THE CHINESE VIEW OF TIME, A PASSAGE TO ETERNITY

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"There is a time for putting together
And another time for taking apart.
He who understands
This course of events
Takes each new state
In its proper time
With neither sorrow nor joy...."

Chuang Tze, vi.9.

There is a given time for everything and a time for every happening under heaven:
   A time for giving birth, a time for dying; a time for planting, a time for uprooting.
   A time for killing, a time for healing; a time for knocking down, a time for building....

Finally I considered the task God gave to the sons of men. He made everything fitting in its time, but he also set eternity in their hearts although man is not able to embrace the work of God from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes iii, 1-10.
The difficulty in discussing time in relation to the human spirit stems from, what Paul Ricoeur says, "a fundamental feature of our experience of time, namely that time is never lived directly, that it is never a mute, immediate lived experience but one that is always structured by symbolic systems of varying complexity."

This "varying complexity" is even more apparent in the Chinese culture with the seemingly opposing orientations of Confucianism and Taoism, and of Buddhism, if one were to make it part of Chinese culture. The difficulty is aggravated by the character of the Chinese mind whose primary interest is ethical. Metaphysical problems such as that of space and time, matter and spirit, are rarely discussed, and if they are, it is for the sake of ethics. So be it, let the intend of this paper be an explicitation of the Chinese concept of time (時) with a view to how we can live a good life and make society and the world a better abode for the human spirit.

The Confucian Time

Confucius, standing by a stream, said, "It passes on like this, never ceasing day or night!" The passage indicates Confucius's view of time: time is the ceaseless passing of things and events, and of human nature. Like the stream, time has a definite past but an indefinite future. Travelling forward, it invites the human being to participate in this movement, to take an active part in the drama of life so the person can achieve the ideal of jen, humanity in its fullness.
Jen (仁) is the supreme virtue of the Confucian sage. Translated in various ways as "benevolence," "kindness," "human-heartedness," "humanity," *jen* is composed of the character *jen* (人), meaning "man," and the character *jen* (仁), meaning "two," thus signifying the virtue that governs interpersonal relationships. For Confucius, "it is to love men." And the *Doctrine of the Mean* makes a pun by saying, "*Jen* is *jen*." To become a man, *of jen* is to be human.

Such an ideal is part of the Confucian Tao, the moral way, which is not divorced from the Master's objective of teaching—to train students to become a *chun tze*, a gentleman who will take the responsibility of being of service to the government and to the country, and to like it.

This program is briefly outlined in the Confucian classic *The Great Learning*. One begins by cultivating the personal life through rectifying the mind-heart, making the will sincere, extending knowledge and investigating things, then regulates the family, then brings order to the state, and finally maintains peace in the world.

What about the spirits? And the after life? Confucius said, "If we are not yet able to serve man, how can we serve spiritual beings?...If we do not yet know about life, how can we know about death?" And once Confucius was very ill, and his disciple asked that a prayer be offered. Confucius said, "Is there such a
thing?" His disciple replied, "There is an eulogy which says, "Pray to the spiritual beings above and below."" Confucius said, "My prayer has been for a long time (that is, what counts is the life that one leads)."

The life that one leads in time takes on a gradual progression of mastering oneself:

Confucius said, "At fifteen my mind was set on learning. At thirty my character had been formed. At forty I had no more perplexities. At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven (T'ien-ming). At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard. At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing moral principles.

For the Confucian, time never simply repeats itself. In the process of production and reproduction, something new evolves which does not destroy the past but recuperates it. A good teacher is one "who reviews the old so as to find out the new". And "the inscription on the bath-tub of King T'ang read, 'If you can renovate yourself one day, then you can do so every day, and keep doing so day after day.'"

This self-renovation is natural in the sense that it is in keeping with our human nature, for after all, "it is man that can make the Way great, and not the Way that can make man great." The development of oneself is also natural in the sense that it takes time and no artificial effort must be exerted to make the self grow. Mencius told a story of a man of Sung who was so
eager to make his corn grow that he pulled it up only to be discovered by his son that the corn had already withered.

