

The Book of Changes: Understanding China from Traditional Chinese Philosophy and History

You Yonghong

Confucius of Institute, University of Malawi, Malawi.

The University of International Business and Economics, China

youyonghong@uibe.edu.cn

Abstract

Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are the main characteristics of Chinese traditional thoughts and philosophies. However, *The Book of Changes*, also called Yi Jing or Zhou Yi, had been the original Chinese thought system earlier than Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. It can be precisely traced back to at least 3,000 years ago. *The Book of Changes* has profoundly influenced Chinese philosophy, thought and culture. Taoism originated from *The Book of Changes*, and Confucianism derives important ideological values from it. Although not the author of this thought system, Confucius studied *The Book of Changes* and made essential contributions to develop it. This paper discusses the development history of *The Book of Changes* thought and some of its key concepts. The paper also discusses the history and religious attitudes of the Chinese people. These are the essentials to understanding China and its culture.

Keywords

China,
The Book of Changes,
Philosophy,
Religion,
History

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Introduction

This paper discusses *The Book of Changes*, an ancient philosophy book in China. Chinese civilisation development process has not been interrupted, and it has maintained continuity since the invention of the Chinese writing system in the past 2,000 years. Therefore, this book profoundly impacts the Chinese spirit and current development. *The Book of Changes* has played a significant role in the Chinese culture's continuity. For this reason, the paper briefly discusses *The Book of*

Changes and Chinese people's attitudes to religion and history. With this, I hope to derive some characteristics of the Chinese spirit.

The origin and development of The Book of Changes

The Book of Changes is said to have been written by Fu Xi, who is widely and authoritatively regarded as the ancestor of the Chinese nation. Several ancient Chinese classics recorded that Fu Xi invented the fishing net and taught ordinary people to domesticate livestock. Before the Chinese letters or characters (i.e. the alphabet) were created, people usually remembered things by tying ropes. Fu Xi made letters or characters and taught people how to write, and invented several ancient musical instruments for entertainment (Fu, 2014). This was a big step towards the Chinese civilisation.

There are not enough historical records to verify the specific time of Fu Xi's era. It is speculated that Fu Xi's period was more than 5,800 years ago (Xu, 2015). According to ancient Chinese historical records, the earliest feudal dynasty in China was the Xia Dynasty (2070BC-1600BC). But so far, archaeologists have not discovered Xia Dynasty's systematic writing system (Chen, 2021). However, archaeologists had found the second dynasty's (the Shang Dynasty, 1600BC-1046BC) recurring characters and essays carved on bronze and bones. These bones with carved characters were discovered in 1899 by Yirong Wang, a high ranking official in the late Qing Dynasty (1639AD-1912AD). This is the last feudal dynasty of China history. Yirong Wang was a famous antiquarian and discovered bone engraved characters occasionally. He realised that these characters were ancient and valuable for history and archaeology. He tried to trace them to a village in Henan Province located in the central part of China (Lu, 2009). The villagers ignored the historical and cultural value of the bone engraved characters and only regarded them as a magic medicine inherited from ancient times. Some bones with inscriptions had been ground into powder and used as medicine. But the scope of these remains is enormous, and the bones are constantly being unearthed. Since then, after a century of excavation and research, archaeologists have discovered more than 154,600 bones with carved characters in this area. The type of characters

on the bones belongs to the Shang Dynasty (1600BC-1046BC), and it is the oldest and most mature stylistic system in China so far (Huang, 2019).

