

Review

On Western and Chinese conception of time: A comparative study

Alberto Castelli

Xiamen University, Xiamen, China.

Received 22 June, 2015; Accepted 1 September, 2015

While Western thinking considers change within a unique process stretching ad infinitum, Eastern thinking conceives change within a process that hold together repetition and transformation. Making sense to this is to simply recognize that the issues regarding time understanding in ontological and metaphysical terms, serve to support the idea that how we consider the nature of history it will impact the interpretation and conclusions drawn about history. But here the issue is less about history as content and more about the developing of a society; we will try therefore to observe how different conceptions of time can shape different imprint on the society as a whole.

Key words: Time, eternal return, Buddhism, original sin, collectivism, individualism.

INTRODUCTION

Time is what keeps everything from happening at once. But the question remains: how do things happen?

时 is commonly translated into English as 'time'. Time is an intellectual concept that requires a metaphoric model since time has no concrete reality. Before 1915, space and time were thought as a fixed arena, absolute moment independent of consciousness, in which events took place, to be understood as analogous to the continuous sequence of points on the line (Newton), where no one of the single points were affected by what happened in it. We now accept the idea that *time* is an intellectual concept, and a priori (along with the concept of space and number) that does not refer to any kind of actually existing dimension, for it does not exist in itself, but it is a product of the way we represent things (Kant), as to say that we can know objects only as they appear to us. Events and objects therefore move through our

experiences, that enables humans to sequence and compare events. By so doing, space and time become dynamic quantities, not only affected by everything that happens in the universe, but expanding like two vectors towards the infinite. In both cases, the Newton vision and Kant's suggestion, the model is associated with a progressive idea of history in which time moves forward without repeating itself. The concept itself, the idea of flowing time, it is what keeps together Western and Chinese society: in *The Analects*, Confucius sitting by a river suddenly exclaimed: *It passes on like that, indeed, not ceasing day or night* (9.16) which strongly recalls the dramatic prayer of Koheleth in the *Ecclesiastes* when investigating the meaning of life he proclaims the vanity of life. Confucius simply contrasts the passing river with the flowing of what we call time and life and yet by observing the ceaseless movement of the water eastern

E-mail: lamezzapunta@tiscali.it

Author(s) agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

and western philosophy just found another common point: change. But while western thinking considers change within a unique process stretching ad infinitum, eastern thinking conceives change within a process that hold together repetition and transformation. Making sense of all of this is to simply recognize that the issues regarding time understanding, in ontological and metaphysical terms, serve to support the idea that how we consider the nature of history will directly impact the interpretation and conclusions drawn about history. But here, the issue is less about history as content and more about the developing of a society; we will try therefore to observe how different conceptions of time can shape different imprint on the society as a whole.

There is a given time for everything and a time for every happening under heaven: A time for giving birth, a time for dying; a time for planting, a time for uprooting. A time for killing, a time for building. . . . Finally I considered the task God gave to the sons of men. He made everything fitting in its time, but he also set eternity in their hearts although man is not able to embrace the work of God from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes iii, 1-10.

Western civilization: About a linear history

In general, the Islamic and Judeo-Christian concept, based on the New Testament, is that time is linear, beginning with the act of creation by God and that time will end with the end of the present order of things. Plainly speaking, after the agrarian civilization- fascinated by the cyclicity of nature- God sets things in motion promising an ending. We would not be wrong anyway to suggest an idea of time conceived as a segment for if it is true that time travels towards progress and progress is, according to XIX European belief, infinite, it is true as well that somewhere, it must have started, be it Plato, Christianity or the industrial revolution. History is consequentially understood as an assumption of linear progression given by a chain of cause and effect: to A followed B and B happened because there was A. The fall of man from the garden of Heaven through the unfolding of time until the Apocalypse in Judaism and Christianity conception, is the attempt of a progressive reconciliation of the evil in the world with the existence of God. The age of enlightenment in modern history and even more the positivism of Auguste Comte contributes to develop the idea of history as perfect mechanism of emancipation where progress and science were the ideal type leading the whole process. Human history is now understood to be a progress from savagery and ignorance toward peace, prosperity, and science, from personal agreement to contract, from chaotic circumstances to personal choices. After Kant, Hegel, in the

Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), developed a complex theodicy which again considered the road of history as linear but it was based on a dialectics clash, where each thesis would encounter an opposing idea called antithesis. The clash of both was going to be transformed into a synthesis, a conjunction that conserved the contradiction between thesis and its antithesis while sublimating it. As Marx famously explained afterwards, that if Louis XVI's monarchic rule in France was seen as the thesis, the French Revolution could be seen as its antithesis and both were sublimated in Napoleon, who reconciled the revolution with the *Ancient Régime*. Inspired by the Enlightenment's ideal of progress, social evolutionism (Darwin, Spencer) confirms the theory of creation while opposing to it, as to say that whether we ascribe the timeline of mankind to the theory of evolution or creation, the process doesn't change direction, a progressive walk with a beginning and an ending be it the hand of God or a natural disaster. Of course progress was not necessarily, however, positive. After the carnage of WWI European intelligentsia believed that the end of a civilization (Spengler), the Western one, had come, collapsed were the utopian ideals of everlasting progress and opportunities brought by the new science, suddenly twenty millions death bodies lying down cities in ruins is what remains of the positivist illusions. The end of history, as Francis Fukuyama put it, however would confirm that the linearity of the process had come to dead end street rather than accepting the human past as a series of repetitive rises and falls.

Western civilization: About a cyclical history

The Western civilization has been obsessed, and still is, with the ideal type of a progressive time, better said, the conception of time as a linear vector crossing the history of mankind, be it infinite or fated to end. In fact, Western society has always been fascinated by the idea of a final goal, a destination, an objective to be reached in spite of man's own finitude. When suddenly the destination, promised Land, ultimate achievement, came loose, somehow blurred by hopeless waiting or simply a transactional phase, the most immediate and evident outcome has always been crisis of consciousness and physical catastrophes, for instance, the decades 1890-1930. At first, we assist at the celebration of positivist philosophy, the optimism regarding the accomplishments of science and by reflex men's achievement. But the historical moment soon collapsed under the destructiveness brought by WWI. As to say that the Western conception of a linear time processing incessantly somewhere is strictly linked to the Western need to have a direction to aim at in order to avoid chaos which is otherwise the normal status of things.

But if we look at history from further away, if we look the big pictures rather than the details, we might soon

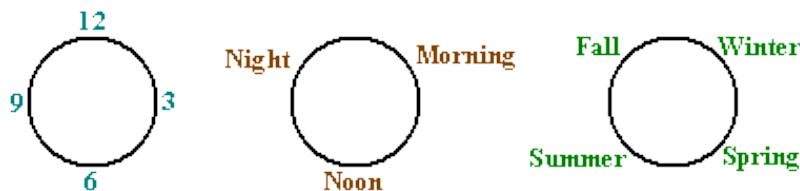


Figure 1. Circular time/clock

realize that the antiquity shared with China is a very similar understanding of time. It is the very Old Testament to push forward a cyclic concept of time: the Scripture declares of a God that always will be and never changes, somehow breaking the *consecutio temporum* (chronological order) between the past and the future. Time is therefore not linear but circular. A clock is not a timeline but a circle for the simple reason that time does not begin or stop, it continues without beginning or end. In the same fashion, days and years are also circular (Figure 1).