The full development of the self, however, entails sincerity. Mencius said, "One who is sincere with himself is called a true man." And the Doctrine of the Mean said, "Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature," and only those who can fully develop their nature can develop the nature of others, and developing the nature of others can then develop the nature of things and assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. Sincerity is having no division in oneself, just like Nature (Heaven and Earth) which has no doubleness and thus can produce things in an unfathomable way. Sincerity is the completion of the self, and the task of self-realization is thus the task of integrating oneself, of making oneself whole. But "sincerity is not only the completion of the self, it is that by which all things are completed. The completion of the self means humanity. The completion of all things means wisdom. These are the character of the nature, and they are the Way in which the internal and external are united."

Sincerity being the completion of the self and of all things, it is "the beginning and end of things." Because the integration of self entails the development of the nature of things,

Therefore absolute sincerity is ceaseless. Being ceaseless, it is lasting. Being lasting, it is evident. Being evident, it is infinite. Being infinite, it is extensive and deep.
Being extensive and deep, it is high and brilliant. It is because it is extensive and deep that it contains all things. It is because it is high and brilliant that it overshadows all things. It is because it is infinite and lasting that it can complete all things. In being extensive and deep, it is a counterpart of Earth. In being high and brilliant, it is a counterpart of Heaven. In being infinite and lasting, it is unlimited...

Such a sincere man was Confucius "who conformed with the natural order governing the revolution of the seasons in heaven above, and followed the principles governing land and water below. He may be compared to earth in its supporting and containing all things, and to heaven in its overshadowing and embracing all things..." It is possible then for man in time through sincerity to achieve harmony with nature.

The Taoist Time

If the Tao in Confucianism stands for the moral way, in Taoism it refers to the origin of all things, nameless (but we are forced to give it a name) and eternal. As origin of all things, Tao's essence is non-being (because only what is no-thing can be responsible for the being of all beings) but its function is being. Both non-being and being are simply two aspects of the one infinite Tao.

How does Tao produce all things?
Tao produced the One.
The One produced the two
The two produced the three.
And the three produced the ten thousand things.
The ten thousand things carry the yin and embrace the yang, and through the blending of the material force (ch'i) they achieve harmony....

Clearly, there is a definite past of all things since they all originate from the Tao. And their evolution is from the simple to the complex: from the "one" that is the original material force that is produced by Tao to the Yin, the female principle, and the Yang, the male principle, and to the three, the blending of the Yin and the Yang with the material force. But all this is done by Tao in a spontaneous manner, that is, by doing nothing or wu-wei. "Tao invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone." Wu-wei does not mean doing absolutely nothing but simply the naturalness of Tao, its effortless non-exerting way of bringing forth being from its nothingness or simplicity.

The movement of Tao, however, follows the law of reversion. When one thing reaches one extreme, it reverts to the opposite. In the end,

All things come into being,
And I see thereby their return.
All things flourish,
But each one returns to its root.
This return to its root means tranquility.
It is called returning to its destiny.
To return to destiny is called the eternal (Tao). 28

To return to the root is simply in keeping with the harmony of nature which works in an endless cyclic rhythm of birth, growth and decay, in the ceaseless alternating flow of the seasons. And "to know harmony means to be in accord with the eternal. To be in accord with the eternal means to be enlightened." 29

What then is the Taoist time? Time consists simply of the events of Nature that originate from the eternal Tao, a nothingness that is fullness because it is unlimited, unbounded, unnamed. Time is the movement of Tao in nature, following the law of wu-wei, or acting by not-acting, and the law of reversion, where opposites complement and complete each other in one whole and where the end is also the beginning. Time then travels in a circle, but each being in its own nature has a definite past since it originates from the Tao and reared by the Tao through its Te, the aspect of the Tao which makes a being what it is.

Does time then repeat itself? What must man do in this view of time?

It would seem that time does repeat itself in the sense that all must return to the beginning. But each return to the beginning brings a change and transformation, and so there is constant
movement in nature. Nothing is final. Only the Tao remains, unchanging, a Great Whole of continuous duration.

What must man do in face of such a time?

Fishes are born in water
Man is born in Tao.
If fishes, born in water,
Seek the deep shadow
of pond and pool,
All their needs
Are satisfied.
If man, born in Tao,
Sinks into the deep shadow
of non-action
To forget aggression and concern,
He lacks nothing
His life is secure.