Rihui Xu's research found that the symbol system of *The Book of Changes* is earlier than the bone writing system. It is generally believed that the symbols in *The Book of Changes* predate the Xia Dynasty (2070BC-1600BC) (Xu, 2015). According to folk legend records, Fu Xi observed the celestial phenomena at night and all things in a day. He used the symbols to represent the sky (☰), earth (☷), wind (☴), thunder (☳), marsh (☱), mountains (☶), water (☵), and fire (☲). He named them Eight Hexagrams and believed that these symbols represented the development and evolution of all things in the world. Fu Xi connected these symbols with eight directions and used the eight hexagrams to explain all phenomena and items (Xu,2015). Dongyue Wang, a contemporary Chinese philosopher, believes it may be the oldest directional map. Before agricultural civilisation, hunting people often lost their way and could not return to camp due to the thick vegetation. But the Eight Hexagrams indicated the direction and geographical features, and it was easy for people to find their way back to the tribe camps from the surrounding geographical features (Wang, 2019).

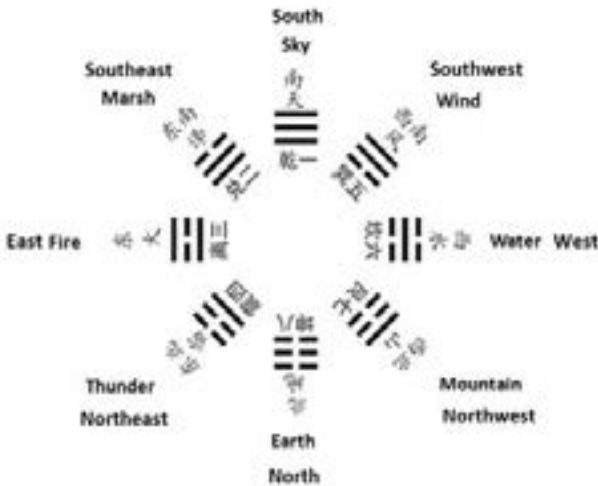


Figure 1: Fu Xi's order of Eight Hexagrams

The third feudal dynasty was Zhou Dynasty (1046BC -256BC), whose first king was is Ji Chang. Ji Chang had good management skills and was a famous emperor in China's history. He attracted outstanding talents from other tribes and granted them high-level official positions. Under his leadership, the tribe named Zhou was developing quickly. The growing of Zhou caused Zou, the last king of the Shang Dynasty (1600BC-1046 BC), to be wary and worried. Zou killed Ji Chang's father and imprisoned Ji Chang. Ji Chang worked hard to study the Eight Hexagrams during the long years of his detention. He rearranged the order of the hexagrams in the cell and believed that the new order of the Eight Hexagrams could be used to generalise the evolution and development of everything in the world. Finally, Ji Chang managed to escape from the cell and united with other tribes, overthrew the rule of the Shang Dynasty and established Zhou Dynasty (1046BC-256BC) (Wu, 2017).

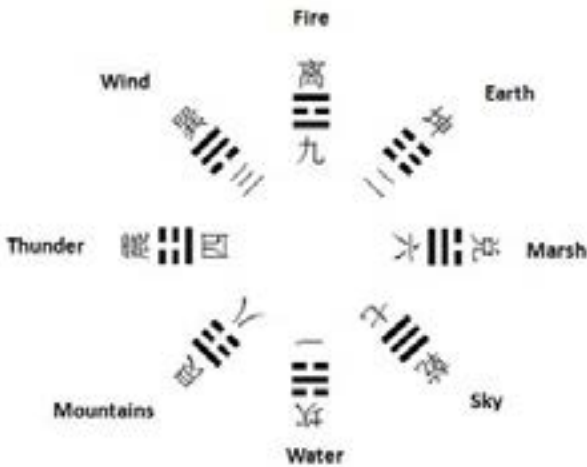


Figure 2: Ji Chang's new order of Eight Hexagrams.

