

PROF GE ZHAO GUANG:

Mr Moderator, Prof Cheng, ladies and gentlemen, as the first speaker in the forum, it's because I could be the food for thought. It's like the Chinese proverb, "You throw a brick to appeal to jade", so I'm just a brick and there will be jade coming after me. So I'm the first to speak here. That means I am all ready to receive criticisms and challenges from others speaking after me.

Today I want to talk about tradition in the plural form instead of in the singular form so there are traditions or heritages, not just tradition or heritage. We know that China's gaining economic strength over the years, rather rapidly, and in recent years there are some new cultural phenomena in China. Some are advocating national studies. There is actually a fervour on national studies or Chinese studies and then there are others who advocate the studying of classical works, in particular Confucian works. And overseas, many Confucian institutes have been established.

In recent years, what's been more interesting is that there is commemoration of various Asian emperors, Yellow Emperor and so on. Even in the university campus, the advocacy that people should wear Chinese costumes, the Han costume in particular. Well, if people come to recognise or identify with the cultural roots, that are encouraging, but in this movement, what I see is unnatural is that what people are advocating or what people are trying to promote is Confucianism or something based on Confucianism. But in reality, in the ancient times of China, the traditions were in a complex form.

Yes, for a long time Confucianism was the mainstream thought, but it could not really represent all traditions of China. And even within Confucianism there is (Chinese spoken), Mencius, they are all different, they have all different thoughts and some focused more on rights and some more on laws.

So even within Confucianism, there are a lot of different schools of thoughts. For instance, the Confucianism in the Sung Dynasty would be different from Confucianism in the Han Dynasty. Buddhism is another important religion of China. That's emphasis on discipline, there's advocacy on nature and so on. So the traditions there are rather different.

So when we talk about ancient traditions of China, I would say they are multi-faceted and they are very complex and intertwined.

Perhaps from the Western point of view, they would say these are all Chinese traditions, but in fact within Chinese traditions, there is a whole complex body of traditions.

Even the Yellow Emperor or the emperors of China, you know, the (Chinese spoken) of Sung Dynasty, he said that Confucianism

regulates the -- rules the world, Buddhism rules the mind and Taoism rules the behaviour. So that's what the Sung emperor said.

That's why we can see that Confucianism was not the only school of thought making possible the various traditions of China. Perhaps Confucianism carried more weight, given its mainstream status, but then on other aspects, like eternity and so on, Buddhism would be more important. And then if we talk about daily life, we talk about health and life, then perhaps it's Taoism that gives more emphasis to these areas.

So when it comes to daily life or lifestyle, it's not Confucianism that could address those issues, so that's why when we talk about ancient traditions of China, within it, that's a complex body of traditions, so traditions in plural form, not in the singular form. We can't say that because Confucianism -- well, on the upside, Confucianism is the symbol, so we just pay attention to that. We shouldn't do that because then there will be discrepancies. And when we look back a hundred years ago, during the 4th May era, during that era, people criticised traditions, they resented traditions, but I wouldn't say that was a movement that was entirely against traditions, they were just picking on one aspect of the traditions. That is the extremist Confucianism.

Sometimes I always wonder, people in the 4th May era who criticised traditions may regard Confucianism as an imaginary opponent. Maybe they were just talking about the very extreme traditions in China, but actually when we talk about such extreme traditions like theocracy, monarchy and so on, well, they did happen. If they were fully realised, it was actually only in the early Ming Dynasty.

Therefore when it looked back at traditions and try to understand them, we have the feeling that at least in Mainland China we did have some misunderstanding and harmful thoughts about Chinese traditions. Therefore, the second issue we have to explore is what Chinese traditions are. I would like to emphasise that we have to examine what are Chinese traditions.

In my opinion, in our history of traditions and history of thoughts, there are lots of discussions about Chinese traditions. However, very seldom did we try to differentiate between Chinese traditions or traditions that are not found in foreign countries. And such traditions manifested the characteristics of China. These characteristics are particularly obvious in China.

