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Confucian China in a Changing World Cultural Order

A transcript of the talk by Professor Roger Ames, celebrating the launch of the UK's first Online Confucius Institute – a partnership between the Open University and Beijing Foreign Studies University – May 13, 2022.

I'm delighted to be part of the opening ceremony establishing an online Confucius Institute between the Beijing Foreign Studies University, a university I've had a lot to do with, over my lifetime and the Open University in Britain. What I want to talk about today is Confucian China in a changing world cultural order. We could say, since we are looking at British culture coming the other way, it's the best of times, it's the worst of times.

The human being is this magnificent animal that particularly in the last years we have developed the technology, the science, where we could start tomorrow and we could eradicate world hunger. That's how incredible. Human beings can land spaceships on meteors that are flying through the sky. So, the technology we have is magnificent. World hunger is not a technological problem it's an ethical problem, and that takes us to the worst of times where we have a perfect storm we have a pandemic, we have global warming, we have food and water shortages, environmental degradation, international terrorism, income disparities. Eight people in the world own half of the world's wealth, consumer waste and so on. We have all of this set of problems, but they're not really problems, they're a predicament.

What's the difference between a problem and a predicament? You can solve a problem, but you need resolution to address a predicament. This predicament has four characteristics. One of them is that human beings are complicit, that these problems have a human signature. Secondly, these problems are organically related. Environmental degradation, explosive population, food and water shortage, all of these things come together. They are of a piece. Thirdly, they don't have a boundary. The pandemic doesn't care if you're Chinese, British, from Uganda: it wants your life. And the fourth thing we can see as characteristic of this predicament is that we have the culture in the world to address it, to try to make a difference with this predicament.

And so what I wanted to do is to share with you a distinction that is made by an American philosopher, James Carse, He talks about the difference between finite games and infinite

games. Now, games are things that human beings play. We do business, we do international relations, we've got the World Cup and Olympics. We have education. We do all of these different games, and finite games are playing according to a beginning, an end, a finite set of rules and a winner and a loser. So when we think of business we tend to think in terms of zero sum, that finite games are games played to win; they are competitive. If I don't win, I lose. This kind of consciousness.

But the idea of infinite games is very different I have a new granddaughter, named Sophia. She is the apple of my eye. And what grandpa does with Sophia is constantly trying to strengthen our relationship so that together we can face an increasingly complex world. I have to care about the world that she is going to inherit, the world she is going to live in and so I am doing my very best in whatever way I can to make it a better world. So in this idea of infinite games family is really the root, the beginning of it. But it's also a global family.

China can't fix global warming. Europe can't fix global warming. America can't fix global warming, but if we work together - the Paris Accord - we can do it, we can address it. We can put our resources and pool our resources and make a difference.

Now, infinite games have to do with the ideology of individuals, individual persons playing to win, individual corporations playing to win, individual Westphalian modern states playing to win. The idea of the sovereign state, the equal sovereign state, this Westphalian model is really the autonomous, liberal individual scaled up to a kind of international order. The fact of the matter is that that model is a fiction. It had its time that individualism. You know, 'the dignity of the individual'. Liberation, economic liberation of peasants from aristocrats, the rights of minorities, the rights of gender, and so on. It had its time. But the fact of the matter is we don't live our lives inside our skins. Everything that we do, we do in association. We do in our relationships with other people, with other states. I might be an American, but I lived twelve years in Britain. I lived two years in Japan. I've lived I don't know

how many years in China, and so on. And right now I'm very worried about what's happening in Ukraine. I'm a person of the world. My life is lived in the world. It's not lived as an American. And so we have to move from this idea of finite games with individuals playing to win and infinite games where we work together, we strengthen our relationships in order to try to resolve the predicament that the human being is facing today.

