Lines and circles, West and East

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Some philosophical and linguistic differences between Western and Chinese cultures

NOTHING in the world is absolute. Everything is relative, cultural difference being no exception. Culture, as the total pattern of human behavior and its products, oversteps geographical limits and historical conditions in many ways, and it is characterized by its strong penetrativeness and fusibility. The advancement of the globalized economy and the rapidity and ease of modern communication, transportation and mass media have resulted in an ever-increasing exchange between cultures, unprecedented in scale, scope and speed. Consequently, an increase in universality and reduction in difference between cultures is an inevitable trend. It is no surprise to see phenomena characteristic of one culture existing considerably in another. As a result, some people even fear that the world will become a dull place when all the different nationalities behave exactly alike. The exploration of cultural difference conducted under the condition of tremendous exchange between cultures might be misled into the pitfall of generalization or absolutization. Nevertheless, the "cultural sediment" formed through long-range accumulation is not to be easily removed and the cultural tradition handed down from generation to generation shows great consistency and continuity. The cultures of different regions and nations still have their own distinctive peculiarities and, therefore, significance still needs to be attached to the study of the individualities of different cultures against the background of their universality.

By and large, linearity and circularity can be used to indicate the major difference between Western and Chinese cultures. We employ "Western culture" here as a general term, putting aside in this paper its interior regional diversities in order to give prominence to contrasting it externally with Chinese culture. A circle is a round enclosure. A line is a narrow continuous mark. The contrast between the linearity of Western culture and circularity of Chinese culture embodies itself in such aspects as world view, core value, outlook on time, mode of thinking and linguistic expression.

World view: linear division and circular enclosure

A line divides an area while a circle encloses one. As far as world views are concerned, Western linearity is displayed in the general belief that the Universe is divided into two opposites and a clear-cut demarcation line is drawn between the two: man and nature, subject and object, mind and matter, the divine and the secular. Chinese circularity manifests itself in the prevailing viewpoint of combining the two opposites and enclosing them. Although opposites are acknowledged in both cultures, Western culture emphasizes their co-existence and opposition while Chinese culture stresses their inter-dependence and integration.

The linear nature of the Western world view can be traced back to the propositions of such ancient Greek philosophers as Thales, Herakleitos, Plato and Aristotle. They all advocated

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dividing the world into two opposing parts in spite of the different concepts they put forward: 'element' and 'soul', 'reality' and 'reason', and 'matter' and 'form'. Their theories laid the foundation for the further development of the one-dividing-into-two view adopted by Western culture. Later hypotheses like those initiated by Descartes and Hegel consolidated the theoretical basis though they introduced different notions such as 'matter' and 'mind', and 'real object' and 'absolute spirit'. Christianity holds that God creates Man and Man sins against God. Throughout the Bible the theme of the redemption of mankind is developed. There exists a clear division between God and Man.

It is believed that God makes and Man shapes, and God brings forth none but she provides for them. Archimedes (212 BC) said over 2 thousand years ago, "Give me but one firm spot on which to stand, and I will move the earth". A proverb says, "Nature is conquered by obeying her". Conquering or obeying her, Man considers Nature as his opposite. The "dividing" world view is the starting point of Western culture's initiative in exploring and transforming Nature and explains the rapid development of science and technology in the West.

The circular Chinese world view originates from the notion of Tao, which was initiated in the proposition "Tao consists in Yin and Yang" in the Book of Changes (about 600 BC). Lao Tzu, who lived about 500 years before Christ, further enunciated the concept of Tao in Chapter 42 of his *Tao Te Ching*: "Tao gave birth to the One; the One gave birth successively to two things, three things, up to ten thousand. These ten thousand creatures cannot turn their backs to the shade (Yin) without having the sun (Yang) on their bellies, and it is on this blending of the breaths (both Yin and Yang) that their harmony depends" (translation: Arthur Maley). It is obviously the 'One', the 'blending' and the 'harmony' that are emphasized in the explanation of Tao.

Two centuries after Lao-tzu came Chuang-tzu (369–286 BC), who used orderly philosophic discussion rather than poetic intuition in clarifying the concept of Tao. He believed in "the One reality which is all men, gods and things: complete, all-embracing and the whole; it is an all-embracing unity from which nothing can be separated" (translated by Gardener Murphy). When it comes to the relationship between Man and Nature, he proposes that "the perfect man has no self because he has transcended the finite and identified himself with the universe". Thus the concept that Man is part of Nature began to take root in the minds of the Chinese people. Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BC), a philosopher of the West Han Dynasty, again developed the Oneness world view. He assumed that "the energy of heaven and earth is a unified one. It consists of Yin and Yang and manifests itself in 4 seasons and 5 elements".

