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"The other does not exist: this is rational faith, the incurable belief of human reason. Identity = reality, as if, in the end, everything must necessarily and absolutely *be one and the same*. But the *other* refuses to disappear; it subsists, it persists; it is the hard bone on which reason breaks its teeth. Abel Martin, with a poetic faith as human as rational faith, believed *in the other*, "in the essential Heterogeneity of being," in what might be called the incurable *otherness* from which *oneness* must always suffer."

Antonio Machado,
In The Labyrinth of Solitude.
Paz, O.

Taoism and the Dichotomy Western-Eastern Culture

by

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I. Introduction

In the context of social sciences in general, but particularly in the field of communications a dichotomy that has frequently called the attention of different scholars is the dichotomy represented by Western-Eastern culture. Through this dichotomy we are constantly informed that there are contrasting issues concerning human affairs such as philosophies, worldviews, meaning of life, ways of knowing, ways of being, and ways of acting and behaving that seem to display patterns of culture and communication different from the dominant Western perspective. Yet, at the same time, some patterns, in some cases, seem to converge and exhibit a universal character that

go beyond any particular pattern of culture and communication resting then on the arbitrariness and complexity of what these processes are by nature.

Bearing this in mind, this paper will try to focus on some issues related to communication and culture. The purposes of this essay are, first, to describe and analyze the leading contrast discussed by different scholars about the traditional dichotomy that inform us about the similarities or differences between the Western-Eastern cultures. Second, to examine some of these contrasts and similarities through four texts^{1/2} that explore the role of communication into the light of one of the philosophical branches of Chinese philosophy --Taoism--.

II. The Dichotomy Western-Eastern Culture

Comparisons between Western and Eastern cultures have been done on a regular basis in the field of Communication as well in Intercultural communication and other fields. However, it seems that as an increasing trait in the contemporary literature in these fields, different researchers are calling attention for expanding on such comparisons. The rationale for it being the need for getting alternatives that shed lights on cultural and communicational phenomena in a distinct way to the traditional Western perspective. Xing Lu, for instance, quoting Shuter, mentions how "the challenge for intercultural communication in the 1990's... is to develop a research direction and teaching agenda that return culture to preeminence" (Xing lu, 1994:108).

In much the same way with the current epistemological contention going on in the field of social sciences as well as in communication it seems that comparisons between cultures on issues related to ways of knowing and being are needed. The rationale here is the current "crisis of explanation" stemming from one of the extremes of the dichotomy: the Western perspective. So as

¹ The texts to be explore are: XX (199) Actionless Activity: Western Leadership Style and the Tao Te King; Ringo, Ma. (1987) Taoist Thinking As Reflected in Communication; Crawford, L. (1991) Conflict and Tao; and Crawford, L. (1992) Intrapersonal Tao and Rank and Tenure Review.

² The author and year of one of the texts is lost. The text is identified only with the title.

a dichotomy, Western-Eastern culture becomes significant under this framework. However, before looking at this comparison we must examine some features of the Western Modern Social Sciences. This will provide us with a backdrop for demonstrating that comparisons are never as objective or as neutral as they might seem.

From the inception of the Western Modern Social Sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many features that today are being understood and criticized, as a result in part of regarding other cultures, were already present. For example, the Western Modern Social Sciences tended from their beginning to generalize about human issues without recognizing cultural differences. Yet, when differences with other cultures were recognized, the explanations were submitted to the western standards. From that viewpoint then everything different was judged as "inferior". In the particular case of the eastern cultures, they did not escape that glance. Even until the 1940's of this century, for example, F.C.C. Northrop, according to Xing Lu and Frank, claimed that Chinese thinking *is intuitive as opposed to scientific* and that the Chinese *language is incapable of being logic* (Xing Lu & Frank,1993).

In like manner, another feature present in this perspective for the traditional Western Sciences from its beginning relates to method. As it is known, the method, which the mainstream of social sciences adheres, is supported by many explanations that come from the experimental method born in the eighteenth century. As such, the main characteristic of this method as pointed out by XX has been to operate on the basis of empirical, logical and linear explanations. However, this Western tendency to accept evidence based on this method remains inadequate at the moment of understanding other cultural realities i.e. Chinese reality. Xing lu and David Frank while reexamining some of the traditional assumptions made about Chinese rhetoric, for example, call for a reformulation about such assumptions. To Quote:

In studying rhetoric of other cultures, we should try to avoid the pitfall or tendency of validating our own method or theory, but to

discover new method and new theory generated from a new context. The traditional and familiar Western mode of inquiry may obscure the vision of rhetorical scholar seeking to develop a multicultural perspective of rethoric (Xing Lu & Frank, 1993:460).

