

Confucianism & Constructive Postmodernism

By Tang Yijie

Peking University

I. What Kind of Age Are We in Now?

From a world perspective, our current age can possibly be seen as the transition from modern capitalist society beginning with the first, 18th-century, Enlightenment toward a postmodern society of a “second enlightenment.” From a China perspective, our age will be seen as a crucial moment for realizing great national revival in the context of globalization. All in all, for human society, this age represents a precious opportunity to enter a totally new era.

Since the 18th-century Age of Enlightenment, Western capitalism has a history of almost 300 years, during which period the Western world achieved dazzling “modernization.” But now, “modernized society” is suffering from more and more intractable problems. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) proposed that reason should be the watchword of the Enlightenment, but these days “reason” faces its own problems. Originally, “reason” contained two related aspects: “instrumental reason” and “value reason,” both aspects with an extremely important role in advancing human progress, but the present-day reality is that “scientifically omnipotent” “instrumental reason” outshines humanistic “value reason,” and the latter has become marginalized. As a result, everything becomes an “instrument”: people become instruments for others and the natural world has become an instrument to be used by human beings as they see fit.

The normal and harmonious relation between man and nature has been severely harmed by man’s unrestrained exploitation, destruction and waste of natural resources. In turn, man’s own survival is threatened by deteriorating natural conditions such as depletion of the ozone layer, poisoned oceans, polluted environment and unbalanced eco-environment. Although the Kyoto Protocol for limiting air pollution was signed in Kyoto, Japan, as early as in December 1997, certain developed countries in the capitalist world set various obstacles on its path. One example is Canada’s recent announcement of its intention to withdraw from the Protocol. This illustrates that the “reason” advocated by the Enlightenment is being changed by some Western leaders into a “non-rational” and utilitarian “tool.”

With the growth of industrialization, a “free market economy” has promoted the huge increase of human wealth, and people have won great material benefit from it. But there is no denying that it has also caused serious polarization between rich and poor (including tensions country-to-country, ethnic group-to-ethnic group, and class-to-class within a country). If the “free market economy” continues to grow like a rapacious monster, without effective supervision, control or restraint, sooner or later it will cause economic crisis and social disturbance. The global financial crisis that first appeared in the USA in 2008 was still ongoing when the debt crisis began to sweep Europe in 2011. According to Professor Paul Kennedy of Yale University, liberalism freed people from the shackles of the pre-market-economy age, but it has also put people in danger of financial crisis and social disasters.¹

Another Enlightenment watchword, “liberation of the individual,” originally targeted religious superstition and vulgar ignorance, encouraging people to be fully aware of their own strength so as to fully deploy their “free” creativity. Today, however, this notion has become an instrument for the domination of others, a tool that imperialist countries in particular use to support their own hegemony and impose their own value systems on other countries and peoples, pushing a universalist doctrine.² The distorted development of today’s capitalist society has resulted in people no longer in pursuit of “reason,” but indulging themselves in the lust for power and worship of money. Consequently, all groups of people live in pain and mental conflict: ordinary people struggle to survive harsh conditions; intellectuals experience constant guilt because of their inability to end social chaos, their inability to win people’s trust. Politicians exist in a state of self-deception; entrepreneurs wrestle to figure their way around mutually contradictory rules and systems. Regardless of rank or identity it seems that the happy life to which all aspire is out of reach and happiness eludes all. But this is not a problem caused by any individual: rather, it is an unavoidable pain for a society in the throes of a major transitional period. Therefore, it is incumbent on each and every one of us to work hard for the coming of a new age.

II. The Rise of Two Trends of Thought in China in the 1990s

In the 1990s, there emerged in China's ideological and cultural circles two ideological trends opposing the concept of "monism." One trend is "postmodernism," an idea originating in the West and aiming to deconstruct "modernity." In the early 1980s, "postmodernism" had already come to China, but it made little impact at the time: by the 1990s however, Chinese scholars were suddenly showing it great interest. Another trend is the "*Guoxue* tide"—the ardent pursuit of revitalizing traditional Chinese culture. In truth, in the 1980s, China's thinkers had advocated greater emphasis on traditional Chinese culture, but it did not coalesce into a surge tide until in the 1990s when *Guoxue* rose quietly in Peking University. What does the rise of these two trends mean for us?