A circular perspective of time implies that man's fate will change along with it, he is no longer the main character of the process, the aim of Nature, for no longer the beginning is the beginning and the end is the end, but a continual cycle of beginnings and endings where nothing is unique anymore. While this view of time is today contrary to the Western way of thinking, for as we mentioned above-Western society since the Renaissance believes to move forward towards progress, the ancient Hebrews of the Bible, Babylonian, the ancient Greeks, the ancient Egypt, the native Americans (Maya, Inca) to remain in the Western side of the hemisphere, have always understood time, the past, present and future, as circular movement, consisting of repeating ages, Dark and Golden Ages, swaying between birth and extinction. Such an understanding might be ascribed to the fact that in early ages, pre-literate culture without a system of writing, where the seasonal harvest would define the rhythm and expectation of life, was hard to visualize a future that is fundamentally different from the past. The creation or restructuring of the earth, the advent of men who populates and advances on the earth, the eventual downfall of man through his evil inclination and the destruction of the earth, the slaughtering of civilizations, the raising of new ones, no matter how far it goes, the process repeats itself. Time therefore, they must have thought, cannot but be cyclical. We could keep speculating on the similarity of previous eras of man based on physical, textual and geological evidence. Physical evidence of man's achievements, on a limited basis, have been preserved in the archeological record. Textual evidence, which has been handed down from generation to generation, has been preserved through oral and written accounts of man's history. Geological evidence is preserved within the earth providing us with catastrophic events that have restructured the earth on

numerous occasions. Nature therefore seems to prove us that in spite of man's pretentious assumption we move within a history that repeats itself and the circularity of time, the everlasting renovation of the events is what keeps the process spinning. However with the decline of antiquity and the spread of Christianity the concept fell into disuse at least until Nietzsche. We shall now discuss briefly his Eternal return (recurrence) theory which even if lacking originality, it borders in many aspect the Chinese theory of time. However a distinguish must be previously elicited: even though for the ancient Greeks nature repeated itself, such a repetition was a fate that men could not avoid, the recurrence of time is therefore related to a pre-arranged design. Nietzsche moves away from this passive understanding of life, in a sense that he offers to humanity a moment of choice where following the death of god, and so the trans-valuation of values, men are called to redefine their life not anymore in terms of destiny but free will. And here must be placed his modernity.

Nietzsche: Eternal return

The concept of eternal recurrence, the idea that within infinite times, a finite number of events will recur again and again infinitely, is nothing but the alternative that Nietzsche had found to deny the end of history as it was pictured by the great ghost standing behind the whole XIX century, Hegel,

"Fellow man! Your whole life, like a sandglass, will always be reversed and will ever run out again; a long minute of time will elapse until all those conditions out of which you were evolved return in the wheel of the cosmic process. And then, you will find every pain and every pleasure, every friend and every enemy, every hope and every error, every blade of grass and every ray of sunshine once more, and the whole fabric of things which make up your life. This ring in which you are but a grain will glitter afresh forever. And in every one of these cycles of human life there will be one hour where, for the first time one man, and then many, will perceive the mighty thought of the eternal recurrence of all things (...)"¹

¹ The Gay Science 341

Let's consider the world as a super-complex chess game. If games of chess are played one after another forever, eventually, a game will be repeated since there are only a finite number of possible games. It is the same with the world; eventually events will recur in the same order. The world is an eternal process of coming to be and passing away and in the great chess game of existence, it must pass through a calculable number of combinations where every possible combination would, at some time or another, be realized. Nietzsche believed that there is no final state of the universe; that the world is in a constant state of flux, always changing and becoming, time is therefore infinite, somehow, there is no beginning neither ending, but it bends round into a circle. If on one hand, the theory of the eternal return drains out history of its purpose, which is mutation, change, displacement, differentiation, variation, on the other hand it is indeed a theory of conflict. How to keep together eternal return and the flowing of history? At first it seems an ethical hypothesis. He professes that the wish for the eternal return of all events would mark the ultimate affirmation of life, more than a philosophy of history it appears to us as a philosophy of life:

The greatest weight: What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live it once more and innumerable times more' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine'².

