

COMMITTEE VI
Eastern Approaches to Knowledge and
Value: With an Emphasis on "QI"

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CH'I (QI) AND WU LI IN CHINA

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Since ancient times in China, all things that existed, or were objects of perception, were generally considered to be 'matter' or 'substance'. When we look at records of those times, first of all in Shih-jing (詩經), 'the common people' are regarded as 'matter'.¹ Similarly, in Lao-tzū (老子), 'the right way' is thought to be 'matter'²; in Chuang-tzū, 'man' is referred to as 'matter'³, and in Lie-tzū (列子), 'heaven and earth' are also referred to as 'matter'.⁴

In Lao-tzū, it is explained that all existing things are made of the two kinds of 'Ch'i', or the female and male principles, 'Yin (陰)' and 'Yang (陽)'; that all matter is born out of the unity and harmony of the 'Yin' and 'Yang'.⁵ On the other hand, in the volume Hsi-t'zu-chuan (繫辭傳) of Chou-i (周易), it is said that things without form ('hsing êrh shang chê' (形而上者)

or the metaphysical) is 'the right way', while things with form ('hsing êrh hsia chê' (形而下者) or the physical) are the 'container'.⁶ Furthermore, it explains that the pure 'Ch'i' between heaven and earth create all things.⁷

During the Han (漢) dynasty, the volume Ta-hsüeh (大學) was compiled as part of Li-chi (禮記) (which later in the Sung (宋) dynasty came to be treated as an independent book, one of the Ssu-shu (四書) or Four Books). In this Ta-hsüeh, the term 'ko

wu' (格物) meaning 'to learn the nature of things' is used. It stresses that in order to promote one's intellectual capacity it is important to learn the principle or way of matter, and that this 'ko wu' was the starting point of man's wisdom.⁸ Chu Hsi (朱熹) (Chu-tzū (朱子), 1130-1200 AD) attached an interpretation to Ta-hsüeh, Saying, "If I wish to practice wisdom, I must pursue and fully understand the reason or principle behind a matter."⁹ He called the comprehensive study of pursuing the principle of matter, 'Li hsüeh' (理学). Later in the Ming (明) dynasty, the scholar Wang Shoujën (王守仁) (Yang-ming (陽明), 1472-1528 AD) called this study of 'Li hsüeh' 'Wu Li' (物理) and left the famous words, "My heart is 'Wu Li' itself."¹⁰ Thus the overall discipline of 'Li hsüeh' or 'Wu Li' which is a pride of Chinese history was born.

During the Ming dynasty, a writer named Fang I-chih (方以智) left a series of twelve volumes, Wu li-hsiao-shih (物理小識) which became extremely popular among the people of the day. These books contained material having to do with the heavens, and the earth, calendars and tricks, medicine, food and drinks, clothes, various tools, animals, plants, and minerals. This was the kind of learning referred to as 'Wu li' in China.¹¹

It was the schools of Chu-tzū hsüeh (朱子学) and Yang-ming hsüeh (陽明学) which established the comprehensive philosophical system of China; however, there is a slight difference between the ways of thinking on 'Li' and 'Ch'i' of the two schools.

Chu-tzŭ, following the theory of his master, Ch'êng I. (程頤) ((I-ch'uan (伊川) , 1033-1107 AD) took the position of the "Li-Ch'i Dualism".¹² However, Wang Yang Ming of the Ming dynasty stated that the heavens and the earth originally were comprised of one 'Li' and that 'Qi' was a function of 'Li', the theory that 'Ch'i' was incorporated in 'Li'.¹³ In spite of such a difference between the two schools, there is a common agreement in the thinking that the traditional learning of China starts by fully grasping the principle of matter.

In the 17th century, the Italian scholar, Jules Aleni arrived in China, and published a book on Western learning in 1623 AD which explained the various disciplines of study in Europe. Jules Aleni, who had the Chinese name Ai Ju-lüeh (艾儒略), had difficulty in translating the word 'Philosophy', and substituted 'Li hsüeh', 'Li ko' (理科) (study of the principle of matter). In Japan, as well, since about the middle of the Edo (江戸) period (18th century), the study of pursuing the reason or logic of matter was translated as 'Ligaku' or 'Butsuli' (the Japanese pronunciation of 'Li hsüeh' and 'Wu li') using identical Sino-Japanese characters. It was in the Meiji (明治) period, (after 1868) that 'Ligaku' was distinguished as 'physical science', and 'Butsuli' as 'physics', and modern education adopted those names. Although China adopted the Sino-Japanese character names for other sciences and disciplines, there was considerable resistance

in importing the terms 'Ligaku' (Li hsüeh) and 'Butsuli' (Wu li), as the country already had a standing tradition as to these two disciplines.

