Cultural Reflections on the Great and Originating Period: Chen Lai 陈来 and the Creative Transformation and Innovative Development of China’s Rich Traditional Culture

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Abstract
Since the 1980s, Chen Lai has been attempting to resolve the binary opposition between tradition and modernity. He has contemplated the position of tradition in modern society from the perspective of “multicultural structures”, emphasizing the continuity of traditions of value rationality. In an exceptional move, he has departed from monistic universality and established “poly-universalism” to rethink the mode of existence of universality. He argues that universality is not an exclusive mode in which one must select one universalism or another, but rather that each civilization contains inherent universality. While certain conditions are required to realize universality, one cannot comprehensively replace the universal values of one civilization with those of another. Based on this cultural view, and considering the relationship between the basic principles of Marxism and traditional Chinese culture, Chen upholds the essence of benevolence, promotes the new four virtues, and reflects on the value of traditional Confucian virtues in contemporary China.

Keywords: pluralistic structures, poly-universalism, tradition and modernity, benevolence, virtue

Kulturne refleksije velikega in izvornega obdobja: Chen Lai 陈来 ter ustvarjalna transformacija in inovativni razvoj bogate tradicionalne kitajske kulture

Izvleček
Od osemdesetih let 20. stoletja dalje si je Chen Lai prizadeval za razvozlanje binarne opozicije med tradicijo in modernostjo. O poziciji tradicije v sodobnih družbah je razmisljal skozi optiko »multikulturnih struktur«, pri čemer je poudarjal kontinuiteto tradicij racionalnega vrednotenja. V izjemnem koraku je presegel monistično univerzalnost in vzpostavil »poliuniverzalizem«, ki mu je bil v pomoč pri razmisleku o obstoju univerzalnosti. Poudarja, da univerzalnost nima zgolj ene same oblike, zato naj se ne bi bilo treba odločati o tem, ali izberemo en ali drug tip univerzalnosti; prej gre za to, da vsebuje vsaka civilizacija svojo lastno,
inherentno univerzalnost. Četudi je za vzpostavitev univerzalnosti potrebno izpolnjevanje določenih pogojev, pa univerzalnih vrednot ene civilizacije ne moremo enostavno nadomestiti z univerzalnostjo neke druge civilizacije. Na temelju tovrstnega kulturnega pogleda ter ob upoštevanju razmerja med osnovnimi načeli markizma in tradicionalne kitajske kulture Chen ohranja esenco človečnosti, širi nove štiri kreposti ter razmišlja o vrednotah tradicionalnih konfucijanskih kreposti v sodobni Kitajski.

**Ključne besede:** pluralistične strukture; poliuniverzalizem; tradicija in modernost; človečnost, krepost

Among the scholars of his generation, Chen was an early proponent of the importance of Confucian values, and since 1987 he has continued to focus on “cultural Confucianism”.¹ This has allowed him to resolve the tension between tradition and modernity, while also actively constructing and striving to realize China’s outstanding creative transformation and innovative development. His position on traditional culture is based on in-depth theoretical research and thought, and is therefore distinct from the nostalgic nationalistic thinking of many scholars. He affirms that cultural conservatism and the subjectivity of national culture should not be dominated by “emotion”, but rather should be based on “rationality”, oriented towards the healthy development of Chinese modern culture, and guided by the harmonious development of global culture. Chen has systematically addressed the question of whether Confucianism and its value traditions are relevant in modern social culture. He has explored the implementation of Confucian values in social and cultural spaces, as well as in personal lives, and explored the theoretical possibility of transforming the values of Confucianism. The possibility of social disorder and confused values brought about by traditionalism and anti-Confucianism has provided a new ontological foundation for Confucian values in philosophy, and has enabled the “great function of the whole”全体大用 of Confucianism to be manifested in the present.

In order to explore Chen’s thought in detail, we can roughly divide his thought into two stages based around the year 2000. Before 2000, the purpose of Chen’s cultural thought was primarily to theoretically resolve the tension between tradition and modernity. He deconstructed the rationality of anti-traditional positions and thoroughly criticized various anti-traditional theories. After 2000, Chen actively took up the mission of cultural awareness, and his thought shifted towards cultural construction. First, he focused on revealing the core values of Chinese

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culture, and second, he engaged in philosophical construction and tried to establish a new philosophical foundation for Chinese culture. It’s worth noting that these two stages are not completely divided, as many of Chen’s ideas in the 21st century have their roots in earlier times, some as early as the 1980s, such as his research into the virtues in Confucianism. However, this division into two stages could help us discover some characteristics of Chen’s cultural view.