(The figure was made by the author own according to the principle of *The Book of Changes*)

However, the Eight Hexagrams pattern was complicated and not enough to explain all the truths in the world, so he overlapped the patterns utilising $8 * 8$ to

form 64 new patterns and wrote descriptive words for each hexagram. Ji Chang believed that when the eight hexagrams were overlapped, different hexagrams would interact, revealing more complex changes in everything (Wu, 2017). For example, the Mingyi Hexagram (䷗), overlapping earth (䷁) to fire (䷔), is one of the Sixty-four Hexagrams. It consists of two parts: earth (䷁) and fire (䷔). The earth is above, and the fire is below, just like the fire is covered by the planet, which means the light is hidden. The implied meaning of this hexagram is that the environment is not suitable for development, and people should hide and wait for a good time. People should study and improve themselves rather than develop their careers or businesses in this period (Ji, 2016, p.109). If ancient Chinese elite people read this hexagram, they would evaluate their environment and make the necessary changes. They would change their strategy if circumstances were not good.

Confucius and the Completion of *The Book of Changes* ideology

The Confucius (551BC-479BC) period is in the Zhou Dynasty (1046BC-256BC). Confucius is the greatest pioneer of civilian education and the founder of the Confucian school in ancient China. He is one of the greatest thinkers, teachers, and social philosophers in world history. When Confucius was three years old, his father died, and his mother raised him single-handedly. Unfortunately, Confucius' mother died of illness due to overwork when Confucius was seventeen. The successive deaths of his father and mother had left a big impact on the life of young Confucius, and he was forced to work at various jobs to support himself. At the same time, the difficulties of trying to survive in this environment disciplined his will, and he tried his best to strive for improvement in a study including the "Six Arts of Ancient Curriculum", which included ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and mathematics. "Six Arts of Ancient Curriculum" had a long history that became systematised in the Zhou Dynasty (1046BC-256BC) and collapsed at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1639AD-1912AD). After thousands of years, it affected china and neighbouring countries (Liu & Gyeong-sik, 2017). On the foundation of mastery over "Six Arts", Confucius proceeded to study the ancient

classics such as *The Book of Poetry*, *The Book of Documents*, *The Rites*, *The Book of Music*, *The Book of Changes* and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, becoming a scholar who was both erudite and accomplished as well as a master of both civil and military arts. He concentrated his energies on mastering ancient classical books while accepting disciples from different social levels and engaging in the educational activities that he loved so well. His educational activities profoundly influenced the politics and philosophy of China (Kuang, 2010, p.58).

In his later years, Confucius studied *The Book of Changes*. He absorbed the essence of thought from *The Book of Changes*, which enriched the theoretical system of Confucianism. He wrote ten essays to develop further *The Book of Changes* thought, a vital Confucianism component. The ten articles systematically expounded the relationship between the arrangements of each hexagram and explained the deep philosophical thoughts of each hexagram. The core idea is dialectics and the opposition of Yin (negative) and Yang (positive) (Hu, 2018). Through Confucius' study, *The Book of Changes* thought formed a complete system, and today, it has become one of the primary sources of Confucianism. During the Confucius period, *The Book of Changes* played an essential role in all aspects of social life, especially when making decisions. Through the principles in *The Book of Changes*, people could understand the changes and development of things (Ge, 2001, p.74).

From the creation of *The Book of Changes* by Fu Xi to the final version by Confucius, the text has experienced a long history. A copy of the text in the Shanghai Museum corpus of bamboo and wooden slips (discovered in 1994) shows that *The Book of Changes* language was used throughout all levels of Chinese society in its current form by 300 BC (Chen,2005). Some scholars suggest that the final version dates back to between 829BC and 672BC (Zhang,1994; Shi & Dong, 2009).

The main ideas and philosophy of *The Book of Changes*

In *The Book of Changes*, everything is in the process of constant change, but the whole order of these changes is unchanged, and it is straightforward to find it. The development of human beings is abiding by *The Book of Changes* thought. This idea mainly includes five aspects.

The first aspect of *The Book of Changes* is that everything is opposite and unified. Therefore, both Yin (negative) and Yang (positive) factors jointly promote the development of everything. Unity and opposition are the fundamental laws of the development of everything. Therefore, Yin (negative) and Yang (positive) forces interact and promote the joint development of human society and nature.

