centred around the three arenas of aesthetics, ethics and philosophy of religion. As you know, following Kierkegaard's tripartite division, aesthetics, with emphasis on the body, on sensuality, on pleasure, is very different, or fundamentally different, from ethics, governed by rules and regulations of behaviour. A leap of faith is required to move into the area of religion, whereas in the Confucian tradition, in Chinese tradition in general, the three arenas are integrated, interrelated. So you can even characterise the Confucian approach to philosophy as the process of transforming our biological realities, our body, our sensory perceptions, our impulses and so forth, into aesthetic expressions of the self. And that process of transformation requires some foundation. That's the reason why the Confucian tradition has been characterised as self-cultivation. Philosophy as a way of life or a spiritual exercise, as Plato talked about it, I think is very central to Chinese philosophical

thinking, especially Confucian thinking. Upon reflection I came to realise that the reason why these three arenas were not studied very well, or not even considered important by some of the philosophers in the Sixties, was a bias of the philosophical enterprise since the Second World War. There was a sense that philosophy as a mode of enquiry, of analytical enquiry, does not presuppose the experiential understanding of the philosopher. You have the Lockean notion of an original state in which every human being is exactly the same. Therefore you cannot say you have to have some kind of experience as a precondition. But for ethics, for aesthetics, for religion, that kind of experience is critical, so maybe that's one of the reasons why they are marginalised.

You are one of the great ambassadors of Chinese philosophy outside China. What do you think is the contribution that Chinese philosophy and especially Confucianism can make in the West, and how do we communicate between those two very different cultural and especially philosophical traditions?

I appreciate your honorific term of ambassador; certainly I don't deserve it. And also my own sense is even though I think communication is very important, you know to establish bridges and so forth, my own work is not necessarily focussed on that. My own work is really focussed on what I would call the hermeneutics of understanding. I think to understand or try to provide a condition where understanding of our own tradition becomes possible, is painfully difficult for modern Chinese, whether you train in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, or anywhere else. As you know, what actually happened in China ever since the mid-Nineteenth Century was a kind of collective amnesia, a loss of memory, in the sense of alienation from our own traditions. This happened for obvious reasons: the impact of the West, China's identity crisis, a search for a new place in the world and so forth. And of course the intellectuals, especially those who are very sensitive, creative minds, are very much affected by this national project. So to understand tradition, to understand what this whole project's source is, has become a major challenge. Especially if it is pitted against the broader background of China as one of the longest continuous

civilizations. The long continuous history in the membrane of the past leads to an imagined culture of the past and a collective amnesia. It is extremely difficult to engage in philosophy for the modern Chinese because of the overwhelming necessity of economic and social questions. Some of the most creative minds in the Chinese academy are action philosophers, or action intellectuals, deeply involved in the dynamic process of building China or establishing a modern project in China.

I don't think the role of being an ambassador, of being a bridge, is possible without a really cultivated sense of understanding of one tradition. I think I'm still in that process. And since I don't do it in the privacy of my home, I do it publicly, I say look, this is what we need to do and I'm willing to articulate some of the ideas that have not yet been totally formed, so as to invite other people's comments. Hopefully we will develop a discourse linked to the hermeneutics of understanding and help especially people in China who are philosophically interested, often philosophically gifted, to again hear the voice that has already been lost.

And I think that that notion is linked to a broader issue of the human condition in the modern world: for example, the Heideggerian vision that we are thrown into this world, you know, *Dasein*, and that we've lost the voice of being and have to go back to the Pre-Socratic period. It is the obsession with the problem of technology, everything turning to technique rather than true understanding. I'm very sympathetic to that understanding of the human condition, because that sense of scientific man in the pejorative sense, that a person has been transformed into a kind of living robot, that is a major problem in China as well. How you retrieve a sense of philosophical wisdom is not through simple cumulative processes but through real confrontation. But how can we understand Confucius and his followers today? I really feel that if we don't understand, if there is no true communication, if there is no possibility of retrieving that, then we're still overwhelmed by external concerns. It's not very authentic, it is still simply out of nationalism, out of ethno-pride, out of ego-self

gratification, that we try to say “this is great”. Yet we do not have a true understanding of the greatness. This is so obvious about us, and I’m quite aware of that.

So sometimes I even think that ‘ambassador’ is not necessarily complimentary, may even become ironic. Just imagine a group of people who have lost their memory, who have really no understanding in their praxis, in their family life, in their relationships. And yet they assume the role of communicating something they don’t understand to people that don’t care. It’s ironic! Especially in China. So the first task is to allow a very small group of Chinese – I’m not an elitist, I open myself to every possibility of communicating with a much broader audience – but still challenging some of the best minds, to retrieve that memory in the sense that they can be inspired. Unless you are inspired you cannot be inspirational. It’s also an existential challenge.

