

The Chinese Correlative Worldview: From Yijing to Modeling of Confucian Decision-making

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Abstract

In this paper I introduce into the discussion of global politics and business the Yijing philosophy including the Chinese correlative worldview framing a traditional multi-tiered, comprehensive perspective on global problem-solving, which had a powerful influence on Chinese ancient understanding of world order, but has not been paid enough attention by modern policy makers and thinkers, especially political realists of international relations. In the Yijing, the world is viewed as a world of correlations, in which every element is interrelated to another. Therefore, a correlative decision-maker is committed to taking under consideration the sometimes competing yet still legitimate interests of all concerned, and at the same time to extending one's range of concern and take full account of long-term tendencies and large-scale contexts, correlating with short-term and small-scale facts available. This correlative model stands in stark contrast to that of rational realists acting in narrowly defined self-interest terms.

Keywords: Yijing, correlativity, decision-making, rational actor, modeling

1. Introduction

In this paper, I introduce philosophy of the ancient Chinese book "Yijing" (otherwise known as "I-Ching," the Book of Changes, also known as the Chinese ancient "Bible") into the discussion of global politics, through interpreting one key Yijing term of correlativity (huxi 互系). This paper argues that the Yijing philosophy including the Chinese yin-yang correlative worldview (all in a world of correlations) has not been paid enough attention by modern policy makers and thinkers, especially political realists of international relations. The Yijing frames a Chinese multi-tiered, comprehensive perspective on global problem-solving in today's globalized world.

My paper identifies correlativity as a clear style of thinking formulated in the Yijing, which had a powerful influence on Chinese ancient understanding of world order. In the Yijing, the world is viewed as a world of correlations, in which there is no element or aspect that in the strictest sense transcends the rest: every element is interrelated to another. Therefore, qualitatively, a correlative actor is committed to doing what is appropriate for everyone in the situation (yi 义), i.e. taking under consideration the sometimes competing yet still legitimate interests of all concerned, rather than just doing what is more narrowly to self-serving personal advantage (li 利), and at the same time to taking into account appropriateness of both means and ends. Quantitatively, a correlative actor is required to extend one's range of concern and take full account of long-term tendencies and large-scale contexts, correlating with short-term and small-scale facts available. This correlative model stands in stark contrast to that of rational realists acting in narrowly defined self-interest, short-term and small-scale terms.

2. Global Predicaments, Cultural Changes, and Confucianism

Alongside undeniably positive effects of globalization, there have come enormous challenges such as widening gaps of wealth, resource use, planetary-scale climate changes, environmental degradation, accentuated likelihoods of global pandemics, high risk fuel extraction and power, and financial, economic and political crises here and there. These predicaments are no longer constrained by national boundaries. Crises often have global reach and even affect everyone regardless of nationality. Moreover, these challenges cannot be met and solved by individual nations. At the same time, however, the growth dynamics of the “global informational capitalism” and “network society” are fueled by the multiplication and magnification of differences, which urge respect for different civilizations or individual voices. However, there is an apparent absence of a robust global culture of open, respectful, inclusive, and creative deliberation.

There is growing awareness of the limits of Western international theory writ at global scale. In contemporary academic rationale, the modern nation-state system has still been popularly accepted as the basic international system. International theory, therefore, is generally a kind of game theory between nation states, dealing with the maximization of national interests or strategies for balancing power, rather than a theory from the perspective of a more global context. Within the nation-state system, maxims such as “Might is right” and “No virtue like necessity” contrast sharply with international organizations attempting to mitigate the cruelty of international conflicts. The United Nations and its predecessor the League of Nations, reflecting the Kantian ideals, failed to effectively solve problems of so-called world anarchy; and owing to many challenges of the new waves of globalization, the degree of conflicts within this system has been intensified rather than mitigated in some areas such as the Middle East and northern Africa.

There is the corollary recognition of needs to consider alternatives to traditional international theories that inform much of contemporary national policy-making and interrelations. China’s growth in the background of Asian development is producing various profound transformations in the world’s order. This reconfiguration of economic and political dominance nevertheless opens possibilities for cultural changes, which challenge an elite world cultural order. Challenges might be posed from, for example, religious traditions like Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, or from the perspectives of indigenous peoples. But Evidence is that many anticipate that Confucian culture can make valuable contributions to the articulation of a new emerging world order. Efforts have been made to explore critically the meaning and value of Chinese culture.