This article is divided into three parts. The first analyses Chen’s view of the relationship between tradition and modernity, pointing out that we shouldn’t see tradition and modernization as in opposition, as tradition has the possibility to revive in a modernized world. The second part analyses Chen’s attitude of poly-universalism, emphasizing that every civilization has its own universality and one shouldn’t suppress the other. The third part analyses Chen’s attitudes towards the revitalization of Chinese civilization. The three parts together offer an overall articulation of Chen’s thoughts on cultural issues as a whole, thus presenting Chen’s deep concerns (and responsibilities) as a modern Chinese philosopher.

**Tradition and Modernity**

As early as 1987, Chen publicly affirmed his cultural conservatism and conducted a systematic review of cultural trends since modern times. In this context it is worth noting his academic seminar on “Problems and Prospects in the Development of Confucianism” sponsored by the Institute of East Asian Philosophy in Singapore in the summer of 1988. More than 40 Chinese scholars from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United States, Canada, Japan, and Singapore participated in the conference. They represented various schools of thought, and especially the three major ideological trends in mainland China in the 1980s. The proceedings of this meeting were collected in the book *A Macroscopic Perspective of the Development of Confucianism* (儒学发展的宏观透视) (1997). From this work we can clearly see the cultural views and standpoints of the participating scholars at that time. Throughout the text, Chen showed no hesitation in defending the core values of tradition and the subjectivity of national culture. His views on tradition were always based on his own standards and did not rely on external ones. He refuted anti-traditional views from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Chen submitted two papers for this conference: one was “An Evaluation and Reflection on Traditional Confucianism – Reference Materials for this Year’s Discussion of Confucianism”. This article set out in detail the attitudes of various schools with regard to Confucianism at that time, and it showed his complete understanding of the state of the ideological world. This is the fundamental quality
of Chen’s research—what he thinks and believes is never aimless speculation. Whether it is assimilation, reference, criticism, or dialogue, his arguments are always based on a full understanding of relevant viewpoints. This stands in contrast to the cultural activities of many notable figures, and it means that his writings are still worthy of further study by today’s scholars. His other article at the conference was “Confucianism and Its Position within a Multicultural Structure” (1997a). This was Chen’s official conference paper, and many of the arguments are still perfectly sound propositions for the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture.

In “Confucianism and its Position within a Multicultural Structure”, Chen responded to some of the criticisms of Confucian culture made by radicals of the time:

> When we demand that Confucianism embrace science and democracy, and that Confucianism provide a direct utilitarian spiritual source for the process of modernization, I cannot help but wonder: have we ever demanded the spirit of Faust from Buddhism, the theory of democracy from Shinto, individual liberation from Hinduism, or scientific epistemology and methodology from Catholicism? … (Chen 1997a, 53–54)

Chen criticized the utilitarian view that required Confucianism to provide an impetus for modernization. He believed that this requirement was a manifestation of pragmatism, behind which there was a psychology of eagerness for rapid success and instant benefit, and that it amounted to an accusation against Confucianism. As to Confucianism’s relationship with modern times, we cannot demand that it be transformed into a system that accommodates all the values needed by modern society, just as we cannot demand that old inner sages inspire new outer kings—in fact, no matter whether or not the old inner sages can inspire new outer kings, it will not affect our understanding of the value of Confucianism in modern society. These issues that Chen raised were affirmed by Du Weiming 杜维明, who is also a cultural conservative, but also by Gan Yang 甘阳, who generally holds different positions. These issues were profound and powerful and became a highlight of the meeting.

Following the thesis of his 1987 article “Looking Forward and Backward at Modern Chinese Thought”, which required Confucian ethics to cooperate with the social practices of the modern political and economic system in modern society, and maintain itself in an appropriate form as an indispensable part of social life (Chen 2009a, 25), Chen abandoned the cultural model of transformative Confucianism: the idea that the “old inner sages” could inspire the “new outer kings”. He believed that Confucianism could not be required to provide everything for modern China, nor could Confucianism be allowed to restore the status it had attained
in traditional China. Herein, Chen proposed a plan to resolve the tension between tradition and modernity from the perspective of “multicultural structures”. He pointed out that “the functional effect of an idea in a certain culture is necessarily related to the structure of the entire culture, as well as the status of this idea within the entire cultural system determined by the structure” (Chen 2009a, 29). Confucianism, which had played a leading role in traditional society, was confronted by the impact of the West, and this had led to many problems. This was because “the irrationality of the structure caused an ‘overstep’ effect for Confucianism, that is, its moral value surpassed its position and it invaded fields such as politics, cognition, and art” (ibid., 30). Today, it is necessary to “construct a new cultural structure, to adjust the position of Confucianism in the new cultural structure, to eliminate its negative elements such as its ‘overstep,’ and to continue to exert its positive value rationality” (ibid.). Moreover, Chen states that cultural modernization is not based on breaking with tradition. The key may be to deploy rational cultural elements and to achieve a benign structure, so that the synthesis of the multicultural system will indicate a more ideal direction, rather than forcing every element in the system to point towards the same direction. (Chen 2009a, 31)