In the 1930s, this man Fei Xiaotong (费孝通) did his undergraduate work here at Beijing University. He did a Masters degree at Qinghua University across the street, and then he went to the London School of Economics and at the London School of Economics he studied with Malinowski. Bronisław Malinowski, the father of anthropology. And Fei Xiaotong from this experience in Britain with his PhD, and he became probably the most distinguished social scientist in China in the the 20th century. He was a magnificent scholar. One of his books ... maybe ten, fifteen years after returning from China, he wrote this book called *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (乡土中国), translated into English as *From the Soil*. And in this book he identified a problem and that is that the concept of person that is foundational within western culture and the Chinese kind of kinship-based, personal, familial, social, political model, are at such variance that you really need a different language to talk about these two worlds. And so what he did was set up a contrast. He talked about how the organisation model of association that he associates with a world full of individuals, discrete individuals, as a kind of western individualism with its roots that go back to Pythagoras, that go back to Plato and Aristotle, the idea of the individual, the individual soul, the immortal soul -

Pythagoras, Plato. The image that Fei uses for this organisational model is individual straws collected and bound together to form a haystack. So, what you've got is something that binds a bundle of individual discrete entities together. And what binds them together is a concept of God you are all the children of God; law - we are all equal before the law; the idea of rationality - we're all rational human beings. And so this model of a collection of individuals is the language that Fei used to talk about his western experience. But in thinking about China, he talked about a kind of focal identity of persons, that persons aren't discrete individuals they're kind of centres of identity. And he called this 'chaxugeju' (差序格局), the differential mode of association. The image that he gave us is not the haystack - individual straws bound together - but rather concentric circles that are formed when you throw a stone into the lake. So, what you get is this kind of rippling effect, and in the Chinese language the word for 'rippling', 'ripples' - 'lun' (伦), and the word for 'human relations' - 'lun' (伦), (is really cognate, is homophonous, pronounced the same way. And what this does is, it give us this kind of centripetal way of thinking about how a person as a centre spreads out in the relationships, the first-order relationships, the constitutive relationships that constitute this person's identity in a human narrative. And so this image of the rock, the stone thrown into the lake, gives us these ripples.

Fei Xiaotong became very famous. Every Chinese person who has had a college education knows Fei Xiaotong's image of throwing the stone into the water, but I wanted to take it another step. Fei's idea is that human beings are centres fanning out into a web-like network so that a person is composed of webs woven out of countless personal relationships. Charles Taylor talks about 'webs of interlocution', that these webs are constituted by our conversations by the giving an account of ourselves, in family, in community, and so on. Fei said this had a distinctive kind of morality, that for this world - a world without a concept of a transcendent God.

So, morality is not righteousness, it's not doing what God wants you to do, morality is not following a set of rules, a set of principles, ten commandments. Morality in this tradition is growth in relationships, growth in human relationships, The word, the term 'yi' (义), 'ren' (仁), 'yi' (义) that was translated by the missionaries into 'righteousness' in fact means 'appropriate relationships', 'optimally appropriate relationships'. And so Fei argues that no ethical concept in this Confucian tradition transcends specific types of human relations. We are our roles and relations. That's how we constitute ourselves. We are a centre of roles and relations. And as soon as you stipulate the relation - a teacher-student relationship, a husband-wife relationship - as soon as you stipulate what kind of relationship then it takes on a normative value. Are you a good teacher? Are you a good husband or wife? So the roles themselves become normative, they become guidelines for the ethical life

So, in this tradition, the tradition Fei is trying to give voice to here not only morality is growth in relationships but education is growth in relationships, and beauty is growth in relationships, and creativity is growth in relationships. This idea of growth is really the fundamental value in the tradition expressed in different ways. And the way it's expressed morally, the prime moral imperative in the tradition, is this idea of 'xiao' (孝) - sometimes this is translated as 'filial piety' – but then our students don't know what we are talking about when we say 'filial piety'. The word 'piety', 'pious' associates with 'God', with a concept of a transcendent God when there isn't this idea within the Confucian tradition and so we translate it as 'family reverence'. It's taking family life as the centrepiece of the

human experience, and 'fraternal deference', deferring to your elders, is integral to that. And so this idea of family reverence and fraternal deference is the kind of guiding morality, the genealogical morality, of this Confucian tradition

But I wanted to add something: if Fei Xiaotong can become famous because of his 'stone thrown into the lake' image, then I want to introduce another image and that is the centripetal, not the centrifugal ripples as they move outward, but rather centripetal annual rings of the tree as they tell the story of the tree's life in the world. When you think of the tree, in the process of producing these rings is internalising its experience in the world. And so this is another kind of image we can use. If you put these two together, the focal identities rippling outward, and then the experience in the world coming back and creating the identity of the individual tree, the individual person. And so the rings of the tree are reflexive they come backward; they are synergistic – internalising the tree's external environments.