A number of Chinese idioms mirror the idea of identifying Man with Nature rather than separating the latter from the former. Here are some examples:

Nature affects human affairs and human behavior finds response in Nature. (*Tian ren ganying*)
Law of Nature and Feelings of Man are in unison. (*Tian li ren qing*)
Nature accords with human wishes. (*Tian cong ren yuan*)
Nature is angry and people resentful. (*Tian nu ren yuan*)
Nature's will brings about human affinity. (*Tian yi ren yuan*)
Nature and Man turn to one. (*Tian yu ren gui*)

The Chinese character '*tian*' is roughly translated into Nature in the above idioms, as Nature conveys the primary meaning of '*tian*', though the latter carries a wider sense. It is clearly shown that '*tian*' (Nature) and '*ren*' (Man) always react to and comply with each other. They can never be separated. The Oneness world view can also finds expression in Chinese poems.

Flowers smile on the happy occasion.
Birds sing with the joyful congregation.
(Wang Wei)

Trees sway in a mournful gale.
Waves surge like hill and dale.
(Cao Zhi)

Catkins scattered by wind, my motherland is being disintegrated.
Rain striking duckweed, I sink against the tide, broken-hearted.
(Wen Tianxiang)

As is shown in the above lines, things in Nature like flowers, birds, trees, waves, wind and rain all respond to such human feelings as happiness, sadness, anger and sorrow. Man and Nature blend into a harmonious identity.

Core value: linear individuality and circular integrity

A line is a point moving continuously onward whereas a circle is a centripetal ring. In terms

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of core value, Western linearity is embodied in priority given to developing individual potentialities, realizing individual objectives and seeking individual interests, and Chinese circularity is embodied in importance attached to harmonizing community relationships, actualizing community objectives and safeguarding community interests.

For most Westerners, individualism is undoubtedly a positive core value. In fact, the social systems of various Western nations, and especially the United States, are based on "rugged individualism" as described by Herbert Hoover in 1928 and aim at fostering a sense of individualism in the people. The pursuit of individual rights and interests is considered utterly legitimate. Self-actualization and the maximal realization of individual potential are supreme aims in life. It is fully justified for individuals to protect their private interests when they are in conflict with those of the community or the state. Weight is given to the individual rather than the community, which is expressed in a way in Margaret Thatcher's speech in 1987, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women." Westerners prefer to discipline themselves rather than be disciplined by others. They take pride in their independence and their right to make their own decisions. They go their own way, not caring much about what others might think about their doings.

In Western culture, an individual is like an independent point, moving forward continuously in the direction he himself chooses, forming a line of his own self-fulfilment. If different people's lines run parallel, each will attain smoothly his own aims in life. As one American professor put it: "You are selfish and I am selfish, but you don't stand in my way and I don't stand in your way. We are both selfish and we are both happy."

However, if two lines intersect, the stronger line must cut off the other one in order to keep itself moving on and that conforms to the law of survival of the fittest. Guided by the linear competition-oriented value, everyone seeks independence and self-reliance, and everyone feels insecure and makes unremitting efforts. It is believed that the linear road of an individual's life is to be made and extended under his own foot and his success, achieved through his own efforts.

Chinese culture takes the circular integrity as the basis of its value. An individual is incorporated in the integrity of the whole. The center of the circle represents the community interests and serves as the common objective of all individuals. The individual exists in the community and finds the meaning of his existence through it. An individual in isolation has no meaningful existence.

Confucius advocated over two thousand years ago that "a public spirit should rule everything under the sun and a gentleman should put others' interest above his own". An ancient Chinese would consider it the topmost aim in life "to cultivate his own moral character, put family affairs in order, administer state affairs well and pacify the whole world". It is evident that the interests of the small circle (family), the intermediate circle (state) and the large circle (world) come above one's own, and one has to cultivate his own moral character and exert himself in order to achieve the goal of serving the community interests. A couplet for a Ming Dynasty academy of classical learning says, "The sounds of wind, rain and reading each come into my ears; the affairs of family, state and world are all kept in my mind." Fan Zhongyan, a Song Dynasty poet, expressed in his poem his desire "to show concern over state affairs before others and enjoy comforts after them".

It has been a widely accepted motto that "everyone has a share of responsibility for the fate of his country". In present-day China, prioritizing community interests remains the mainstream value in spite of the importation of varied values from other cultures. Jean Brick (1991), as an outsider who has come inside for some time, has observed the circular group-oriented Chinese value with keen cross-cultural awareness. She says in her book *China*, "Private interests are vested in the group, that is in the family or in the community, and not in the individual. True self-fulfilment for the individual lies in fulfilling social responsibilities to the greatest extent possible. In fact, the establishment of harmonious social relations is seen as an absolute necessity, without which any development is impossible."