When we look for the cultural resources necessary to respond to the global predicament, primary among them are resources suited to replacing the familiar competitive pattern of individual actors pursuing their own self-interests with a pattern of players strengthening possibilities for coordination across national, ethnic and religious boundaries. Confucian culture, originated from the Yijing, celebrates the relational values of deference and interdependence. That is, relationally-constituted persons are to be understood as embedded in and nurtured by unique, transactional patterns of relations—a conception of person that contrasts rather starkly with the more familiar model of discrete individuals associated with liberal democracy. For Confucius it seems that the solution to global predicaments, or especially the path to conflict resolution, is to transcend the intellectual and motivational framework within which the rational participants compete with each other by seriously considering the much larger space-time environment in which they are embedded (the “ten thousand events” worldview).

3. The Yijing: the Living Water Source of Chinese Philosophy

The Yijing is an ancient Chinese classic that dates back at least two thousand years. There is a commentary on the Yijing that is attributed to Confucius. The Yijing has been called head of the five Confucian Classics, head of the cluster of classics in Chinese intellectual history, or “the living water source of the endless flow of Chinese philosophy,”¹ just like the snow-covered Geladandong, the main peak of the Tanggula mountains, where the Tuotuohe River, the headwater of the Yangtze River (Changjiang, “Long River”), originates from.

¹ According to Chung-ying Cheng, Founding President of the International Society for the I’Ching (ISIC), “Zhouyi de xingcheng shi zhongguo zhexue siwei de yuantouhuoshui 周易的形成是中国哲学思维的源头活水。” See Cheng, Chung-ying, *Yixue Benti lun* (易学本体论 *Theory of Benti in the Philosophy of Yijing*), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006, p.1.

The Yijing provides not only a primordial strand of philosophy of dao for most of the schools of thought in the Chinese tradition, but also a summary of yin-yang correlative cosmology that is shared by most classical Chinese thinkers such as Confucians, Taoists, Legalists, Mohists, and Militarists (Bingjia 兵家) and so on, who generally believe that the religious, natural, and cultural context and the human experience are continuous and mutually entailing.

The Yijing contains most of the fundamental principles in the world, including the correlative relationship between yin and yang, or two opposing forces, which themselves include polarities such as bright and dark, moving and static, weak and strong, hidden and visible, and so forth. When applied to human society, the relations between different polities are also in the network of such changes and interactions. This ancient book as a philosophical expression of tradition and transformation of the world is not just a divination text as it is usually interpreted, as the book contains philosophical thinking on the cosmos and its development. As it talks about nature, human, and civilization, and frames a Chinese multi-tiered, comprehensive perspective on global problem-solving, it can readily be used to illuminate global politics and business even in the 21st Century.

4. The Yijing and Correlativity

The central concept of this paper is huxi (互系), translated as—correlativity. If we were to choose just one English word to characterize the Chinese way of thinking, making decisions, and producing knowledge, that word would be “correlativity” (continuity through change, or in plain terms, processual and relational). I attempt to identify correlativity as a clear style of thinking (or philosophy), a style which is distinctly Chinese, but not necessarily uniquely Chinese.

In ancient Chinese philosophy, correlativity presents an image of two things being tied to each other, each of which constitutes continuity with the other, and being seen associated with a change from one thing into the other and/or transforming into yet something else. Huxi (correlativity) consists of three key ideas in the Yijing: polarity, continuity, and change. In the Yijing the world is viewed as a world of correlations (of any type, loose or tight, multilevel, multidimensional, multifold, and multicategory²). In such a world, as Hall and Ames point out, there is no element or aspect that in the strictest sense transcends the rest: Every element is related to one another, and all elements are correlative.³

As dao is fully expressed in one sentence in the Yijing: a yin and a yang exemplify dao,⁴ the salient feature of the Yijing philosophy is that the complementary and contradictory interactions of the two basic elements of a polarity like yin-yang constitute the forces, and produce change. With no transcendence, every element is relative to every other and all elements are thus "correlative." Each particular is both self-determinate and determined by every other. An explanation of relationships requires a contextualist interpretation of the world in which events are strictly interdependent. "Polarity" implies a relationship of two events, each constituting a necessary condition for the other. Yin always suggests becoming-yang, and vice versa. Any two events constantly alternate each other, change into each other, exchange with each other, and displace each other, and so on.

In other words, there is no sense of dualism and transcendence (associated with ancient Greek Cosmology) in Yijing philosophy. The sky, earth, and ten thousand events mutually correlate with each other. It is interactions of the two basic elements of a polarity like yin-yang that constitute the forces, and produce change. The Confucian "polarity" implies a relationship of two events for example, each of which constitutes a necessary condition for the other. Each particular element is both self-determinate and determined by every other particular element. A polar explanation of relationships requires a contextualist interpretation of the world in which events are strictly interdependent.⁵

² See Tian, Chenshan. *Chinese Dialectics: From Yijing to Marxism*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005, p.27.