Let's think about this tree: that in Hunan Province there is a 4500-year-old cypress tree - a 'boshu' (柏树) - and it's in the garden of what is now the Songyang Academy. The Songyang Academy began as 'song yang si' (嵩阳寺) the Songyang Buddhist temple. And then it became the 'Song Yang Xue Yuan', the Daoist retreat. It was only in the Sung dynasty that it became the 'Song Yang Shu Yuan' (嵩阳书院), the Songyang Academy. So this tree really does represent this Confucian tradition 'san jiao wei yi' (三教为一) - the three teachings as one. And when you look at a tree like this what you have is, you have branches and roots. That's the heavens and the earth - 'tiān dǐ' (天地) - the heavens and the earth. The roots are usually about three times the expanse of the branches. And the roots are kind of the organs, like we have internal organs, the roots are kind of the organs of the tree and the branches have no boundary. And so, this tree is drawing in life from the branches, the leaves, and it's drawing in life from the earth through the roots, and there's a sense in which the roots are branches underground, and the branches are roots reaching to the sky. And so the life of the tree, the success of the tree, is this kind of internalising its external environments in creating its own identity, its own unique, its own particular identity. There's no other 4500-year-old cypress tree in Songyang Academy, just this one. Just this one, beautiful tree. So, when we think about this image of the rings of a tree the actual life of the tree only takes place in the inner bark and the sap wood - a very small perimeter of the tree, and then you have the hard wood of the tree and the pith, the centre of the tree, and so the life, the strength of the tree is the narrative, is the story, is the culture that this tree has accrued over its lifetime and then life goes on on the perimeter. The life cells are all on the perimeter, growing, continuing the growth of this magnificent tree. And so when I talk about this internalisation, when you look at the lighter-coloured part of the ring, it is formed in the spring and summer when there is abundant water, sunshine and growth and the darker shade comes with the late summer and the autumn. The size of the rings corresponds to the availability of resources necessary for healthy growth, years of abundance and years of distress, and the negative conditions, drought. excess of rain, fire, insect eggs, disease, epidemics, injuries, air pollution, all of these things leave their mark and are registered, or become part of the narrative of the tree.

So, this idea of thinking about a tree as a family - you don't find a tree by itself, there's a stand of trees, a forest, there's the woods. Trees come together, you don't have just one tree. And so, this idea of family, the inter-relationships, the interdependence, the collaboration, of plant growth in the world. So when we are looking at this idea of being

rooted, in the book of Mencius there is a saying and this is a saying that is very helpful in getting clear on how China, in many ways, is a different world. Mencius says there is a popular adage heard among the people, who all say, 'the world, the state, the family'. The world is rooted in the state, the state in the family, and the family in one's own person. So you have this kind of isomorphism between the state, the family and the world where the state and the world are a simulacra of the family.

And so in a Chinese world, the family model is pervasive. I'm a teacher. In my classroom, in Chinese, I'm called 'shi fu' (师父) or 'shi-gong' (师公), 'teacher father' or 'teacher grandpa', and the students are 'xue jie' (学姐), 'student elder sister' and 'xue di' (学弟) 'student younger brother'. This idea of family is a pervasive idea in the culture. We use a word like, we say 'everybody' or 'everyone', reflecting this idea of the individuality: every 'body', every 'one'. But in Chinese, to say that same thing, if I wanted to say, 'everybody please stand up', in Chinese I would say, 'da jia qing zhan qi lai' (大家站起来), 'big family, please stand up'.