It was also said in China, that as man was one of all created things, in order for man to grow, it was necessary for him to become one with matter; this was called 'Wu hua (物化)'. The theory of 'Wu hua' began with Chuang-tzū.¹⁴ Soon, the need for 'Wu hua' was taught within Chinese Buddhism, and influenced the Zen (禪) sect which taught that, "If one could make his heart (identical to) a tree or a stone, one could learn the right way."¹⁵

Chuang-tzū explained that one shouldn't think whether a matter was useful or not in the process of 'Wu hua' but that he should place his criterion of judgment midway.¹⁶

Within European civilization, 'Man' and 'Matter' are distinguished from the beginning, and it is thought that Man should make effective use of Matter to improve his own life. Thus all things without utility have been more or less cut off or eliminated. In China, the traditional thought has been that there is meaning in all existing things, and that efforts to make the 'useless' 'useful' is what is important. The Chinese people still think to a certain extent that as Man is a part of All Things, it would be difficult for him to exist in a society in which All Things could not exist freely. I must say that this traditional way of thinking of the Chinese people in the face of

the 21st century is indeed a precious, and an outstanding wisdom that all man can learn from.

It goes without saying that present-day China is investing great efforts in nation-building, allegedly upon the basis of materialism. However, it is my prediction that the materialism in the minds of the Chinese people is developing into something rather different from the materialism of the Marxists.

Throughout its extremely long tradition of culture, the Chinese held the view that 'man' is 'matter', 'the way' is 'matter', and that the 'mind' is also 'matter'. I have explained this previously, that the Chinese people consider materialism to be a matter-of-fact logic, based upon their traditional way of thinking.

I have had several opportunities to travel in modern China, and have often been made to feel that the sensitivity of the Chinese people toward 'matter' or 'things' does differ somewhere from that of the Japanese people today.

It was in the 60's that I first visited China; in Japan of those days, pollution had just started to emerge as a problem. At that time, one Chinese friend whom I made there told me: "I hear that there is much pollution in Japan. How can only man manage to survive in a place where plants and animals cannot? China does not need a civilization that brings about pollution."

Behind this statement is a strong sense of viewing man, plants, and animals, all as 'matter'.

The Japanese people today have become rapidly inclined toward materialism in the process of economic growth, so that it might be said that the Japanese sensitivity is closer to the sense of 'matter' which developed within the land and climate of Europe. In addition, the development of science in Japan has also promoted further materialistic thinking. When we speak of being rational in modern Japan, this is equivalent to being scientific, to judge things from a materialistic point of view.

When we observe the living conditions of the modern Chinese people through Japanese eyes, we can say that their sense of 'matter' is definitely different from ours; and this sense of difference is very similar to what Westerners travelling in China would feel as being 'different' from their views. In other words, Japan has become so rapidly Westernized in modern sensitivity, that their ways of thinking and feelings have made them 'Europeans' or 'Americans' within Asia.

For instance, the Japanese as well as Westerners of today think of things that we can use and discard as 'matter'; yet in China, the custom of throwing something away after use hardly exists. The Chinese people think that as long as there is life in 'matter', it should be recycled or used to its fullest advantage, for many purposes, on many levels. The idea in Chuang-tzu (

): "I would like to regard a thing as a thing, but I do not want to be treated as a thing by things," still lives on strongly.

Foreign travellers in China are all called 'Wai pin' (outside guest) and generally stay in high-class hotels. As these guests leave their hotel to move to another place and board their buses, it is a common sight to see hotel clerks engaged in discussion with the Wai pin. The hotel staff bring 'lost and found' or 'forgotten items' that the guests have left behind to the bus, while the Wai pin say they don't need those items any longer, or that they have discarded them as waste. The Chinese staff insist that the objects can still be used, and make them take the objects back. Such exchanges between the Chinese and Japanese guests are seen as well as with Westerners.

In traditional Chinese cuisine, there are menus such as 'Whole Fried Carp', 'Roast Pig', 'Steamed Duck', etc. It has been a tradition in Chinese civilization to make full use of a fish or a pig or a duck, whole, throwing away almost nothing. There is no difference between the rich and the poor in the inheritance of this tradition. The Chinese people have from ancient times, come up with wisdom to utilize 'things' or 'matter' most effectively. If one goes to Pei-ching, the part of the famed 'Peking Duck' (Pei-ching Kao ya tzu) that is valued the most as a delicacy is the skin.

One American plant physiologist once visited the People's Commune to experience life with Chinese farmers. He was deeply

impressed and exclaimed that "the Chinese are the greatest conservationists (utilizers of resources) in the world!"

