



Restoring Culture Back to Its True Nature: The Perception of “Culture” in Traditional Chinese Hermeneutics

LAISSONS LA CULTURE RETROUVER SA JUSTE PLACE- LA CONCEPTION DE LA “CULTURE” A L’INTERPRETATION DE LA LITTÉRATURE CHINOISE TRADITIONNELLE

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Abstract

In the ancient The Book of Change of China, “script” means the manifestation of all things into certain phenomena or appearances. The “human scripts” refers to the human culture that “saints are using to organize things”. In this sense, “culture” refers to “achieving universal peace and order” with the “scripts” as the means of education so as to realize the harmony and prosperity of the world. In this case, the cultural activities show the meaning of things in nature or the artificial products, which presents the unique lifestyles and values of the Chinese people. The concept of “culture” in traditional Chinese Hermeneutics has become a “meaningful pattern” because of the people living with it.

Key words: Chinese culture; Traditional Chinese Hermeneutics; The Book of Change; Achieving universal peace and order with scripts

Résumé

Dans le livre ancien de Chine qui s’intitule “Mutations”, le sens du « texte » se réfère aux cieux et la terre est affichée dans tous les phénomènes de l’extérieur (la manifestation) ou physionomie, les « sciences humaines » se réfèrent aux « saints utilisées pour soigner la question de la culture humaine. En ce sens, la « culture » est « le texte dans » sont définies par l’illumination de la « culture », de

manière à parvenir à la paix et l’ordre d’efficacité. À ce stade, le point culminant des activités culturelles, est la caractérisation de la signification des objets naturels ou artificiels pièce, qui ont été présentés dans des ensembles de style de vie unique et des valeurs. Concept traditionnel chinois herméneutique de la « culture » dans l’arrière-plan, en raison des activités de personnes au cours de la spéciale « forme significative ».

Mots clés : La culture chinoise; L’Interprétation du chinois traditionnel; Livre des Mutations; Le texte traduit en

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The 20th Century is a period when “culture” was talked the most among all centuries in history. However, so far the word “culture” is still a concept without explicit interpretation. According to the research of American cultural anthropologists in 1952, there were over 160 definitions for “culture”.¹ Similarly, Chinese scholars also have different understandings on the definition of culture.

Liang Qichao thinks that “culture is a valuable enterprise created by the human mind”. Liang Suming defines culture as “a way of life” or “something people all live on”. Hu Shi holds a similar idea with Liang Suming that “culture is a way of life created by a certain civilization”. The understanding of “culture” on its broad sense is exactly Liang Suming’s definition that “the meaning of culture covers economy, politics and

¹ In 1952, American cultural anthropologist A. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn co-authored *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, which listed more than 160 definitions for “culture” created by the western academic circle from 1871 to 1951. In 1965, Moore listed over 250 definitions for “culture” in his book *The Social Progress of Culture*. Later on, Russian scholar Kelterman found that the definitions for culture had exceeded 400 when doing comparative studies on the definition of culture.

everything else". What's worth notice is that the definition of "culture" actually has its origin in traditional Chinese Hermeneutics.

Let's go back to the ancient *The Book of Change* and try to comprehend the true meaning of "culture" in the Chinese tradition.

First, "script" in *Xi Ci II of the Book of Change* refers to the manifestation of all things into certain phenomena or appearances.

The Book of Change is comprehensive and all-inclusive. It tells about the heaven, the earth and the human world, which are all explained in their positive and negative senses. Therefore, there are altogether six aspects that constitute the world. These six aspects cover all the changes and interactions between different elements in the world. The interactions between the six aspects are represented by the divination marks. All kinds of divination marks represent all the material things in the world. "Script" represents the interactions between the material things. When the interactions between the material things are inappropriate, good or ill luck will emerge.

The annotations for this paragraph by Wang Bi and Kong Yingda explain the relationship between "script" and "Dao", "divination mark", "material thing": First, both "material thing" and "divination mark" can be divided into different types. "Material thing" is divided into "heaven and earth", and "divination mark" is divided into "Yin and Yang". The changes of "material thing" and "divination mark" originate from the changes of "Dao". Second, "script" represents the complicated interactions of everything in the world and their state of existence between heaven and earth. Third, if the movements of all things in the world do not interfere with each other, there will not be good or ill luck. If their movements are inappropriate, good or ill luck will emerge.²

Therefore, we can say that "script" means all kinds of patterns of things in traditional Chinese Hermeneutics. In *Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters*, "script" is explained as "interweaving graphs and images". In *Xi Ci of the Book of Change*, there is such a comment: "to observe images from the sky, to comprehend the rules from the earth, and to watch scripts from living creatures." Therefore, "scripts of Heaven", "scripts of the earth", "scripts of human beings", "scripts of animals", rays of the sun and the moon, shapes of mountains and rivers, Yin

and Yang, positive and negative, male and female, ..., all these manifestations, phenomena and appearances and their interactions in nature and in society are "scripts".