So this conscious self-reflection of Chinese thinkers concerning their own tradition that you were talking about: where can it lead them and does it really open a door into the 21st Century? The Confucian tradition has often been seen as being very rigid and not allowing for much development. Do you believe that modern movements of thought such as feminism can ultimately somehow be accommodated by that tradition, or is it closed to many strands of thought that nowadays become important?

There is no question about the fact that ever since the May 4th of 1919 some of the major Confucian thinkers began to reflect upon their own project as a way of responding to the challenges of the West by transforming the tradition from the feudal past to the modern and even postmodern situations. So this has been going on for two generations, from 1919 to 1949, in China with people like Liang Shuming, He Lin, Feng Youlan and quite a number of others, certainly Tang Junyi. But in ‘49 to ‘79, in that period outside of Mainland China, in Taiwan and Hong Kong in particular and in North America, people began again to think deeply about how the tradition could respond creatively to the challenges of science, of democracy, of human rights, of liberty, due process of law. More

recently, my generation... well, we continue to think about those issues, they continue to be important, that's the reason why I got into the question of understanding human rights, Confucianism and human rights. Also there are two very powerful forces of the late 20th Century, important not only for Confucianism: one is environmental principles, ecological concerns, the other one is feminism, and gender relationships. I think with the rise of feminism, our sense of human relationships, of power, of authority, of appropriateness, and of what are the bases for moral reasoning, of every aspect of the cultural agenda, let alone philosophical agenda, has to be reshaped. And I wonder whether the survivability of all major religious traditions is partly determined by their ability to accommodate. In the Confucian tradition we have new situations. For example there is virtually no limit, theoretically, to the Confucian tradition's ability to accommodate some brilliant feminist ideas, because Confucianism is not genderspecific in terms of achievement. I mean there is no question about who can become a priest or not, who can become a sage or not, who can become an educated person, teacher, philosopher, a leader, a political leader or a religious leader. It is a historical factor that a lot of habits at the heart of the Confucian tradition are very detrimental to feminist ideas of human flourishing, for example the idea of the division of labour between domestic and outside. That can be changed, but it's painfully difficult. China is changing more rapidly than, say, Korea. And the whole question about leadership, can we imagine a woman sage, there is no difficulty for me to imagine a woman sage. Can we imagine a woman president? A woman as leading authority on Confucianism? I don't have any problem with imagining or accepting or even encouraging that. So on the one hand there are a lot of openings. Confucianism may even be in a better position than many other major religious traditions. On the other hand, the habits of the heart in East Asia in general, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan or even China, are very difficult to overcome, and the actual situation is quite miserable. There are some angry voices especially from the feminist side for very understandable reasons. I'm not just totally sympathetic, but actually I consider myself as part of their project as well.

China is in many ways in a situation of transition and of change and generally I think we can probably say that certainly Confucianism has not now found acceptance on a broad scale in any way. What do you see as the future of Chinese philosophy in general and is there space for Confucianism, any form of New Confucianism, perhaps?

The ruling ideology of China is still Marxist-Leninist, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping. That's their kind of genealogy. And of course it has been fundamentally transformed. In the late eighties scholars already began to talk about, in a kind of wishful thinking, of the possibility of fruitful interaction between traditions in China. One is Marxist-Leninist, Maoist thought. The second one is traditional Chinese philosophy with emphasis on Confucian humanism. The third one is liberal-democratic ideas. The question is, whether the three can enter into a fruitful interaction, because what actually happened before was conflict and tension among them: the Marxist-Leninist tradition would consider the democratic liberal tradition as an imperialist counterreaction, and Confucianism as the feudalism of the past. From the point of view of the liberal democratic tradition, Marxism means more or less Leninistic dictatorial control whereas Confucianism is in support of neo-authoritarianism. From a Confucian point of view Marxism-Leninism and that sort of dialectical materialism is iconoclastic, any tradition becomes illegitimate. And the liberal-democratic tradition in fact is not at all interested in the deep moral concerns of the Confucian tradition, they have become more interested in the market economy, in democratic politics. So the three have been involved for a long, long time in a kind of vicious circle. But in the late eighties there was a lot of talk about the possibility of a *virtuous* circle of the three. In the nineties the situation dramatically changed. Still these three traditions are powerful, but all kinds of other traditions, the postmodern for example, have sprung up. It's very pluralistic. And yet, in the context of pluralism, a very powerful force is the consensus of all the major thinkers in reference to the necessity of retrieving traditions as cultural resources for the further development of our thinking. This is understandable. It is unimaginable for any thinker in the West, no matter how

