

Habermas's Study of Confucianism and East-West Civilization Dialogue

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I would like to start with Jürgen Habermas' views of China at three moments/stages:

- In 2001, when he was visiting China
- In 2020, right after he published his *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, in which he made an extensive discussion of the Axial traditions of China, particularly Confucianism
- In 2024, when he was trying to defend his confidence in human capability of cumulative learning processes that had been somehow weakened by what has been happening in Europe as well as in America these years

In his discussion with a group of Chinese intellectuals in Beijing in April, 2001 (Weidong Cao: “Communicative Rationality and Inter-culturality: A Symposium with Jürgen Habermas”, in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, December, 2001, Vol. I, No. 1), responding to a remark by one of his Chinese interlocutors (Xin Chunyin, later one of the highest-ranking officials promoted from legal scholars) that “The reformation of the legal system has become an important part of our political reform since then, which has contributed to the stability of the society”, Habermas said:

“You mentioned that, in the last twenty years, legal reform has been an instrument for political reform. I think there are some limitations here. Modern legal systems should be based on a completely democratic society. In other words, modern legal systems cannot exist without basic freedom, equality, rights for political participation, and basic social justice.”

In **an interview published in 2020** (“Moral Universalism at a Time of Political Regression: A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas about the Present and His Life’s Work”, Claudia Czingon, Aletta Diefenbach, Victor Kempf, in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2020, Vol 37 (7-8)), Habermas said:

“These symptoms of *political regression* in Western democracies are disturbing. However, I can’t see any alternative to our constitutional principles for which one could provide a convincing normative justification, or any stable form of ‘illiberal democracy’ that could be reconciled with the functional requirements of modern societies *in the long run*. Quite apart from the fact that there is no way to simply reverse the development of mentalities towards a post-materialistic value horizon, systems theory teaches us that – despite **the current fascinating counterexample of the People’s Republic of China** – the steering capacities of authoritarian political communities are not *sufficient* for complex societies.”

In **an interview published in 2024** (“Nachbetrachtungen zu Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie”, in Jürgen Habermas: *“Es musste etwas besser werden...” : Gespräche mit Stefan Müller-Doohm und Roman Yos*, Suhrkamp, 2024), Habermas said:

“Aber zurück zu Ihrer Frage: Wenn also, was ich nicht hoffe, mein Alterspessimismus doch nicht ganz in die falsche Richtung gehen sollte, bliebe mir im Rahmen dieser Hintergrundüberzeugungen immer noch diese eine, ganz und gar spekulative Frage: **Wird ein – hoffentlich ohne Krieg – weiter aufsteigendes China aus den Tiefen seiner langen, großen und vielfältigen Kultur eines Tages, aber rechtzeitig, die Einsicht gewinnen, dass die von einem absteigenden Westen bestenfalls unvollendet liegen gelassene Menschenrechtsordnung eine gewisse interpretationsfähige und fortentwicklungsbedürftige, aber vernünftige politische Errungenschaft ist, die der Menschheit im Ganzen gehört?** Dann dürfte freilich die Rhetorik der Menschenrechte bis dahin nicht schon zur bloßen Ideologie im Munde eines selbstgerecht militanten Westens verkommen sein. ”

In **an interview published in 2024** (“Nachbetrachtungen zu Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie”, in Jürgen Habermas: *“Es musste etwas besser werden...” : Gespräche mit Stefan Müller-Doohm und Roman Yos*, Suhrkamp, 2024), Habermas said:

“But to return to your question: If, contrary to my hope, my old-age pessimism is not entirely mistaken, then within this framework of beliefs, I would still be left with one wholly speculative question: **Will a rising China — hopefully without war — one day, in time, come to the realization that the human rights order, which a declining West may leave at best incomplete, is an institution that, while open to interpretation and in need of further development, is nevertheless a rational political achievement that belongs to all of humanity?** If that were to happen, however, the rhetoric of human rights must not, by then, have already degenerated into mere ideology in the mouth of a self-righteous and militant West.”

Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

Confucianism's unbroken history as a leading ideology of China even up till now:

"The singular history of Confucianism that continues unbroken to the present day only began when the Han dynasty had the canon of the *Five Classics*, which Confucius had created, carved in stone and adopted it, together with the *Conversations (Analects)* of Confucius and the teachings of his disciples, as the basis for legitimizing its rule. It turned this classical literature into the training canon for a bureaucracy selected according to strict educational standards. Confucianism continued to play this role into the twentieth century; and **currently there are even signs in the People's Republic of China that the official Marxism** – which has in any case been Sinicized and is being further diluted by state-capitalist economic policies – **is undergoing a renewed Confucianization.**"

Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

- Confucianism, though heavily relying on the political context and the unique continuity of a world empire for its political influences, is **one of the world religions because it shares with them the general constitutive structures of the axial worldviews**:
 - By ontologizing the sacred, Confucianism made **the breakthrough to a perspective (Tao) that transcends everything in the world**;
 - furthermore, it took the step towards **a universalistic morality** without allowing the sacred to be dissolved in the crucible of an enlightened secular moral consciousness;
 - and finally, it **upheld ritual practices**, but ones that became **detached from their roots in magical thinking and were reinterpreted in ethical terms**.

Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

- Confucianism is one of the “world religions” that is both political and cultural; it is a “*learned religion*” instead of “a religion of redemption”.
 - On the one hand, Confucianism, like Judaism, advocates **a moral-practical path of salvation and adopt a critical stance towards power**;
 - on the other hand, Confucianism, unlike Judaism, and similar to the intellectually elitist Greek learned humanism, prescribes **an epistemic approach to transcendence** – contact with God or the divine is not achieved through revelation and prayer but **through learning and knowledge with the reflexive moment of being tested and recognized**.

Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

- Confucianism is not only a “*learned religion*”, but also a “*learned religion*” that cannot be assimilated to ethics.
 - The traditional way of dealing with the powers of salvation and misfortune is certainly moralized, but not to the extent of that sacred loses its aura and disintegrates as such;
 - Confucius “sublate” (*aufheben*) the magically rooted practices in a completed different way from Judaism and Buddhism: Not by replacing them with something else, but **through a reflective repetition of rites that have long been placed at a distance.**
 - Unlike Laozi, who resorted to disciplines of bodily control and meditation exercises, Confucius wanted to **sacralized education by aestheticizing moral insights.**

Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

- Confucius did not see himself merely as an academic teacher, but primarily as a political adviser, a reformer and renewer of the ancient truth that is anchored in the transcendent Tao,
 - because he knew that moral appeals, which are addressed to the individual, will fall on deaf ears if their addressees cannot **draw upon their own experiences of ethical role models**;
 - therefore he holds up to the political rulers the mirror of the cultured gentleman who would rule his country in such a way **that moral conditions would arise of their own accord**;
 - in his conversation with political rulers Confucius uses the pragmatic argument, which is intended to motivate the rulers to adopt a “noble” attitude and practice, not so much in a strictly utilitarian sense as in **that of an ethics of the good**.

Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

- Ambiguities clarified / dualities highlighted in Confucianism
 - Transcendence / immanence
 - Ethos / cosmos
 - Enlightenment of mind / firmness of mind
 - Universalism / particularism
 - Principles / rules (special duties)