Moral: "All the fish needs
Is to get lost in water.
All man needs is to get lost
In Tao.

To live in the Tao is to practice wu-wei and to live by the Law of reversion, in the harmony of opposites.

Wu-wei is not doing absolutely nothing but doing nothing that is
unnecessary, artificial or not natural. To practice *wu-wei* is to be empty of desires, to be humble, to do things without attachment to the fruits of one's labor, withdrawing as soon as the work is done. The reason why Heaven and Earth is eternal is because "they do not exist for themselves." *wu-wei* is what Chuang Tze refers to as the "fasting of the heart," the emptying of faculties so that the person is free from limitation and preoccupation and his heart, like the window, becomes full of light, secretly transforming others. Empty, still, tranquil, silent, the non-action of the Taoist sage is not inaction but action, or perhaps the distinction between action and inaction is lost since joy is attained.

If (still) water is so clear, so level,
How much more the spirit of man?
The heart of the wise man is tranquil.
It is the mirror of heaven and earth
The glass of everything.
Emptiness, stillness, tranquility, tastelessness,
Silence, non-action: this is the level of heaven and earth.
This is perfect Tao. Wise men find here
Their resting place.
Resting, they are empty....

To live by the law of reversion is to stand in the pivot of the Tao, where one is in the center of the circle of change, harmonizing the opposites. "The pivot of the Tao passes through the center where all affirmations and denials converge."

Knowing that one extreme leads to the opposite, the Taoist sage
stays in the middle, not taking sides, not competing nor interfering, sensitive to the changes around him but sensible enough not to be affected by them and seeing the totality. “Letting things alone, he rests in his original nature.”

Long life is no ground for joy nor early death for sorrow.
Success is not for him to be proud of, failure is no shame.
Had he all the world’s power he would not hold it as his own
If he conquered everything he would not take it to himself,
His glory is in knowing that all things come together in One
And life and death are equal.

The key to both wu-wei and the law of reversion is the life of simplicity. Just as Tao is simple, so the man of Tao lives simply. He is one with his own nature, true to himself, and seeks not to identify himself with possessions and prestige, with things that pass away. “Though, like objects, he has form and semblance, he is not limited to form. He is more. He can attain to formlessness.” Simplicity is formlessness; it is placing one’s heart not in anything (where there is the possibility of getting lost) but in the Tao. The man of Tao “will rest in his eternal place which is no-place....His nature sinks to its root in the One.”

In sum, for the Taoist

There are no fixed limits
Time does not stand still.
Nothing endures,
Nothing is final.
You cannot lay hold
Of the end or the beginning.
He who is wise sees near and far
As the same,
Does not despise the small
Or value the great:
Where all the standards differ
How can you compare?
With one glance
He takes in past, and present,
Without sorrow for the past
Or impatience with the present.
All is in movement.
He has experience
Of fullness and emptiness.
He does not rejoice in success
Or lament in failure.
The game is never over.
Birth and death are even.
The terms are not final.

Convergence: The I-Ching

At first glance, Confucianism and Taoism may have divergent attitudes towards time: Confucius sees time as travelling forward into an indefinite progressive future, while Lao Tze and Chuang
Tze view time as a cycle of change, stretching indefinitely into the future and the past with the infinite Tao as the source and return. The former lives time to master oneself and return to propriety; the latter to transcend it and be one with the Tao. The former emphasizes the way of man; the latter the way of Heaven. Both, however, find their convergence in the view of time in the Book of Changes or the I-Ching.

