

◎ Value System with Chinese Characteristics

Gergely Salát

Chinese thought, culture and society is often said to be 'Confucian', although Confucianism is only one element of the ideas that influenced China in the past two millennia. Others are traditions formed in the prehistoric age (e.g. the cult of ancestors), different philosophical schools, religions and foreign influences. A mixture of different ideas determines the attitudes of the Chinese.

The same is true for their values. We cannot actually talk about a 'value system' here, as that implies something consistent. Chinese tradition lacks an Aristotelian logic, where 'A' and 'non-A' cannot be true at the same time. In Chinese thought, one thing and its opposite can be valid simultaneously. In the West, we tend to think in terms of correct reasoning and syllogisms, while the Chinese prefer to accept the co-existence of contradictory things, symbolised by the harmony between Yin and Yang – two principles that are opposite, but at the same time complementary.

Of course China is also a very varied and colourful nation. Cadres, peasants, artists, businessmen pursue different aims, as do members of different generations, inhabitants of different regions, people of different educational backgrounds. While these huge dissimilarities are normal for Europeans, we tend to think of China as a monolithic bloc with people like parts of a huge machine. The truth could not be further from this. And China is rapidly changing, so what is true today may not be tomorrow.

Therefore we cannot present a complete picture of the Chinese value system. We can, however, present some elements that influence how Chinese society works. But we should not forget that there are always exceptions. For example, the Chinese usually place their family above all, but there have always been extremely individualistic people; the Chinese tend to respect authority, but we can always find cynics and rebels.

Order and hierarchy

The most valuable thing in China is order, and basically all other social values derive from it. Anything that contributes to order is valuable; anything that endangers it is despised. The classical word for 'order' (*zhi*) is the same as that for 'governance'. Thus order can only be achieved through government, that is, by definition, hierarchical. If governance fails – which has happened several times in history – the worst thing of all ensues: chaos (*luan*). The most important task of the government is to maintain order – an extremely hard task in this huge country, and the legitimisation of any Chinese government is based on its ability to maintain order.

Chinese society and Chinese notions of society have always been hierarchical. The need for hierarchy has never been questioned; the presence of those who lead and those who are led is seen as a natural phenomenon that secures order. This is not only true for state and society, but for all other organisations, including the family.

Society is a complex structure, where everyone has his or her designated position. Position, ideally, depends on virtue: the more virtuous one is, the higher the position. Someone in a high position should be respected, since their status theoretically reflects

virtues, merits and abilities, not skills in acquiring power. This never meant that leaders were always the most virtuous men, but that is the ideal. The Chinese sometimes seem obsessed with position and rank; this is because the need for hierarchy is widely accepted and rank and virtue are thought to accompany it.

Every position in state, society, company, organisation, family, comes with a set of duties; how highly a person is valued depends on how well they fulfil their duties. The important thing is outward appearances. The inner qualities of a person do not really count, and their private life is rarely discussed. In fact, the Chinese have a completely different notion of sincerity and integrity: Westerners say a person is sincere if their words and deeds reflect their inner feelings; in China, sincerity means that a person's inner feelings are in accordance with their outward behaviour.

Family

Traditionally the basic units of society are families, the most important thing in the life of the Chinese. We should note that, firstly, Chinese families tend to be bigger than Western ones: they might incorporate distant relatives, sometimes hundreds of them. Secondly, Chinese families are more hierarchical than Western ones. The elders can guide or even give orders to younger members, while the young must obey and care for the elders. Thirdly, families do not comprise only living members, but also dead ancestors and future generations. Fourthly, families in the West are associated with feelings such as love and intimacy; in China, family is more a source of duty, and fulfilment of these duties is seen as the real meaning of life.

Family imposes limits on one's freedom, as everyone is expected to work and live for their family, obey the *pater familias*, and contribute to the welfare of relatives. On the other hand, family provides security: relatives should use their influence and money to support family members. If I am in trouble, relatives will help; if they are in trouble, I am expected to help. Family is an extremely important institution in a country with no real social security system.

The Chinese are often said to be community-oriented, rather than individualistic. This is only true as regards the family: the Chinese feel their most important duty in life is to promote the prestige, wealth and influence of their family. However, outside the family, the Chinese are just as individualistic and competitive as Westerners, or even more so. Unlike the Japanese, Chinese people from different families do not co-operate well with each other in a company, since fundamental loyalty is with family, not company. Family enterprises are very effective, but those run by non-relatives face many problems due to lack of trust.

Family is also at the centre of religious life. The cult of the ancestors is a family cult, but other religions are also seen as vehicles for promoting the good of the family. While Christians basically strive for personal salvation, the Chinese pray for a son, business success, passing an exam, etc.

State and civil society

Traditionally the Chinese state was modelled on the family. The emperor was the head of the family, the ministers the elders, with the people as ordinary members. Local officials have been called popularly "father and mother officials". As in a family, inferiors had to feed and obey their superiors, while superiors had to guide and care benevolently for

subordinates. We must, however, remember this was the *Chinese* family model, based more on duty than passion: in Chinese families the elders could punish, or even kill, junior members. Individuals had no rights, such as private property, within the family and in the same manner people had no rights towards the state. The present Chinese government seems to follow the example of the benevolent and autocratic imperial state.

Traditionally, there was nothing between families and the family-like state: China lacked middle-level institutions and organisations representing the interests of a particular group. The notion of civil society in Europe differs from that in China. Although China has been inspired by European ideas since the early 20th century, Confucian philosophy still provides the underlying framework for China's societal value system. Some communities existed, such as village organisations or guilds, but these did not have the same function than their counterparts in western societies.