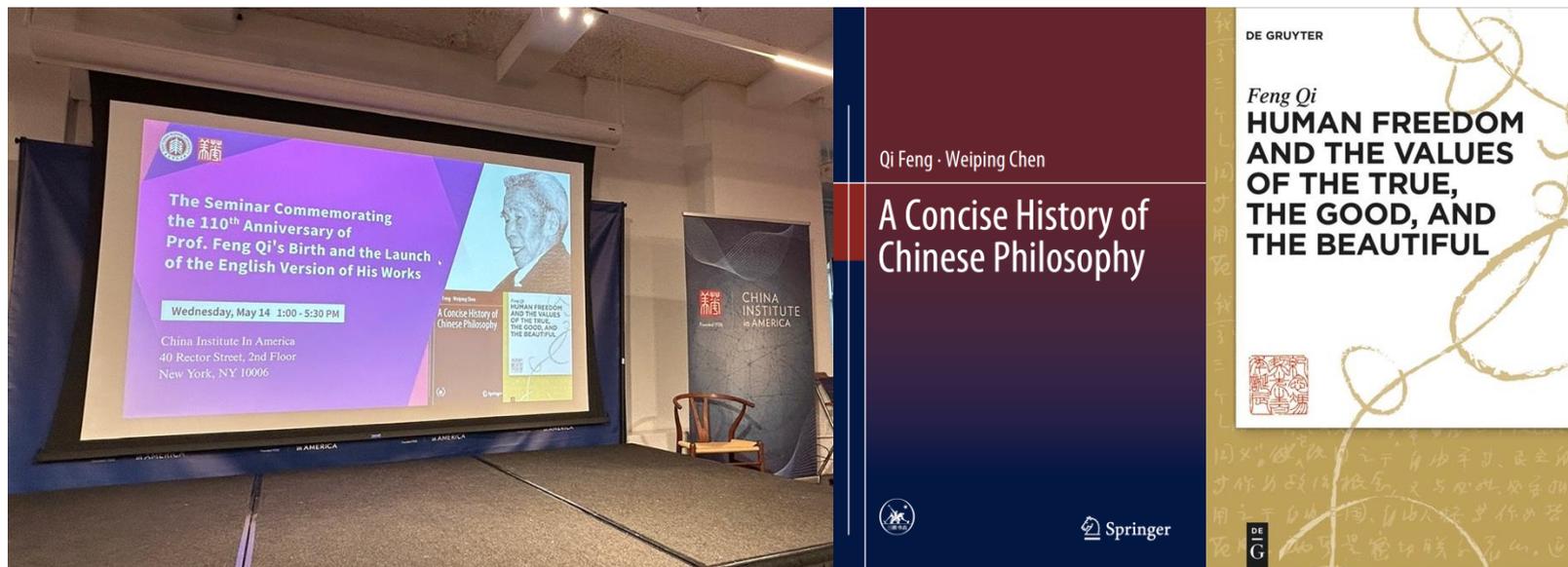
At the beginning of the lecture delivered at Goethe University Frankfurt, June 19, 2019, titled “Once again: On the relationship between morality and ethical life”, Habermas talked about his efforts of “floating between Kant, Hegel and Marx”:

“The far from original topic of my lecture this evening brings to mind an episode during a memorable Hegel conference held in Stuttgart, to which Dieter Henrich had invited—as a highlight, so to speak—the avant-garde of American analytic philosophy. Besides Richard Rorty and Ian Hacking, Quine, Davidson and Putnam gave lectures. After my talk, Rorty came up to me and remarked with a friendly shake of the head: ‘You Germans keep floating between Kant and Hegel’. I tried my best to explain that some of us were even floating between Kant, Hegel and Marx, because we believed that these historically transmitted arguments could still provide answers to systematic questions.”

In that lecture, Habermas argues for strengthening and realizing Kant’s idea of “**autonomy of reason**” (Autonomie der aus Vernunft), our “**self-understanding of the person as an autonomous rational being**”, by turning to helps from Hegel and Marx:

“Here we must distinguish **the cognitive level of rational insight** from **the volitional level of the decision to follow that insight under all circumstances**. Both are levels of freedom, for practical reason cannot simply force the good reasons on a rational subject. Reasons do indeed constrain rational beings, but they lead these subjects, who cannot avoid the necessity of saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’, at the same time to take a stance. Therefore, the aspect of reason taken on its own betrays a weak moment of freedom (which carries weight when assessing whether an action can be imputed under criminal law, for example). Beyond that, however, our free choice must let itself be bound by these reasons, which it recognizes as correct. **Autonomy in this two-level sense has the meaning of self-binding based on insight—the binding of our freedom of choice to norms of action we consider to be right on practical rational grounds.**”

Feng Qi (冯契 , 1915 – 1995), a contemporary Chinese philosopher who **interpreted Chinese philosophical traditions, particularly Confucianism, on the basis of his version of “floating between Kant, Hegel and Marx”**.



A major achievement by Feng Qi is to argue for an idea similar to the idea of “rational autonomy” by integrating **the principle of self-awareness** (自觉原则) and **the principle of self-willingness** (自愿原则) on the basis of his **constructive comparison between Chinese and Western philosophical traditions**.