Outlook on time: linear extension and circular rotation

A line extends and a circle rotates. Time is looked upon in Western culture as the extension of a line going ceaselessly forward and never returning and therefore the future is held in high regard and well planned. In contrast,

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time is thought of in Chinese culture as the rotation of a circle, going repeatedly round and round day in and day out and thus the past is cherished and revered.

The linear outlook on time finds reflection in many Western literary works. Men of letters compare time to "the devourer of everything" (Ovid, 15), "the subtle thief of youth" (Milton, 1645) and a "winged chariot hurrying near" (Marvel, 1681). Shakespeare in 1601 described time as "most brisk and giddy-paced". As Jia Yuxin (1997) says, "time is viewed in Western culture as an unceasing one-way movement. It means marching, flowing and flying. It resembles the river, the waterfall and the torrent". Hall (1959) points out that nobody in the Western world can escape the iron-hand control of unidirectional time. The linear view of time can also find evidence in such proverbs as "Time lost is never found again" and "Time and tide wait for no man." As time is regarded as something moving on in one direction and never coming back, Westerners have a strong sense of the shortage of time, which quickens their pace of life and makes them habitually look ahead, having their eyes on the future.

People are used to writing in their diaries or calendars what is to be done in the future and focus much of their attention on planning for it. They tend to defy authorities and enjoy blazing new trails rather than follow the beaten track. It might be said that the linear view encourages bold exploration and promotes scientific creation.

The circular Chinese outlook on time is also revealed in literary writings and proverbs. The flight of time is compared in classical writings to the movement of a 'shuttle' (suo), which flits back and forth in a weaving loom. Qu Yuan (about 270 BC), a patriotic poet of the Warring States Period, writes in his masterpiece *The Lament*, "The sun alternates with the moon; autumn returns after spring soon". Time is looked upon not as never-returning one-way movement, but as back-and-forth rotation like the endless cycle of seasons. It is true that time goes quickly, but it comes back soon like the alternation between the sun and the moon. The circular view results in the shaping of the sense of an abundance of time and the general behavior pattern of doing things in an unhurried manner.

People believe that loss can well be made up for as time rotates. This belief is expressed in a line from *The Biography of Feng Yi* written in the East Han Dynasty, "What is lost at sunrise can be regained at sunset." Although people also sigh over "time waiting for no one" (Tao Yuanming, Jin Dynasty) and feel "regret for the negligent loss of time" (Han Yu, Tang Dynasty), yet they expect "the favor of the time cycle and the change from bad to good luck". The unhurried and leisurely manner is so appreciated that advice is given and farewell remarks are made by frequently using the phrases "go (eat, play, watch, discuss, do something) slowly" or "take your time". The road sign "slow down, look around and then cross" can be found at crossroads everywhere in China. The view of time as a cycle often directs people's attention to the past. People keep diaries to record what has been done in the past instead of listing what is to be done in the future. They tend to look back, value past experience, respect authorities and follow established practice. Confucius advises people "to engage in introspection every day on three points". He means that everyone should constantly reflect on his own past behavior and try to find out whether he has done anything unfaithful and dishonest or has shunned his studies. It might be surmised that the circular view motivates self-examination and contributes to social stability.

Mode of thinking: linear dissection and circular synthesis

With regard to modes of thinking, people nurtured in Western culture tend to dissect things into parts and analyze their relationships. Nevertheless, people brought up in Chinese culture are likely to synthesize parts and examine the whole. Linear dissection contributes to the development of logical thinking by abstractive reasoning while circular synthesis helps to think in terms of images and gain intuitive insight.

Analytical thinking prevails in Western culture. People are good at classifying things and arranging them systematically. Encyclopedic works appeared long ago and taxonomy was advanced. Animals, plants and objects are clearly divided, sub-divided and further divided according to their similarities, differences and relationships. Have a glance at the title, sub-titles and topic sentences of each paragraph of an article and you instantly know its content. When a speech is made, the audience can easily get the message by following

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the cohesive connectors signaling time relationships like 'first', 'second', 'third', 'next', 'finally', etc. and those signaling logical relationships such as 'because' (cause), 'however' (contrast), 'actually' (contradiction), 'supposing' (condition).

Experimental analysis has long been used as the major method of scientific research. A doctor of Western medicine treats his patient by examining parts of the body through tests and X-rays before making a diagnosis. A cook makes a dish by strictly following the recipe and carefully preparing the ingredients. Even an apple is eaten by cutting it into parts before biting. Linear dissection is related to abstraction. Qian Xuesen (1986) says, "Abstractive thinking seems to be linear or branch-like." Westerners are relatively stronger in making use of concepts for logical judgement and reasoning. Methods of induction (reasoning from the specific to the general) and deduction (reasoning from the general to the specific) are widely applied to theoretical demonstration of argumentation. Abstraction is synonymous with precision and clarity and that may help to explain why more theoretical works on science and technology have been produced in the west.