Other pervasive features related to the tradition of Western Social Sciences have been the conventional cause-effect model of explanation. The assumption that after repeated observations supported in experience, one observes that B consistently follows the appearance of A, and therefore, A is the cause and B the effect (Golden et al, 1992) has been the essence of ordinary explanations from the Western perspective. In this sense, human phenomena that do not fit this model are considered not "logical" or incapable of being processed. The cultures that do not follow then the rigid and strict Western model have been called as "exotic", "primitive," or "third world."

It is inherent in Western Modern Sciences that any comparison between the dichotomy Western-Eastern culture has to be in part understood. Particularly, because some of these features in theories as well in method were and are ethnocentric, pervasive, and universalistic by nature. These antecedents are essential to an understanding of what is being said about western culture as well as Eastern culture in the four context related to communication bellow.

Comparisons between Western and Eastern culture exist from an ample range of dimensions. Ling Chen, for example, using three dimensions time, space and ego, relating to views on nature, the individual, and society, argues that communication between North American and Chinese cultures is possible despite their differences (Ling Chen, 1993). Similarly, Roichi Okabe, using five dimensions listed By L Scott in communication and rethoric, "substance", "form", "strategy", "style", and "tone", demonstrates how the Japanese and North American style of communication diverge according to values, assumptions and presuppositions in each society (Okabe, 1992). Likewise, Jan Servaes, asserting that each culture must be analyzed in their own

"logical" structure, evaluates Western versus Asiatic mode of communication. Furthermore, according to him the three dimensions to be considered in this comparison are world view, value system and symbolic representations (Servaes, 1988).

In the context of this paper and according to the four texts considered, three dimensions are emphasized. The Unidirectional Causal Paradigm vs the Mutual Casual Paradigm pondered by XX; Low context cultures vs High context cultures as mentioned by Ma Ringo; and, West-East rhetoric as a dimension as pointed out also by Ma Ringo. It is important, however, to draw attention to two general points: that the comparison between West-East culture here is based primarily on some traits of the Western philosophy and is based on the Taoist philosophy for Eastern culture; the fact that any comparison by nature is simplistic and never adjusts to the "reality" it pretends to represent. As Servaes, quoting Johnsons, mentions it is significant then in any comparison West-East to provide at least two cautions. To quote:

First, generalizations stressing differences between East and West gloss over the diversity within both Eastern and Western traditions themselves --over different eras, among different cultures, and as these traditions are differentially experienced by individuals. Second, such comparison between East and West necessarily set aside civilizations and nations whose traditions have not been recorded in a manner permitting equivalent representation (Servaes, 1988:63).

With respect to The Unidirectional Causal Paradigm vs The Mutual Causal Paradigm, these are concepts that, according to XX have been advanced by Reeding & Martin-Jhons and based originally on Maruyama's work. These concepts in essence are epistemological and refer to the ways how people get knowledge following their own cultural manifestations as well as their philosophies. In this sense, in a broad picture between the two paradigms some of the different characteristics between West-East cultures include the following features: 1) While the Western scientific pattern follows the unidirectional cause-effect model, the Eastern pattern lies in

reciprocity which means that in any phenomenon there are no causes or effects that determine, but causes and effects as a whole keep the same force in determining. 2) Whereas in the Western mentality, human beings are seen as different entities from nature and from here the latest exists to be mastered, in the Eastern mentality human beings and nature conform a unity. 3) In the Western cultures religions tend to be monotheistic and humanized the concept of god and therefore project the cultural features of the culture that thinks of god, whereas in the Eastern tradition religions are polytheistic and keep the individual and his or her self-reflection as a midpoint. 4) Western culture bases its ethics on competitiveness whereas Eastern culture bases its on self-assertion quietude, calm, and humility. 5) Finally, in contrast with easterners who think of the meaning of life in a more "holistic" i.e. body/spirit, for westerners the same meaning can be an adding-up event i.e. the predominance of mind over spirit or mind over body.