Though the notion of civil society is now rapidly changing, it is still true that most Chinese civil organisations are founded by the state to transmit the will of the political leadership to sectors of society. Trades unions, women's federations, academies are all organised and controlled from above, rather than initiated from below. This fundamental difference between China and the West should be kept in mind in contacts with Chinese 'civil' organisations.

Since the 1990s an ongoing discourse on civil society and on the application of this concept has arisen among Chinese intellectuals. This debate is strongly interlinked with the discussion on the causes of the decay of the former Soviet Union, China's further political development, and the issue of establishing a new framework for state-society relations. Whereas in the early 1990s many academics wanted to "learn" from this "Western concept", meanwhile the focus has shifted to whether the concept is applicable to China's conditions and if so how to implement it.¹⁴

A distinct set of Chinese values

As we have seen, family is traditionally near omnipotent regarding individuals, and the state is near omnipotent over everybody. Chinese society is still bound together by a set of duties, and under such conditions freedom, rights, individuality, personal sovereignty are naturally not considered as values. On the other hand, a series of values emerge that the Chinese are very proud of.

Respect for the elders is one. While we in the West worship a cult of the young, in China old people are respected and are to be cared for. Actually the Chinese look down on Westerners who do not take care of their aging parents.

Another value is responsibility. People who contribute greatly to the welfare of their community are widely respected; those who think only of themselves are despised.

A third group is diligence, conscientiousness, love of study, high saving rates, etc. These values come from the fact that the Chinese do not work only for themselves, and their aim is not to seek pleasure. They study and work for their families and their child: they seem content with a lower living standard if they can save money for their child's studies, so that the next generation has better living conditions.

Keeping face can also be considered a value. 'Face' (*mianzi*) means dignity, image, prestige, reputation, how someone is seen by others. Since a person's value is judged by

14 Also see Heberer, Thomas: *Creating Civil-Society Structures Top-down?* in: Bruno Jobert/Beate Kohler-Koch (eds.), *Changing Images of Civil Society. From Protest to Governance*, London and New York (Routledge) 2008: pp 87–104.

their role in the community, it is strictly forbidden to question that role: humiliating or offending someone is something like a crime. For this reason, the Chinese try to save face in all circumstances, one's own and others. Open conflicts and debates, natural as they are in the West, are quite rare in China.

Personal relations (*guanxi*) are valued highly. Since other ways of promoting one's interests are limited, the Chinese get things done through their informal personal networks: relatives, friends, old schoolmates, fellow countrymen. This *guanxi* network, based on trust and mutual favours, is essential for survival in China. While Westerners trust institutions, the Chinese place their trust in people they know personally.

Practical considerations

When we co-operate with Chinese people or organisations, the most important thing is to respect them, their traditions and values. The Chinese have heated discussions on the compatibility of Chinese values and the modern world, but outsiders should not intervene. While many Chinese are unsure whether their traditions, such as autocratic control, fit the modern world, they are still very proud of them. We should not question them.

Hierarchy must also be respected. Chinese organisations – including cultural ones – are much more hierarchical than many Western ones. In working with a Chinese organisation, it is not a good idea to pick those individuals who seem most appropriate for us. We should not try to bypass the leader of that organisation, even if he doesn't seem an ideal partner. Chinese leaders tend to be men in their 50s or 60s, with less flexibility and language skills than their subordinates, but circumventing them would mean loss of face. Chinese partners expect us to be hierarchical and we should adapt to them: directors should talk to – and take photos with – directors, vice-directors with vice-directors etc.

We should not be surprised if bureaucracy gets involved. State and party are theoretically omnipotent and omnipresent in China. If a party secretary is present at a negotiation on, say, a joint exhibition, this may mean censorship to us, but is a sign of official attention and affirmation for our Chinese partners. This is much more important for the Chinese than for us, even in cultural matters. An artist's value is judged by the community, which is represented by officials. We may smile at state prizes and evaluations, but they are very important for the Chinese.

Both in personal and official communications we should try to preserve our and our partners' face. We should not bring our own conflicts to China, since the lack of a clear and unified will makes us ridiculous. Open debate is a value in the West, but a fault in China. We should also avoid offending our partners: for example, if they break a promise or do not tell the truth, we should not admonish them openly, as they would lose face; instead, we should circumscribe the situation very politely. They will understand.

If we have long-term plans with China, it is essential to form our own relationship network. No institutional contact can be as effective as personal relations. Trust is one of the highest values for the Chinese and, if we can win their trust, everything is possible. For that, however, we must be open, tolerant, understanding and respectful. And, of course, we should never lose our sense of humour. ▲

FURTHER READING

Dawson, Raymond (2000): *The Chinese Experience*. Phoenix Press

Eberhard, Wolfram (1971): *Moral and social values of the Chinese*. Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center

Heberer, Thomas: *Creating Civil-Society Structures Top-down?* in: Bruno Jobert / Beate Kohler-Koch (eds.), *Changing Images of Civil Society. From Protest to Governance*, London and New York (Routledge) 2008

Pan, Zhongdang (ed.) (1994): *To See Ourselves: Comparing Traditional Chinese and American Cultural Values*. Westview Press

Wu Genyou (2008): *Peace: The Roots of the Cultural Tradition and Values of the Chinese People*. Foreign Languages Press

Zhang, Everett; Kleinman, Arthur; Tu, Weiming (eds.) (2011): *Governance of Life in Chinese Moral Experience: The Quest for an Adequate Life*. Routledge

About the author

Gergely Salát PhD is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Humanities, ELTE (Eötvös Loránd University), Budapest, Hungary and head of the Center for Modern Chinese Studies at ELTE Confucius Institute. He has lived in Beijing for four years, and taught Chinese history, culture and language at different institutions in Hungary for over ten years.