The synthetic mode of thinking holds sway in Chinese culture. People are accustomed to observing and judging things as an enclosed whole. Analysis is not rejected, but synthesis predominates. There was no encyclopedia in its exact sense published in ancient China. *Leishu*, a kind of reference book that comes closest to an encyclopedia, is a set of political, social and ethical data dealt with in a circular way with *emperor* as the center. It does not take into account the essential nature of the included items and their fundamental differences. When writing an article, a classical writer would attach great importance to the unity and harmony of the whole piece, giving much attention to the correspondence between introduction and conclusion and the natural transition from one point to another, rather than the clear-cut division between different sections.

A doctor of Chinese medicine diagnoses his patient's disease by first looking at his complexion and the coating on his tongue, feeling his pulse and eliciting his complaints in order to form a correct judgement of his general physical condition. He tries to get at the root of the trouble and effect a permanent cure rather than apply a palliative remedy. Interestingly, Chinese people eat an apple not by cutting it into parts, but by peeling it around and reserving the whole before biting.

The synthetic mode of thinking is closely associated with intuition and thinking in terms of images, and it is synonymous with implicitness and fuzziness. As R. Fleisch (1946) puts it, "They [the Chinese] formed the habit of expressing ideas by metaphors, similes and allegories, in short, by every known devices for making a thing plain by comparing it with something else." An apprentice learns cooking not by following recipes with precise quantitative descriptions, but by intuitively acquiring his master's technique after repeated imitations. A Chinese painter seeks close resemblance in spirit instead of accurate likeness in appearance. A Buddhist monk rarely makes or attends religious speeches with clear-cut viewpoints about virtues and vices, but he practices transcendental meditation and seeks intuitive insight. In fact, intuitive feeling and fuzzy beauty are held in great esteem almost in all forms of Chinese arts, such as poetry, drama and painting. As Shen Xiaolong (1990) says, "This is a circular dialectic mode of thinking with a strong plastic, flexible and stochastic nature".

Linguistic expression: linear branch-like connection and circular wave-like moving

Language is an integral part and carrier of culture and therefore cultural difference is necessarily exhibited in linguistic difference. As numerous different languages are used in Western countries and China, we take English and Hanyu (usually referred to simply as Chinese or its official form Mandarin), the language used by the Han nationality, as the typical languages for comparison. The linearity of English is displayed in the tree-like sentence structure with different parts of the sentence connected like branches and sub-branches to the trunk line. The circularity of the Chinese language is manifested in topic-centered sentence structure and the roundish wave-like moving of the discourse.

English is mainly hypotactic. Sentence elements are linearly arranged with the subject and the predicate verb forming the trunk line, and the object, if there is one, as the extension of the trunk. The attributive and adverbial

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phrases and clauses are all branch lines or sub-branch lines linked by connectives to the trunk or the branches. Although the branch-upon-branch tree-like structure seems complicated and involved, yet the apparent connective marks help to achieve explicit cohesion and make it easy to analyze the logical relationships between different elements and understand the meaning of the sentence. It is assumed that the structurally compact linear language is the product of abstract thinking and, in return, facilitates abstract thinking and forms a solid foundation of formal logic.

Chinese is comparatively paratactic. It has far fewer connectives than English and lacks inflections in the strict sense. Implicit coherence plays a much more important role than explicit cohesion in semantic conveyance and comprehension. The meaning of a sentence is understood mainly through context and language feel. Sentence elements are arranged circularly around the center of topic. Prominence is given to the topic to such an extent that the structure is rendered highly flexible and even deformable. Meaning predominates over form, message over structure, and coherence over cohesion at both the sentential and discoursal levels. The composite construction of sentences in a discourse is loose and plastic and the discourse evolves freely in a wave-like manner. Curiously enough, Fowler (1965) gives a truthful description of the movement: "Rhythmic speech or writing is like waves of the sea, moving onward with alternating rise and fall, connected yet separated, like but different, suggestive of some law, too complex for analysis or statement, controlling the relations between wave and wave, waves and sea, phrase and phrase, phrases and speech."

Conclusion

We have explored the major difference between Western and Chinese cultures in terms of world view, core value, outlook on time, mode of thinking and linguistic expression. The linearity-versus-circularity difference is merely a matter of degree. There is no absolute distinction between the two cultures. Exceptions are numerous and counter-evidence exists. However, the above observations might provide us with a better knowledge of the main historical trend in each culture. Comparison is made here not to judge which is superior to which, but to promote understanding. A complete understanding of the individualities of the two cultures will clear the way for further cultural exchange and cultural fusion and accelerate the expansion of cultural universality. Different cultures can learn from each other's strengths to offset their own weaknesses. The moon of the west is not rounder and the sun of the east has its spots as well. The extensive exchange between Western and Chinese cultures will certainly contribute to the creation of an even more splendid world civilization.

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