It is the attempt to create a brand new humanity, outside the limit of moral, the renunciation of Christian ethic, willing to desire life once and once again, authentically expression of own desire and choices where the system is kept on moving by man alone rather than the chain of moral and metaphysic. If we consider the eternal return as an ethical hypothesis, where happiness is desire of repetition, human suffering find here a moment of rest for if any given pain is reproduced for an infinite number of times pain itself loses its dramatic feature and it becomes bearable. But the Eternal return is first and foremost a cosmological theory. More than a negation of metaphysic, we assist to a negation of time, at least time as conceived by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Such a definition in fact (the Judeo-Christian suggestion) recalls an Oedipical structure of domination where each moment is the son devouring his father (the previous moment) fated nonetheless to be devoured soon after. Out of metaphor is the sense of every single man what comes less, sucked back by a bigger history, which is the Western optimism in the new values brought by the new technological progress, and the enlightened trust in all

might come from the future, chaining man to the construction of the future. Anchored to an arrogant time that careless moves forward, man is not worth for what he is as singular being but he is worth as much as he contributes to the developing of the process. Stretching the reasoning to the limit, man has been left alone on the uprising towards the future, he has to produce for behind production stands the keys of success, man will fiercely compete in the economic arena among all those like him strive for better condition, a better house and a better self. At last, the economic success he alone achieved might tell him that he belongs to the chosen ones. The protestant ethic might have given rise to capitalism indeed, but it is the linear time conception that gave rise to the Western individualism.

Nietzsche therefore by freeing man of his egoism, setting man free from the chain of moral and a 'must be obtained-progress', suggests a cyclic time where every moment of time has its own reason to be and so does man. Following the reasoning, the eternal return is a very transparent critic versus the Hegelian system (which ends in Absolute Spirit, read it as god) and the whole Platonic-Christian understanding of the universe which, by setting an ultimate goal, condemns human being to a rigid competition and a futile achievements. The Christian speculation defines history as a dialectic-linear process (sin-redemption-salvation) which encompasses the singular existence in a perfect mechanism where men, events and time assume meaning only when related to the whole. Contrarily, Nietzsche breaks the continuum of Christianity into independent moments where man is not any longer anchored to a pre-defined project, he is not heading towards any unavoidable progress, and he is not anymore a tool for an aim but becomes an indispensable moment of the history where the aim is not divine but man himself. From here on, we can read the death of god, historical prerequisite for a cyclical conception of time (for the existence of god would force time to head towards him) as instrumental to the collapse of the mechanical structure that the positivism gave to the world. We should now consider what the death of god really is, be it a theological speculation or philosophical, but unfortunately this does not matter for this paper. We shall be satisfied by pointing out a very strong similarity with Chinese understanding of human things. The death of god is the literary expression used to synthesize the end of the platonic metaphysic and so the Western one, all in all, the idea that there is an after world where we all refer to build moral categories, very much alike the Chinese after world where the living and the dead remain separate and yet coexist as phenomena of the natural world. The eternal return presents itself as an alternative theory to the creation. The risk however is to allow metaphysic to come back from the window for once there is no god, the process does not end, but it cannot even start. Nietzsche resolved the problem of creation by ignoring it. And there is another issue that Nietzsche seems to have overlooked and Chinese philosophy did not. The eternal return wants

² Ibid.

to be a step further from the crisis of value, the iron cage where the Western civilization is melancholy suffocating, by donating to humanity a new existence based on auto direct moral. However, Nietzsche seems not to have considered that yin and yang live in harmony which means that for as much as the eternal return is at his historical time a theory that overpasses the crises, decadence, will come back again, just as the theory indicates, and therefore such a theory is no solution at all but only a brackets, it absorbs the conflict for a while, as long as it might be, until it comes back when the combinations of possibility ends.