My personal opinion is that in actual fact in the traditional Chinese culture, there are five aspects which may be unique to China. They are common in China but very rarely found in foreign countries. The first aspect is that in history the Chinese race has formed its knowledge about the world. That is, the global aspect or the world aspect. And this perception or concept was found in the ancient Han race. (Chinese spoken) of the United States also emphasised this concept; that is, to offer or contribute items to

the emperor, that is the emperor is in the centre of the nation, he's the most superior person.

This concept is still sustained at present. We can meditate on this. For the Chinese people, in particular for those in Mainland China, we can reflect on this. In fact, we do have a mentality of that China is in the centre of the world, but at the same time such a nation also have an inferior complex. For example, when we take a taxi, taxi drivers will talk to you about almost everything under the sun. It seems the taxi drivers know everything. For example, they are very concerned about news about Clinton and when I was still studying, Mao Zedong said we should be concerned about national issues. In fact, we should also be concerned about global reforms.

We can all see that recently we had very well known TV series covering the major big country in the world and that's about the mentality of such a nation. Of course, the advantage of such a mentality is that the nation would be concerned about very broad issues.

However, when the smaller countries in the surroundings are developing and advancing, then this nation will envy the developments of the small countries and at the same time feel insecure.

Therefore, in ancient China, we adopt this world or global outlook. And this is very special and unique to China. That is, this contribution and global outlook, it's very special and unique to China.

So that is the first issue that we should explore.

Secondly, the family is the core of our philosophy as well as our views about our country and society. For Chinese people, the country is an enlarged family, therefore when we view State issues, we very often view them from the viewpoint of a family.

So Chinese understanding about country and family has developed and evolved into the Confucianism. As a result, the Chinese have very strong responsibility towards the country and the family. At the same time, a Chinese is deeply regulated and controlled by this outlook about the family and the nation. In actual fact, those of us who are present here should have very deep studies about this concept.

Thirdly, in Chinese culture, there's another important aspect. That is, we have a religious world that is an integration of three religions and that has affected our politics and economy. Religious powers will never be able to be on a par with political powers.

For religions, nothing absolute.

Therefore, as a result, the three religions were able to co-exist harmoniously and the three religions have had exchanges, coordination and then we did have a period in which some other religions would like to destroy Buddhism. But in China, there's never been any religion which claimed that it's the unique and superior religion. Therefore, this condition of an integration of three religions is also unique to China. They are often in Taishan, Mao Shan and Xian. When we carried out investigation and studies, we discovered that believers very often cannot understand fully what they are actually believing, so they adore and worship whatever they know.

So there's no strong differentiation between the three religions and the three groups of believers, so I think this is the third important aspect.

Fourthly, we have this concept of yin and yang and the five behaviours. They are the foundation of our perception, technology and beliefs. I believe this is also a very important aspect of Chinese culture. Take, for example, Chinese medicine, feng shui and so forth.

They are very greatly affected by these concepts.

When we analyse nature and politics, we have this yin/yang concepts and the five behaviour aspects in our mind. And then when we do our analysis, we try to consider what we lack and what we have.

Take for example we'll say among the five basic elements we lack fire or we lack water. These are traditional knowledge which we've actually not understood very clearly and completely. Otherwise, we would have advanced much more in terms of Chinese medicine. Chinese medicine has played a role in our daily life and it has solved a number of problems that remain unresolved in Western medicine.

The fifth aspect may be very familiar with you. That is, we're living in Chinese characters. The Chinese characters in the Chinese language are the fifth important aspect in our culture. In actual fact, at present, apart from the language of the Nazi race, only the Chinese race is still using characters that are based on symbols. And this has also manifested a way of approaching things.

Let me give you some examples. In ancient times, Confucius said that name is not just a name or a title, it is linked to facts. If you give something a name, then it is tantamount to giving certain facts to that thing. When you call a person "the emperor", you're not just giving him the title of emperor, you're attaching facts to his status as an emperor. And even modern linguists are telling us that reading the Han characters and reading English and French, which are written in a horizontal way are very different.

