

DID THE CHINESE PEOPLE HAVE NO PAIDEIA
AS REAL CULTURE?
The Werner Jaeger Thesis Revisited

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It is universally recognized that upon cultural growth depends the future of any community, any nation, and all humankind. Werner Jaeger, Director, Institute for Classical Studies, both at Harvard and University of Berlin, Germany, has advanced the distinction between mere culture and ideals of culture; the latter he called *Paideia*, namely real culture. Unfortunately, due to ignorance or misunderstanding, he classified the cultural traditions of China and India to the former category, i.e., without *Paideia* as real culture. This is a serious charge and challenge. Thanks to Dr. George C. H. Sun of Alabama and Dr. James W. Kidd of California for their age-long joint scholarly efforts at critical clarification, we are enabled to present to our esteemed readership the fruits of their collaboration, at once brief and insightful.

Problematics: Did the Chinese People have no *Paideia*?

In this paper we wish to take some issues with Werner Jaeger, by focusing on his thesis that of all early nations in the world only the Greeks can be said to have *paideia*, i.e., real culture; for no other culture—Chinese, Indian, Babylonian, Jewish or Egyptian—has even a word that corresponds to the Greek notion *paideia* as ideals of culture. Instead, we maintain that the ancient Chinese people did have their *paideia* which, in certain senses, is superior to its Greek counterpart as conceived by Plato and Aristotle. For decades in the West Werner Jaeger, formerly Dean of Philosophy Faculty, University of Berlin, Germany and Director of the Harvard Institute for Classical Studies in the United States, had been highly esteemed as the most distinguished authority on Greek philosophy (especially Aristotle) and history of ancient culture.¹ Among his disciples is Ludwig Chung-Hwan Chen, an Aristotelian scholar. Also he was greatly admired for his classical scholarship by Thomé H. Fang.

Culture vs. Ideal of Culture

In *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture* Jaeger exhibited both great insight and great limitation, too—if not great folly. His merits consist in adopting a *paideia*-oriented, hence axiologico-centric view of education in classical Greece; whereas his weakness lies in espousing a Helleno-centric,

hence a Western-European chauvinist view of world cultures in general. Take his merits first.

He is right in maintaining: 1) that “the basis of education is a general consciousness of the values which govern human life”; 2) that for the Greeks “the ever present aim of their life was the creation of a higher type of man”; and “they believed that education embodied the purpose of all human effort”; 3) that “what we call culture today is an isolate thing, the final metamorphosis of the original Greek ideal. In Greek terms, it is not so much *paideia*, as a vast of disorganized external apparatus for living”; 4) “However highly we may value the artistic, religious, and political achievements of earlier nations, the history of what we can truly call civilization—the deliberate pursuit of ideal—does not begin until Greece”²; and 5) that only a nation with *paideia* can be said to have real culture. But he has gone so far as to conclude that, thus, of all ancient nations only the Greeks can be properly accorded such a distinction:

We are accustomed to use the word culture, not to describe the ideal which only the Helleno-centric world possesses, but in a much more trivial and general sense, to denote something inherent in every nation of the world, even the most primitive. We use it for the entire complex of all the ways and expressions of life which characterize any one nation. ... Thus the word has sunk to mean a simple anthropological concept, not a concept of value, a consciously pursued ideal. In the vague analogical sense it is permissible to talk of Chinese, Indian, Babylonian, Jewish or Egyptian culture, although none of these nations has a word or an ideal which corresponds to real culture. ... Of course every highly organized nation has an educational system; but the law and the prophets of the Israelites, the Confucian system of the Chinese, the *Dharma* of the Indians are in their whole intellectual structure fundamentally and essentially different from the Greek ideal of culture. And ultimately the habit of speaking of a number of pre-Hellenic ‘cultures’ was created by the positivist passion for reducing everything to the same terms: an outlook which applies hereditary European descriptions even to non-European things, and neglects the fact that historical method is falsified by any attempt to apply our conceptions to a world formula to them. ... Our kinship with Greece is not merely racial, however important the racial factor may be in understanding the nature of a people.³

Jaeger distinguishes “culture” in the sense of a merely anthropological concept, which means the entire way of life or character of a particular nation, from “culture” in the humanistic sense as the conscious ideal of human perfection.