Chinese reflections

As we said before, the Western conception of a linear time processing incessantly somewhere is well connected to the Western need to have a direction to aim at. Western society needs to foresee the future and itself in it. Western society seems to have a plan placed somewhere in a no well-defined future, and in order to make it possible, time, the order of a sequential time, becomes indispensable to avoid chaos which is what reality otherwise is. Unlike Chinese society who does not contemplate chaos for life is first and foremost equilibrium. Things cannot be destroyed once and for all for once the previous order is split apart the elements, cosmic forces, will adjust themselves in a new equilibrium as in an eternal cyclic movement where life goes, up and down, to and fro. Here lies one of the main differences between the two cultures: Christian theology divided time into past, present and future, and such a conception of time forced Western civilization to study nature in order to unveil the secret held by the mysterious future, and so they opened the sky and they dug up the earth to compete with nature and enrich themselves with a promise of Heaven. Asian civilization did not compete with nature for they never had a future to decode, the same divination is a practice used to adjust the present rather than the attempt to change coming events, Asians, China specifically, therefore did not challenge nature but rather accepted it. Buddhism by introducing the idea of after-life tried to introduce as well the concept of responsibility and so the ability of planning the future and for men a chance to foresee themselves in it. But China did not accept it, China could not really cope with the idea of future because by not having a god to refer to, China has felt vulnerable in front of nature, thus China based the core of a civilization essentially on the historical present. Chinese language itself is luckily the best evidence to the theory: Chinese tense knows only the present, it does not have neither past nor future, unlike Latin languages, but it describes past and future by adding external preposition, sometimes it is the content of a sentence to offer to the listener the guessing of the historical momentum, as to say that the flowing of time, it exists and it is accepted only as a deviation from normality.

And because China did not have the idea of future neither of responsibility, because China, out of fear, did not try to fill the gap between man and nature first, nor man and divine after, capitalism was replaced by a subsistence economy, which felt to have reached stability with the introduction of collectivism, the repetitiveness of the economic and social system led to conservatism, conservatism brought despotism in the political shape of socialism. On the other hand, Buddhist emphasis on suffering helped China to accept the tragedy, belief of reincarnation made easier to see the cyclical changes of life together with the everlasting coming back of everything. In the early Chinese texts, there is no story that describes the creation of the world out of nothingness and marks the beginning of time. In Chinese chronologies, time is not counted from a single date, such as the birth of Christ, but from repeated historical beginnings, the foundation of a dynasty, or a royal family. On the personal level, individual lives are bounded by birth and death, each person's life is regarded as a link within the continuum of the ancestral lineage, which includes both of the living and the dead while the ritual is what keeps together the ancestral spirits and the living. However the spirits Chinese traditions refer to, were not gods-like, nor were their souls standing before an almighty God to be judged. The Han death ceremony, for instance, where the two souls, the *hun* and the *po* are rejoined together after a ritual, it is based exactly on the belief of immortality but more than this on the idea that there is not an unbridgeable gap between the sacred and the secular. The fact that the character 神 numerates between its meaning human spirit (soul) and spirit/ghost indicates that Chinese religious philosophy does not have an ontological distinction between the two elements, divine and human somehow are placed in the same dimension, as in the Greek mythology, in a continuous echoes of symbolism. Very much different from the Western civilization based on an original sin which turns to be first the gap between man a divine, and soon after between man and nature. To say it in a different way, while the Western order of cosmos might be seen as horizontal in a way that it tends to stretch towards an ending, the Chinese understanding of the universe, from the very beginning, seems to have a vertical order, by which I mean continuity towards eternity. But the guarantee for maintaining the regular spinning of the process could not be, other than repetition. Here we cannot but being struck by the remarkable contrast between two civilizations. While the European society, Western society tout court, approaches the world religiously, as created by a transcendent deity, or scientifically as a mechanism consisting of objects in evolution, ancient Chinese thinkers viewed the world as a complete and complex organism where events happen the way they happen because of their position on the ever moving cyclical universe.

