

RECENT WORK

AN INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN CONFUCIANISM AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHIES CONCERNING APPROACHES TO FAMILY: A REPORT FROM A WORKSHOP

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This report is a summary of the key outcomes of a recent workshop on the theme “Confucianism and Western philosophies concerning approaches to family,” which was held on July 23rd through 27th, 2018 at Tutzing, Germany. More than twenty professional philosophers from Europe, Asia, and USA participated in the workshop, presented ten papers, and conducted in-depth discussions on the theme. During the opening speech, Michael Spieker, a senior researcher at Akademie für Politische Bildung, asserted the importance of comparative study on approaches to family. “Family presents a primary, perpetual topic in philosophy, which is still debated in contemporary philosophy with great social relevance. An intercultural dialogue between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy can significantly contribute to the better understanding of family, while enabling a more profound understanding of the fundamentals of both sides” (Spieker & Guo, 2018). In this essay, I recapitulate the key points of the workshop in terms of the three dimensions of family as a value, an art of life, and a model of social order.

1. ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

The concept of family evolves over time. The definitions of family are not only philosophical, but also being applied on daily basis. The participants debated the interpretations of family by some representative philosophers, including Confucius, the ancient Greeks, German idealists, and Heidegger.

The participants agreed to use an analysis framework for the philosophy of family—the word “family” contains three layers of meaning, including biological, sociological, and axiological contexts. The concept of family does not merely depict natural and social entities, but also comprises human values. Family represents

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kinship, harmony, mutual trust, and the network where people can find security (Yang 2002). Peimin Ni articulated that the values of family depend not merely on its material forms, but more on the art of “regulating the family,” which means setting acceptable rules and enforcing them in a family. A well-regulated family can possibly provide a model for the ideal social order and a broader theme in which individuals can manifest and elevate their art of life to the utmost ideal (Ni 2018). Cheng’s paper refers to the *Great Learning* and describes the transformation process from nature to virtue, which reinforces Ni’s points above. The transformation process will be further discussed in section 4.3.

Western philosophers who attended the conference echo this analysis framework but may disagree with some of the content presented by Confucius. From Western critics, with the modern conception of the human being as an individual, the family is in question. Can individual freedom exist in family or can these two entities coexist? Is the individual necessarily lost in the quasi-natural relationship of the family, the so-called reproductive community, or must it be understood as a contractual relationship (Spieker 2018)? The concept of family diverges in many ways in 20th century, possibly putting family to an end in the West (Wladika 2018). The major differences between Eastern and Western views on the Approaches to Families will be analyzed in this paper.

2. CONCEPTS OF FAMILY INTERPRETED FROM PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 FAMILY DEFINED IN CONFUCIAN CONTEXT

Traditional Confucians believe that a family owns five functions including ratification of marriage, raising future generations, offering primitive education, nurturing self-cultivation, and a place for practicing ‘*Tao*’ the Heavenly Way (Cheng 2018).

Cheng’s paper draws critical comments from his Western counterparts, mainly including Marchal. The so-called “neo-Confucians” in China, Taiwan, Singapore, and USA develop new interpretations of family. (1) Western society during pre-modern time defined family in a way similar to the Confucian interpretation of five functions mentioned above. (2) The traditional Confucian view on family is ideal and not pragmatic. Multiple controversies can be found in Confucius’ classic textbooks, including the Four Books and the *Book of Change*, and Confucian philosophy based on intuition is not perceived as a coherent theory from Western philosophers’ point of view. Human knowledge and belief must be reliably built based on objective observations on the physical world. Wang Yang-ming (王陽明), one of the Confucian masters, declares that a moral life can be realized without much knowledge of the physical world. Moreover, Confucius seems not to be concerned with whether we shall understand the law of nature or just follow our moral intuition. Confucian interpretations on the same concepts lack consistency and universality. (3) Like ancient Greeks, ancient Chinese believe that individual fate is associated with ‘*Tao*.’ Social order is universal order, and vice versa. In the 20th century, mainland China

largely abandoned the value of traditional family. Young people were often regarded as rebels from their parents' views when pursuing self-expression, self-recognition, and independence. The requirement of filial piety often makes them look awkward in their modern lives. Confucianism has its limitation in modern, open, and democratic society. For example, Confucius defines harmony or peace as the maintenance of certain social hierarchy, 'Zheng,' the equivalence of rightfulness and justice in the West, as correcting mistakes.