In the face of contemporary Chinese cultural issues, we should not blindly criticize Confucianism and make it bear all the guilt, since “we are not to think about the ways and means of further development of Confucianism in terms of Confucianism itself, but rather to comprehensively design its development by placing it within the multiple interactions of the modern construction of Chinese culture” (ibid.). The establishment of such a structure means “to return Confucianism to its proper position, which can be said to be a matter of ‘repositioning’. But the reorientation of Confucianism does not exclude criticism and development. The critical inheritance and modern interpretation of Confucianism must also contain adjustment, reflection, supplementation, and development” (ibid., 32). Here we can see that Chen is truly aware of the pluralism and variety of cultural structures, as he deftly points out the crux of the problems and presents solutions to resolve the contradictions. At present, when we think about the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture, it is important to base ourselves on the overall rejuvenation of Chinese culture, and to find out the contemporary positions of both Confucianism and tradition. It is necessary that we “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto Confucius the things that are Confucius”, so that we could promote the positive factors of Confucianism and the practice of “multicultural structures”, which is a particularly urgent issue of our times.
This “pluralistic” position is the basic content of Chen’s cultural outlook. Beginning from the position of a multicultural structure, Chen opposes examining Confucianism and Chinese traditions from a utilitarian standpoint, and thus argues that we cannot demand that Confucianism enrich the country, strengthen the military, enhance the legal system, and develop high-grade technology. Chen points out that it was originally common that modern Chinese people lost their trust in Confucianism from a functional perspective. Now, however, criticism of Confucian ethics from economic perspectives such as those of Weber and Parsons has strengthened intellectuals’ tendency to judge cultural values using functional coordinates. With such a sharp contrast between internal and external comparisons, the impetus for “total westernization” is highly likely to grow. Once these ideas are commonly shared among the people, it will be no surprise if cultural radicalism comes to power again. (Chen 2009b, 92)

Elsewhere, Chen notes that people always critically reflected on tradition when China was in the key periods of its “frustrations with modernism”, and these criticisms have been based on the general feelings of ‘frustrations with modernism’ in society at that time. In other words, whenever modernization is frustrated, there is bound to be a strong, general sense of frustration, and during periods of modernization, there will arise a questioning of culture, an inquiry into the cultural reasons for the difficulties of modernization. (Chen 2009c, 334–35)

Anti-tradition arguments based on this kind of mentality are clearly emotional, and they are non-reflective attitudes with a desire for rapid success and instant benefit. Such attitudes were the basic mentality of many scholars during the cultural boom at the end of the twentieth century.

At the same time, Chen does not view Confucianism and modernization in opposition, and does not believe that the relationship between tradition and modernity is unavoidably in tension. In his view, although Confucianism cannot produce modern values, it can accommodate them, and it can promote China’s modernization, as seen in the practices of industrial East Asia. Second, Confucianism can play a value-regulating role for the ills of modernity. The importance of Confucianism in the cultural structure of contemporary China is reflected in its promotion of national cohesion and the shaping of national cultural self-confidence. It
is also reflected in the value of Confucianism in overcoming the division between modern morality and modernity, and thus giving full reign to the positive elements of Confucianism will help China achieve modernization without the ills of modernity. Third, Chen emphasizes that the revival of Confucianism depends on modernization, and indeed that the greatest condition for the revival of traditional thought in general is modernization. As early as 1987, Chen predicted that “once China realizes modernization, the redevelopment of Confucian tradition will surely come. At that time, superficial anti-traditional thoughts will disappear, and a cultural revival rooted in our profound national tradition will inevitably take its place” (Chen 2009a, 28). At the end of 1991, Chen was invited to contribute to Hong Kong’s *21st Century* magazine. At the beginning of the column “Looking Forward to the 21st Century”, he described his outlook on Confucianism in the article “The Cycle of Heaven and Human Affairs Passing Endlessly Onwards”, in which he pointed out:

The most severe test for more than two thousand years that Confucianism has experienced has been the plethora of criticisms by intellectuals in the 20th century led by notions of cultural enlightenment, economic function, and political democracy. But today, as the 20th century is about to pass, looking at the future of Confucian culture there is no reason to despair or to be pessimistic. On the contrary, I am convinced that, having passed through the last hundred years, and especially through the more recent challenges and shocks, Confucianism has passed its most difficult moment and has now exited its trough. (Chen 2015, 119)

We have seen that Chen’s predictions have come true time and time again, and entering the new century China has displayed trends indicating the revival of traditional culture, both at the levels of the people and the government. With regard to the recent rise of Chinese studies and the revival of Confucian culture, Chen observes that

government promotion is the environment, intellectual groups are the key, social culture is the foundation, but the most fundamental condition for the revival of Confucianism is the revival and re-emergence of the Chinese nation. In other words, the success of China’s modernization and rapid economic development are fundamental conditions for cultural revival. (Chen 2012)

Chen never put tradition and modernity in direct opposition, and this cultural standpoint is where his thought is particularly valuable. As Chen emphasizes,
only by removing Confucianism’s outdated content and at the same time positively and confidently affirming its spirit and principles that are valuable to modern social life, so that it can be legally used in national education and cultural construction, can we rebuild a unified national morality and a stable national spirit, moving towards a rational modern society. (Chen 2009d, 111)

This is Chen’s affirmation based on his study of tradition and modernity, and of the contemporary status of tradition. This is the practical attitude we should now be taking.

In fact, the demand for “the old inner sage to bring out the new outer king” has meant that, in terms of cultural standards, the power of judgment has been transferred into the hands of modernity. This means that, unconsciously, the success of the modern transformation of Confucianism has been judged according to whether or not it brings out Western values. Confucianism has thus been reduced in scope. Faced with this implicit attitude of compromise, Chen always looks to China and to Confucian culture for his standards of thought. As he says about himself, “my position is to ‘take China as the system’, and by ‘China’ I mean both China and Chinese culture” (Chen 2015, preface, 23). Chen has a high degree of self-consciousness in insisting on a Chinese system. First, he has always emphasized the universal status of Confucian values and been opposed to viewing Chinese culture from a position of relativism. For example, when critiquing the 1958 cultural declaration of New Confucianism, Chen stated that the declaration “mainly engaged Westerners as the objects of its dialogue, and did not comprehensively engage in dialogue with the Enlightenment Movement in modern China or with the general anti-traditional ideological system in modern China” (Chen 2010). As the declaration was communicating solely with Westerners, it implicitly surrendered the right to judge culture. Furthermore, Chen does not adopt a simple attitude of negation or defence when it comes to Western culture. When discussing the dialogue between Chinese and Western cultural values, he extracts the traditional values at the essence of a problem, ponders whether we can accept modern Western values from the standpoint of Confucianism, and asks whether we can put forward deeper thinking from the standpoint of Confucianism after having accepted such a notion. It is clear that for a period of time many scholars’ attitude towards Western values was “we have what you have”. Even though some scholars emphasized the “uniqueness” and “transcendence” of Confucian values, in fact they had subtly taken the other side’s perspective as the yardstick. Chen’s self-conscious “focusing on China” is an important characteristic of his
thinking that reaches beyond that of New Confucianism, and indeed beyond many contemporary scholars.

Chen addressed the theoretical problems of anti-traditionalism and provided a thorough response. He extensively criticized anti-traditionalism in theory, drawing heavily on Weber's theories. In fact, Weber is a resource that many contemporary Chinese scholars have used to criticize tradition, and Chen is a scholar who has long paid attention to and responded to Weber's ideas.

As early as 1987, in his article “Looking Forwards and Backwards at Modern Chinese Thought”, Chen referenced Weber's view on the distinction between instrumental and value rationality, arguing that “Confucianism has value rationality at its core, while economic reforms prioritize the development of instrumental rationality. Thus, it is unreasonable to expect Confucianism to provide concrete solutions for economic reforms. A tradition of values does not lose its intrinsic value simply because it cannot propose specific reform plans” (Chen 2009a, 25). Chen consistently stressed that “the most fundamental thing to grasp is to understand that the problem of ‘East and West, ancient and modern’ is in essence the relationship between value rationality and instrumental rationality” (Chen 2015, preface, 7). He emphasizes the intrinsic value of tradition from the independent standpoint of value rationality, and this forms the basis for his opposition to a utilitarian evaluation of Confucianism and his belief in the importance of Confucianism as the continuous development of value rationality. Here it should be noted that no scholar had previously discussed Weber's dichotomy regarding Chinese tradition and modernity.

