

Notes Toward a Chinese View of Time



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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

PAUL RICOEUR writes that any attempt to articulate a given culture's understanding of time has to contend with the difficulty presented by the fact that "time is never lived directly . . . is never a mute, immediate, lived experience, but is always structured by symbolic systems of varying complexity."¹ This is certainly true of the attempt to hammer out a Chinese conception of time (時),² considering the culture's positioning in the interplay of Confucianism and Taoism, two symbolic systems as complex as they are diverse.



Once, standing upon the embankment of a stream, Confucius mused, "(time) passes on like this, never ceasing day or night!"³ It flashes out of a definite past, gathers, gains momentum, presses on to an indefinite future. Gliding along with it entails one's total, benevolent, and

1. Paul Ricoeur, introduction to *Time and the Philosophies* (UNESCO, 1977), 13.

2. The Chinese character for time is *shih*, a composite character made up of three characters: the sun, the earth, and the small unit.

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

compassionate participation in the drama of life or human *be-ing*; and it results in the development in oneself of the condition of *jen*.⁴ *Jen*, according to the Confucian *Tao* and *The Great Learning*, is tied to a set of practices that includes the cultivation of the powers of mind, heart, and will, the elimination of self-interested desires, the development of a habit of inquiry, the expansion of one's knowledge of the world, the cultivation of family ties, the generous and cheerful service of country and government, and cooperation with others for the sake of securing peace and order within the state and in the world.⁵ All this to become the gentleman, or *chun tze*.

One of the most remarkable things about *chun tze* is that he is distinctively this-worldly, uninterested in speculation concerning the world hereafter. Once, a disciple asked Confucius as he lay on his sick-bed whether he knew of a prayer that could be offered for his recovery. "Is there such a thing?" Confucius replied. "There is an eulogy," persisted his disciple, "which says, 'Pray to the spiritual beings above and below.'" "My prayer has been for a long time," rejoined Confucius. Clearly, for him, it was not anything that a man could say to the gods, but the civic-service-oriented activities of a lifetime that alone could count as prayer.⁶ "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?"⁷ It is just this sort of an activist stance toward the question what one is to do with one's time, that preempts time's reduction to dull repetition. For just as a good teacher "reviews the old so as to find out the new,"⁸ so also time creatively reappropriates or recuperates the past, instead of merely reinstalling or destroying it. Confucius, by his own account, exemplified his own dictum.

At fifteen my mind was set on learning. At thirty my character had

4. A composite of the character for "man" and the character for "two," *jen* signifies the space of the "interpersonal." When asked about *jen*, Confucius replied, "It is to love men" (Analects XII, 22).

5. *Great Learning* (Wing-tsit Chan translation).

6. Analects VII, 34.

7. Analects XI, 11. If there is a "spirituality" in any of this, it must consist of the return to one's roots, "passing from the moving circumference of the cosmic wheel to the unmoving Centre which unites all," or, in the manner of the Hindu *balya* and the Christian Gospels, "becoming like a child again" (70).

8. Analects II, 11; Commentary on the *Great Learning*, ch. 2.

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.⁹

"The inscription on the bath-tub of King T'ang reads, 'If you can renovate yourself one day, then you can do so every day, and keep doing so day after day.'" By so biding one's time, one avoids the mistake of the man of Sung who, in his impatience to get his corn to grow, kept tugging at them, causing them to wither and die.¹⁰ There is no point in seeking to hasten the pace of one's progress artificially. After all, "it is man who can make the Way great, and not the Way that can make man great."¹¹

To be great is, above all, to be "sincere," because "only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their own nature."¹² One is "sincere," that is, integrated, complete, whole,¹³ when no divisions exist, either within oneself,¹⁴ or between oneself and an "earth which supports and contains all things, and a heaven which overshadows and embraces all things,"¹⁵ following Confucius himself, who "conformed with the natural order governing the revolution of the seasons in heaven above, and followed the principles governing land and water below."¹⁶

9. Analects II, 4.

10. Book of Mencius (Wing-tsit Chan translation), IIA, 2.

11. Analects XV, 28.

12. Doctrine of the Mean, ch. 22.

13. Ibid., ch. 25.

14. Ibid., ch. 26.

15. Ibid., ch. 22, 30. "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" (ch. 25).

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. (Ch. 26)

16. Doctrine of the Mean, ch. 30.



While the *Tao* in Confucianism might refer to the moral way, it refers in Taoism to the primordial “one” that constitutes both *Yin* (the female principle) and *Yang* (the male principle), and the “ten thousand things” called the universe.