The I-Ching was one Chinese classic that Confucius regarded so highly that he is said to have written ten commentaries on it and would have devoted an entire life studying it if given another life. Originally used as a book of divination and by Confucianist and Taoist alike, it interprets symbolically all cosmic phenomena and their interrelatedness. Beginning with the T'ai Ch'i, Primordial Unity or the Tao, and descending into the yin and yang, the female and male principles, representing these two into broken (--) and unbroken (---) lines respectively, the I records all the possible happenings in human and physical nature in terms of hsia or symbols, the eight triagrams and the sixty-four hexagrams. The hexagram is a combination of two triagrams, representing the relationships and interplay of ideas, states, and things represented by the triagrams. Now, the word hsia does not only refer to the symbolic representation of an object but also the object itself. Symbols or hsia serve as models or patterns from which physical objects, including institutions, evolved. For example, the Meng hexagram (4) is a combination of the triagram Ken, meaning "mountain," at the top and the triagram K'An, meaning "water," below.
The I is "a reflection of the universe in miniature." There are three meanings to the word "I": ease and simplicity, change and transformation, and invariability, but "I" primarily means change, used interchangeably with the word Tao since Tao is life, spontaneity, evolution, or in one word, change itself." All changes and transformation are the result of the movements of the two primal forces, the Yin and the Yang, the female passive principle and the male active principle. Yang and Yin are also equated with Heaven and Earth, represented by the first two of the eight triagrams, Ch'ien (☰) and K'un (☷). The transformation then is from simplicity to complexity, and yet in the midst of this variability, there are the elements of continuity and invariability, a constant definite order, the Tao of Heaven and Earth.

Two rules are to be followed in interpreting the hexagrams: First, the two trigrams symbolize the past and future in time, the height and depth in space. Second, the three lines of the triagram represent the three different degrees in time and space; the bottom line represents the cautious attitude, the top line...
the "on guard" attitude, and the middle line the active attitude. In divination, one line in the hexagram indicates the degree in time and space while the other five lines symbolize the different conditions of the universe. What is implied here is the notion of ming or fate and destiny. For any action to succeed, the cooperation of the time and the situation is needed. The development of something cannot go counter to its time and situation. And nothing can divorce itself from the Tao and its natural order. Even the consulter himself is part of this order, and as such his action must acknowledge the existent conditions of the universe and harmonize with the Tao.

What laws can one detect in the workings of the Tao in the universe? Once again, as in Taoism, the first law is the law of reversion, put in another way, that everything involves its own negation. An example is the judgment of the Feng hexagram (55):

When the sun has reached its meridian height, it begins to decline. When the moon has become full, it begins to wane. Heaven and Earth are now full, now empty, according to the flow and ebb of the season.

Given the law of reversion, the giving rise to the opposite and the ensuing reconciliation, the process of change in the universe is a cyclic process but one that calls for constant transformation and not simply a repetition. Perhaps, a spiral transformation is a better image. And thirdly, in this spiral transformation, "there can never be an end of things. The things
in the universe are never absolutely completed or finished, they follow a definite order to which they move everlastingly."

What then is the concept of time in the I-Ching? How are the Confucian and Taoist views reconciled in it? And being not simply an interpretation of the changes in the universe but a guide for human conduct, what must man do in view of such a conception?

The I-Ching being a reflection of the universe in miniature, its time is cosmic. The cosmic conception is "based on the assumption that all that happens in the universe, natural and human, is a continuous whole, like a chain of natural sequences." The universe is a continuous whole, evolving or revolving around the Tao, the source of life, in an endless cycle of change and transformation. The cosmic conceives of time as cyclic but not in the sense of mere repetition of opposites represented in a closed circle. The essence of time is change, but the universe being a continuous whole, nothing is absolutely different and separated from everything else, and "everything is constantly changing into something else, and therefore all things are one." The change generated by Tao is creative, dovetailing the old and the new.

The dynamic sequence of time, ridding itself of the perished past and coming by the new into present existence, really gains something over the loss. So, the change in time is but a step to approaching eternity, which is perennial
durance, whereby, before the bygone is ended, the forefront
of the succeeding has come into presence. And, therefore,
there is here a linkage of being projecting itself into
the prospect of eternity.

Tao in fact is identified as the Creative and in the words of the

The Creative is strong. The Creative works sublime
success, furthering through perseverance. Great indeed
is the sublimity of the Creative, to which all things owe
their beginning and which permeates all heaven. The way
of the Creative works through change and transformation,
so that each thing receives its true nature and destiny and
comes into permanent accord with the Great Harmony: this
is what furthers and what perseveres.....

With such a creative cyclic view of time, the Confucianist will
find no disagreement. Faced with a creative world, he is called
to be "equally creative in order to fit in with it," "to
participate in the cosmic creation through the process of
transformation and thereupon become a co-creator with Heaven and
Earth." On the other hand, the Taoist is at home with the idea
of the I that the Tao of Heaven is identified with the Tao of
Man, although the Tao of Man should be normalized in accord with
the Tao of Heaven. The sage attains both the Tao of Man and
the Tao of Heaven.