In the 1960s, to save human society and cancel out modernity's concomitant negative impact, the trend of "postmodernism" first emerged in the West. In its early period, postmodernism was "deconstructive postmodernism," posited as a way of dealing with problems produced in the course modern society's development. The aim was to deconstruct modernity, to oppose monism and advocate pluralism, to shatter all authority and to cast the "authoritativeness" and "dominant nature" of modernity into the shade. But, postmodernism of the deconstructive kind produced neither positive standpoints, nor any designs for a new age.

At the turn of the 21st century, "constructive postmodernism," a concept based on process philosophy, proposed integrating the positive elements of the first Enlightenment with postmodernism and thus called for a "second enlightenment."

For instance, according to Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, "man" should not be taken as the center of everything. Rather, "Man and nature should be regarded as a closely related living community."³ According to John B. Cobb, a major founder of process philosophy, Constructive postmodernism takes a critical attitude towards deconstructive postmodernism...we have introduced ecologicalism into postmodernism. In a postmodern age, man and man will co-exist harmoniously, as will man and nature. It is an age which will retain something positive of modernity while transcending dualism, anthropocentrism and male chauvinism, an age that aims to build a postmodern society for the common good.

According to process philosophy, if the rallying cry of the first Enlightenment was "to free the self," then the second enlightenment's watchword should be

"to care about others" and "to respect differences" (in a postmodern society). In their opinion, when people use their personal "freedom" in ways that diminish the community, they are bound to weaken their own "freedom." Therefore, it is necessary to reject an abstract concept of freedom in favor of a profound and responsible freedom by bringing in the notions of responsibility and duty and by revealing the inner relation between freedom and duty. In the West, constructive postmodernism is a tiny branch stream with very little influence, but in China it has attracted the attention of a group of scholars who are passionate for national revival.

Karl Theodor Jaspers wrote in *The Origin and Goal of History*:

Until today mankind has lived by what happened during the Axial Period, by what was thought and created during that period. In each new upward flight it returns in recollection to this period and is fired anew by it. Ever since then it has been the case that recollections and re-awakenings of the potentialities of the Axial Period—renaissances—afford a spiritual impetus. Return to this beginning is the ever-recurrent event in China, India and the West.⁴

In the West, constructive postmodernism is a tiny branch stream with very little influence, but in China it has attracted the attention of a group of scholars who are passionate for national revival. This is exemplified in the "*Guoxue* tide" in the late 1990s, when China was experiencing a process of national rejuvenation, and for this the support of a revitalized national culture was essential.

In my opinion, it is precisely because traditional Chinese culture (*Guoxue*) has had over a century of impact from Western culture that Chinese scholars have had the chance for reflecting on our own traditional culture. We have gradually come to realize what of our culture should be promoted, what abandoned and what absorbed. For over one hundred years, Chinese scholars have been trying to absorb and digest "Western learning," and this most certainly laid the foundation for the transformation of *Guoxue* in the traditional sense to its modern counterpart. The new or modern *Guoxue* must be a spiritually significant power for China's revival as well as for the "peace and development" of human society. It will help China to realize "modernization" in an all-round way, and also to avoid the predicament that Western society currently experiences.

In other words, the new *Guoxue* should stick to the principle of *Fanben Kaixin*. Only through *Fanben* (return to the source) are we able to *Kaixin* (open up new territory). *Fanben* requires of us a deep understanding

of *Guoxue*'s essence and insists on the mainstay nature of our own culture, whereas *Kaixin* requires of us a systematic understanding of the new problems facing China and human society, problems in need of urgent resolution. The two aspects are inseparable: only by digging deeper into the true essence of *Guoxue* can we open up new territory at the appropriate time. Only by squarely addressing the problems of human society can we better promote and update the essence of *Guoxue*, so that in the 21st century, the flame of *Guoxue* will once more be ignited by the *Fanben Kaixin* principle and contribute to human society.

What are the prospects of these two trends of thought in China? Will they exert a positive impact on Chinese society and on human society as a whole? To answer these questions, we must fully investigate the possibility of integrating the two.