In the Chinese language, you don't have a country, it's not a 'guo' (国), it's a 'guo jia' (国家), 'a country family'. You don't have 'humanity', 'human beings', you have 'ren jia' (人家), 'human family'. And if you are a Confucian you're called 'ru jia' (儒家), you're called 'member of this lineage' of literati that go back into the mists of history in the Chinese tradition. So this idea of family is really at the core of this cultural experience.

There's a passage in the *Analects* of Confucius, some mean-spirited person says to Confucius, who never was able to get a good job; he spent his lifetime frustrated, trying to achieve some kind of important political office, everybody wanted to take advantage of him, but he never really received the kind of appointment that would enable him to make a difference in the world. He was a 'Philosoph', a philosopher who wasn't interested in simply waxing theoretical on issues. He wanted to change the world. He wanted political power, social status, in order to make a difference and he didn't get that. And so some mean-spirited person says to him, 'Confucius, why are you not employed in government? You are this celebrated moralist, this celebrated teacher. Why aren't you employed in government if you are so distinguished?' And so Confucius replies, he says, 'In the Classics, it says it is all in family reverence. Just being reverent to your parents and a friend to your brothers is carrying out the work of governing. In doing this, I am employed in governing, why must I be employed in government? Why do I have to have this kind of formal status?' And so Confucius is saying the same thing Fei Xiaotong is saying, and that is that family is the starting point of culture, that family reverence is the prime moral imperative in this cultural tradition.

And just a little bit of advertising! [At this point, Roger Ames shows a slide with the cover of his book *Confucian Role Ethics: a Vocabulary*] I'm really a student of Fei Xiaotong and in order to capture what he's trying to say I really got tired of always theorising China according to Western concepts. So we'd argue over whether Confucian ethics is virtue ethics - Aristotle and Hume. Is it deontic ethics - Kant? Is it utilitarian ethics - Mill and Bentham? And the answer is no. We have to use its own vocabulary in order to talk about Confucian ethics. So the real important part of this book is resisting, is what it's not. And that is that I would not use the Western vocabulary in order to talk about Confucian ethics; I wanted to use the Chinese terminology itself. So that's what this book is about. And then more recently I did a book ... [At this point, Roger Ames shows a slide with the cover of his book

Human Becomings: Theorising Persons for Confucian Role Ethics] We're not human beings in Fei Xiaotong's world we are human becomings. A person is not what you are, it's what you do. The person and the narrative are the same thing in this tradition and so the idea of *Human Becomings: Theorising Persons for Confucian Role Ethics*. And so I really tried to take Fei Xiaotong's insights and bring them into Confucian philosophy in a concrete way.

Now, when we ask, 'what is Confucianism?', Confucianism is an English word. We're not using the language of the tradition to speak for itself. We're using a term that was created by Sir John Francis Davis, a British diplomat, second Governor of Hong Kong, and while he was Governor of Hong Kong he published a book, *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and its Inhabitants*, and this was the first time that we see the word 'Confucianism'. (There is a history professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, named Tim Barrett, and this is his research, and he identifies

the first use of 'Confucianism' with Davis.) Now, if we speak Chinese, we don't say 'Confucianism', we say, 'ruxue' (儒学) and 'ru' (儒) is a term that goes back to the Shang Dynasty. In Chinese the meaning of 'ru' is something like 'mild, or 'gentle', or 'subtle', 'soft'. And so what it does, it kind of corresponds to the English language where we talk about the 'gentlefolk', 'the gentry', 'the gentleman', and the 'gentlewoman'. And so this idea of 'ru' is really not a... When you use a word like 'Confucianism' it sounds like 'Marxism' or sounds like 'Hegelianism' or 'Christianity': a way of thinking, a way of living, a set of values that you associate with the life of one person, this person Confucius. But the people who were responsible for the Shang Dynasty bronzes - you go to the British Museum, you go to the museums here in China. you go to museums around the world, you find these bronze vessels that were produced in the Shang Dynasty, not bronze made into weapons, but bronze made into vessels that had iconic value, that the person who owned this had status in the community, was responsible for communicating with the ancestors, pouring libations to communicate with ancestors, was a person of political authority, was a person with a religious dimension to it. So, this isn't an artefact, it's an icon. An icon is alive in the culture, an artefact is simply something that we make. And so, the iconic status of these bronzes in their own time and place is just magnificent and the beauty ... if we ever think of our Ancients as primitives make me one of those! This is just a magnificent,