What does it mean to attain both the Tao of Man and the Tao of
Heaven? It means to harmonize himself with the universe and to
enter into "a fellowship of sympathetic unity...with other persons in thought, feeling, and action." The human being, occupying the central position between Heaven and Earth, must follow chung, the mean, in his action, taking the mean between extremes and synthesizing them. To act in accord with the mean is not simply to do things no more than halfway, which can be a mediocrity, but to maintain a delicate balance between the yin and the yang, neither too much nor too little but just right. To be in the mean is also to be humble, simple, and modest for one cannot arrogantly set limits to the opposites. In concrete, it means "not to forget danger in time of peace so as to protect one's peace; not to forget ruin in time of security so as to preserve that security; not to forget disorder in time of order so as to guard that order." Positively, chung means to have one's conduct attune to the situation at the moment but holding on to the Centre that is the eternal Tao. On Tao lies the common centre of the sympathetic unity with fellowmen and the perfection of man.

Cyclic Time VS. Linear Time: the Chinese Notion of Perfection

If we are in fact destined to make contact with a sort of eternity, it will be at the core of our experience of time.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

...human time cannot exist without an irreversible evolution toward eternity, which subtends it.

Jean Guitten
The two quotations above follow one another and indicate the inseparability of time and eternity. Eternity feeds on time, and "the truth of time is the concurrence of all events in an eternal present," "the unity of all time," hidden in the flux of time and simultaneously exceeding our experience of time.

Phenomenologically speaking, if man is an embodied spirit, then human spirituality is expressed in time, in a field of presence that opens itself to the past and the future. But if we are to equate eternity with perfection, then cyclic time would have a different idea of perfection from that of linear time and would entail a distinct kind of spirituality.

Cyclic time represented by the circle is self-contained while linear time represented by the line is open and must have a beginning and an end. Although cyclic time does not necessarily imply repetition, it nevertheless makes the transient subject to the law of recurrence; unlike linear time with its succession of events (one after another), though not necessarily implying a series of disconnected "nows," which makes everything once-for-all. Because of the law of reversion in cyclic time, the power of death diminishes and the emphasis is placed on the cosmic rather than the individual. Linear time, on the other hand, accentuates on the individual consciousness, and death becomes for it a break and a threat. Both times can have a mysticism where there is a "Great Year in which time begins again and a new heaven and a new earth come about. In linear time this must, of course, be a complete break, with an absolute end and beginning,
Western traditional science relies on linear time, while acupuncture, Tai Ch'i Chuan and herbal medicine are all based on the Chinese concept of yin and yang. Understandably it took a long time for China with its concept of cyclic time to develop scientifically, leading Max Weber to think that modernization may not be possible in China. Modernization did come to China but it aroused a lot of philosophical self-questioning. The impact of western science on the Chinese people has unleashed on them a drive for material prosperity that involves a mastery of nature, which may be conceived as a disruption of the cyclic view of time. On the other hand, the new science, particularly physics, has gradually come to discover the compatibility of science and eastern mysticism. If acupuncture and other forms of Chinese traditional medicine work, can one not then speak of eastern science? And is it not possible to integrate western and eastern sciences in view of humanizing the earth and making life more human?

Cyclic time combines the duality of the constant and the changing; permanence is implied in change and vice versa. Life is grasped in constant change and growth, and death and rest are not an interruption but part of life. The cyclic movement is one of renewal, revolution, endless possibilities but a natural development or envelopment with cosmic completion. The opposite
of change and transformation is not rest but regression.

The perfection in cyclic time is symbolized in the circle, which is rounded off. The perfection of nature, human and physical, is to be found not outside of its dynamic cyclic movement but within it, not at the end of the process of evolution but at the very heart or core, the Centre, which is the principle of equilibrium, harmonizing opposites. Nature's perfection conceived as a whole consists precisely in the "unceasing movement going on in the Universe." In the words of the Confucian classic The Doctrine of the Mean, "to the most perfect, there is no rest." Nature is already that "infinite realm wherein the universal Flux of Life is revealing itself and fulfilling everything with its intrinsic worth. Nature is infinite in the sense that it is not limited by anything that is beyond and above it, which might be called Super-nature."