The second aspect of *The Book of Changes* is that it calls on people to pursue self-improvement and self-introspection. Confucius said that people should constantly strive to become firm, just like the universe's evolution, and generously cultivate to become tolerant just like the earth bears everything on it. This motto is the most famous sentence about the philosophy of life in *The Book of Changes*. Human beings should imitate the characters of heaven and field to improve in the pursuit of morality and self-discipline constantly.

The third aspect of *The Book of Changes* is that everything is a long-term cycle of development. This thinking shows that Yin (negative) and Yang (positive) constantly interact and transform. All things of the world are consistently developing all the time. For human beings, the development process of things represents hope. At the same time, the good and bad aspects will also change each other. There is an ancient Chinese fable that can illustrate this point. A young man fell from a horse and broke his leg. He thought it was so bad, but his father comforted him and said that maybe it was a good thing. Indeed, several days later, the dynasty forced and recruited young people to fight on the frontline. This war was fierce, and many people lost their lives.

The fourth aspect of *The Book of Changes* consists of the call that human beings must be good at thinking and be flexible rather than fall into stagnation

and rigidity. *The Book of Changes* emphasises flexible strategies and believes that all development processes will decline when these processes get to the maximum or summit. Therefore, people should constantly adjust themselves and adapt to new environments. Everyone has many paths to choose in the long life. However, only by weighing the pros and cons can one ensure progress and development.

The fifth and final aspect of *The Book of Changes* is that quantitative changes will result in qualitative change. *The Book of Changes* advocates that people should engage in self-introspection and make more progress every day. Only in this way can people promote themselves, their spirits and morals. This idea requiring people to be introspective has specific characteristics of religious thinking. The profound connotation and content of *The Book of Changes* thought, just like the *Analects*¹ (one of the critical texts of Confucianism), is also an ethical code and guideline of conduct for Chinese elites.

In the past, most Chinese intellectuals would study *The Book of Changes* to find methods and laws for cognition of all things. However, most ordinary people in ancient China did not have the opportunity to participate in school education and could not learn about these precious ideas. Therefore, *The Book of Changes* is usually regarded as a divination book by ordinary people. Some people maybe recognise *The Book of Changes* as a religious doctrine. However, in terms of its main ideas, it is a philosophical book because it does not propose or appeal to gods or ghosts but highlights the value of people. Confucius said, “Honour heavenly fate yet keep it at a distance” (Confucius, 2016, p.121). Consider one of the hexagram’s images: Qian (☰), which means the sky, and strong. Confucius said that we could get the revelation from which one person should strive for self-improvement. This means that heaven gives people enlightenment that people should continue pursuing and improving themselves in competence and ethics (Huang & Zhang,

¹ *Analects* is an ancient Chinese book composed of a large collection of sayings and ideas attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius and his contemporaries, traditionally believed to have been compiled and written by Confucius’s followers. It is believed to have been written during the Warring States period (475–221 BC), and it achieved its final form during the mid-Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). *Analects* is one of the key texts of Confucianism.

2007, p.1). Therefore, *The Book of Changes* is an ancient Chinese philosophical thought rather than a religious doctrine. *The Book of Changes* encourages people to objectively understand the laws of the development of things and pursue their self-worth rather than worshipping a particular person or a particularly mysterious phenomenon. This outstanding humanistic thought in *The Book of Changes* has profoundly influenced Confucius' religious views (Gao,1998).