At the same time, Chen emphasizes the tolerance and adaptation of the Confucian tradition to modernity, which was even more of a development of Weber's thought. In fact, Weber had pointed out long ago that although the Confucian tradition could not develop the values of modernity, after modernity was accepted by China the Confucian tradition could tolerate and adapt to modernity. Chen keenly grasped this point at an early stage (Chen 1994), while most domestic scholars only focused on the first half of Weber's theory when borrowing his resources, that is, that Confucianism could not produce modernity. Chen's grasp of Weber's theory of modernity surpassed that of many domestic scholars. Moreover, Weber had pointed out that although Confucianism could assimilate modernity, he thought that this was a form of “Chinese-style petrification” (Chinesische Versteinerung). He believed that China would embrace modern production methods more enthusiastically than other cultures due to the lack of tension between this world and the other side, and that human spiritual life could enter into a state of “Chinese-style ossification of spiritual life”. However, Chen notes that:
All religious traditions are in conflict with modernization. They must all be critical of its negative factors such as materialistic desires, value disintegration, alienation of human nature, interpersonal alienation, and cultural commercialization in the development of modernization. At the same time, we must admit that modernization is an inevitable development. In such a situation, religions that have an excessively tense relationship with the secular world are not suitable, but through the process of assimilation, a system that emphasizes morality and culture may form a reasonable tension with market instrumental rationality. (Chen 2009e, 240)

Regarding modernization and the relationship between modernization and Confucianism, Chen does not share the pessimistic Weberian view. Instead, he adopts the standard Chinese attitude of “this world” and “being in the world”. In addition, Chen points out the inconsistency between Weber’s research on Confucianism and on Protestantism. When Weber studied Protestant ethics he focused on secular ethics, while when studying Confucianism he focused on elite traditions and failed to analyse his questions from the perspective of secular Confucian ethics. Chen notes that since Weber only made arguments based on elite Confucian culture and ignored secular Confucian culture, his conclusions on Confucian ethics were inevitably incorrect (Chen 2015, 145). By pointing out this incoherence of Weber’s theory, Chen is able to conclude that “with regard to secular Confucian culture, Weber’s assertion that ‘there is an even stronger tension between the Confucian ideal and the ascetic Protestant concept of the profession’ is also inappropriate” (ibid.). Chen also argues that “in terms of economic behaviour, people trained by Chinese culture have the qualities of self-discipline and thrifty practice, which can play an active role in the process of simulating modernization, and the legalization of utilitarian motives provides psychological support for Chinese people” (ibid., 146). This is also the theoretical implication of Chen’s exploration of elementary learning and secular Confucian ethics.

Pluralism and Trends

We have placed particular emphasis on Chen’s 1988 article “Confucianism and its Position within a Multicultural Structure”, since it relates to my understanding of the value of Chen’s cultural theory, as I believe that this article is the origin of his view of “poly-universalism”. Moreover, the concept of “poly-universalism” is the most powerful rebuttal of the views of foreign scholars (represented by Levinson) who claimed that Confucianism had died and entered a museum. Additionally,
the article provides the basic cultural standpoint that we should have when thinking about Chinese culture and contemplating new forms of human civilization.

We find that modern anti-traditional radicalism is characterized by “monist” thinking. This “monist” cultural model reduces the complexity of the various global elements, and when dealing with China’s drive for modernization it has manifested in various forms of “cultural determinism”. With regard to world culture, it shows a certain kind of exclusive centrism, particularly Western centrism. In practice, it expects to use the “single fix” method, hoping to solve problems quickly and with rapid returns. As a historical practice it has thus appeared eager for quick success, oversimplified, and crude. Mechanization and rigidity are the primary characteristics of monism. We see such characteristics of monistic thinking in Chen’s description of radicalism since modern times. It is also worth noting that many scholars are often unconscious of being trapped in “monism”. For instance, Chen pointed out that when Hans Küng and several other scholars hoped to find common ground among different civilizations to promote world peace, in fact, this was still a kind of monism. Can we not imagine a Chinese way of thinking of ‘harmony alongside diversity’? There is no need to expect the final convergence of all religions to resolve conflicts in the world. This expectation can only be a negation of multiculturalism. Common ground in belief and ethics cannot guarantee peaceful coexistence, and more common ground in an area does not mean easy coexistence. (Chen 2011a, 14–15)

In order to oppose monism, some scholars insist on pluralism, but they end up with various forms of relativism. In this regard, Chen's concept of “poly-universalism” undoubtedly has great theoretical significance.