³ See Hall, David L., Roger T. Ames, and Confucius. *Thinking through Confucius*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, p.18.

⁴ The Chinese original is “Yi yin yi yang zhi wei dao 一阴一阳之谓道” *Yijing*, Xici I, Ch. 5.

⁵ Ames, Roger T. *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1993, p.69.

5. Modeling of Decision-making: Rational vs. Correlative Actor

Correlativity, the central concept of this paper, will be compared with rationality as developed in the European family of cultures. Explicitly, my study is an experimental project providing a comparative study of rationality here mainly referring to rational thinking (way of thinking), rational choices model in decision-making (way of acting). I compare rationality with correlativity mainly referring to correlative thinking, “correlative” choices model.

Distinct from correlative thinking, rational thinking is a modality of causal, linear and single-track thinking, originating from ancient Greek Cosmology. Within Chinese Yijing tradition, because of absence of belief in a single-ordered world and one standing independent of the world ordered as its efficient cause, and the employment of aesthetic over logical senses of order, the world of the sky, earth, and ten thousand events are considered as mutually correlating with each other. It should be noted that correlative thinking is distinctly Chinese but not necessarily uniquely Chinese. It is a holistic approach that includes giving reasons and patterns of coherence--whatever we might take as a definition of rationality. In other words, it should be recognized that within a certain concrete decision-making situation there may be both correlative thinking and rational thinking.

How does a typical rational actor make decisions? A rational actor tends to make short-term and small-scale decisions for maximizing his/her interests as final goals of economy, politics, and social life, minimizing his/her costs at the same time, after considering facts available, alternative choices, possible gains and losses, and also weighing benefits and costs, and opportunities and risks. Rational choices theory is consistent with individualism and utilitarianism, associated with dualistic, absolute, and essentialist conceptions such as human nature, autonomy, equality, and freedom. It can be argued that corporations and even national government are extended concepts of the individual.

Comparatively speaking, a correlative actor envisions him/herself in their multiplicity of relations and roles, their organizational contexts, and their larger significance in the natural and human environment. Correlative actors are context-sensitive instead of “Me” —sensitive of egoism. Therefore and furthermore, actions are expected to be properly and particularly situated within roles and relations, pursuing for appropriateness fitting within the specific circumstances, as time changes and as circumstance varies. He/she must be prepared for the art of contextualizing and take full account of *qu shi* (趋势 long-term tendency and large-scale context, correlating with short-term and small-scale facts available). A never-ending environmental scanning to identify contingencies, correlations and correspondences as well as coherence and processes, and constant adjustments to the whole environment full of uncertainties are required so that one is not left unprepared for the unexpected surprises that often accompany rationalist certainties.

Therefore, qualitatively, within a tradition in which person is irreducibly social, and the “I” and the social context are reflexive and mutually entailing,⁶ a correlative actor is committed to doing what is appropriate for everyone in the situation (*yi* 义), i.e. taking under consideration the sometimes competing yet still legitimate interests of all concerned, rather than just doing what is more narrowly to self-serving personal advantage (*li* 利), and at the same time to taking into account appropriateness of both means and ends. Quantitatively, a correlative actor is required to extend one’s range of concern and take full account of long-term tendencies and large-scale contexts, correlating with short-term and small-scale facts available. This correlative model of decision-making stands in stark contrast to that of rational realists acting in narrowly defined self-interest, short-term and small-scale terms.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to develop an understanding of the potential for Confucianism’s cultural role in global problem-solving, its potential rooted in aspects of ancient texts composed over two millennia earlier of which even China itself is not clearly aware. Although the Yijing, head of the five Confucian Classics, represents the essence of Chinese civilization, the Chinese traditional strategic culture (especially the Chinese way of decision-making) originating from the Yijing has not been paid enough attention by today’s policymakers.

⁶ See Ames, Roger T., and David L. Hall. *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001, p. 84.

In this paper, a new model of “correlative” choices was built on the basis of Chinese correlative worldview embodied in the Yijing. This correlative model of decision-making stands in stark contrast to that of rational realists acting in narrowly defined self-interest terms. For purposes of exposition it may be useful to draw such a sharp contrast, because there is the advantage for exposition purposes to contrast extreme forms of correlative vs. rational decision-making as two “actor models.”

At the age of China’s rise, which has aroused much attention, can we anticipate an alternative intellectual framework necessary to respond to global predicaments, produced on the basis of the development of Confucian culture and philosophy? Can today’s decision makers also benefit from understanding and using the Yijing, in terms of dealing with multi-national business and foreign relations, and thus solving global problems?

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