The influence of *The Book of Changes* on the religious views of the Chinese

To know about Chinese views on religion, one must trace back and comprehend Confucius' ideas towards religion. As an essential component of Confucianism, *The Book of Changes* has profoundly shaped the values and religious concepts of the Chinese people. Confucius' view exerted an important influence on the development of Chinese thought, and his religious view was manifested mainly in his theories on heavenly fate and ghosts and spirits. He said,

“gentlemen should honour heavenly fate yet keep it at a distance”.
 “gentlemen did not discuss strange marvels, brave feats of strength, rebellions or ghosts and spirits” (Confucius, 2016, p.121,139)

“There are three things of which a superior man is in awe. He is in awe of the will of Heaven. He is in awe of great men. He is in awe of the words of sages”. “Without knowing the heavenly fate, you will not become a gentleman.” (Confucius,2016, p.322,388)

On Confucius view on heavenly fate, the *Analects* discloses the complicated connotations of 'heaven'. On the one hand, it implies a 'heaven with a volition'. On the other hand, this 'heaven' hints at an anthropomorphic spirit. Confucius once expressed his awe of the order of heaven. He said, “if one offends heaven, then it is of no use to pray.” (Confucius, 2016, p.55). It is clear that 'heaven' is an anthropomorphic spirit that can understand human affairs and punish. At the same time, Confucius used two approaches to rid 'heavenly fate' of its mystical qualities. One of these approaches was to unite 'heaven' with the human realm and emphasise the relationship between heaven and the human individual, for heaven bequeathed 'virtue' to people. Confucius sacralised the moral culture that

he inherited and advocated its connection with the 'virtue' inherently of heaven. In other words, his conception of heaven derived from his ethical thinking that was based on humaneness. This was significant because 'heaven' was no longer an utterly mysterious power beyond human affairs that controlled humanity; instead, it possessed human qualities (Kuang, 2010, p.58).

The second approach to rid 'heavenly fate' of its mystical qualities was rationalising heaven as a force of nature. As Confucius said, "What does heaven say? The four seasons operate as always, all things grow as always, the order of nature is the words of heaven" (Confucius, 2016, p.341). This implies that the way nature operates was the same as the conception of heaven; no longer was the Way of Heaven a mysterious force. Instead, it was a natural principle with its own set of rules, so the existence of heaven fate now became rationalised.

What are Confucius' views on ghosts and spirits? On the one hand, he perhaps had ideas that he did not express; maybe he respected ghosts but kept away from them. Confucius usually avoided speaking about them. He said, "Gentlemen did not discuss strange marvels, brave feats of strength, rebellions or ghosts and spirits." (Confucius, 2016, p.139). On the other hand, he told his disciples, "if we do not understand the way of life, how can we understand death?" (Confucius, 2016, p.210). Confucius was concerned with the practical matters of life while he did his best to avoid a discussion or study of death, ghosts and spirits.

To summarise, Confucius' views on 'heavenly fate' and "ghosts and spirits" are strikingly different from religious theology. Like a contemporary historian named Yutong Zhou said, "Confucius' view of religion emphasised moral cultivation within the human realm. Therefore, he did not discuss the questions of pre-existence or life after death, or of ghosts or spirits" (Zhou, 1996, p.3). American scholar Hebert Fingarette also remarked,

Confucius said that neither human morality nor spiritual accomplishments depended on the intervention of spirits who either deceive or bless or rely on mysterious spells or any purely external force. This

thinking takes an additional step in deepening the practical, these world qualities of humanism represented (Fingarette,1972, p.2-3).

The Book of Changes' ancient thought accepts religions and gives Chinese people diverse choices. It believes that there is no absolute truth or supreme gods, although mysterious powers exist. Beliefs play a pivotal function in unity and harmony in human society. *The Book of Changes* encourages people to pursue morality because the power of ethics can be the same as the power of religion to unite people and be friendly to each other. However, this thought does not prevent people from having religious beliefs. Therefore, many elite scholars and bureaucrats in ancient China firmly followed the guidelines of *The Book of Changes* view, but at the same time, they were devout Buddhists or Taoists. This inclusive tradition continues today and builds a diverse belief culture in China.