radical, not to be aware of their philosophical tradition. Take Derrida. Or Habermas. They can't stand in ignorance of traditions, you couldn't survive academically in Germany. That's true for analytical philosophy, for ordinary language philosophy, none of them is ignorant of their own traditions. And the situation in China is just the opposite. It's all too obvious: many scholars are much more familiar with what's going on in the West, especially fashionable trends in the West, to the detriment of their own understanding of their own traditions. This is a lacuna. So with the retrieval of the traditions the situation dramatically changes. What kind of future is there? It can be politicised and become another kind of powerful ideology, but that would generate a lot of psychological suspicion, or even a great deal of hypocrisy. People with no interest in Confucianism now wanting to study Confucianism because now it is not only legitimate but even profitable, you can enhance your career in some areas. On the other hand, in Taiwan for example there's a movement for teaching youngsters to memorise classics. We're talking about kids from 8 to 13. If you are encouraged, sometimes seduced, into reading those kinds of classics, sometimes you don't even understand. Now the vicepresident of a Party school, the place to train future leaders, made it very clear that a cultural renaissance is happening, and he would like to see a fruitful interaction between new Confucian humanism and a kind of Marxist-socialist reconstruction which is of course under tremendous pressure in China since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. And I don't think Marxism-Leninism is going to fade away in China. No. It's going to have another lease of life. But how will it interact with liberal democratic ideas on the one hand, and Confucian humanism on the other? It's fascinating to see.

And do you perhaps think that this renewed interest in the Confucian tradition is part of something like a search for a Chinese identity?

Right. Very much so. But I hope it's not just that. You see, the danger many people are now perceiving from the liberal point of view is the resurfacing of Confucian humanism as a symbol for a new kind of national identity. That's as

a basis on the positive side, for patriotism; on the negative side for ethnocentrism or cultural centrism. This is happening, very clearly. But I think it depends upon how we do it. Certainly historically there is no question about the fact that the Confucian tradition can serve as a very important identity for the Chinese. And in fact some people go so far as to say, I think with persuasive power, that without Confucianism it is difficult to imagine what the shape of China's culture would be, especially Chinese cultural identity. That's a very important observation. But look at the Confucian tradition as a flowing stream: It began in the 6th Century B.C. as a tiny stream then became a major intellectual tradition in China, then for a while it actually went underground, Buddhism and Daoism turned out to be more powerful, especially as models for some of the most brilliant minds in China. There was a revival of Confucianism in the 11th Century, and that revival helped the Confucian tradition to spread beyond Chinese borders. Now, see, in the mid 19th Century the tradition was marginalised. Its very survival became questionable because some of the best people wanted to get rid of it. And now it can reemerge again. But now it cannot afford to be Sinic, it cannot even afford to be East Asian, it has to be global.

This may be a good moment to ask you, you coined the term 'Cultural China'; could you explain that term for our readers?

Right, it's partly descriptive, partly normative. From the descriptive side, there is no question about the fact that we want to understand China not simply as a political entity but as an economic interconnectedness and with cultural viewpoints. That China is not just confined to the People's Republic; now Hong Kong is part of it, but Hong Kong is culturally very distinct. Also you have to take into consideration Taiwan and Singapore and the overseas Chinese communities. So I decided to use the expression 'Cultural China' to try to accommodate three 'Symbolic Universes'. The first one consists of Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Macao. These are the societies primarily organised by ethnic Chinese. There is tension and conflict among