The second dimension characterizing West-East cultures here refers to High and Low Context. These dimensions that mean fundamentally the expression of the relationship between the verbal and nonverbal communication, is different for Western cultures and Eastern cultures. While the Eastern cultures stress more the implicit over the explicit, the Western cultures stress the explicit over the implicit. Ringo Ma, complementing these characteristics adds that "members of HCC are more likely to view the world in "synthetic, spiral logic terms," while LCC members are more likely to view it in "analytical, linear logic terms" (Ringo Ma, 1987:6).

The third dimension in this characterization West-East culture according to the four texts considered relates to rhetoric. Again, according to Ringo Ma, The Aristotelian rhetoric in which Western culture bases many of its assumptions comes from a core of concepts such as deliberation, analysis, and goal-orientation towards thought and action. In contrast, in Eastern cultures in general, but in particular in Taoism the core comes from *wu-wei*. According to Ringo Ma, "wu-wei can be interpreted literally as "nonaction or more importantly, as the kind of unpremeditated,

nondeliberative, noncalculating, nonpurposive action (or, more accurately, behavior)" (Ringo Ma, 1988:1).

These contrasts and dimensions and the other considerations made about Western-Eastern culture serve then as a backdrop to see the four contexts stress on the texts in which this paper is based. These contexts are intrapersonal, personal, organizational and intercultural. However, before presenting the contexts themselves as the different authors analyze them, it is important to see some of the general traits of what Taoism is and means.

III. The Tao and the Communicational Contexts

The Taoism is only one of various philosophies practiced by Chinese culture; other philosophies as well are Confucianism, Mohism and Legalism (Xing lu, 1994). Contrasting between Confucianism and Taoism, XX notes that they conform two sides of the Chinese character because the first guides social behavior while the second is self-reflective. However, to say that Taoism is self-reflective represents only a point of view because it seems many meanings are attributed to it. XX, for example, underlines that its focus is on individual leadership behavior. On his side, Robert Oliver recognizes its transcendental character and sees in it a system of conduct (Oliver,199?).

The Taoist philosophy as such appears in the *Tao Te King*, a book that has been characterized with enormous amount of features and controversies. In the context of this paper, they will not be displayed because the controversies themselves give opportunity for another paper. The following quotation by XX (in which he/she quotes Lin Yutang) nicely encapsulates the meaning of the *Tao Te King*.

The message of the book is simple and its dozen ideas are repeated in epigrammatic for again and again. Briefly, the ideas are: the rhythm of life, the unity of all world and human phenomena, the importance of keeping the original simplicity of human nature, the

danger of over-government and interference with the simple life of the people, the doctrine of *wu-wei* or "inaction," which is better interpreted as "non-interference" and it is the equivalent of *laissez-faire*, the pervading influence of the spirit, the lessons of humility, quietude and calm, and the folly of force, or pride, and of self assertion (XX,199?:7).

It is important to add that there are two kinds of *tao*, according to XX, "the first is the ineffable *Tao* (with a capital "T") whose description is pointless, since words are inadequate to the task; the second is the describable *tao* (small "t"), the concept with whose definition Lao-Tzu is concerned in the book" (XX, 199?). In this sense, the first *Tao* has to deal with the universe whereas the *tao* is only an imperfect human imitation. The translation in English of *tao* is as "the way", and according to XX, it is "the way of nature, of non-artificiality, of noninterference, of non-description, of non-manipulation: it is, in short, the antithesis of what Western empirical science tries to achieve" (XX, 199?). On the other hand, *Te* in English is understood as "Virtue" and in the book, it represents the second part in contrast to the first that it is the *tao*.

"The way" how Taoism, according to the four text analyzed in this paper, relates to culture and communication is by now consubstantial for distinct reasons. First, as Ringo Ma demonstrates as philosophy Taoism is even present in the Chinese communication today. Yet, many of its features such as relativism, circularity, and paradoxical ways of thinking are present in other cultures such as the North American culture although in a marginal manner. Second, as XX illustrates it orients the Chinese behavior and the way organizations are established. Third, it lights ways of dealing with matters of life in general, but in particular in the case of conflict as displayed by Lyall Crawford. And finally, it helps in self-reflection and intrapersonal communication as displayed also by Lyall Crawford. However, in order to complete this picture it is interesting to look at how these authors show the four contexts through their different articles.

