

Helga Zepp-LaRouche

The Urgently Required Aesthetical Lessons To Be Learned from Leibniz, Schiller and Confucius

This is the edited transcript of the opening presentation by Helga Zepp-LaRouche to the conference, “China and the West Face to Face: Rivalry or Cooperation,” co-sponsored by the Schiller Institute and Spain’s Cátedra China think tank on October 21, 2020. Mrs. Zepp-LaRouche is the founder of the Schiller Institute. Subheads have been added.



Schiller Institute

Helga Zepp-LaRouche

First, let me thank Professor Marcelo Muñoz for quoting Leibniz saying that “China is another planet.” Hopefully that will be an incentive for people in the West, watching the world through their Eurocentric spectacles and otherwise interested in space exploration, to get the idea that it really requires intellectual effort to learn about Chinese civilization. Yes, the West and China are two very different worlds. When I travelled to China for the first time in 1971, in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, I had a real culture shock. China was so different from anything I had seen in Europe up to that point.

Common Universal Principles

But apart from the substantial difference in terms of culture, history, language, philosophy and values be-

tween the two civilizations, there are also common universal principles which, once you have discovered them, make it much easier to relate to the other one. Because Leibniz also said in his *Novissima Sinica*:

I believe it has come about through a unique decision of destiny that the highest cultures and most advanced technical civilizations of mankind are now collected, as it were, at the two extremes of our continent, in Europe and China that like a

Europe of the East adorns the opposite end of the Earth. Perhaps Divine Providence is pursuing the goal by which the most civilized, most distant peoples, are reaching out their arms; and to thus lead all lands found between them to a way of life filled by reason.

There are, however, those in the West who think that we are involved in a systemic competition today with China, and in a sense, we are. If present policy trends are continued on both sides respectively, the outcome is clear: The West will catastrophically lose, and not because of anything China does, but because of a self-

destructive paradigm shift in the West, whereby Europe and the U.S. have abandoned their best traditions, while China on the contrary has returned, with Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “reform and opening up,” to its thousands of years old Confucian tradition.

In Europe on the contrary there is presently a gigantic memory loss of the most advanced periods of European history, such as the Greek classics, the Golden Renaissance of Italy, and the German



Novissima Sinica (News from China), written in 1699 by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: “The most civilized, most distant peoples, are reaching out their arms; and to thus lead all lands found between them to a way of life filled by reason.”

classics, so much so, that people don't even remember anymore, what they have forgotten. The most excellent tradition in classical science, humanistic culture, and a concern for the common good have been replaced by an overriding orientation for the maximization of profit and a counter-culture based on the liberal principle that "everything goes."

While China is enjoying the benefits of being a meritocracy for thousands of years with only relatively brief interruptions, and therefore is not only turning out millions of creative scientists working on research and development, close to a million engineers every year, and is therefore close to being the leading scientific civilization in the world, as it had been until the 15th century, on the other side, in Germany 25% of the 15-year-olds are functional illiterates and Germany at this point does not even have the nuclear engineers any more to dismantle its nuclear plants after the ruinous exit policy.

It is not accidental, that China, on the basis of its traditional prioritization of the common good and system of meritocracy has been able to contain the COVID-19 crisis and restart its economy, while the Western countries are facing the worst yet to come.

Aesthetic Education

Returning to the initially stated common universal principles, they are not so much to be found in the specifics of history or culture, but much more in the method of perfection. And there one can find an extraordinary similarity between especially Confucius and Friedrich Schiller, the German poet, in respect to the method of moral improvement of man: the aesthetic education. Confucius developed his philosophy of creating the continuous self-perfection through lifelong learning as a way to create harmony in the individual, the family, and the state. It was Confucius' very genial way of developing a method by which society could escape the chaos and disarray of the period he lived in.

Leibniz's enthusiastic response to the reports he received from the Jesuits in China about Confucius were nourished for a similar reason: He regarded his approach of life-long learning and self-perfection as the way out of



"An extraordinary similarity [exists] between especially Confucius and Friedrich Schiller, in respect to the method of moral improvement of man: the aesthetic education."



the troubles of a 150-year period of religious wars in Europe. Likewise with Schiller: He developed his method of aesthetic education as the only possible answer to what he regarded as the subjective moral failure of the French in the face of the Jacobin terror and chaos of the French Revolution. "From now on," he wrote, "any improvement in the political realm can only happen through the ennoblement of the individual," and that can only occur through great art.

And in the Fourth Aesthetic Letter he says:

Every individual man, one can say, carries by predisposition, a purely ideal man within himself. The great problem of his existence is to bring all the incessant changes of his outer life into conformity with the unchanging unity of this ideal. This pure ideal man, who makes himself known more or less clearly in every subject, is represented through the state.