“虽然，中国和西方的古代哲学家都认为，真正的道德行为应当是自觉原则和自愿原则的统一，但是，自觉是理性的品格，自愿是意志的品格，二者是有区别的，因此在伦理学上可以产生或强调自觉或强调自愿的不同偏向。中国古代哲学和西方哲学正表现了这两种偏向。”

“Although ancient philosophers in both China and the West believed that true moral action should be a unification of the principle of self-awareness and the principle of self-willingness ; **self-awareness is a quality of reason, while willingness is a quality of will; the two are different**. Therefore, in ethics, there can arise different tendencies that either emphasize self-awareness or emphasize willingness. Ancient Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy precisely reflect these two tendencies.”

A major achievement by Feng Qi is to argue for an idea similar to the idea of “rational autonomy” by integrating the principle of self-awareness (自觉原则) and the principle of self-willingness (自愿原则) on the basis of his constructive comparison between Chinese and Western philosophical traditions.

“孔子哲学思想的中心是“仁智统一”的学说。他的这一学说把“知”作为“仁”的必要条件，“未知，焉得仁？”认为对伦理关系没有正确的认识，就不可能有自觉的仁德。显然，孔子强调的是道德行为出于理性的自觉。孟子则更突出地强调了真正的道德行为是自觉的，是和理性认识相联系的。他指出：人之所以异于禽兽者，在于人有理性，人有了理性，才有可能对人道有明白的认识；“舜明于庶物，察于人伦，由仁义行，非行仁义也”，认为舜把理性充分发挥了，明察万事万物的规律和人们之间的伦理关系，从而能自觉地“由仁义行”而不是像一般人那样自发地“行仁义”。”

“The core of Confucius’ philosophical thought is the doctrine of the “unity of benevolence (*ren*) and wisdom (*zhi*).” This doctrine regards “knowledge” as a necessary condition for “benevolence”: “If one does not know, how can one be benevolent?” Confucius believed that without correct understanding of ethical relationships, it is impossible to have self-aware benevolence. Clearly, Confucius emphasized that moral action stems from rational self-awareness. Mencius, on the other hand, emphasized even more strongly that true moral action is self-aware and connected with rational understanding. He pointed out: what distinguishes humans from birds and beasts lies in humans having reason; with reason, it becomes possible to have a clear understanding of human morality. “Shun was discerning about all things, perceptive of human relations, and acted out of benevolence and righteousness, rather than merely practicing benevolence and righteousness.” Mencius believed that Shun fully exercised his reason, discerning the laws governing all things and the ethical relationships among people, and thus was able to *act out of benevolence and righteousness with self-awareness*, rather than merely practicing benevolence and righteousness as ordinary people do.”

A major achievement by Feng Qi is to argue for an idea similar to the idea of “rational autonomy” by integrating the principle of self-awareness (自觉原则) and the principle of self-willingness (自愿原则) on the basis of his constructive comparison between Chinese and Western philosophical traditions.

“更应当加以指出的是，孔子哲学的最高原理是“天命”，他要人“畏天命”“知天命”“顺天命”，这在实际上已经包含有忽视自愿原则和导致宿命论的倾向，给后世以消极影响。孟子也以为“天命”非人力所能为，所能致，“莫之为而为者天也，莫之致而至者命也”。不过孟子以为对仁义礼智和天道是“命也，有性焉，君子不谓命也”，使宿命论倾向有所削弱。”

“It should further be pointed out that the highest principle in Confucian philosophy is **“Heaven’s Mandate”** (*tianming*). Confucius wanted people to “fear Heaven’s Mandate,” “know Heaven’s Mandate,” and “submit to Heaven’s Mandate.” In practice, this already contained a tendency to neglect the principle of willingness and led to fatalistic inclinations, exerting a negative influence on later generations.

Mencius also believed that “Heaven’s Mandate” was beyond human power to act upon or bring about: “That which is done without being done by anyone is Heaven; that which comes without being brought by anyone is Mandate.” However, Mencius held that benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and the Way of Heaven are “mandate, yet have their nature; the noble person does not call it mandate,” which somewhat weakened the fatalistic tendency.”