I carried out a study on the poets of Li Shan Yin and I tried to find out the relatively rarely used words that are unrelated. I picked 28 of them and arranged them in four rows, seven in a row. In just a second, I asked a person to tell his impression. Over 90 per cent of my students were able to tell their impression and that impression did comply in a certain way or to a certain extent with the content of the poems of Li Shan Yin. Therefore, Mr He Zhe wrote an article on the philosophy of names. He pointed out that Chinese people have a certain kind of adoration for characters and language. This is actually similar to the Han character circle that we often mention.

Chinese people always living within Han characters. They think through Han characters, which have had great impact on us and our discussions on Han characters have not been sufficient.

In actual fact, Chinese culture belongs to China. Chinese culture is the culture of China. There is a degree of continuation and sustainability in Chinese culture. Today we're still living in cultural China or Chinese culture, which has been sustained. Why?

I think there are three reasons.

First of all, the ancient sages and classics of China appear rather early in history, so we're influenced by them. And also, the examination system of ancient China has strongly allowed the intellectuals to sustain knowledge. Thirdly, education in ancient China in primary schools, village schools, private schools and royal schools, they have been protecting the sustainability of education.

So I believe these five aspects should be examined and discussed by us. We'll see how we could make possible the innovative transformation so we could continue to promote and develop as well as retain the unique characteristics of Chinese culture.

Now I would like to talk about reconstruction of traditions and how it could be done. I said at the beginning that there were many interesting cultural phenomena, but I think they are rather superficial, like we have rituals to commemorate Confucius every year or the rituals to pay respect to the Yellow Emperor or we have children to recite Chinese literature or people wearing Chinese costumes. Yes, they are all positive developments, but when we talk about reinvention of traditions, shall we just rely on such external or superficial behaviours? Because all heritage or traditions are, in fact, a source of resources.

It's like a huge godown. In it there are many different weapons, it's like an armory, but which weapons do you use, which resources do you draw on? I think we need to discuss. In the current situation, current reality in this time of the world, what do we need to bring out from what warehouse?

So apart from resources, we need to look at the reality, the stimulation from reality.

And then there's still another task. After we've identified reality, we need to reinterpret. We cannot just live mechanically the traditions, we have to process the resources, the information, so that the resources suit modern day's appetite and need. Otherwise are we going to talk like ancient Chinese? No, that's not possible.

For any tradition to be sustained, there are three aspects. First, there must be official and government support. That's the first channel for us to promote and sustain traditions. So that's what I mean by incorporating traditions into the institution. If traditions are not institutionalised, then they are just fragmented resources. They could not be compiled into any useful form. I could not say more on this because of time constraints. In Sung Dynasty they did a lot. In Ming Dynasty there was also strict system on this. So institutionalisation is one thing. Without it, then there is not much binding authority and it would remain just a concept.

The second channel is we need the intellectuals to help here. We need to make the elitist thought and the Chinese classical thoughts be transformed into a part of our knowledge through education by intellectuals, so the intellectuals play an important role of promoting these thoughts.

I think on the TV, in the mass media, some are already doing that and I think it really works. Some have turned very difficult classical literature, they have translated into modern day language, into some essays and so on. I think that's a good idea, but I hope they will do it in a better way, not something too popular.

Another, the third channel is about turning the traditions into social customs. Without that, that's not possible to promote traditions. I stayed in Japan for a long time. I think Japan is very good in one thing: they have various festivals to keep reminding people, "You are a part of this culture, you have this culture, this is your heritage, this is your roots." So that people could identify with their own culture. So I think festivities and social customs and local customs must all be considered. Intellectuals must pay attention to all these.

To sum up, Chinese traditions are in complex form. They are in plural form. We must not just be one-sided in any way, so we have to look at the overall picture.

Thank you.