China is one of the countries most tolerant of religions in the world. According to statistics from the white paper named *China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief* (2018, p.314), the main religions in China are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Christianity. There are nearly 200 million religious citizens and more than 380,000 religious clerics. Many people believe in Buddhism and Taoism but have not finished the strict procedures for registration, so it is difficult to count the numbers accurately. Specifically, about 222,000 Buddhist clerics and more than 40,000 Taoist clerics. 11 ethnic minorities who believe in Islam are more than 20 million, including more than 57,000 Islamic clerics. There are about 6 million Catholics, including nearly 8,000 religious clerics and more than 38 million Christian believers, including 57,000 religious clerics.

The white paper also shows that there are currently 98 Catholic dioceses in China and more than 6,000 churches and 60,000 Christian churches. In addition, a total of 91 religious schools have been approved for establishment up to September 2017, including 41 for Buddhism, 10 for Taoism, 10 for Islam, 9 for Catholicism, and 21 for Christianity.

In China, every citizen has the freedom to religious beliefs and not to believe in any religion. There is the freedom to believe in a particular religion and believe

in a certain sect in the same faith. There is the freedom to not believe in religions in the past but believe in religion now. There is also the freedom to believe in religion in the past and not to believe in religion now. If one goes into the remote areas of China, he will find churches, mosques, Taoist temples or Buddhist temples in most counties, villages and towns. Everyone freely chooses his religion and willingly attends the activities in churches, mosques or temples. In short, Chinese society is highly tolerant of religion.

The thought in *The Book of Changes* shows humanistic characteristics and advocates that people should pursue morality, introspection and self-discipline. The Book of Changes emphasises the value of human beings and has an open and tolerant attitude towards religion. “As heaven maintains vigour through movement, a gentleman should constantly strive for self-perfection!” (Huang & Zhang, 2007, p.5). Meanwhile, *The Book of Changes* also contains records of sacrificing to heaven and ancestors (Huang & Zhang, 2007, p.34, 245). The sacrificing deeds are religious in scope, and they play an essential role in promoting human morality. This diversified social consciousness that advocates the choice of religion is also a modern manifestation of the traditional *book of Changes* thought.

China has 1.4 billion people with diverse beliefs or religions. Some Chinese people do not believe in religion, but it does not mean that they have no faith. It is a common agreement that having no faith is a terrible thing. Some Chinese people do not get their beliefs from religion; instead, they get them from history development. *The Book of Changes* plays a significant role in this process. Most intellectual elites who ruled the country use Confucianism to guide themselves more than a particular religion in historical periods. The explanation is that *The Book of Changes* thought, as an ancient philosophy of China, has influenced the elites of China. They observe all things in nature and explore the philosophy of developing things instead of devoting themselves to a particular religion.

The role of history in the Chinese thought system

What are the Chinese people's attitudes towards history? No country or civilisation is as keen to record its history as China. China's dynasties were eager to preserve their history records. To this day, Chinese people can recognise and read the characters and essays of 3500 years ago. Although these hieroglyph characters have changed with the dynasty and historical development, ordinary people can still remember most of them.

Every dynasty in China history worked hard to compile the history of the previous dynasty and keep records of its history. It seems that collecting history books is a kind of belief. The China dynasties believe that recording the history of the previous dynasty is not only a moral responsibility to inherit culture but also a meaningful way to ensure the legitimacy of their dynasty. At the same time, they can discover the governance experiences and lessons and critically inherit the political policies from the previous dynasty. China dynasties have a very commendable political tradition in which there are full-time officials responsible for recording the words and deeds of the emperor in the process of ruling the country every day. The emperors did not have the right to read these records. This is an important mechanism used to restrain the emperor's power because emperors will be afraid that these records will describe themselves as a dim or incompetent emperor like a clown in history. So, emperors have had to work hard to govern the country and take practical measures to help ordinary people.