When Chen talks about pluralism in relation to the relationships among culture, politics, economics, and so on, he emphasizes the need to look at problems structurally. Instrumental rationality is universal, as is value rationality. As Chen says, “there is no difference in importance between the value rationality traditions of the East and the West, ancient or modern. Humanistic values must have their own independent dignity and territory” (Chen 2009f, 52). This is what he particularly emphasizes when resolving the tension between tradition and modernity. In a structure, the role of each element should be positioned to form a joint force, rather than expecting a certain element to play all roles. If a certain element is expected to play all roles, then this will cause other elements to overstep their positions, and this will lead to harsh criticism of the various elements. As for the elements in the structure, their value or function is universal, and they
generally act on every part of modern society. The realization of their universality requires the combined efforts of the whole system.

Secondly, in the face of the various civilizational systems that exist in the world, it is emphasized that the values of all civilizations are universal. It cannot be considered that only Western civilization is universal in modern society, and non-Western civilizations have a specific particular culture. This is what is argued in the previous quotation, that there is no difference in importance between the value rationality traditions of the East and West, no matter whether ancient or modern (see also Chen 2002).

Chen views the relationship between tradition and modernity and different cultures with a dialectical and a historical attitude, emphasizing the originality and the universality of the values proposed by various civilizations. He distinguishes between “intrinsic universality” and “realized universality”. The term “intrinsic universality” emphasizes the universalizing ability of a certain culture in the historical process. “Realized universality” is how much a culture’s “intrinsic universality” has been realized in certain conditions and environments (Chen 2011b, 290). A civilization may have achieved universality earlier due to historical opportunities, but this realization cannot suppress and cover the universality of other civilizations. According to Chen, globalization cannot become “globalization with a subject”. As history develops, it may provide opportunities for the realization of universality in other cultures. Therefore, we cannot only regard Western freedom and democracy as universal values. Eastern values, such as benevolence 仁爱 and equality 平等, are still universal. Here, we can see that civilizations with inherent universality can also have diverse relationships, and in the process of realizing universality, a “clash of civilizations” may occur. However, if in a worldwide cultural structure the local roles of various civilizations can be rationally brought into play, the inherent peaceful elements of each civilization can also be brought into play, and at the same time, a “culture of recognition” can be gradually established among civilizations and cultures. Then it will be possible to resolve the conflict of civilizations so that “each beauty is beautiful to all”.

On this point Chen notes:

... Philosophically speaking, it was customary in the past to think that universality is unitary, and that pluralism means particularity. In fact, diversity is not necessarily particular. Whether and how the universality of diversity is possible should become a topic of philosophical thinking in the era of globalization. (Chen 2011b, 291)
Such a cultural view amounts to an internal disintegration of the “End of History”. The root of the theory of the End of History lies in the insistence on the universality of the West, and the belief that the full realization of this universality means that there will be no new developments in human history. However, contemporary historical developments prove that we cannot expect the “End of History” to realize the ideal of human development. This extreme appeal of the West for universality may instead lead human history to a dead end. Poly-universalism sees precisely the dynamic balance among civilizations. It is that at different junctures in human history civilizations with different value systems can provide new possibilities for solving human problems and new ideas for human development. The relationship between universalities is not only competitive, as in the process of realizing universalities the various exchanges that take place between different civilizations can promote the creative transformation of each other’s cultures. The monist universal view not only suppresses the development of other cultures but also restricts the development of one’s own culture, turning one’s civilization into a rigid entity and leading oneself and others to a dead end. In the process of “recognizing the beauty of all cultures” we can absorb the strengths of different civilizations, develop our own civilization, and deepen human values with an open attitude.

Further, if we begin with poly-universalism then we can also highlight the characteristics of Chen’s own philosophical construction and cultural thinking. As a cultural conservative, Chen neither advocates total Westernization nor restoration of traditional culture. Instead, he rationally arranges the positions of ancient and modern elements into a structure, hoping that they can all play a positive role. The rejuvenation of traditional culture in contemporary China also requires vigilance against monocentric thinking within the field of traditional culture—that is, the idea that tradition is omnipotent, and that Confucian culture can comprehensively solve the various problems that China is currently facing. This approach will only lead to another kind of hurried success and oversimplification.