The difficulty in discussing time in relation to the human

spirit is aggravated in Chinese society by the character of the Chinese mind whose primary interest is ethical (Wang and Richard 1994; Lao and Taoism 1969; Mo 1963; Wing-tsit, 1963)³. Metaphysical problems such as that of space and time, matter and spirit, are rarely discussed, and if they are, it is for the sake of ethics. Confucianism is the philosophy of social organization, of order, public education and practical knowledge. It gave Chinese society a system of education and strict conventions of social etiquette. The main purpose was to form an ethical stratum of intellectual who could lead the road for a right and durable government. Taoism, was more concerned with the observation of nature and the discovery of its Way, or Tao, in order to maintain peace. Human happiness, which is to be found in harmony, is achieved when men follow the social order which is hierarchy linked to the natural order of things. In this sense, Western society relates itself to God and therefore the philosophical speculation is either a denial or a reaffirmation of metaphysical elements, while Chinese society relates itself to the society itself. Confucian preaching is about rectifying men's conduct and behavior, a man who rectifies himself can rule his family, he will bring order to the State and peace to the world. As we see it, the philosophical speculation never engages itself with metaphysic but social ethic, more realistic or practical in a way and yet much less systematic. However, the fact that Chinese philosophy lies on the moral realm, on human daily experiences, does not allow us to consider humanism as the backbone of Chinese society. In fact, if we consider humanism as a critical thinking that bases itself on an anthropocentric paradigm man orientated, I believe this is not what China is about. Deep into Chinese history, man seems to have always been subordinated to nature, in the traditional painting for instance, landscapes and bucolic scenes precede people and if there are human figures they are very small compare to the economy of the picture. Short stories and novels with the first person narrator appeared in China only after May Fourth (Merle, 1977; Jonathan, 1991; Lin 1979; Liang, 1967), as to say that Chinese literature has not found space before for individuality and personal discourse, but the singular bibliography had to convey into a larger pond, the empire or the party. Deep into Chinese history, society has always hierarchy overshadowed individuality, the individual overshadowed by the family, the family overshadowed by the state, the very same Confucian ethic lacks of discussion on individual freedom and rights. The economic system has always been about subsistence economy which provides for basic needs provided by the State. The

sociological implication of the *danwei* (单位), millions or urban workers eating with a meal ticket food supplied by the party state, recalls the idea of a mother country (China) that tends to control every single aspect of people life. It has to do with collectivism and egalitarianism rather than humanism which unlike is a perspective that affirms *humanitas* (人道主义), benevolence towards the other of course, but first and foremost a connection with the beauty of human reason, individual choices and the human dogma. Humanism as Sartre puts it, is a theory which takes man as an end and as a higher value, unlike Chinese ideology which always considered man as an aim to achieve some outside purpose: in ancient history, the well ruling of a dynasty, in modern history, which is the party state point of view, to legitimate Humanism was to acknowledge an autonomous space of morality and authority independent from the Party leaders, therefore potentially dangerous. All this to say, that, the center of Chinese cosmos, it is the human world, but not human itself.

What about the spirits and the afterlife? Again when it comes to metaphysic Chinese philosophy seems not to be interested for once Confucius said

*until you are able to serve men, how can you serve spiritual being? Until you know about life, how can you know about death?*⁴

Harmony seems to be the key to decode the Chinese understanding of time. Confucianism sees in the good relationship of an ideal society the main factor able to ensure stability. The legalist stressed as well the equilibrium factor but it was to be realized through standardization, the application of the law is the guarantee for a just government, a right ruler, a wise man. Daoist viewed harmony as an interchange: *Tao produced the one. The one produced the two. The two produced the three. And the three produced the ten thousand things.* Clearly, there is a definite past of all things since they all originate from the *Tao*. Their evolution is from the simple to the complex: from the *one*, that is the original material force that is produced by *Tao*, to the *Yin*, the female principle, and the *Yang*, the male principle, and to the three, the blending of the *Yin* and then *Yang* with the material force. What does this exactly mean? Yin and yang, better to be understood as a symbolism, is the dualist schema used to explain a range of phenomena, seasonal change, life cycle, rise and fall of dynasty, where yin stands for the female passive pattern and yang for the male dominating one. The alternation of day and night, the duty of a wife towards her husband, the duty of younger to obey the older, the balance between the two elements maintains harmony on one hand and on the other guarantees the permanence of the process for we have thesis and antithesis at the same time, dialectic and

