

**Zhang Dainian and Cheng Yishan** (張岱年, 程宜山)

*Zhongguo wenhua jingshen* 《中國文化精神》 (*The Spirit of Chinese Culture*).

Beijing: Peking University Press, 2015. 319pp.

Mainland China has undergone dramatic cultural changes in recent years. From the title *The Spirit of Chinese Culture*, one might expect to find a timely reflection of recent changes in Chinese folk culture in this book. But in fact folk culture is mentioned only in passing the first time (104) and then criticized as “selfish” and “superstitious” the second time (235). The authors consider philosophical refinement as representative of Chinese culture and aim to settle a 400-year-long debate (up to 1980s) over the identity of Chinese culture in the face of Western culture.

In the Introduction, the authors state that a discussion of Chinese culture needs to employ a “correct methodology,” by which they mean a “self-conscious acceptance of the guidance from universal truths in Marxist dialectical and historical materialism” (12). This cannot fail to cast a cloud of suspicion on what is to come, a suspicion ultimately justified by the authors’ systematic references to Marx and Engels in the basis of argumentation. Still, a sensitive reader can perceive two levels in the book—the first ideological and the second analytical—that often shift within a single section. For example, after examining how the concept of private property can illuminate the way in which individualism emerges from the Western family system, the authors immediately charge Western family relationships with reducing natural emotions to “ice-cold cash transactions” (57). Perhaps the authors had assigned themselves different functions, and one of them is mainly responsible for issuing value judgments to make the critiques of Chinese culture as politically correct as possible.

Tracing the development of traditional Chinese philosophy, the authors identify Confucianism (儒家) as the dominant theme in Chinese culture. The spirit of this Confucianism is said to consist of “vigorous action” (剛健有為), “harmony and the mean” (和與中), “upholding virtues and utility” (崇德利用) and “harmony between Heaven and man” (天人協調). The fundamental guideline is said to be “vigorous action,” which further consists of “unremitting self-improvement” (自強不息) and “using virtue to navigate through myriad things” (厚德載物) (14-15). The authors compare Confucianism

\* Zhang Yin is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at CUNY Graduate Center; email: jzhang2@gradcenter.cuny.edu.

to Legalism (法家), observing that the dominance of Confucianism over Legalism in Chinese culture results from the former's capacity for having political power positively construct everyday life, whereas the latter's conception of power as an external discipline defies public acknowledgment by the feudal landlord ruling class (107-109, 124). The authors reject national chauvinism, wholesale Westernization, and reconciliatory eclecticism before proposing creative integration to form a new Chinese culture.

The outstanding strength of the book lies in its use of ancient texts to support critiques of sinocentrism (華夏中心主義) (65-66), the traditional examination system (科舉制) (206-209), and cultural despotism (文化專制主義) (222-227). This approach to original voices tremendously animates the philosophical debates as in their critique of the Westernists (洋務派) and Reformists (維新派). Also praise worthy is the use of historical evidence to support their arguments. For example, to oppose geographic determinism (21-23), the authors trace the different outcomes of "familism" (家族主義) in China and the West back to the modes in which the primitive patrilineal clans evolved into slave societies. Likewise, compared to France and the United States, the authors attribute British nobility to the Glorious Revolution.

The book nevertheless comes up short, as it relies upon literal readings of philosophical works for textual interpretation. For example, the authors charge Li Zehou with being contradictory about whether ideology should be considered an aspect of a society's nature (302). But, with more charity, the authors could have read Li as toning down the idea that an influential ideology can by itself constitute the basis of social existence.

This uncharitable interpretive strategy hinders the authors' appreciation of certain precious aspects of Chinese culture, as is also painfully obvious in their discussion of Daoism. Clearly, whatever Daoists mean by the chronically ill-defined "nothingness" it includes in a cultural context goes much beyond the tired "passivity," "quietness," "gentleness," "diminishment," "peacefulness," or the vaguer "weakness" that critics adduce. The authors employ perennial clichés and discard Daoism without attempting to defend its rationale. To take just one example, while commentators have widely regarded Zhuangzi (莊子) as having relativized knowledge claims, the authors interpret him as rejecting all analytic methods (173). More controversial is the authors' characterization of Zhuangzi as an intuitionist who proposes that we rid our hearts of knowledge and desires to intuitively perceive the Dao. Here the authors fail to consider the alternative, that Zhuangzi is engaged in a descriptive project that groups people into two realities with different codes of happiness. This descriptive project may not carry any normative force that obligates "human" beings to change their "small" nature for the sake of imitating the "big" ways of

“heaven.” Arguably, the end of Hundun (混沌 primordial chaos)—the allegory that concludes *Zhuangzi*’s Inner Chapters—aims to show that human efforts at crossing the boundary between “big” and “small” are fatally futile.

The authors ignore similarities between Chinese and Western culture. For example, in a discussion of the highest value in Confucianism, the authors quote Mencius (164) as claiming that human nobility follows from heavenly nobility. It is natural to associate this Confucian thought with Matthew 6:33 in the Bible, according to which seeking the kingdom of God brings fulfillment of worldly needs. Rather than taking such chances to compare Western and Chinese thinking—as, say, Choong Chee Pang has done in a comparative study of Qu Yuan’s pleading to heaven and Job’s pleading to God, the authors cherry-picked shallow interpretations of Western canons to create a contrast with what they see as a Chinese culture dominated by Confucianism. To advocate harmony between humans and nature in Confucianism, the authors claim that Christianity situates humans outside and above nature (43). To show that Confucianism encourages people to create a better life, the authors claim that Christianity instructs sinful believers to abandon worldly happiness for the sake of eternal life (86). The authors also regard St. Augustine as advocating strict separation between church and state (60) without considering contemporary scholars’ challenge to the old chestnut that he advises that one lead a Christian life apart from politics.

Overall, this outdated book offers a one-sided introduction to Confucianism dictated by Marxist value judgments. Without a charitable interpretative strategy, the authors mangle Daoist insights and fail to accurately present the positions they oppose. Without an adequate appreciation of Western culture, the authors’ positive proposal of creative integration rings hollow. This book fails to present the spirit of Chinese culture. Still, the authors cover the major cultural topics and figures, so reading the book can allow the reader to become familiar with the terms of Chinese cultural debates.

*Reviewed by Zhang Yin*