Poly-universalism shows us Chen’s sense of history as a philosopher. It shows us that he views human culture dynamically, historically, and structurally, rather than mechanically, rigidly, and dogmatically making judgments on cultural theory and reality. Of course, from the discussion of poly-universalism we can also see his strong concern for practical issues. Moreover, poly-universalism is still worth exploring for its significance with regard to the future development of human culture.
Creation and Revitalization

Entering the new century, Chen has consistently emphasized that,

how to make one’s own voice heard and express one’s own attitude in the face of the reality of today’s world and society (including expanding democracy, social justice, and public welfare, etc.) must become a new test ... as we enter an era of governance and security. Culturally, we have moved from the ‘criticism and enlightenment’ of the last century to the ‘creation and revitalization’ of the new century. (Chen 2011c, 10–11)

Such an era of “governing the country and ensuring peace” is the so-called Great and Originating Period 元亨之際, and “creation and revitalization” is the mission that Chen has consciously assumed in this era. Much of his thinking and writing revolves around the creativity of Chinese civilization, its transformation and innovative development. We can look at Chen’s contribution according to the following aspects.

First of all, Chen pays special attention to promoting the core values of Chinese civilization in the new era. Many of his articles go beyond purely professional research, and spread aspects of traditional Chinese culture to large and medium-sized schools in a clear, popular, and fluid style. He uses the language of modern Chinese to describe the core values of Chinese civilization. This has had profound practical significance. His contemporary practice seeks to provide a way for Confucianism to re-enter social culture and ethics. Within the context of the recent craze for Chinese studies, a large number of pseudo-Chinese studies have also appeared, which has hindered the revival of tradition. This has made it even more necessary to clearly explain the true colours and core values of the tradition to the public. Chen’s work in this area is undoubtedly the most representative among contemporary scholars. For example, he has revealed five aspects that elucidate Confucian thought about governing the country: its foundation in the person, its foundation in the people, its foundation in morality, its foundation in self-cultivation, and its foundation in the family. This clarified the Confucian outlook on life from the aspects of life attitude, moral ideals, and universal values. More importantly, Chen has outlined the most important characteristics of the core values of Chinese civilization, comparing them to modern values:

First, morality is more important than law. Second, the community is more important than the individual. ... Third, spirit is more important than matter. Fourth, responsibility is more important than power. ... Fifth, people’s livelihood is more important than democracy. ... Sixth,
order is more important than freedom. Seventh, this life is more valuable than the next life. ... Eighth, harmony is more valuable than struggle. Ninth, civilization is more valuable than poverty. ... Tenth, family is more valuable than class. (Chen 2015, 105)

The above ten items are Chen’s demonstration of the characteristics of Chinese civilization on the basis of comparison with modern Western values. Here we must pay special attention to the propriety of his conclusions. Chen emphasized that these traditional values are more important than Western values, but this is not an exclusive assertion. It is not that the Western values are not wanted, but rather that by absorbing these values he was able to highlight the values and the significance of Chinese civilization. Going back to the pluralistic structure mentioned above, we can say that Chen did not make either-or choices between values, but instead he settled these values within his pluralistic structure, under the main body of China. Thus, the core values of Chinese civilization demonstrate their uniqueness, but they also gain vitality within the structure.

Second, Chen highlights the essence of benevolence, and in doing so establishes its value. In *The Ontology of Benevolence* (2014), Chen stated, “First, benevolence is the fundamental body that is the foundation of all things; second, the fundamental body of benevolence is that which spreads all things; third, the fundamental body of benevolence is the source of life; fourth, the fundamental body of benevolence brings benevolence together with the myriad things” (Chen 2014, 68). The essence of benevolence takes the origin of values as the fundamental body of the universe and of the world, considering values as the foundation of metaphysics, and it directly provides a philosophical basis for the moral reconstruction of our society and its people. The first eleven chapters of *The Ontology of Benevolence* focus on explaining the “body”, while the twelfth chapter, “Benevolence Connects the Four Virtues”, explains the particularities of “function”, i.e., the interpretation of value. This interpretation is still based on the reinterpretation of the content of “benevolence”, but it uses the “new four virtues”—benevolence, freedom, equality, and justice—to endow the “four virtues of benevolence” of traditional Confucianism with a contemporary mission.² Chen points out that

in modern society, the theory of the four virtues should be developed, as the existing four virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom still have their value and significance. The traditional four virtues are mostly concerned with moral values or private virtues (though they are not limited to private virtues), while the new four virtues or five virtues are