It is ironic that the Japanese people today who are generally lacking in resources have the attitude that 'things' exist to be used once and thrown away, and are wasting the valuable resources of this earth. In China, which has an abundance of natural resources, there is more will to conserve, to utilize things to the maximum.

It might be said modern rationalism found in European societies developed, beginning with the Industrial Revolution in England about 1760; since then, immediate efficiency has been given top priority everywhere. Such a tendency may have existed since Greco-Roman times (on this I would like to hear the opinion of everyone); however a clear theory was demonstrated by the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650 AD) whose idea of 'dualism' of spirit and matter as independent realities is well known.

The Industrial Revolution which soon followed spread the idea that man's mission is the efficient use of the earth's resources and the development of civilization, far and wide. Yet, in those days it was mistakenly thought that the earth's resources were infinite.

Following the tendency to emphasize efficiency, our resources have been exploited and thrown away, so that exhaustion of

resources has become a serious problem. It is at such a time that the traditional wisdom of China, "to regard a thing as a thing" ought to be reconsidered, and our way of thinking changed as we face the 21st century. China will continue to stand and develop upon its traditional civilization; it will not develop by severing itself from tradition. In the view of values normally held by the Chinese people, there is the idea that "Good things will last through the passage of time," an idea which seems to be forgotten in contemporary civilization. Modern rationalism does emphasize that what is practical and efficient now is good; however, in order to seek for an enduring prosperity of this earth, it is absolutely necessary to revise this contemporary sense of value.

NOTES

1. "Heaven creates people, Everything has its own order,
People regard this order as permanent,
People like this virtue.
Shih-jing, Ta-ya, Chêng-min (Chapter 1).
2. "There was something nebulous yet complete, Born
before Heaven and Earth....I do not know its name,
And address it as Tao (道). Attempting to give it a name,
I shall call it the Great."
Lao-tzŭ, (Chapter 25).
3. "There are a myriad things (in the world),
A human being is one of them.
Chuang-tzŭ, Wai-pien, Ch'iu-shui (Chapter 17).
4. "(Yin T'ang asked Hsia Kê...)
Kê said, "...Then, Heaven and Earth are just things."
Lie-tzŭ, T'ang-wen (Chapter 5).
5. "The myriad things carry the Yin on their backs,
and hold the Yang in their embrace, and derive
their harmony from the permeation of these forces."
Lao-tzŭ, (Chapter 42).
6. "What is beyond form (shape) is called the Way (Tao).
What is below form (shape) is called Tool (Ch'i (器)).
Chou-i, Hsi-tz'u-chuan shang.
7. "Spirit and vital force make substance,
The Spirit goes around, then, the substance changes."
Chou-i, Hsi-tz'u-chuan shang.

8. "In order to get the comprehensive faculty, we have to learn the nature of things. After we learn the nature of things, we can understand it."
Ta-hsüeh.
9. "We have a phrase that, in order to get the comprehensive faculty, we have to learn the nature of things. It means that if we want to have comprehensive knowledge, we have to scrutinize the principle of matter.
Chu-tzū, Ta-hsüeh chang-chü.
10. "Wu li does not exist outside our mind. If we look for Wu li outside our mind, we cannot find it."
Wang Yang-ming, Ch'uan-hsi-lu.
11. Fang I-chih in the Ming dynasty, Wu-li-hsiao-shih, 12 vols.
1) Heaven 2) Calendar 3) Climate and Weather 4) Earth
5) Divination 6) Human Beings 7) Tricks
8) Peculiar affairs 9) Medicine 10) Food and drinks
11) Clothes 12) Minerals 13) Tools 14) Plants 15) Animals.
12. "Li and Ch'i exist between Heaven and Earth.
Li, which is beyond form, is Tao (Way).
It is a principle of living things.
Ch'i, which is below form, is Ch'i (Tools).
It is an embodiment of living beings.
Chu-tzū chüan-shu, Ta Huang Tao-fu.
13. "Li is a principle of Ch'i.
Ch'i is a function of Li."
Ch'uan-hsi-lu.

14. "The Universe and I exist together,
and all things and I are one."
Chuang-tzŭ, Nei-pien, Ch'i-wu-lun (Chapter 2).
15. "Make your mind like stone or wood,
then, you will understand the Way."
Huang-po Hsi-yun, Yüan-ling-lu.
(We do not know the birth nor death dates of Huang-po
Hsi-yun. One of his disciples was Lin-chi I-hsüan
(?-867 AD) who was the founder of the Lin-chi sect.)
16. "I would like to be between capable and incapable...
I would like to regard a thing as a thing.
But I do not want to be treated as a thing by things."
Chuang-tzŭ, Wai-pien Shanmu (Chapter 20).