Second, the "scripts of human beings" in *The Book of Change* indicates specifically the human culture that "saints are using to organize things". In *Tuan Ci Book of Divinatory Symbols of Bi of the Book of Change*, there is a paragraph³:

Bi indicates smooth going. Softness comes and supplements rigidity. Therefore, things will be smooth going. The pattern of the symbol is that rigidity takes the lead and softness supports. Therefore, "if things move this way, the situation will ameliorate slightly". Rigidity and softness interweave and form scripts, which is the pattern of Heaven. Civilization is formed, which is the human scripts.

The original meaning of Bi is "decoration", "rigidity and softness decorates each other".⁴ However, in Tuan Ci, the counterpart of "the scripts of Heaven" is "the human scripts" manifested by "the formation of civilization".

So, how to understand the sentence "civilization is formed" here?

The shape of Bi is Gen on top and Li at the bottom. Kong Yida explained that "civilization is Li and Gen is formed".⁵ Li indicates fire and the sun. Fire gives out light, and the sun brings brightness. Gen indicates mountain and formation. The original meaning of "formation" is "the base like the root of a plant".⁶ Therefore, "civilization is formed" can be understood as "the basis is civilization". When the scripts of the human activities are "shining brightly", they will be "formed" into certain knowledge such as customs and rituals, thus forming the colorful cultures of human beings, which is exactly "the human scripts" in "the formation of civilization".

Similar with "the scripts of Heaven", "the human scripts" is the shape of Bi as well. The explanation of Bi in *Xiang Ci Book* is "fire under mountain", which means Gen—mountain—on top and Li—fire—at the bottom. Fire is under mountain and the plants on the mountain are living vigorously because of the fire.⁷

If we try to understand "civilization is formed" in this way, we may comprehend the two aspects of "the human scripts" mentioned by Kong Yingda including "organizing things" and "educating people". The two aspects cover

² More details refer to *Proper Meaning of the Book of Change*, notes by Wang Bi [Wei Dynasty], edited by Kong Yingda [Tang Dynasty]. It is collected by *Collating Notes on the Thirteen Classics*, 1979 edition, Zhonghua Book Company, p. 90.

³ "Tuan" means "judge", i.e. judging the meaning of divinatory symbols, which is usually a summary of the theme of the divinatory symbols based on the shapes and appearances of the symbols. This book is the explanation of the 22nd divinatory symbol, Bi, in the *The Book of Change* by Tuan Ci Book.

⁴ Kong Yingda's explanation. See *Proper Meaning of the Book of Change*, notes by Wang Bi [Wei Dynasty], edited by Kong Yingda [Tang Dynasty], which is collected by *Collating Notes on the Thirteen Classics*, 1979 edition, Zhonghua Book Company, p. 37.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The meaning of "formation" in *Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters* is "the base like the root of a plant. Therefore formation indicates the foot."

⁷ The explanation of "civilization is formed" in *Essence of the Book of Change* is "the formation of civilization is the human scripts. Formation means coming into the state of civilization." Such meaning of "formation" can also be seen in the phrase "formation of the supreme goodness", which means coming into the state of the supreme goodness.

everything related to the material and spiritual activities of human beings.

Material culture means the material products created by human beings in order to survive and develop, including growing plants to get food, weaving cloth to make clothes, constructing houses to live in and making vehicles to travel by ancient people as well as the industrial products by modern men. All these products are made by human beings by transforming and rearranging the existing structures in nature with certain kinds of knowledge. This is the aspect of "organizing things" of "the human scripts".

As the counterpart of material culture, spiritual culture is the human activities related to the human mind, including philosophy, ethics, literature and art. It has "a signifying system, through which...a social order is conveyed, reproduced, experienced and studied".⁸ Spiritual culture represents the meaning of things in nature or produced by human beings, presenting the lifestyles and values that only belong to human beings.