His argument for the thesis that “this ideal of culture is a specific creation of the Greek mind” rests simply on such a distinction. This Eurocentric attitude is imperialistic and oppressive! Similarly, we are no less

surprisingly disappointed by Hajime Nakamura, formerly Dean of College of Liberal Arts, Imperial University of Tokyo, Japan when he stated in *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* that “in Chinese there is no single word capable of expressing precisely the meaning of ‘to become’ as there is in modern European languages.”⁴ What, then, has *The Book of Changes* been all about?

By the same token, the Jaeger thesis is seen to be quite questionable because its argument is based, firstly, on the fallacy of linguistic determinism and secondly, on the fallacy of *monomania* or *argumentum ad ignorantiae*, if not suppressed evidence!

Could then one claim that the ancient Chinese people had no drink and no food because they had no word corresponding to “coffee” and “hamburger” as real drink and real food! And how can one claim that all other ancient nations have no ideal of culture because theirs differ essentially or accidentally from the Greek one?

Cheng-jun as the Chinese Paideia

As a matter of historical fact the Indian culture is *sadhana-oriented*, through and through, concentrating both on the goal of self-realization and on the means thereto. The ancient Chinese culture, particularly, was not lacking in a word or an ideal corresponding to the Greek concept *paideia*.

That word is “cheng-jun” (literally, “achieving harmony” in the full sense as the ideal of human perfection). It parallels *paideia* i) in the original etymological sense before the 5th Century B.C. as “child-rearing”; ii) in the later extended general sense as “education,” or “culture” as “the moulding of character”; iii) in the highly sophisticated humanistic sense as “the ideal of man’s perfection”; but obviously free from *paideia*; iv) in the degenerated sense of the Alexandrian period when it came to designate mere learning.

The Chinese *paideia* had taken shape in the course of its historical evolvment from time immemorial, going through the Three Dynasties of Tang, Yu and Xia and culminating in the Zhou Dynasty (12th to 4th Century B. C.).

The Chinese people of antiquity, while “aiming at the creation of a higher type of man,” are thus seen to have conceived *paideia* even in the strict sense of “a consciously pursued value,” as Jaeger stresses, yet “expressible in the form of the unity of man and heaven and earth by cosmic identification and cosmic participation.”

In the full sense, “achieving harmony” signifies the concord of microcosm and macrocosm ranging from the achievement of a well-

balanced, integrated personality of harmony to the achievement of the state of what Teilhard de Chardin calls the omega-point as the consummation of comprehensive harmony on the cosmic scale or what Alfred North Whitehead calls Peace as the Harmony of Harmonies.

It is to be noted 1) that, for the Chinese people as for the Greek, the value to be consciously pursued is none other than the ideal unity of Supreme Good and Perfect Beauty; 2) that, for the Chinese people, such an ideal of culture suggests, in the human terms, the idea of the grand commonwealth as the great world community and, in the cosmic terms, it suggests the idea of “complete fulfillment of all forms of Life in proper order”; 3) that the ideal personality—“the higher type of man”—that the Chinese people have aimed to create, according to Confucius, Laotzu and Chuangtzu, represents the whole program of self-fulfillment ranging from “a) the common run of men, to b) the learned and en-lightened person, c) the superior man or jüntzu, d) the great man, and e) the sage or the holy man.”