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 . . .¹⁷

What is most remarkable about such productivity is that no part of it is the outcome of any activity. “*Tao* invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone.”¹⁸ This is a reference to the doctrine of *wu-wei*, Tao’s effortless manner of bringing forth being from its nothingness or simplivity. It is wrong, of course, to read *wu-wei* as a formula for doing absolutely nothing. According to Chuang Tze, the man inhabited by the spirit of *wu-wei* is a man who habitually “empties” his heart of vain self-preoccupation. Purified of whatever is unnecessary, artificial, and unnatural,¹⁹ the selfless and humble heart, like a window, can fill with light, becoming for others as well a source of illumination.²⁰

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

17. Tao Te Ching, ch. 42.

18. Ibid., ch. 37.

19. Tao Te Ching, ch. 9.

20. Chuang Tze (Thomas Merton edition) IV, 1.

Their resting place.

Resting, they are empty.²¹

To live in the Tao is also to stand at the pivot of the Tao, "where all affirmations and denials converge,"²² where opposites harmonize, where each of the "ten thousand things," on getting done, comes undone, returning to its beginning.

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)²³

To live in the Tao, accordingly, is to live by the law of reversion, in that harmony which results from "letting things alone,"²⁴ from not taking sides, from not interfering. What both *wu-wei* and the law of reversion require is a certain simplicity of life reminiscent of the simplicity of Tao itself. "Though, like objects, (the man of Tao) has form and semblance, he is not limited to form. He is more. He can attain to formlessness."²⁵ Simplicity means formlessness. It means not placing one's heart or one's treasure in anything that is liable to be lost (e.g., possessions and prestige), but in "no-place," that is, in Tao itself, "its root in the One."²⁶



Confucianism and Taoism appear, on first inspection, to carry divergent attitudes towards time: the former emphasizing its connection to the process of self-mastery (the way of man); the latter emphasizing its importance to self-transcendence and the convergence of the self with the Tao (the way of Heaven). In the *Book of Changes* or the *I-Ching*, we

21. Ibid., XIII, 1.

22. Ibid., II, 3.

23. Tao Te Ching, ch. 16.

24. Chuang Tze XI, 1-2.

25. Ibid., XIX, 2.

26. Ibid., XIX, 2.

find an attempt to reconcile them. Originally a book of divination consulted by Confucian and Taoist alike, the *I-Ching* categorically states that the success of any action requires the cooperation of the natural workings of the *Tao* in the universe,²⁷ particularly in the “law of reversion,” the fact that everything involves its own negation.

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.²⁸

Indeed, even if “everything (in the universe) is constantly changing into something else,”²⁹ because the universe itself is “a continuous whole,”³⁰ nothing is absolutely different or separate from everything else. Quite the contrary, in this universe which revolves around the *Tao* in an endless cycle of change and transformation, “all things are one.”³¹ But while change in the universe may be cyclic, it is not repetitive. Rather, it 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.”³² Indeed, the *Tao* in fact is explicitly identified with the Creative:

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.³³

27. Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai, introduction to *I Ching*, trans. James Legge (Bantam Books, 1969), lxvi–lxvii.

28. *Ibid.*, lxxv.

29. *Ibid.*, lxxviii–lxxix.

30. *Ibid.*, lxxi.

31. *Ibid.*, lxxviii–lxxix.

32. Thomas H. Fang, “The World and the Individual in Chinese Metaphysics,” in *The Chinese Mind*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: East-West, 1967), 240.

33. *Book of Change* (Wilhelm translation) II, pp. 1–2, 4, 8, 10, quoted by Thomas H. Fang, “A Philosophical Glimpse of Man and Nature in Chinese Culture,” in *The Chinese Heritage*, edited and published by Youth Culture Enterprise Co., Ltd., 94.

The Confucian can hardly disagree with the claim that, faced with a creative world, he must be “equally creative in order to fit in” and “become a co-creator” with it.³⁴ The Taoist, on the other hand, is in no position to reject the idea that, as occupant of the central position between Heaven and Earth, he must seek not only to achieve a measure of harmony between himself and the universe, but also to enter into “a fellowship of sympathetic unity . . . with other persons in thought, feeling, and action.”³⁵ This entails observing *chung*, or taking the mean of *yin* and *yang* in any given situation. Thus, one does not “forget danger in time of peace so as to protect one’s peace; (does) not forget ruin in time of security so as to preserve that security; (does) not forget disorder in time of order so as to guard that order.”³⁶ ∞

34. Fang, “The World and the Individual,” 241–42.

35. Fang, “A Philosophical Glimpse,” 111.

36. Chai and Chai, introduction to *I Ching*, lxxxiii.