And then he specifies:

An agreement should not come to pass in that the state suppresses the individual, but that the individual becomes the state. And that man, in time, ennobles himself to the man in the idea.

Classical Culture

Confucius expresses the same concept this way: "He who understands music comes very near to the understanding of the *li*," meaning to find one's proper place in

the state and the universe. “If a man has mastered both the *li* and music, we call him virtuous, because the virtue is the mastery of fulfillment. Truly great music shares the principle of harmony with the universe.” And in the *Lunyu*, or *Analects*, Confucius writes:

My young friends! Why are you not engaging yourselves with poetry? (*Shijing*) Poetry is congenial to stimulate the imagination. She lets us view life in a contemplative mirror, thus cleansing our emotions. She awakens social nobleness, she arouses anger against injustice and deceitfulness. She permits the emergence in families and in the state of intentions for moral actions and otherwise broadens our knowledge of the whole organic world.... He who wants to be a scholarly person, should read poetry in order to develop in himself a soul oriented to truth and beauty. Then, read the Moral Laws in order to stay on the true path and learn music to be able to harmonically ensoul yourself.

Schiller attributes that same power to poetry, in his critique of Gottfried August Bürger’s poems he writes:

In a time when our mental powers have been compartmentalized, and their effectiveness scattered as a necessary consequence of the expanded scope of our knowledge and the specialization of professions—poetry is virtually unique in its power to re-unify the soul’s sundered forces, to occupy the heart and mind, activity and wit, reason and power of imagination, in harmonious alliance, and as it were, to restore the entire human being within us.

Confucius and Schiller

Both Confucius and Schiller describe in many ways how immersing oneself in poetry, music, and painting during leisure hours creates an aesthetic pleasure in the observer, in which there is neither a desire nor a rejection of the sensuous world, but in which taste is educated and the emotions are ennobled. The aesthetic sensation includes beauty and the sublime, and in this way a bridge is created between the world of the senses and

that of reason.

The scholar who is key for the understanding of the exquisite affinity of Confucius and Schiller as the Rosetta Stone to access both Chinese and European culture, is Cai Yuanpai, the first education minister of the provisional Chinese Republic and later President of Beijing University, who has shaped the modern education system of China more than anybody else. He reached the highest academic degree of *bianxiu* at 26 years of age and had excellent knowledge of all of the classical writings.

Cai Yuanpai’s efforts to study foreign education systems brought him, among other places, to Leipzig, Germany, where he studied from 1907 to 1911, where he discovered the profound correspondence of Confucius with Friedrich Schiller’s conception of the aesthetic education, and the conceptual identity of Confucius’ notion of the *junzi* and Schiller’s notion of the beautiful soul.

Cai wrote:

The comprehensive theory of Friedrich Schiller and his idea of aesthetic education has brought us all great clarity. Since that time the European idea of aesthetic education can

provide us a lot of what we can refer to regarding our own comprehension of this matter.

Cai coined the Chinese word *meiju* for this idea.

While President Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of the aesthetic education for a long time because of its relevance for the development of a beautiful mind of the students, China’s central authorities have just now issued new guidelines for a diversified high-MINT quality system of physical and aesthetic education. Art classes such as music, painting, calligraphy, dance, drama, and opera will be put on the same level of importance as the MINT subjects (Mathematics, Information, Natural Sciences, and Technology), in which China is already in the top PISA ratings (Program for International Student Assessment). Fan Di’an, president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, commented: “Aesthetic education is not only to teach students how to paint, sing or dance; it is about the ability to appreci-



Cai Yuanpei, the scholar who is key for understanding the exquisite affinity of Confucius and Schiller.

LoC

ate artistic beauty, which is important to student's psychological health."

I am convinced that if people in Europe start to study Chinese culture with the help of the Rosetta Stone of the role of aesthetic education, they will come to the same conclusion as [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe who, in a discussion with [Johann Peter] Eckermann on January 31, 1827, said about his impressions of China: "The people think, act and feel almost exactly like we do, and one feels oneself very quickly as being equal to them, except that with them everything is more clear, neat and moral."

If the world is to come out of the incredible combination of the pandemic, world famine, and social chaos in many countries, we can learn a lot from Confucius, Leibniz, and Schiller about a cure. If we can't do that, we could otherwise follow the advice of Goethe, who said in a letter from Weimar [Germany] on November 10, 1813, commenting on his intensive studies of China: "I have reserved this important country and segregated it, to be able to flee there in a case of emergency, as just now occurred.... To be in a completely new condition, even if only in thoughts, is very healthy."