Superiority of the Chinese *Paideia*

Generally speaking, the superiority of the Chinese *paideia* consists in a different philosophical anthropology: The Greeks adopt a bifurcational view of the human being as good vs. evil, soul vs. body, though the rational; whereas the Chinese regard the human being as the center where heaven and earth intercept, hence the core or heart thereof, aiming to concord in virtue with heaven and earth as a participant in the transforming and nourishing process of the cosmic creative advance, in order to fulfill an avocation as the cosmic citizen. Specifically, we will attempt at a sixfold view of the superiority of the Chinese *paideia* as follows:

- 1) On the Supreme Good as transcendent vs. transcendental—Though both the Chinese and the Greek have in tendency aimed at the realization of an ideal, nevertheless not in exactly the same sense: in Greek thought the problem of separation—ideality vs. actuality—cuts a gap hopelessly unbridgeable, puzzling even the great mind of Plato; whereas in Chinese thought the guiding model, as embodied in the doctrine of an all-pervasive unity, is the principle of interpenetration for comprehensive harmony, viewing Supreme Good under the aspect of perpetual creativity as always in the making;
- 2) On Harmony as static vs. dynamic—The Greek adopt a static view of harmony mathematically determined, emphasizing permanence at the sacrifice of flux, thus unable to intuit permanence in flux and flux in permanence (as Whitehead puts it); whereas the Chinese take a dynamic view of harmony, as taught in *The Book of Creativity*, so as to see the

fluctuating phenomena of Change in the light of Time and Timeliness and to take flexibility, rather than fixedness or rigidity, as the model of adaptation to the concrete situation;

3) On the doctrine of exalted personality—The ancient Chinese philosophers in their doctrine of exalted personality advanced the program of self-actualization ranging from “the junzhu to the great man and the holy man” as the realization of the ideal of sageliness within and kingliness (leadership) without, by way of the three cardinal virtues of wisdom, loving-kindness and moral courage; whereas the ancient Greeks in their doctrine of the ideal type of human being advocated the development from the hero to the aristocrat and thence to the philosopher-king, taking virtue as *aretê* in the sense of excellence, etymologically cognate with “aristocracy,” paralleling the English ideal of “gentleman” which takes its origin in the ideal of “chilvary” of the Middle Ages. How can the Platonic cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, and moderation, be compared with the Confucian version?

4) On the doctrine of emotions—The Greeks taught the importance of controlling emotion through the dominance of reason and curbing desire by refining emotion; whereas the Chinese view suggests the feasibility of having desire properly conducted, rather than curbed and emphasizes “allowing the human nature to take its course” as the spontaneous manifestation of the heavenly reason at work, with a view to self-transcendence by self-transformation, self-creativity for soteriological function;

5) On ideal politics—The Greek *paideia* inspired Plato’s *Republic* as the blueprint for the scheme of the ideal state to come; whereas the Chinese sage-philosophers from Duke Zhou to Confucius pointed directly to the sublime ideal of the grand commonwealth;

6) On actuality of ideal leadership in history—Indeed, no true philosopher-king seems to have ever appeared on the historical stage in the West for more than two millennia since Plato for whom, as well as for Socrates, even Pericles was found to have fallen short of such a lofty ideal; whereas in the history of China we have witnessed at least in the person of Duke Zhou a concrete exemplification of the ideal of the unity of sageliness within and kingliness (leadership) without!

Paideia, Aims of Education and the Ideal Politics

Our present discussion on *paideia* is inseparably bound with “the aims of education” as the central concern. It is of special interest to notice that the educational theory and practice in modern China had been predominantly influenced by John Dewey for thirty years (1919-1949), to the effect that not until 1929 had the aims of education been officially promulgated by the Chinese Ministry of Education! For Dewey advocated that education is growth, other than which there should be no aims at all, for fear that the business of education might degenerate into merely a means of propaganda, manipulation or control mechanism, serving only the self-interests of those in power or even any one person rule, such as we have witnessed in Nazi Germany and all the other totalitarian-despotic states! Yet, at the same time we should not forget that it is the fixed, rigid, ignoble kind of the aims of education that Dewey opposed.

According to Liu Yi-Zheng in *A History of Chinese Culture* the aims of education had been age long ago anticipated by Confucius’s grandson Tzu-sze in *The Doctrine of Equilibrium and Harmony*. We shall strive to the utmost after the ideal of “the complete fulfillment of Life of all forms by participating as co-worker with heaven and earth in the same transforming and nourishing process of the cosmic creative advance.”⁵ As used in the Greek language, *paideia*, “aims of education,” and “ideal politics” are so closely interrelated that they simply form a trinity.