2.2 FAMILY DEFINED BY GERMAN IDEALISM MASTERS

Spieker presents the main ideas about family from three German idealists, including Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. In German idealism, marriage and family are the focus of freedom. Kant, Fichte, and Hegel sought for a theory of the "bourgeois family" on the superficial level. The three thinkers developed the true concept of family in its absolute meaning. For instance, Kant thinks that family is an external legal form; Fichte believes that it is an internal form of ethical life; Hegel perceives it as a transformation of the immediate natural constitution of man into a "second nature" as an institution of ethical life (Spieker 2018).

According to Spieker, Hegel's philosophy of family could be considered as a synthesis of Kant's and Fichte's positions. In marriage and family, two persons become "a unified person" and they renounce "their arbitrariness in favor of unity with the other's will and gain consciousness of their unity with the other" (Lee 2018).

2.3 FAMILY DEFINED BY HEIDEGGER

Xianglong Zhang introduces Heidegger's view on family. According to Zhang, family is a *Dasien*, a term coined by existentialism. The meaning of existence can be discovered only by an understanding of the essence of human life based on empirical experiences. Heidegger encourages human to move away from secular families and search for the ultimate existence in *Heim*, home of *Being*.

Heidegger's discovery of the philosophical meaning of home is provocative for Confucianism to understand both ontologically and existentially, because home is the very origin of all Confucian doctrines and practices. Confucianism may agree with Heidegger regarding the significant role of home during our quest of ultimate reality, named either "Being" in the West or the Heavenly Way (*tian-dao* 天道) in the East, and in revealing the role of arts in transforming the secular family into the authentic home. Confucius may also appreciate Heidegger regarding the non-dualistic relations between human and world and between the truth and untruth, the existentially temporal or spatial essence of human beings, the necessity of earth, and the essence of technology. Confucians differ with Heidegger on how to uncover authentic home in daily family life, in order to ultimately reveal its ultimate "Being." The methods of uncovering the authentic home are discussed in section 4.

2.4 FAMILY DENIED BY ANCIENT GREEK

Schmid studies astrology in ancient Greek to seek for the very origin of individualism. According to his study, every individual on earth owns a corresponding constellation in the sky and one's constellation determines the individual's fate, declaring that the human being is isolated from his or her environment. During the Axial Age, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle borrowed the idea and built the concept of the political sphere consisting of autonomous entities and individuals who try to escape from the influence of family. The sharp distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere of family is fundamentally important to understand Western society (Schmid 2018). Apparently, it is very different from the Confucian idea of modeling society and states using family.

Wang, representing Confucianism, points out several side effects introduced by the notion of absolute individualism. He argues that self-identity can be protected in family relationships and that family provides a platform for self-cultivation and spiritual growth. Further comparisons are needed from a psychological perspective in addition to political philosophy.

2.5 REFLECTIONS ON CHINESE CONCEPT OF FAMILY

The discussions focus on how Chinese can borrow from other traditions concerning approaches to family. The Chinese concept of family is centered on living a delighted secular family life. It can be improved by some relevant and valuable resources from Jewish and Christian, which emphasize individual freedom and transcending values of life. The areas for improvements may include the concepts of family education (*jia-jiao* 家教), marriage or starting a family (*jia-ting* 家庭), and extended family (*jia-zu* 家族). These concepts can be improved by a balanced approach to education for children, spouse equality, and clear role of family in social order, respectively.

On the subject of approaches to education for children, the Chinese parents should learn from their Western counterparts to allow greater freedom for their children to explore different interests and encourage them to become both intellectually and spiritually independent.

Spouse equality within a Chinese family can be enhanced by embracing the value of justice from the West. Mutually respected relationship shall be promoted to avoid in-family suppressions, domestic violence, and nominal marriage for the sake of financial reasons and obsession of original families.

Chinese people attach significant importance to the role of family in social order, which often neglects the values of individuals and social institutions. Clear boundary of family as a private space must be distinguished from public sphere in order to rationalize Chinese political philosophy.

3. FAMILY AS A VALUE

3.1 BIOLOGICAL VALUE

A biological family is a group of people affiliated with the blood relation of human reproduction. In this sense, everyone has a family since people are always brought to the world by their biological parents. Family in this sense is nothing but a biological causal chain, which, according to the strictly scientific view, has no inherent value.

3.2 SOCIOLOGICAL VALUE

A sociological family is defined as a group of people affiliated by co-residence and shared consumption based on a sexual relationship, consanguinity, or adoption. It is a social institution, often referred to as household. Family in this sense emerged in the history and changes as historical conditions change. Depending on how one classifies its forms, sociological families can be patriarchal or matriarchal, monogamous or polygamous, single parent family, empty-nest family, re-organized family, adoptive family, homosexual family, co-habitat family, and so forth. These forms each have their own characteristics, fit for different needs, and have different limitations. Family in the sociological sense can be set up, dissolved, abandoned, and regulated (Ni 2018).