Let's take eating and drinking as an example. Besides the practical aim of filling the stomach, people can express some spiritual meanings through such activities. When people are eating together, by giving away food or persuading other people to eat people can show their friendship or respect to each other. When a person is eating alone, he can show his gratitude and respect for the ancestors through cleaning the tableware and behaving himself, conduct self discipline by following some commandments (e.g. Buddhists only eat vegetables), commemorate ancient people by eating some special food (e.g. rice dumpling at Dragon Boat Festival), or even show the elegance of himself through cooking in a subtle way and eating gracefully. Sometimes, even the tableware have their special cultural connotations. For example, the Chinese have been using the chopsticks to eat for thousands of years. There is a poem about chopsticks that reads "two good friends, go to bed together, and get up together; go to a meal, hand in hand, eating together the delicious food". On the one hand, the poem reflects the cultural tradition of China that the Chinese people love peace and rituals; on the other hand, it shows people's appreciation of the cultural spirit of "equal sacrifice and win-win cooperation" represented by the chopsticks.

The creative activities of some folk artisans reflect realistically their current living condition and folk customs of that time. The paper-cut work named *Visiting a Grave* by a peasant woman named Wang Guiying in

northern Suzhou, which shows an activity of her family—visiting the grave of family ancestors to worship them and to sweep their tombs, is a narrative reflecting the local customs through visual images. Her other works such as *Mixing the Sand*, *Installing Electric Wires*, *Go to a Fair*, *TV Reporters Interviewing Me*, *Beijing Won the Olympic Bid*, etc. are telling about her everyday life. The colorful paper-cuts are the truthful records of Wang Guiying's life.⁹

All these show that people can transcend the limitation of the self and extend infinitely the meaning of life. The infinity is actually where the true value of human activities lies. This is the aspect of "educating people" of "the human scripts".

Third, the phrase "to use the scripts to form" in *The Book of Change* means to use "the scripts" to educate, which has the great effect of achieving universal peace and order. In *Tuan Ci Book of Divinatory Symbols of Bi of the Book of Change*, there is such a sentence:

Observe the scripts of Heaven in order to comprehend the changes in nature; observe the human scripts in order to realize a harmonious human world.

Let's try to analyze why "the human scripts" can help people achieve harmony and order in the human world: When people observe the changes of "the scripts of Heaven", they may comprehend the rules of changing of the four seasons. Similarly, when they observe "the human scripts", they can use what they learned to educate the people and achieve universal peace and order.¹⁰

What's more, since the changes of "the scripts of Heaven" are natural changes that conform to the rules of Heaven and earth as well as Dao, the education through "the human scripts" is also a natural and smooth process. It can never be rigid dogma or dictation. In *Tuan Ci Book of Divinatory Symbols of Li of the Book of Change*, there is such a sentence:

Li means obviously attached. The sun and the moon are both obviously attached to the sky. The grass and trees are all obviously attached to the earth. The sun rises every day, following the rules of Heaven. Hence the world is created.

"To achieve universal peace and order" is like how the sun and the moon are obviously attached to the sky and how the grass and trees are obviously attached to the earth. How the recycling of the sun has created everything in the world is a beautiful story and a natural course. The ethics between the King and the subjects, between father and son, between elder and younger brothers and between husband and wife are natural results of respect

⁸ The definition of culture by Raymond Williams. Raymond Williams, *Culture*, Glasgow, 1981, p.13.

⁹ See Yang Naiqiao, "The Principles of Ecological Aesthetics of Folk Paper-cut Art: From *Foster Mother* to *Four Seasons that Are Cut out*", *Contention in Literature and Art*, No.6, 2010.

¹⁰ The interpretation of Wang Bi: "If people observe the scripts of Heaven, they will comprehend the changes in nature; if people observe the human scripts, they will realize a harmonious human world". The comment of Kong Yingda is: "Saints observe the human scripts, and they will know how to educate people and achieve universal peace and order."

and affection. The merging of the human affection will finally make all human beings an integrated whole again. Besides, the upper level educates the lower level in order to help them achieve their own integration. The root of the harmony and prosperity of the world is the mutual assistance between the higher and the lower levels. When people are doing so, the result is just a natural outcome.

“To achieve universal peace and order” on the basis of “a natural process” means not only ameliorating the human life so as to expand and deepen the spiritual meaning of the daily activities of human beings; it can also make all the “scripts” existing in the world become “meaningful patterns” because of the human activities. When the world is merged into an integrated whole, all things are in order and all the people are living in harmony. The universal peace and order will be achieved in this state of union of nature and man.

Therefore, when we return to the meaning of “culture” in traditional Chinese Hermeneutics, the focus of our attention will not be “whether the 21st Century is a century of the Chinese culture”, but how to realize the communication and dialogue between the Chinese culture and the culture of the world in the bilateral and multilateral cultural interactions, inter-penetrations and communications. I believe that only on this sense can the

process of “the globalization of the Chinese culture” have its actual possibility. Only in this way can the Chinese culture realize at the root of the issue its function of promoting the development of human civilization and the realization of the harmonious relationship between all nations in order to make progress together in the world.

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