them, and they are very different linguistically, politically and organisationally. Stages of economic development are all very different. And yet they are part of this Chinese cultural universe. The second one consists of Chinese in the global community outside China, and the difference between the first and second is that the first constitutes an extremely highpowered majority of Chinese: in China 90 percent plus, but even in Singapore 76%. The second symbolic universe consists of people in an extreme minority, with the exception of Malaysia, about 23%, all the other societies below 10%, Indonesia probably 3%, Phillipines 3%, United States less than 1% and so forth. So the second symbolic universe consists of only about 46 million people. If you add Taiwan it would be about 50 million. But 50 million is about the population of either England or France. The third symbolic universe is very controversial in Hong Kong but not necessarily in Taiwan or in Mainland China. There are an increasing number of people who are interested in China, but who are connected with China neither by birth nor by marriage. They look at China from their own linguistic universes; German, French, English, Japanese, Russian, but they're not just Sinologists, they may be journalists, people in business, some of them don't even speak Chinese, some of them don't recognize a word of Chinese, and yet their understanding of China, and their sharing their ideas, like you are doing, shape the international understanding of what China is all about. So culture is not *given*, it is an *attainment*. For example the best interpreter of American democracy turned out to be a Frenchman, the best interpreter of American race relations is Swedish, the best understanding of classical Chinese turned out to be Swedish, and the best study of Chinese science and civilisation turned out to be British. These are possibilities which people increasingly accept as useful. Therefore, I would say the Confucian discourse ought to be an open one rather than a closed one. Some people ask me "what's the relationship between your commitment to Confucianism and this 'Cultural China'?" Here, two concepts or two forms of understanding are very important: One, no matter how broadly we define Confucianism, it is only one of many traditions that constitute the cultural resources of Cultural China. Next to Daoism, Buddhism, folk traditions, Christianity, Islam, all kinds of traditions, Confucianism is only one of them. To

say Confucianism is the most important influence is highly problematic. It depends on what context you want to work in. On the other hand, no matter how broadly you want to define Cultural China, it cannot accommodate the whole Confucian tradition unless you want to include Japan and other countries, which is out of the question. You can even be a Confucian and be very hostile to China. It happens all the time. For example I visited Vietnam. Ever since the 14th-15th century some of the most important Vietnamese thinkers have been deeply committed to Confucianism, although they were anti- Chinese, because they wanted to assert their own independence. So you have a very complicated intellectual universe if that happens.

Yes, but I can see that there is also a window of opportunity. Can I just finally ask you what would you recommend to people who have an interest in Chinese philosophy but haven't really studied it as yet? What would be a good way of getting into the study of Chinese philosophy?

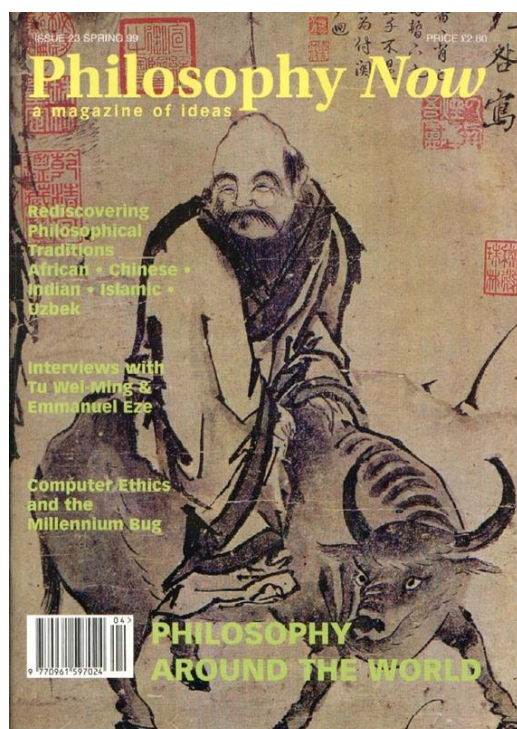
One is open-mindedness, to be sure. But I think more than that, I do believe it's not possible for anyone to understand anything that is radically different without some kind of psychological preparedness in terms of sympathy. In other words the sympathy is not to say "we now allow the culture to do things contrary to our principles", not to condone human rights violations, condone China's aggressiveness towards Tibet, or China's inattention to the minorities, or China's aggressiveness towards the outside world, not to condone any of these things, because true sympathy also requires critical reflection. But sympathy is to say "I want to get into this material not for any immediate pragmatic reasons, but because there is something intrinsically valuable." Just like knowing a person. You know, the Kantian idea, always treat a person as an end. Of course normally, when we do these things, we want to have a cash pay-off. But even if we want a cash pay-off, if we want to have any kind of depth of understanding it requires a sympathetic understanding which allows us to move into the cultural universe and to be able to think internally. Philosophy is a major way we can do that. The economic situation, political situation can be observed just

by looking at the statistics or journalistic accounts. But if you want to understand how the mind functions, what are the deep commitments of the society, the highest aspirations as well as the deepest fears, that's the philosophical dimension. So I think maybe all the disciplines in the humanities; philosophy, literature, history, they are the most immediate to our own selfreflexivity. Philosophy teaches us how we think, and reflect upon our own reflection; history teaches us our collective memory; and art and literature help us to understand the most aesthetically appealing symbolic forms of the culture. So some appreciation of those forms, in addition to an appreciation of the economic and political conditions, will help us to understand in some depth how the culture actually functions.

Professor Tu, thank you for this interview.

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