³ As discussion on Chinese Philosophy see also: A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, trans. Wing-tsit Chan, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1963 An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy, Karin L.Lai, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008

Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation, trans. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr, Ballantine Publishing Group, New York, 1998

⁴ Confucius, The Doctrine of Mean, in Confucius, Dover Publication, New York, 1971

equilibrium with a never reaching synthesis.

When the sun goes, then the moon comes, and when the moon goes, then the sun comes. The sun and the moon drive each other on, and brightness is generated in this process. When the cold goes, then the heat comes and when the heat goes then the cold comes. The cold and the heat drive each other on, and the yearly season comes into being in process. (...)

The harmony of nature which works in an endless cyclic rhythm of birth, growth and decay does repeat itself in the sense that all must return to the beginning, decay as well will be displayed again on the historical stage and for some reasons Nietzsche preferred to ignore this element focusing on the idea of morality as anti-nature. Back to Daoism, each return to the beginning brings a change and transformation, like the stream of a river, always the same water never the same water, the constant is the movement itself rather than the change it brings, as to say that nothing is final. In fact before the bygone is ended, the forefront of the succeeding has already come into presence, the outcome is harmony but the final goal reveals a society projecting itself into eternity. And yet the repetition of the process is not enough to allow any change, that is, if there is a change, it is not clear what it is about. If Nietzsche's flow is to have ignored the coming back of decadence at some stages, Tao did conceive a system based on alternated elements, either Yin or Yang, but did not conceive the idea of a synthesis between the two elements, as to say that it did consider the yearly appearance of summer and winter but it did not consider spring or autumn. Taoism saved change by giving it a certain space of action, this summer or winter is different from the past summer or winter and the coming next will be different from this, and yet Taoism denies change by not contemplating anything which might be neither summer nor winter. Out of metaphor, Taoism deprived history of the freedom to create the outcome, the systems indeed, of Yin and Yang. But if we denude history of change what is left? The introduction of Tao in Chinese society, the magic spell of repetition of events maintaining the appearance of evolution towards another state, has to be seen as the ideological justification of Chinese socio-economic order, an emerging conservative system taking over a dying conservative system, the transaction for instance form a dynasty to another one, or from Confucianism to communism.

Cyclic time is self-contained while linear time represented by the line of progress is open and must have a beginning and an ending. Although cyclic time does not necessarily imply repetition, it is nevertheless subject to recurrence. Unlike linear time with its succession of events, one after another, all connected and yet considered as once for all. Because of the law of reversion in cyclic time, because time is repetition and so to one dynasty will follow another, China is always been concerned about enduring rather than developing and