jaw-dropping, beautiful... the patina, you know, just magnificent. When we ask the question, 'what is Confucianism spoken on its own terms?', it's either, 'Kongzi zhuyi' (孔子主义) that's how you'd say Confucianism in Chinese, or its generations before Confucius and generations after Confucius, of people of letters, of gentry, of the scholarly people, the academic people, the people who take the responsibility of inheriting the cultural tradition, understanding the tradition, exercising themselves in trying to understand it, who write commentary on it and expand upon it, who use the cultural tradition to address the issues of the time, and then when their hair turns grey, like me, they recommend to the next generation that they continue to build the connector to the next generation. So this is the idea of 'dao tong' (道通), the idea of the cultural tradition built from generation to generation. Each generation taking the responsibility for building the 'dao' (道), the 'way', to the next generation. And so, in the Analects of Confucius 'ren neng hong dao' (人能弘道), it's the human being that extends the way, not the way that extends the human being, 'dao xing zhi er cheng' (道行之而成), 'dao' is made in the walking that we extend the culture.

Think of the British tradition, Beowulf and Chaucer, and Shakespeare and Milton and so on. How that tradition within British culture - this is the pride of British culture - is passed on from one generation to the next, the institutions of higher learning. If you go to a feast at St. John's College in Cambridge, around the wall are all of these famous literary figures, these are the 'ru' (儒) of the British tradition. So how do we understand them? The Master said... the first time we see this firm 'ru' in the tradition is ... Confucius says to one of the students, 'You want to be an exemplary person, a person of letters, not a petty person.' And so, you're the person who is responsible for the tradition, passing on the tradition, do it in an exemplary way. And it's hugely conservative. The Master says, 'Following the proper way, I do not forge new paths.' I cherish the ancients. And so the idea of embodying the tradition and passing it on is a huge responsibility for the 'ru'. But then, there's a critical aspect to it, too. If we're talking about growth and relationships, then we need moral imagination in every relationship. There's not a set of rules that you can follow. We just have to pay attention to the people in our family, to the people in our community, to our students, and we have to work at saying, 'Ru zhi he, ru zhi he? (如之何), Yinggai zuo shenme?' (应该做什么), 'What should I do? What should I do in this particular situation?' And so there's this critical aspect of it, that being moral in this Confucian tradition is hard work; you have to pay attention to your relationships, you have to listen.

And then there's the creative aspect, too that it's hybridic, it's advancing. it's evolutionary. The Master said, 'Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new - such a person can be considered a teacher.' And so if you want to be a teacher in this 'ru' tradition you have to know the cultural tradition, but you also have to be an innovator. You have to take it in new directions. When Confucius says, 'I do not forge new paths', he is simply being modest. The language that we find in the *Analects*, the term 'ren' for example - one of the key terms - appears only incidentally before the hundred times that we find it in the *Analects* where Confucius makes it into a technical term. So many of the terms in the *Analects* are neologisms, new terms that Confucius is creating in order to transmit the cultural tradition to the next generation. And so this idea of hybridic, of evolutionary, of progressive Confucianism.

So, we have the 'rujia' that's the family of literati, but then this idea of 'xiao' is of the moral imperative of family reverence and so when we look on the oracle bones, the earliest kinds of Chinese characters, and we look at the term for 'old person', it's an old person with crazy hair, a kind of Einstein, bent over leaning on a cane. and so this is the word for 'lao' and that's the top part of the character. But then, the lower part of the character is 'zi', it means 'the next generation', it means 'the young people'. And so this idea of 'xiao' is the space between, the gap between, the elders and the juniors. So, when we look at the character for 'xiao' on the oracle bones, it's an old person leaning on a young person. So it's this relationship between the generations, the younger generation embodying the older generation taking their identity from the cultural tradition, and the older generation being the teaching generation, respecting their elders, but at the same time transmitting the tradition to the next generation.