III. In the New Historical Period of Chinese Revival and in the Context of Globalization, Traditional Chinese Culture May Well Make an Epochal Contribution to Human Society.

China is in the process of national revival, and this must have the support of revitalized national culture. However, in this globalized age, the revitalization of our traditional culture requires us not only to address our own social problems but world problems also. It follows that while developing our traditional culture we must keep in mind that it belongs to both China and the world at large. It requires us not only to pay close attention to the actual development of our own culture but also to incipient tendencies in Western culture. Here the author would like to offer a possible trend for discussion, namely: Could a combination of *Guoxue* and constructive postmodernism—the former traditional Chinese learning and the latter of Western origin and still in the bud—have something to offer to the healthy and rational development of China and the rest of the world?

i. "Man and Nature as a Closely Related Living Community" and "Unity of Man and Heaven"

According to John B. Cobber, "Today we recognize that man is a part of nature and that we live an ecological community." This idea, although coming directly from Whitehead, is very similar to a traditional Chinese notion—the unity of Man and Heaven, Heaven implying the laws of nature. As a core traditional Chinese value, it is a mode of thinking that differs from the "man-nature dichotomy" idea that long prevailed in the West.

In 1992, 1,575 famous scientists from around the world signed and published a document named "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity." Its first line read: "Human beings and the natural world are on a collision

course." Why has nature been so devastated? There is no getting away from the fact that the long prevalence of the "man-nature dichotomy" mindset made nature a victim.⁵ Fortunately, the "unity of Man and Heaven" way of thinking offers us a feasible way towards tackling the destruction of the natural world.

As early as 2,500 years ago, Confucius was exhorting people to both "know heaven" and "fear heaven." The first admonition requires us to learn more about nature and thus consciously use it to improve the welfare of human beings. The second requires us to hold nature in awe and fulfill our duty of protecting it. According to Zhu Xi, another great thinker of ancient China, "Heaven is inseparable from man and man from heaven." What he is telling us is that, after heaven gives birth to man, man and heaven have formed an inseparable relation, one that requires man to embody the laws of heaven and to be responsible for it.

As we have seen, in dealing with the relation between man and nature, traditional Chinese philosophy takes a road similar to that of constructive postmodernism. As Léon Vandermeersch put it, "Western humanism that brought the world such a perfect thought as the concept of human rights now faces many challenges from modern society that as yet it has been unable to answer. Why, then, not give some consideration as to whether Confucian thinking might indicate a way forward for the world, for example: respect for nature as proposed in the 'unity of man and heaven' concept; and the philanthropic spirit that 'all men are brothers'? We can and should bring to bear the essence of Confucian teaching on current world problems, to examine them afresh from a new perspective."⁶

Why does Vandermeersch put Western thought on human rights together with the three concepts from Chinese thinking as mentioned above? As we know, human rights are very important to us, because man should not be deprived of the right of freedom, and social progress can only be realized with "freedom of thought," "freedom of speech," "freedom of belief," "freedom of movement," etc. However, the question of how to protect human rights is often subject to interference by external forces, to removal even. This has been the case in China and overseas. Some Western thinkers and politicians widen the concept of human rights to the extent that there are no limits and that man can destroy nature at will. Hence Vandermeersch asserts that there should be some constraints on man's rights over nature, and to do that we should use the significant philosophical asset of the concept of their unity.

According to Christian belief, God created the world in its complete form and man can do nothing further to it. However, in Vandermeersch's opinion,

once God created a complete world, the rest was man's problem and for man to address. Just as André Gide, the French writer, said, "God proposes and man disposes." The Confucian view that "all men are brothers" is linked to another traditional Chinese idea, namely "world outlook." This considers that man's loftiest ideal is "the world being One" (or the world is in Great Harmony). As is written in *The Great Learning*, it is important to cultivate one's moral character, to take good care of one's family, to run the State well and thence make the whole world peaceful and harmonious. For any country or nation, it is important to consider not just its own interests, but "peace in the world" (i.e. common interests of mankind), which, in my opinion, should be an intrinsic meaning of "human rights." In other words Western thinking on human rights would do well to look into the traditional thought and culture of other nations (such as China) for valuable elements that could supplement and enrich its own approach, and thereby set human society on a more reasonable path.