duration is often synonymous with repetition, harmony is provided by an orthodoxy that can provides immobility: family system, kinship, rituals, the dynastic political apparatus, the extremely complex bureaucracy area, all attempts to maintain China as it is. The imperial examination is another example, not the ability to think or innovate of the candidates was tested but their knowledge, read it as ability to memorize, on the Confucian classic. By so doing, it succeeded on establishing a static bureaucracy, were conservatism and stagnation shaped the soul of a civilization. And of course in a certain sense such immobility placed China out of history for few centuries. Linear time, on the other hand, by giving every single man a specific role in history, an indispensable position on the ladder towards the main goal, be it progress or God, lead to the raise of the loneliest of loneliness, individualism. But a philosophy gives a society what that society need the most: Confucianism, Mencius, the Legalist, Buddhism, Taoism, broadly speaking Chinese philosophy, gave China stability, the idea of an equilibrium ruling men's destiny, a dialectic of opposition without synthesis and yet guaranteeing the balance of the universe while contemplating a resemblance of change. By so doing, China found an intellectual justification for the lack of unity, warring states, civil wars that more often than not have violated and devastated Chinese land. Unlike Western culture which after having satisfied primary needs, having reached a satisfactory level of welfare quite early, had to cope with the awareness of being mortal, the liability of life where every second is not just one second but the last one. Western philosophy therefore did not offer stability, it offered immortality. Western society did believe in the promise made by Christianity, believed in the after-life, a glorious stage of peace and prosperity to be reached either by divine election or personal achievements. Being responsible of the historical present therefore helped the West not to fear nature and planning the future in accordance with it, more often rebelling to it. As Weber suggested, the outcome might have been capitalism, more evident is a society tending very much towards its expectation, for the uniqueness of a time that does not repeat shaped a civilization that lives only once, but it lives today and tomorrow. And yet China is changing. The transaction from socialist China to post-socialist China, the impact of Western culture on the Chinese people has unleashed forces that involve a mastery of nature, a new understanding of man, society and man's role in it. Facing modernity has been until now a cultural breakdown, the coming in age of a new economy (capitalism), a new philosophy (individualism), the run for material prosperity, will as well effect the cyclic flowing of time?

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

- Confucius (1971). *The Doctrine of Mean*, in *Confucius*, Dover Publication, New York.
- Jonathan DS (1991). *The Search for Modern China*, Norton & Company, New York.
- Karin LL (2008). *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Lao T, Taoism MK, (1969). Stanford University Press, Stanford
- Liang C (1967). *The Mind of Modern China*, University of California Press, Los Angeles.
- Lin Y-S (1979). *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, University of Wisconsin Press, London.
- Merle G (1977). *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, Harvard University Press, London
- Mo T (1963). *Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, New York
- Roger A, Henry R (1998). *Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, trans., Ballantine Publishing Group, New York.
- Wang B, Richard JL (1994). *Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by trans.* Columbia University Press, New York.
- Wing-tsit C (1963). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, trans., Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Wing-tsit C (1963). *The Way of Lao Tzu.*, Prentice Hall Library of Liberal Arts, New Jersey.
- Philip R, Laszlo L (1976). *Tao: The Chinese Philosophy of Time and Change*, Review by: Watt Chi-yan, *The China Quarterly*, 65 : 157-158, Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/653141>
- John H (1955). *The Concept of Time*, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 5(18) : 1-20, Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Scots Philosophical Association and the University of St. Andrews, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2217042>
- Hannah A (1958). *The Modern Concept of History*, *The Review of Politics*, 20(4) : 570-590 Twentieth Anniversary Issue: Published by: Cambridge University Press for the University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1404861>
- Time and History: The Variety of Cultures*, Edited by Jörn Rüsen, Series: *Making Sense of History*, Edition: NED - New edition, 1, Published by: Berghahn Books Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qchrw>

Online Sources

- Chinese Overseas: Comparative Cultural Issues*, Tan Chee-Beng, Published by: Hong Kong University Press, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbzp1>
- Carlo MC (2003). *Clocks and Culture 1300-1700*, Norton Company, New York,
- Jie Lu (2005). *Dismantling Time: Chinese Literature in the Age of Globalization. Materializing China*, Review by: Robin Visser, *China Review International*, 12(2): 491-496, Published by: University of Hawai'i Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23732822>
- Chung-ying C (1974). *Greek and Chinese Views on Time and the Timeless*, *Philosophy East and West*, 24(2): 155-159, Time and Temporality, Published by: University of Hawai'i Press, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1398017>
- History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, Martin Heidegger, Trans. by Theodore Kisiel, Series: *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*, Published by: Indiana University Press, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gzbw5>