The perfection of the self entails also the perfection of others, in fact of the whole of the universe, as one is a significant part of the organic whole. This is the meaning of sincerity or cheng mentioned in the Doctrine of the Mean, which is the beginning and end of things and also signifies "realness," "truth" and the fullness of virtue (jen). "The perfection of the self lies in the quality of jen." Sincerity is the unity of Heaven and Earth, infinite and lasting because they do not exist for themselves.

Cyclic spirituality consists of returning to one's roots, which
is "passing from the moving circumference of the cosmic wheel to the unmoving Centre which unites all," something akin to the return to childhood (bala) in Hinduism and "becoming like a child" in the Gospels. It is to see in the finite the infinite which has been there from eternity, and harmonizing these is "to come home." To unite the finite and the infinite is "to bring the spiritual down to earth and to raise the earth to the spiritual. This is attained by keeping the yin and the yang in balance, avoiding all extremes and establishing harmony." The spiritual man or "wise man maintains an even course through prosperity and adversity and is neither elated by the one nor downcast by the other," knowing that these are but the seasons of Tao. Cyclic spirituality is integrating spirit and matter, and integrated, the whole universe becomes centered on the passive yet creative Tao, and life becomes not simply a means to an end but sacred as it is itself a consummation of perfection.

Postscript

After all that is said of the Chinese view of time and spirituality, what can one say of the Tienanmen incident of 1989? May not one say with Chuang Tzu and the Ecclesiastes that it was a time to die, and soon (how soon, one cannot fathom) there will be a time to be reborn? In unity with the Chinese people, one can hope for that time to come, for as Lusin said, "Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence."
NOTES


3. The Chinese character for time is shih, a composite character made up of three characters: the sun (凹), the earth (干), and the small unit (寸).

4. Analects (Wing-tsit Chan translation) IX, 16.

5. Analects XII, 22.

6. Doctrine of the Mean (Wing-tsit Chan translation), ch. 20.

7. Great Learning (Wing-tsit Chan translation).

8. Analects XI, 11.


10. Analects II, 4.

11. Analects II, 11.

12. Commentary on the Great Learning, ch. 2.


16. Doctrine of the Mean, ch. 22.


18. Doctrine of the Mean, ch. 25.

19. Ibid.
Ibid.

Doctrine of the Mean, ch. 25.

Doctrine of the Mean, ch. 30.

Tao Te Ching (Wing-tsit Chan translation), chs. 1, 31, 25

Tao Te Ching, ch. 1.

Tao Te Ching, ch. 42.

Tao Te Ching, ch. 37.

Tao Te Ching, ch. 40.

Tao Te Ching, ch. 16.

Tao Te Ching, ch. 55.

Chuang Tze (Thomas Merton edition) VI, 11.

Tao Te Ching, ch. 9.

Tao Te Ching, ch. 7.

Chuang Tze IV, 1.

Chuang Tze XIII, 1.

Chuang Tze II, 3.

Chuang Tze XI, 1-2.

Chuang Tze XII, 2.

Chuang Tze XIX, 2.

Ibid.

Chuang Tze XVII, 1.


Ibid., p. liv.

Ibid., p. liii.

Ibid., pp. xl-xlvi.

Ibid., pp. xi-xlviii.

Ibid., lxiv.
Ibid., pp. lxvi-lxvii.

Ibid., p. lxxv.

Ibid., p. lxxvii.

Ibid., p. lxxi.

Ibid., pp. lxxxviii-lxxxix.


Ch’u Chai & Winberg Chai, op. cit., p. lxxvii.

Ch’u Chai & Winberg Chai, op. cit., p. lxxxix.


Ibid., p. 23.


65 Ibid., p. 59.

66 Ch’u Chai & Winberg Chai, *op. cit.*, p. lxxviii.

67 *Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 26, sec. 1.


69 *Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 25.

70 J. C. Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

71 Ibid., p. 10.

72 Ibid., p. 57.

APPENDIX

Linear Time

Cyclic Time

Chinese Time