3.3 AXIOLOGICAL VALUE

Family in the axiological sense means an ideal bond between a group of people, associated with the sense of kinship, harmony, and mutual trust. It means a network which they can rely upon for help and seek security. Expressions such as “we are like one family,” “he is like a family member,” or “I feel like being surrounded by the family,” are used in the axiological sense, which represents values such as love, trust, sharing, commitment, and security. These values are considered what a family should have. People use this notion of family to measure the quality of our biological and sociological families (Ni 2018).

Ames supports the axiological value of family by formulating the term “Confucian Role Ethics” in his book published in 2011. According to Ames, the heart of Confucian role ethics is “a specific vision of human beings as relational persons constituted by the roles they live rather than as individual selves.” The roles are family-based: son, daughter, older sibling, grandfather, and so on. Traditional Confucian roles of ruler, subject, husband, wife, minister, and friend fill out the picture. Their point is not that humans as fundamentally constituted by our on-going living in roles ramifies throughout Confucian thinking in a way that renders it dramatically different from Greek or contemporary Western views (Angle 2018).

King’s comparison between Kant and Mencius on universals and roles posts great challenges to Confucians. Roles defined by Confucians fail the scrutiny of Anglo-European moral philosophy. According to King, if all obligations are bound to roles

strictly, no obligations can be universal; if all obligations are necessarily universal, no obligations can be strictly bound to roles. On the contrary of Mencius, Kant is more straight forward. He believes that everything depends on the formula of universal law. His universality ignores the family roles and even the distinction between the sexes (King 2018).

4. FAMILY AS AN ART OF LIFE

4.1 SUSAN MOLLER OKIN VS. CONFUCIUS ON GENDER RELATIONSHIPS

Gender relationship is the central issue in any discussions about family. Ames referenced Susan Moller Okin's 1989 book *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, which is a critique of modern theories of justice, during the workshop. Okin's theories include the liberalism of John Rawls, the libertarianism of Robert Nozick, and the communitarianism of Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Walzer. For each theorist's major work, she argues that a foundational assumption is incorrect because of a faulty perception of gender or family relations. More broadly, according to Okin, these theorists write from a male perspective that wrongly assumes that the institution of the family is just. She believes that the family perpetuates gender inequalities throughout all of society, particularly because children acquire their values and ideas in the family's sexist setting, then grow up to enact these ideas as adults. If a theory of justice is to be complete, Okin asserts that it must include women and address the gender inequalities she believes are prevalent in modern families (Okin 1989).

According to Ames, Okin sees family as the classroom for teaching social justice, and quite properly asks the question: How can an institution saturated with gender prejudice produce a just society? Her answer is to invoke justice as an abstract and objective principle of equality of opportunity for all and to thus reject gender as a legitimate distinction. Okin's response entails certain liberal assumptions about persons and families that can be challenged by a holistic Confucian conception of justice. Confucian justice begins from optimizing family relations and abjures the reductionism and ultimate violence of objectivism.

If people are indeed going to aspire to real social justice – if people are going to do justice to justice – they must begin from a more capacious understanding of the uniqueness of lives lived within family and community, and how such an understanding of persons requires a conception of justice that certainly includes both regulative ideals consistent with the lives people aspire to live, and an appreciation of the particularities of human narratives and their diversity. But most importantly, Ames argues that people's understanding of persons as subjects of justice, and what justice itself means, must be derived from and justified by the empirical experience of families and communities within which such concepts originate. We must ask the question: What is justice experienced as? A question that will no longer allow people to ignore the integral role of family relations in the ethical discourse (Ames 2018).

Baillon-Wirtz uses the *Incredibles II* movie story to illustrate the possibility that women can save the world while men can look after children, exchanging gender

roles in traditional family set-ups. According to Baillon-Wirtz, feminists believe that justice must be universal regardless of gender difference. On the contrary, the Confucian system for family is built on inter-role relationships and the goal is to pursue the status of '*ren*' rather than personal happiness and equality. Justice in public sphere and justice in private sphere are meant to be mirrored in each other. An individual can be a member of public space as well as private space. The sense of equality developed in family may apply in broader society. Family issues are so complicated; the characteristics of families, including intimacy, maturity, and particularities, must be considered in dealing with them. Baillon-Wirtz cautions the tendency of over-idealizing the role of family in the pursuit of justice.