ii. *Constructive Postmodernism, a Second Enlightenment and Confucian "Renxue" (Learning of Goodness)*

According to constructive postmodernism, if the watchword of the first Enlightenment was "liberty of the individual," then those of the second should be "care about others" and "respect for differences."⁷ The former can be described as *ren* (goodness), a core value of the Confucian school. The starting point and basis of *ren* is "love of family," but according to Confucius we should not only extend *ren* to family members but beyond the family too. Similarly, as taught by Mencius, an important successor of Confucius, "Apart from taking good care of the elderly and children of one's own kin, one should extend concern for the elderly and children of other families." He also asserted that love for family was a prerequisite for loving others, and loving others a prerequisite for loving all creatures.

Mencius' thought is also in line with the "care about others" line proposed by constructive postmodernism. According to constructive postmodernism scholars, their philosophy is to try to "construct a postmodern world where all living communities get due attention and concern" on the basis of "retaining some positive factors of modernity" (mainly valuable concepts such as "freedom," "democracy," "human rights," as proposed by Western thinkers on the basis of what they call "reason").⁸ This can be regarded as a more comprehensive description of "care about others." In the development of human society, culture always undergoes a process of accumulation, inheritance and creation. A postmodern society must retain the positive factors of modernity such as "freedom," "democracy," "human rights," before the significance of "constructing a postmodern world in

which all living communities get due attention and concern" can be fully displayed. "Respect for differences" can be taken as a different way of expressing the Confucian proposition "the Ways move in parallel and do not interfere with each other."

Different ideological and cultural traditions often have different features. Fortunately, such differences can be meaningful to human society to some extent and are by no means necessarily at odds.⁹ For example, to allow that the concept of "democracy" proposed by the West as having positive meaning in specific social conditions, is not to deny traditional Chinese thinking such as *Minben* (people as the root) as also having positive meaning in specific social conditions too. Nor do we deny the "universal value" of our traditional thoughts such as "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself." Only by acknowledging that every ideological and cultural tradition has its positive effect on human society can different countries and nations co-exist and co-prosper. Absorbing and digesting the strong points of different cultural systems as a means to achieving real comprehension of them is an essential path for the development of culture. Just as Bertrand Russell said, "Many times in the past has it been proved that exchanges between different civilizations made milestones in the development of human civilizations."¹⁰ We should remember that as human beings, we face common problems. We may adopt different ways to tackle those problems but we often come to the same end via different routes. Therefore, "respect others" and "the Ways move in parallel and do not interfere with each other" have equivalent value to us.

iii. *Defining "Human" and Examining "Human Rights" from the Standpoint of "Li" 礼 — a Traditional Chinese Concept*

The human rights concept is a very important one for modern society. But each ideological and cultural tradition should discuss deeply how to have the concept play a positive role in building a healthy and rational society. As written in *Thinking Through Confucius*, co-authored by David Hall and Roger Ames, two well-known American philosophers,

"What we need to do is not only study Chinese traditions but also to use them as a cultural resource to enrich and restructure our own. The Confucian school defined 'man' from a societal perspective. Can we use it to modify and strengthen the Western mode of liberalism? Can we find some useful resource from a society built on *li* (rites, courtesy, ceremony, etc.) to help us better understand our insufficiently rooted but indeed valuable outlook on human rights?"¹¹

This paragraph discusses three issues: One, that

the West should not stop at studying China's thinking and culture, but go on to apply those things so as to "enrich and restructure" its own; Two, the necessity of understanding the significance of "man" as defined from a societal perspective in traditional Chinese culture; Three, that China's *li* contains elements that could well be valuable if brought into the Western concept of human rights.

