

HYI Weekly Talk

*What is Chinese Philosophy?
Four Expositions on its Characteristics
by the Scholars from National Taiwan University*

Harvard-Yenching Institute
19 March 2010
Seminar Room, 2 Divinity Avenue

Purpose of Activity

Taiwan, along with Hong Kong, was once known among scholars of Chinese philosophy as one of the two major “bases” of contemporary Neo-Confucianism. However, changes in the domestic socio-political environment and a drastic increase in international scholastic activities have caused considerable diversification in research topics and methods. In particular, there has been remarkable development in research on Daoism and Buddhism over the past twenty years, a trend best represented by the scholars from the philosophy department of the National Taiwan University (NTU).

The proposed activity will complement the “International Workshop on the Research of Chinese Philosophy: Critical Retrospection and Prospects,” that will be held at the Harvard-Yenching Institute on March 20-21, 2009.” In that workshop, four NTU scholars will be reviewing the current issues and problems of Chinese philosophy research in Taiwan and Japan. In contrast, in this proposed activity, these four scholars will expound upon the characteristics of Chinese philosophy through discussions of the following four major subjects:

- (1) On Self-cultivation (by Bau-ruei Duh)
- (2) On Meaning of Life and Death (by Yao-ming Tsai)
- (3) On Language and Knowledge (by Wim De Reu)
- (4) On State and Society (by Masayuki Sato)

These lectures, while engaging topics close to the heart of scholars of Chinese philosophy, and both graduate and undergraduate students of the EALC and philosophy departments, also target a more general audience, and those who want a comprehensive introduction to the subject of Chinese philosophy are most welcomed.

Program

Morning Session

Chair: Masayuki Sato, Associate Professor, National Taiwan University / Harvard-Yenching Scholar, 2009-2010

10:00-10:10

Opening: Introduction of the Activity and Presenters

10:10-11:10

Bau-ruei Duh, Associate Professor, National Taiwan University

Chinese Philosophy on Self-cultivation: With Cosmological and Ontological Approach

11:10-11:30 Coffee Break

11:30-12:30

Yao-ming Tsai, Associate Professor, National Taiwan University

Chinese Philosophy on Meaning of Life and Death from a Buddhist Viewpoint

12:30-14:30 Lunch Break

Afternoon Session

Chair: Michael Puett, Professor, EALC, Harvard University

14:30-15:30

Wim De Reu, Assistant Professor, National Taiwan University

Chinese Philosophy on Language and Knowledge:

With a Close Focus on the Zhuangzi

14:30-14:50 Coffee Break

14:50-15:50 Masayuki Sato, Associate Professor, National Taiwan University

Chinese Philosophy on State and Society: The Concept of Li in the Xunzi

Synopsis

Chinese Philosophy on Self-cultivation:
With Cosmological and Ontological Approach

Bau-ruei Duh

The three main school of Chinese philosophy Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism set their theoretical goal on reaching a perfect personality such as a sage, a deity or Buddha respectively. The basement of the practical theory will not build on arbitrary opinions but a strong faith that based on the understanding of the world which is precisely the Cosmology of the three schools. The strong faith include both the believe of the world (i.e. Cosmology), even is the world where allows the life after death, and the ultimate meaning, understood as why there happened to have this world, which lead to be the significant of the existence of human beings (i.e. Ontology). Therefore the theory of self cultivation, or the theory of practice, could trace its thread of thought in two lines. On this basis, this lecture tries to illustrate the Chinese philosophy on self cultivation differently in between the three main schools through the explanation by of their strong faith on the Ontological idea and Cosmological knowledge, and this is going to be the main content of the speech.

Chinese Philosophy on Meaning of Life and Death
from a Buddhist Viewpoint

Yao-ming Tsai

In order for philosophy of life to be unfolded in academics, this lecture endeavours to deal with Buddhist philosophy on the meaning of life and death from field of epistemology. The viewpoint of this lecture does not limit itself in the sphere of human life, living surroundings, locality, or human characteristics, but rather extends to the process of cyclic birth and death of sentient beings. In order to properly develop a theoretical description of this process, rather than clinging to substantialistic concepts of being or entities which will end up in the static thoughts tied up with words or phrases, the perspective is as process-like and dynamic as possible.

In order to properly reveal the reality of life, this lecture departs from the perspective of emptiness and non-duality and carefully employs negative terms. By so doing, the result will not turn out to be clichés derived from the borrowing of referents, nor will it be trapped in isolation or quandary of opposition resulted from the usage of opposite concepts. In the final point, the philosophical brooding upon topics,

especially of the meaning of life and death, is in an unprecedented way because it not only avoids many possible traps leading to plight but also unwraps the clues for investigating these topics.

Chinese Philosophy on Language and Knowledge:
With a Close Focus on the *Zhuangzi*

Wim De Reu

This talk deals with language and knowledge in Chinese philosophy. I will start from some relatively unstudied chapters of the *Zhuangzi* and provide a contextual reading of their remarks on language and knowledge. The chapters under discussion are chs. 23-27 and ch. 32, all of which are in Western as well as in Chinese scholarship thought of as nothing more than compilations of heterogeneous material. I will focus in particular on ch. 26. I will show that assumptions concerning heterogeneous content do not hold, and that a contextual reading reveals refreshing insights about language in the *Zhuangzi*: its relation to patterned behavior and discourse, to master-disciple lineages, and to knowing how to act in society. On this basis, I will attempt to make more general remarks on the nature of language and knowledge in Chinese philosophy.

Chinese Philosophy on State and Society:
The Concept of *Li* in the *Xunzi*

Masayuki Sato

This lecture takes up the concept of “*Li*” (rituals and social norms) as a key term for understanding the characteristic of Chinese (and, I argue, all of East Asian) political philosophy. The discussion will proceed as follows: First, it focuses on the multiple applications of *Li* in attaining a harmonious socio-political order, especially its important function of controlling the ruler himself instead of those he rules. Second, it sheds light on its comprehensiveness in its striving to attain individual moral cultivation, social justice, and cosmological harmony *at the same time*. And third, in Chinese philosophy, especially in that of Xunzi, there is a dimensional difference of between *Li* and *fa* (usually translated as “law”). In Chinese political philosophy, a more fundamental aspect corresponding to the concept of law (e.g. Natural Law) in

the early Western political philosophy can be expressed in the concept of *Li*, rather than *fa*.