4.2 RECONCILING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP

Li studies the *Book of Change* and asserts that family is a place to develop good daughters, good wives, and good mothers for women and to develop good sons, good husbands and good fathers for men (Li 2018).

The *Book of Change* says:

The *Jia-ren* (家人) hexagram symbolizes family. It requires that the wife has a proper role in the family, the husband a proper role outside the family. This is a principle designated by the divine power of cosmos. How husband and wife shall play proper roles? The *Qian* (乾) functions as the seed of all creations while the *Kun* (坤) for their reproduction and development (Qing 2009)

According to Li, when a man and a woman take a vow to be united and form a family, the husband and the wife will no longer be independent of each other. Instead, they complement each other. In another word, "the husband and wife fitting in the proper roles" do not prevent the couple to cultivate certain righteousness independently, meaning that the husband and wife should fit in the positions of *Qian* and *Kun* to cement a harmonious bond between them (Li 2018). Taking different roles emphasize that the husband should behave as a husband and the wife should behave as a wife (Feng 2018).

Most scholars agree that such a stereotypical view on women's roles in a family must change in response to spousal relationships today. Confucians recognize both gender difference and complementarity, while rejecting the traditional division of labor between the internal and external affairs of the family, which makes sense for agriculture-dominated society but is apparently irrelevant today. The Yin-yang philosophy and the philosophy of harmony with difference in a family still apply. Equality between the sexes can be achieved without giving up on gender difference and without jeopardizing family harmony. Both men and women should aspire to play good family roles within and social roles without the family based on mutual agreement (Li 2018).

4.3 FILIAL PIETY IN PARENT-CHILDREN RELATIONSHIP

Filial piety (*xiao* 孝), an essential concept in Confucianism, is mentioned by Cheng at the workshop. Filial piety means the natural feeling of a child to take care of his or her parents. As parents take care of children, the children would simply imitate their parents' caring for their offspring. Filial piety can be developed by education and cultivation of oneself. Moreover, *ren* (仁), extending *xiao* to the whole community or the whole of humankind, can be cultivated after practicing *xiao* (Cheng 2018).

As stated by Marchal, Western philosophers dislike blind filial piety, which often reminds them of the pre-modern time when people were required to be filial to religious masters. It is also perceived as a roadblock for unleashing the full potential of being one's best self, which will make negative impacts on the creativity and ownership of younger generations.

Huang and Wang clarify three important Confucius ideas concerning filial piety including '*se-nan*' (色难) difficulties in heartfelt love for parents, '*ze-shan*' (责善) criticizing parents for their wrongdoings, and no changes to '*fu-zhi-dao*' (父之道) family code of conducts. According to Huang, '*Se-nan*' means that simply providing food by the children for their parents is not enough. '*Ze-shan*' means that the younger generations must be open-minded and humble toward the elders when they don't share the same ideas. Sticking to '*fu-zhi-dao*' means that one shall not change the family codes defined by his or her parents for at least three years to ensure continuity.

5. FAMILY AS A MODEL OF SOCIAL ORDER

5.1 REGULATING THE FAMILY AND REACHING TO THE UTMOST EXCELLENCE

According to Ni, the Confucian regulation of family is not merely for the sake of helping people to go through difficult stages, but also for reaching the utmost excellence. He quotes the following from the *Zhong-Yong*,

The way of the exemplary person is broad and subtle. Common men and women, however ignorant, may intermeddle with the knowledge of it; yet in its utmost reaches, there is that which even the sage does not know. Common men and women, who are much below the ordinary standard of character, can carry it into practice; yet in its utmost reaches, there is that which even the sage is not able to carry into practice. ... The way of the exemplary person begins with the intercourse of common men and women; but in its utmost reaches, it shines brightly through heaven and earth (Ames & Hall 2001).

The Confucian utmost excellence is manifested exactly through the ordinary. Yet, because utmost excellence is displayed through the ordinary, people often fail to recognize it. People tend to believe that the great must be extraordinary. This belief makes everyday family life artistry a harder task. Ni defines artistic family life as a

lifestyle in which everyone is genuinely happy and in healthy relations. The aim is much higher than becoming a mature and rational being.

Furthermore, Ni explains that the Confucian way of regulating the family brings together all the three senses of family. As the foundation, the biological family generates values and spirituality, which provide the guiding principles for regulating the sociological family. Ni points out that one instance from the Confucian text supports the relation between the biological and the sociological family. As Confucius explains the underlying reason for the ritual of a three-year mourning period for one's parents, he utters, "it takes three years before an infant is able to leave the arms of his or her parents." Different from other animals, human infants depend on their parents for a long period. Consequently, parents and their children will develop a strong emotional bond, which allows them to extend the meaning of life into the lives of each other. The tendency of taking one's children as an extension of one's own existence is not unique in Chinese culture (Ni 2018).