Intrapersonal Context

In the context of the rank and tenure review process, 6 people are asked for their personal impressions and narratives. Following the organization of an hexagram of the *I Ching* they are matched from high to low (7Th year, 5th year, and 3th year in the rank process) and according to sex i.e. woman are considered *ying* and men *yang*. The objective in this article made by Lyall Crawford, moreover, is to construe their narratives using the *Tao Te King*.

In relation to the intrapersonal context the most significant observation is that the rank and tenure process is an evaluation required by Universities in order to promote and give a definite position to teachers. In this respect, as any process of evaluation it is an arbitrary procedure where a group of people judges the performance of other groups of people and does not consider the self reflection of individuals as an important criteria. In the context of the Tao many of the procedures required for this process, for example, contradict this philosophy. Taoism for instance calls for being quiet, avoid success, avoid desires, and avoid argument, however, in the context of evaluation, as it is regularly understood in many instances that these attitudes are of course not recommendable. In the cases illustrated in this article, it is clear that the procedures and the whole process are a source of inconvenience for the people who had to go through the process. An interesting thing to note in this article is the similarity between the concept of evaluation and the western scientific glance between the knower and the known.

Organizational Context

Following the Tao Te King, XX compares four traits between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy with reference to organizations. These traits are: "being aware," "holding to the natural," "leading," and "non interfering." With respect to the first one, the author shows how "being aware" according to Taoism means something else than the empirical facts necessary for western thought. That is, being aware requires an universal identification with the environment as well as a state of enlightenment that begins in the most deepest part of one's self. It is expected,

furthermore, that one's awareness be spread in circles so to as act upon one's environment. In this sense, a person as leader in an organization works in changing his or her state of awareness. In contrast with this approach, from a Western perspective, leadership is conceived as a set of behaviors that is assumed to be modified after a mechanism of information-education has been set in a person. XX states that the Western approach here is based on describing with words (information-education?) what an ideal of leader must be, whereas in the taoist approach, leadership is a more complex process that involves the broad life of the individual and not only his or her behavior in a work setting.

With respect to the second feature contrasted by XX, "holding the natural," also there are some contrasts between the Western approach and Eastern approach to leadership. Taoism states that all activity should be confined to what is necessary and natural. By necessary, it means something that does not require arbitrary efforts. That is, overdoing as related to action is something that according to Taoism leads to a rupture with the rhythm of the natural. By contrast, according to the western approach to leadership, in many instances, the emphasis is directed towards overdoing. Here in fact it is interesting to note how these cultures are characterized as cultures of doing as a pivotal value. For supervisors and managers, working in Western settings may be difficult looking at their staff from a concept such as "actionless."

"Leading" the third element compared between the Western and Eastern approach to leadership, relates to the primary responsibilities of the leader. According To Taoism, a leader must not take action contrary to the te of the organization. Similarly, plainness, simplicity, selfishness, and sparse desires, are attitudes valued in a leader as a person with authority. Hence, the idea is that people influenced by the leader will embrace these attitudes when they perceive them in their interaction with their leader. By contrast, in the Western approach, of course, values as fame and competition underline individual characteristics more than organizational

characteristics. Similarly, in Western work settings authority is given based on "the outward trapping of authority", and not in the inner attitude of the leader.

Finally, the last trait in contrast between these two approaches relates to "interfering." According to the Tao Te King the leader is advised to interfere as little as possible (actionless). This advice is based on the fact, moreover, that a leader must know, in a holistic way, people, as well as situations. Consequently, here, the interference is not based in ignorance, but on the contrary, in the deepest wisdom of interfering. For Western management theory, XX states that the emphasis

...is always place on profit-and-loss, the "bottom line", more efficient production and so forth. The unidirectional causal paradigm conditions Western managers to be enamored of notions such as "management by objectives," performance evaluations, and "goal-oriented behaviors," measures with carry with them the inescapable assumptions that if objectives aren't met, if performance goals aren't achieved, if financial gain is less than expected, then something is wrong and it is up to the leader to "fix it" (XX, 199?:22).

Interpersonal Context

In the essay by Lyall Crawford, Conflict and Tao, he examines interpersonal management conflict from an Asian perspective, particularly from two sources: The Tao Te King as well as an ethnography made by him about a Taoist commune in the United States.