The same with ancient China, especially during the Zhou Dynasty when the State was developed as a moral and a cultural community as well, according to Wang Kuo-wei.⁶ The ideal politics raises one question, simple but crucially important: What is the *raison d’etate* for the State?

a) The State is a field of enterprises in which the life a part of humanity comes to be perfectly realized. All the steps it takes are for the insurance of happiness and the protection of safety due to its people. b) The State is not merely a formal organization of political, economical, and military activities, but, what is more important, a community in which the moral ideals may be realized by way of these activities. c) The State should be a perfect and commodious school having for its function the refined cultivation and the full development of all the capacities latent in its people. d) The State is, also, a realm of cultural values. Aside from the mechanism of government, it must create fair opportunities whereby every citizen, besides fulfilling the necessary civil duties, is enabled to develop fully his or her special talents with a view to hastening the advancement of cultural creations.⁷

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Notes

- 1) A Profile: Werner Jaeger, Ph.D., Litt. D., university professor at Harvard University and director of the Harvard Institution for Classical Studies, was born at Lobberich, Germany, in 1888 and received his early education at the Gymnasium Thomaeum at Kempen at the Rhineland. In 1907 he attended the University of Marburg and thereafter the University of Berlin, whence he gained his doctorate in 1911. In 1913 he taught at the University of Berlin and in 1914 at the University of Basel, Switzerland, where he was professor of Greek language and literature. He became full professor of classics at the University of Kiel, Germany, in 1915 and in 1921 returned to the University of Berlin as full professor of classics, holding that chair until 1936. He was also dean of the Philosophy Faculty during 1935-1936. He came to the United States in 1936 as professor of Greek at the University of Chicago and remained there until 1939, when he joined the Harvard Faculty as University Professor and Director of the Institute for Classic Studies which was established that year. Professor Jaeger visited the University of California in 1934 as Sather Professor of Classical Literature. He gave the 1936 Gifford Lectures at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. He was a member of the central directorate of the Archaeological Institute of the German Reich until 1936 and from 1926 to 1930, was President of the Association of Classical Scholars, Archaeologists and Ancient Historians. He was a member of the Academy of Berlin, Copenhagen, Munich, Stockholm and Bologna, of the British and American Academies and of the Humanities Societies at Lund and Budapest. He was, besides, an honorary fellow of the Society for Hellenic studies in London and an honorary member of Phi Beta Kappa. Three universities had awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters: Manchester, 1917; Cambridge, 1931 and Harvard 1936. Professor Jaeger had contributed to most of the leading publications of classic scholarship and was himself editor of *Die Antik* (1925-1937) and of *Neue Philosophie Untersuchungen* (1926-1936). Among the most important of his many works are: *Entstehungsgeschichte der Metaphysik des Aristoteles* (1912); *Nemsius von Emesa* (1931); *Aristoteles* (1923), English edition (1934); *Plato in Aufbau der griechischen Bildung* (1928); and *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. I (first edition in 1933, English edition 1939, translated into several languages; vols. II and III, Oxford University Press, N. Y., 1943); his Gifford Lectures of

- 1936: *Theology and Early Greek Philosophies*; and *Humanism and Theology*, the Aristotelian Society of Marquette University Press, 1943.
- 2) Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, translated into English by Gilbert Height (New York: Oxford University Press, Third Edition, 1954), pp. xv-xviii.
 - 3) *Ibid.*, pp. xviii-xiv.
 - 4) Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (Honolulu, Hawaii: East-West Center Press, 1964), p. 204.
 - 5) Liu Yi-cheng, *A History of Chinese Culture*, Eighth Edition (Taipei: The Cheng Chung Books Co., 1968), Vol. I, pp. 316-317.
 - 6) An eminent classical scholar in the late 19th century China, Wang was the first to introduce the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer into the literary criticism of the monumental masterpiece *The Dreams of the Red Chamber* or *The Story of the Stone*.
 - 7) Wang Kuo-wei, "An Essay Concerning the Institutions during the Yin and Zhou Dynasties," *Complete Works* (Taipei: Yi Wen Books Co., 1956), Vol. X, p. 2.