Ironically, the practice of regulating family is not being carried out ideally in the Chinese society as Ni describes. Some parents often forcibly extend their unachieved ambitions on their children under the so-called emotional bond. Over-reliance between family members deteriorates the spirit of individual independence. Maintaining a broken family often leads to stormy relationship or domestic violence, which are hurtful for both the adults and children. Therefore, regulating the family may cause negative influence on individual growth rather than nurture the individuals to reach the utmost excellence.

5.2 REGULATING ORDER FOR SOCIETY AND STATE

China has a long history of using family as a model to establish society and state. Yan Fu in late Qing dynasty once describes that two thousand years of China dynasties are built on roughly 30 per cent of emperor system and 70 per cent of family system (Ames, 2018). According to Ni, in the Chinese classics, familizing all-under-heaven (*jia-tian-xia* 家天下), using the word 'family' as a verb, means to transform the world into a large family (Ni 2018).

However, Schwenzfeur argues that family has limits to be the sensible model for government. Even Karl Marx does not mention anything like the Confucian idea. In view of Western political philosophy, family as private space needs to be properly positioned in a social establishment. For example, a family member is encouraged to go out of a family to become a free employee by a social institution. Confucianism lacks equivalent concepts such as individual, independence, and freedom, but owns sophisticated knowledge in inter-role relationships. Schwenzfeur believes that a government may borrow some ideas from running a family, but the government is clearly not a family. Such a metaphor can easily lead to authoritarianism or tyranny.

6. FURTHER THOUGHTS

Looking ahead, further comparative analysis in approaches of family serves an

excellent angle for observing and appreciating the differences between the West and the Chinese. China's future modernization will most likely develop as a renaissance of the traditional Confucianism accompanied by its modern transformation initiated and defined by the West. The renaissance and the evolution of Chinese culture will take place against the backdrop of Scientific and Technological Civilization grounded in Western philosophies. Through rational thinking and the scientific method, there will be "adjustments of the national heritage" in traditional culture in China. It will continue to evolve and develop, and over a long period of sustained buildup, a social consensus gradually will be hopefully established in China. This will also provide the Chinese people and the Chinese society with a moral code by which all will abide, as well as common beliefs and faith to console the soul. With such foundation, China will be able to stay in the forefront of advances in the global civilization and gradually make the contributions to the world that a country with one-fifth of the world's population ought to.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper cannot be made possible without the strong support and coaching from the following scholars: Prof. Roger T. Ames, an American philosopher, translator, and author, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, a Berggruen Fellow, and currently the Humanities Chair Professor at Peking University in Beijing, China; Mr. Zhe Feng, the founder and president of Sihai Confucius Academy where I spent my elementary school years. Mr. Feng inspires me to join the effort to bridge China and Western cultures, and his Sihai Foundation also financially sponsored the 5th Intercultural Dialogue between Confucianism and Western Philosophies; Ms. Lisa Durkee, the Chairwoman of Religion and Philosophy Department in Blair Academy, and my advisor in my current school, whose teachings and coaching greatly broaden my views into Western thinkers.

My appreciation shall go to all contributors to the conference who joined the conference in person by either presenting their papers or making comments (alphabetical order): AMES, Roger T. (Peking University), BAILLON-WIRTZ, Nathalie (Reims University France), BREHM, Uta (Federal Institute for Population Research, Wiesbaden, Germany), CHUNG, Chong-ying (University of Hawai'i at Manoa), GUO, Yi (Seoul National University), HUANG, Yong (Chinese University of Hong Kong), KING, Richard (University of Bern), LEE, Nam-In (Seoul National University), LI, Chengyang (Nanyang Technological University Singapore), LIU, Yuedi (China Academy of Social Sciences), MARCHAL (Political University Taiwan), NI, Peimin (Grand Valley State University), SCHMID, Alfred (Basel University Switzerland), SCHWENZFUER, SOFFEL, SPIEKER, Michael (Akademie für Politische Bildung), WANG, Qingjie (Chinese University of Hong Kong), WIRZ, WLADIKA, Michael (University of Vienne, Austria), and ZHANG, Xianglong (Sun Yat-Sen University). Lastly, I owe great thanks to my parents for their unconditional love and support as family members.

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