In Crawford's words, conflict is expressed disagreement. However, this characterization is according to the western view. In contrast with that, from an eastern point of view a characterization of conflict points out harmony. That is, "in the East, conflict and harmony are taken together as closely related expressions of human experience (Crawford, 1991:8)." Similarly, both of them are seen as features of a whole due to the holistic approach of this culture to human affairs. In the West, conflict and harmony, by contrast, are observed as separated for the way the world is divided. In this sense, after examining these concepts the author goes on to examine some

excerpts from the tao, the te, and the ethnographic remarks in order to state three basic points related to the management of conflict from an interpersonal context.

According to him from the tao as well as the te an assertion that would explain the view on conflict is "do not fight." To quote:

This counsel may even be considerably practical. If, in interpersonal relationships, we are able to monitor our behavior and label our emotions as many believe we are able to do, then we can, in theory at least, choose not to fight. And, if we choose not to fight, then it is difficult, in theory at least, for others to fight with us -- if we are not contentious then it is harder for others to be contentious in return (Crawford, 1991: 11).

The second dimension coming from the Taoism is "the principle of relativity and the ideas of mutual conditioning and mutual dependence that are important features of Chinese philosophy" (Crawford, 1991:14). In terms of conflict, this means that it is not possible to reach agreement without rejection as well as no rejection without agreement. The third dimension drawn from Taoism is the concept of reversal or reversion. In a simple assertion, it means "exhausting the yang to return to the ying (Crawford, 1991:16)."

As a result of this exploration Crawford concludes with four approaches:

- "1. Don't fight. Don't be contentious, and no one will be able to be contentious with you.
2. Recognize conflict as merely a part of a larger whole, and don't become identified with just it alone. Assume a wider, more relativistic perspective.
3. Realize that "fighting to get closer" is a conceivable way of creating solidarity with another person or within the context of a group. Conflict viewed in this way becomes a potential vehicle for strengthening interpersonal relationships and promoting community.
4. Acknowledge "exhausting the yang to return to the yin" as a viable frame of reference for construing conflict. The idea is to exaggerate conflict as a way of experiencing harmony, its

opposite, and becoming peaceful (Crawford,1991:20)."

Intercultural context

Contrasting North American culture with Chinese culture in reference to thinking patterns, Ringo Ma, states different ideas. He mentions that Taoism keeps enormous distance from the Western perspective based on Aristotelian rhetoric. While the first one is characterized by a circular way of operating, and furthermore, is based on paradoxical and relativistic statements, the Western pattern is analytic, deliberative, and goal-oriented towards thought and action. In this sense, these patterns of thinking are seen as still permeating the regular, daily communication of many people across the two cultures. Chinese communication manifests today, for example, this pattern of thinking through the used of proverbs and idioms in ordinary conversations.

However, the point most valuable in considering this intercultural context and the patterns of communication, as Ringo Ma depicts them, is that paradoxically, the thinking pattern stemming from Taoism is not exclusively Chinese. According to him, in some expressions used commonly in North American culture some traits of this pattern can be seen. The issue is that they do not represent the mainstream of thinking in North American culture.

This interesting contrast then between cultures about differences, and at the same time, similarities in the patterns of thinking offers a pivotal issue, because at the end, the meaning of culture as a force which is primary a determinant in the way individuals organize their worldview, becomes, up to a certain extent, relative. The author does not explore this issue, but suggests the offering of different alternatives of thinking could be a major contributor to a pluralistic education in North America. Similarly, he underlines the fact that it could contribute to the enrichment of life as well as the understanding of the two cultures.

In order to conclude this essay and following this last premise we want to close this essay with a poem by a South American poet that seems to follow the way.

Moments

If I could live my life again, in the next one I would try to make more mistakes. I would not intend to be so perfect, I would relax more. I would be sillier than I have been; in fact, I would take very few things seriously. I would be less hygienic. I would take more risks, undertake more journeys, see more sunsets, climb more mountains, swim in more rivers. I would visit more places where I never visited before, eat more ice cream and less "peanuts", have more problems real than imaginary.

I was one of those who lived sensibly and productively each minute of his life; true that I had moments of joy; yet, if I could go back, I would try to have only good moments. But you may not know that life is made up only of moments, do not lose this moment.

I was one of those who never went anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, an umbrella, and a parachute. If I could live again, I would travel lighter. If I could live again, I would walk barefoot from the start of Spring and continue until the end of Autumn. I would go more around and around on a carousel, see more sunrises, and play with more children, if life lies ahead of me. But, you see, I am 85 years old and I know that I am dying.

Jorge Luis Borges

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