In my opinion, the three issues raised by Hall and Ames are for treating the condition of some of Western philosophical concepts being "insufficiently rooted." It is precisely because of the great importance attached to man's right of liberty in modern society (since the first Enlightenment) that human society has developed by leaps and bounds. The right of liberty is a great creative force. That said, the misuse of right of liberty by an individual, a country or a nation can, in certain circumstances, constitute a threat to, suppression or violation of the rights of other individuals, countries or nations. To define "human" from a societal perspective as traditional Chinese culture does means "not defining it from the isolated angle of 'the individual'" because "humans" have to live and grow up in various relations starting with the moment of birth. It is much like what Karl Marx said in *Theses on Feuerbach*, "the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of social relations."¹²

How then are we to handle the complex "social relations of man"? In ancient China, great emphasis was placed on *li* in dealing with these relations. Although *li* was a conceptual thing, it did have a restricting power on man's behavior. As written in *The Analects of Confucius*: "In practicing the rules of *li*, harmony is to be prized." The most important role of *li* is to promote social harmony as a normalizing power over society. As written in the *Book of Rites*, "...rulers use *li* to protect morality and laws to prevent people from committing crimes." Rulers created *li* for preventing moral norms being ruined and made laws for keeping social order. As written in "Explaining Government" by Jia Yi of the Former Han Dynasty, "*Li* is put into practice before people do something wrong whereas law is executed after people do bad things. The role of law is visible whereas the role of *li* is invisible and hard to perceive." Another reason that *li* is greatly valued in our tradition is, as advocated by the Confucian school, the importance of reciprocal relationships among people. As written in the *Books of Rites*,

"What is human righteousness? It involves ten (or five pairs of) person-to-person relations: A father is kind to children and children show filial obedience to parents; brothers are kind to each other; a husband is responsible to wife and wife obedient to husband; the older children are kind to younger siblings and the younger respect the

older; a ruler is benevolent and his subjects are loyal."

That is to say, according to the Confucian school, the moral relation between people should be a relation of rights and corresponding obligations rather than one-sided enjoyment of rights without fulfilling obligations. China's *li* was created precisely in order to balance the rights and obligations of those social relations. Therefore, in my opinion, is it possible to call pre-modern China a society under "rule of *li* and law?" This, of course, is an ideal of the Confucian school.

From this one could envisage, in establishing a "convention on human rights" also establishing a "convention on obligations" at the same time, so as to keep a balance between rights and obligations. This would accord with what Hall and Ames believed a possible role for *li*: "enriching and restructuring" the Western concept of human rights. One might envisage a "convention of obligations" to protect and strengthen a "convention on human rights." According to John B. Cobb, "Traditional Chinese ideology is very attractive to constructive postmodernism, but we should not just return to it. Instead, our postmodernism should renew itself by serious scientific means and by adjusting itself to the changing society. The pre-modern tradition should absorb the positive factors of the Enlightenment such as concern for and respect of individual rights before it can contribute something to the postmodern society."¹³ This paragraph has great significance for study of our ideology and culture. Traditional or pre-modern Chinese culture needed to absorb rather than exclude all valuable fruits achieved by modern society since the Enlightenment, such as freedom, democracy, human rights, concepts that embody "concern and respect for individual rights." In addition, we must work hard to put into practice those positive concepts before we can successfully align traditional or pre-modern Chinese culture with postmodernism and promote the transformation from modern to postmodern society.

It is good to note that some Chinese scholars have had extensive contact and satisfactory cooperation with Western scholars of constructive postmodernism. The representative figures of constructive postmodernism have also realized the value of traditional Chinese culture to their research and are absorbing nutrition from it. Similarly, some Chinese scholars have noticed the practical significance of constructive postmodernism in helping human society out of predicament and are paying close attention to the development of this thought. If an organic synthesis between the widely influential "*Guoxue* tide" and constructive postmodernism can be achieved, then pioneered deeply in Chinese society and developed further, China could perhaps proceed smoothly to completing the mission of its own "first enlightenment," realize modernization, and then rather

rapidly enter a postmodern society marked by a “second enlightenment.” If this does come to pass, the fruits achieved in China’s current cultural revival will be of great significance to human history.

In this paper, the author explores the possibility of communication and integration of Western and Chinese cultures. Whether this possibility can become reality hinges mainly on how China’s *Guoxue* can adapt to healthy social development and whether constructive postmodernism, currently a minor branch of thinking in the West, can become more mainstream and win widespread acceptance. The author stresses that this paper is simply a theoretical foray—a try-out—and would welcome any comments.