This tradition rooted in history has also affected the Chinese. Emperors and elites worked hard to fulfil their responsibilities, fearing that the image in the historical records would be terrible. Even ordinary Chinese people are very concerned about how history evaluates him. Under the influence of tradition, many families have edited their family history. Some families still retain complete history records that lasted for hundreds of years. Whether official or private, the Chinese are keen to record their history. If the historical records of ancient China were piled up, the size of books in total is maybe as big as a mountain. The most famous history books are included in the "Twenty-Four History" series

(Qu, 2009). It contains the complete history of the feudal dynasties except for the Qin Dynasty (1639AD-1912AD). *ZiZhi TongJian* (English name: *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*), written in 1084AD during the North Song Dynasty, is another essential history book. It outlined the history of 16 dynasties from 403BC to 959AD for 1362 years. The primary purpose of compiling *ZiZhi TongJian* was to help emperors and elites learn lessons from history and better govern the country (Xu,2019).

ZiZhi TongJian summarises the successful and failed experiences of the governance of past dynasties, expecting that these experiences can guide future rulers to make fewer mistakes (Zhang, 2016, p.3). The Chinese elites are keen to study history, and they believe that failure can be avoided by studying history. In a sense, in the eyes of some Chinese people, history can guide people's practical activities more than religions. By studying the history of the past periods, people can find the wisdom to enhance self-wisdom, run business and govern the country.

The current socialism with Chinese characteristics in China is very open and inclusive and emphasises co-operation, development and a Community of shared future for humanity (Xi, 2017, p.569). These ideas can be traced back to *The Book of Changes*, thought as early as at least 3000 years ago and in which the ideas of harmony have vital practical significance to contemporary development. Moreover, this kind of harmonious thought has been recorded and strengthened by historical books in different dynasty periods (Su, 2021).

Conclusion

Pursuing harmony and shared happiness is the spirit of the Chinese people. Many foreign friends are very interested in contemporary China and are only concerned with economic development and infrastructure development. But I think that the national culture and spirit also play a vital role in China's development. Without the positive and progressive culture as support, China's economy would not develop so rapidly and soundly. From this perspective, *The Book of Changes* thought facilitates people to constantly strive to improve their moral standards

seek common ground while reserving differences. Therefore, it still has a solid practical significance for guiding China's current development.

Finally, I would like to introduce a book, *The Spirit of the Chinese People* by Ku hung Ming (1857AD-1928AD). The book was written in English and was published in 1915. The book tries to unveil the spirit of Chinese people in the Western world. The author travelled to 11 countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy, since he was 13 years old. He could speak more than ten languages and obtained several different doctoral degrees from world-famous universities. He had a profound study of Western civilisation. When he returned to China at the age of 33, he studied Chinese traditional culture systematically and compared it with Western culture. He believed that Chinese civilisation had a unique value system, and he turned to worship Chinese traditional culture very much. In this book, Hungming Ku introduced some characteristics of Chinese society systematically. To better understand Chinese history and contemporary China life, this book still has profound significance today. Hungming Ku (2020) explains the spirit of the Chinese people in this way:

“The real Chinaman is a person with the head of a grown-up man and the heart of a child. Therefore, the Chinese spirit is a spirit of perpetual youth, the spirit of national immortality. What is the secret of this national immortality in the Chinese people? What gives to the Chinese type of humanity—to the real Chinaman—his inexpressible gentleness is the possession of what I called sympathetic or true human intelligence.” (Ku,2020, p.54)

When *The Spirit of the Chinese People* was published in 1915, it was during the First World War period. The Qing Dynasty (1639AD-1912AD), the last dynasty in China history, had just collapsed in 1911, and China's democracy and modernisation were in the challenging exploration. At this time, Hungming Ku re-emphasised the value of Chinese traditional culture and believed that if the Western society knew about and learned some of the spirits and morals of the Chinese people, there would be no world war. Although more than 100 years have passed since the book was published, this book is still essential for understanding the spirit of modern Chinese people and Chinese traditional culture.

Acknowledgements

I thank several anonymous reviewers for their insightful and valuable comments. It is a big challenge for me to discuss traditional Chinese philosophy and culture in English as a second language. This article was inevitably influenced by Chinese expression. The article has been further developed in the previous version with several insightful comments.

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