And so, in the book of *Family Reverence*, one of the Classics, Confucius say, 'It is family reverence that is the root of excellence'. That is the substance of virtuosity as a human being. It's what makes you a person of excellence. It's what education is all about. Education is not getting a PhD, education is becoming a person, is becoming 'xiao', is becoming a person who transmits the tradition to the next generation.

And so, I wanted to jump ahead - I've got too much to share with you here - I wanted to jump ahead to this idea of embodiment. Family reverence means being good at continuing the purposes of one's predecessors, and at maintaining their ways. So, this idea of transmission, of embodiment of 'the way'. The simplified Chinese character used in China today (and Japan as well) isn't this complex character this is the old character, the complex character 'ti' but the character that is used today is a combination of root and trunk and person. And so, the body is the root of the human experience. Remember that tree. This character 'ti' that means 'body' in Chinese - 'shenti' (身体) is a word for body in Chinese today - it really has to do with 'rootedness', the word 'ti xia' (体下) in the Classics really refers to rhizomes, to tubers, to potatoes and turnips and parsnips and garlic and these kind of rooted things that live in the ground. The metaphor for body that we have, if you think of Old German 'botah', is a kind of receptacle, it's a tub, but the metaphor for body in the Chinese tradition, is organic it's this idea of 'what lies underground', the root, the trunk of a plant. The living body is the conveyance of the cultural knowledge. It's the way in which the living civilization itself is preserved. When you look in the mirror you see your grandparents. The physicality is the most superficial aspect. You have the values, you have the language. Shakespeare lives on in the language that we speak. You can't speak for two minutes in English without Shakespeare being part of the conversation. The way in which the culture is embodied and is lived.

So, I wanted to finish up today with just a short story here. In the *Classic of Family Reverence* it says, 'Your physical presence, with its hair and skin, are received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where family reverence begins.' So that then is the starting point, and it goes on, 'distinguish yourself, walk the proper way, raise your name high for posterity and bring esteem to your family. These are things you should do.' This is what 'xiao' means. But the idea of not allowing injury to your person ... I just wanted to end on a little story.

When we learn Classical Chinese language, we use the language of the 'shiji' (史记), this is the first of the comprehensive histories in the Chinese tradition, and it is the model of writing history not only for China, but for Japan, for Korea and Vietnam, any tradition that uses Chinese characters celebrates this. And so the person who was responsible for the 'shiji', the family, was the Sima family. Sima Tan, the father, and Sima Qian, the son. Sima Qian was out in the provinces when his father was dying, and so his father called him and he said, 'Son, I have been working on this history, this comprehensive history, I need you to finish it for me. And so the son, Sima Qian, said, I'm gonna to do that, I'm gonna make our family proud. And so he made this promise to his dying father, and for the next ten years he worked at this history. But then the 'han wu di', the Marshal Emperor, had sent an army out to quell the Huns on the border and the general who had led them, a man named Li Ling had been captured and the army defeated and destroyed and the Emperor was in a fury that this had happened and so he said this Li Ling was worthless, that he was a traitor. He just said really bad things about the general. Sima Qian had the temerity to speak up in defence of Li Ling and so the Emperor said, you're going to die for your impertinence. And then he said, no, I'm going to commute your death, I'm going to allow you to be castrated, for your body to be humiliated. Sima Qian was a scholar, he was a literati, he was a 'ru' and he would gladly embrace death but he had promised his father that he would complete this work and so he suffered this indignity, stayed in jail another three years, and then finally, when he was released, he came back to court to finish the history and he was a pariah,

people would have nothing to do with him. He was a person without dignity, but he finished this history. And so, when you think of what it means to preserve your body, what Sima Qian did was preserve the body of the culture, the corpus of the culture. And so the physical body is incidental, it's how each generation transmits the cultural tradition that is so important. And so I wanted to end with this little bit of history, to try to promote an understanding of body, how each human being is a conduit through which the living civilization is passed on.

Thank you very much.