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“在先秦儒家中，荀子提出“制天命而用之”，是明确反对宿命论的。但是，汉代以后，荀子地位越来越被贬低，最终被排斥于“道统”之外，占据统治地位的正统派儒家，从董仲舒到程朱理学用天命论来替封建专制主义辩护，完全漠视自愿原则，片面地强调自觉原则，认为道德出于天命、天理，对于天命、天理，只能认识它，自觉地顺应它，服从它，而决不能抗拒；不管你愿意与否，都得服从。这就完全成了宿命论。”

“Among pre-Qin Confucians, **Xunzi** put forward the idea of ‘ordering Heaven’s Mandate and making use of it,’ which clearly opposed fatalism. However, after the Han dynasty, Xunzi’s status was increasingly diminished and he was eventually excluded from the ‘orthodox lineage.’ The orthodox Confucians who held dominant positions, from **Dong Zhongshu** to the **Cheng-Zhu** Neo-Confucians, used Heaven’s Mandate theory to justify feudal authoritarianism, **completely disregarding the principle of willingness and one-sidedly emphasizing the principle of self-awareness**. They believed that morality comes from Heaven’s Mandate and Heavenly Principle; towards these, one could only recognize them, self-consciously submit to them, and obey them without resistance, regardless of whether one was willing or not. This ultimately became complete fatalism.”

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“儒家注重自觉原则，因而认为道德是可以教育而成的。他们在强调自觉原则的同时，也热中于讨论道德的教育和修养的方法，即“为学之方”。正统派儒学的“为学之方”主要是两条：一是通过教育，对道德规范有明察，但每个人明察的程度有不同，要靠用功学习来提高；二是以明觉的心理状态遵循道德规范行事，当然明觉的心态也有程度的不同，要用修养功夫来提高。”

“Confucianism emphasizes the principle of self-awareness, and thus believes that **morality can be cultivated through education.** While emphasizing the principle of self-awareness, Confucians were also keen to discuss methods of moral education and cultivation, namely **the “ways of learning.”** The “ways of learning” in orthodox Confucianism mainly consist of two aspects: first, through education, one gains clear understanding of moral norms, although the degree of understanding differs from person to person and must be improved through diligent study; **second, one acts in accordance with moral norms with a conscious and clear mental state,** and naturally, such a mental state also varies in degree and requires cultivation and practice to be improved.”

Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

- Ambiguities clarified / dualities highlighted in Confucianism

- Meta-Virtue:

Ren/Goodness (仁)

or

A love for learning (好学)

“For the scion of a noble family that had fallen on hard times, ‘the gentleman’ was the exemplary social embodiment of **the meta-virtue of serene humaneness.**”

“All concrete virtues are summarized in **the virtue of goodness of humaneness (ren).**”

“Correct moral action is a result of cosmological knowledge that must be learned: **‘Loving Goodness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of foolishness’ (17:8).**”

Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

- Ambiguities clarified / dualities highlighted in Confucianism

子曰：“由也！女闻六言六蔽矣乎？”对曰：“未也。”“居！吾语女。好仁不好学，其蔽也愚；好知不好学，其蔽也荡；好信不好学，其蔽也贼；好直不好学，其蔽也绞；好勇不好学，其蔽也乱；好刚不好学，其蔽也狂。”（论语·阳货）

The Master said, “You, have you heard the six words to which are attached six becloudings?” You replied, “I have not.” “Sit down, and I will tell them to you. **There is the love of being benevolent without the love of learning; – the beclouding here leads to a foolish simplicity.** There is the love of knowing without the love of learning; – the beclouding here leads to dissipation of mind. There is the love of being sincere without the love of learning; – the beclouding here leads to an injurious disregard of consequences. There is the love of straight-forwardness without the love of learning; – the beclouding here leads to rudeness. There is the love of boldness without the love of learning; – the beclouding here leads to insubordination. There is the love of firmness without the love of learning; – the beclouding here leads to extravagant conduct.” (*Analects*, 17:8)

Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

What is of highest importance is the virtue of **loving of learning**, or the virtue of **willingness to learn**.

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Habermas's study of Confucianism in *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*

What is of highest importance is the virtue of loving of learning, or the virtue of **willingness to learn.**

“In the postcolonial age of global multiculturalism, the claim of postmetaphysical thinking to universality could be defended, ideally speaking, only in an intercultural discourse among equal participants **who are aware of their fallibility and are willing to learn.**”

-- Jürgen Habermas

Thank You