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² If we add, “Harmony” then it is what Chen calls the “Five New Virtues.”
mainly concerned with social values, but the two are not mutually exclusive, they are complementary and compatible. (Chen 2014, 429)

Such a value system takes “benevolence” as the core of the structure, embraces modern values, and shows a spirit of tolerance. Furthermore, in the “New Four Virtues” the relationships among the four are no longer flat and juxtaposed. Instead, “benevolence” is used to unify the other three values, and thus takes precedence over them, which highlights the subjectivity of Chinese culture. Whether it is for traditional Chinese values or other values, Chen’s analysis is based on the “body of benevolence”. This interpretation of values beginning from the universal “body of benevolence” is another core feature of his cultural outlook.

Third, Chen expounds the virtues of Confucianism in order to resolve contemporary moral issues. Regarding the moral problems in China since modern times, in On the Virtues of Confucianism Chen once again emphasizes that we cannot criticize Confucianism for lacking certain virtues that are required today. Instead, our judgment should depend on whether the universal principles of Confucianism can be introduced or accepted in the modern context. Chen argues that “we should understand ‘Confucianism’, especially ‘Modern New Confucianism’, from a dynamic and developing perspective, and avoid using a single essentialist concept of Confucianism to judge the multiple manifestations and historical development of Confucianism …” (Chen 2019, 156–57). Chen does not want to incorporate Confucian ethics into virtue ethics, nor to use the framework of virtue ethics to “settle” Confucian ethics. Instead, he hopes to highlight the characteristics and contemporary significance of Confucianism in a dialogical relationship. Although this book begins with “virtue ethics”, where it really delves deep is in the area of “Confucian ethics” and “Chinese issues”. Its inclusion of virtue ethics is more of a question of reference and entry. In Chen’s view, Confucius provided a kind of universal value, which is manifested in the personality of a Gentleman 君子. Only by starting from the personality of a Gentleman can we see features such as the unity of principles and virtues, the unity of ethical behaviour and ethical actions, the unity of morality and immorality, the unity of public morality and private morality, and the unity of the moral realm and the super-moral realm. The Gentleman’s personality and the cultivation of such a personality show various aspects of Confucian virtue theory. At the same time, the proposal of this personality distinguishes the discourse framework from Western virtue ethics and shows the value of Confucian virtue theory. More importantly, excavating the general characteristics of Confucian virtue theory and the unique status of the “Gentleman” can provide direction for overcoming current problems. That is, we can return to the Confucian
theory of the Gentleman and rethink today’s issues surrounding moral cultivation. We can focus on the cultivation of “Gentleman personalities” rather than the one-sided distinction between “public morality and private morality”.

In 2010 Chen published his article “Confucian Research and Confucian Development in the Twentieth Century”. In this he writes that

only by an in-depth and detailed study of Confucianism over two thousand years, including its interactions with society and with systems, can we truly understand this great tradition and its partiality, can we have a true cultural awareness of the future development of Chinese culture, and will we be able to respond to the challenges of the study of Confucian learning worldwide. (Chen 2011d, 270)

He later continues,

only by organizing and reconstructing Confucianism academically and theoretically can we stand in the field of philosophical thought, gain the respect of our opponents of the debate, and form a reasonable interaction with other thought systems; only then can we persuade intellectuals and win the trust of the public, improve our cultural atmosphere and lay a solid foundation for the comprehensive revival of Confucianism. (ibid., 274).

Systematically examining Chen’s reflections on the relationship between tradition and modernity, and drawing a picture of the future of Chinese philosophy, we might consider this to be “the master speaking of others, but unwittingly describing himself”. With such a gesture, from the perspective of theory, Chen has provided us with a profound and convincing cultural viewpoint.

Summary

The series of cultural reflections presented by Chen, including “poly-universalism”, had previously not received sufficient attention within academic circles. With this article, however, we hope to bring awareness to its significance and promote its crucial cultural implications, allowing it to flourish and become an essential perspective within the cultural discourse of China’s new era.

On the journey towards the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and in the context of revitalizing Chinese culture to secure its rightful place in the world, it is this poly-universalism that emerges as the solution proposed by Chen. It is evident that as a philosopher and thinker, Chen’s proposition of poly-universalism
reflects his profound concern for the development and revitalization of Chinese culture, underscoring his deep cultural responsibility as a contemporary Chinese intellectual.

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