¹ Paul Kennedy, “The Form of Capitalism Will Change to Some Extent.” *Reference News (Cankaoxiaoxi)*, March 16, 2009.

² “Universalism: Some Western scholars and politicians believe that only the values preached by Western empires have “universal value” and that the ideas and cultures of all other nations have no “universal value” to present-day human society except as museum exhibits. Therefore, we must distinguish the issue of “universalism” from that of “universal value.” On this, please refer to the “General Preface” written by Tang Yijie for *Zhongguo Ruxue Shi*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2011.

³ According to the paper “Whitehead’s Process Philosophy,” “Process philosophy takes environment, resources and human beings as a closely related living community.” *Social Sciences Weekly*, Shanghai, August 15, 2002. Even the Stoics of Ancient Greece believed “man is part of nature.” (Translator’s back translation due to lack of the original English version of the relevant quotation)

⁴ Karl Theodor Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*. trans. by Wei Chuxiong, et al. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, June 1999, p. 14.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*. trans. by Ma Yuande, Beijing: The Commercial Press, August 1988. On page 91 of the final volume of this translation, it is written, “Descartes’ philosophy completed or nearly completed the dualism of spirit and material that began from Plato and was developed by Christian philosophy for religion related reason... According to Descartes’ system, the spiritual world and the material world are two parallel and independent worlds and the study of one may not involve the other.”

⁶ Léon Vandermeersch, “The Significance of *Ruzang* (Confucian Collection) in the World.” *Guangming Daily*, August 31, 2009.

⁷ Wang Zhihe, “Postmodernism Calls for a Second Enlightenment,” *World Culture Forum*. February, 2007.

⁸ “For the Common Welfare: an Interview with John B. Cobb” (interviewed by Wang Xiaohua), *Social Sciences Weekly*. Shanghai, June 13, 2002.

⁹ According to the section “Supreme Harmony” of *Correcting Ignorance* by Zhang Zai, “Everything has its opposite and the opposite must move against the thing. When the opposite moves against the thing, there must be fight between them. As long as there is fight, the end must be harmony.”

¹⁰ “Comparison between Chinese and Western Cultures,” in Bertrand Russell’s *A Free Man’s Worship*. Beijing: Time Literature and Art Press, April 1988. The Chinese translation is slightly changed.

¹¹ *Thinking Through Confucius*. Beijing: Peking University Press,

August 2005.

¹² *Complete Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, Vol.3, p. 5.

¹³ “For the Common Welfare: an Interview with John B. Cobb” (interviewed by Wang Xiaohua). *Social Sciences Weekly*. Shanghai, June 13, 2002.

About the author:

Tang Yijie, IACSCW Honorary advisor, is professor at Peking University and director of the Institute of Chinese Philosophy and Culture. He is the chief editor of the ongoing national project, the “Complete Works of Confucianism”. He graduated from the Department of Philosophy of Peking University in 1951 and received an honorary doctorate from McMaster University of Canada in 1990. As an expert of Confucianism, Taoism and metaphysics of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, he played a leading role in a number of national and international academic institutions, and has been a guest professor at several universities in China and abroad. He is the author of a remarkable number of works on Chinese philosophy and culture. His recent academic interest extends to economic globalization, cultural diversity, global ethic and related cultural issues.

German Edition of *Annotated Poems of Mao Zedong (H.-C.Günther & Gu Zhengkun)* Has Just Been Published in Germany

In time for the 120th anniversary of the birth of Chairman Mao Zedong a new translation of his poems in German appeared (Bautz: Nordhausen 2013, Poetry, Music and Art, vol. 2). In cooperation with Gu Zhengkun, H.-C. Günther, the German scholar, tried to render Mao’s poems in a poetic way so that the reader might appreciate the poetic quality of the work in another language. Günther has a wide experience in verse translation from various languages. The text is based on the most recent English version by Gu Zhengkun. Beside a preface by the translator it also contains Gu Zhengkun’s long introduction to Mao’s poetry in German translation. The extensive commentary too enlarges on the detailed commentary by Prof. Gu. Thus the book provides by far the most complete and most amply commented version of Mao’s poems available today in any foreign language.