

Jung's Appreciation of the Ancient Chinese Work *The Secret of the Golden Flower* Can Help Us Better Understand Our Western Cultural Heritage

Thomas J. Farrell

Professor Emeritus in Writing Studies

University of Minnesota Duluth

tfarrell@d.umn.edu

When young Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) was growing up in Switzerland, he heard his father, a Swiss Reform pastor, say foreboding sounding things about the Jesuits. When young Carl grew up and became a famous psychiatrist and psychological theorist, he never attained a clear-sighted view of the Jesuits.

Nevertheless, Jung in his commentary on Richard Wilhelm's German translation of the ancient Chinese work known as *The Secret of the Golden Flower* notes that the Jesuits translated Tao as God – and Jung does not criticize their translation (page 94). On the contrary, he himself explicitly renders Tao as God on page 135 – but without again mentioning that the Jesuits rendered Tao as God.

On page 135 of his commentary (pages 75-138, plus plates 1-10), Jung says, “Therefore, when God or Tao is spoken of as a stirring of, or a condition of, the soul, something has been said about the knowable only, but nothing about the unknowable [as proscribed by Kant].”

Christians have long spoken of God's immanence. As a matter of fact, Jesuits are known for their emphasis on discernment of spirits experienced in one's soul – that is, stirrings of the soul. In addition, Jesuits are known for seeking to find God in all things.

Richard Wilhelm (1873-1930) also translated the *I Ching*. Cary F. Baynes (1883-1977) translated both of Wilhelm's German translations, into English. In addition, she translated the parts of the 160-page book titled *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life* written in German by Jung, into English. Unfortunately, Richard Wilhelm died on March 1, 1930. At the memorial service in May, Jung delivered a moving tribute to Wilhelm, which is also included as an appendix in this short book (pages 139-151).

My, oh my, does C. G. Jung ever find encouragement for his own thought in Richard Wilhelm's translation of the ancient Chinese work known as *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. Whew!

For Jung, Wilhelm's work was a great “Eureka!” experience. However, because Jung was deeply culturally conditioned in the Swiss sense of propriety, he was too reserved to run naked through the streets exclaiming, “Eureka!” -- as Archimedes reportedly did in ancient Syracuse.

Instead, in his own Swiss way, Jung worked to the best of his ability to process and work through what he had learned from Wilhelm's work.

As I say, Jung's tribute (pages 139-151) to Richard Wilhelm is moving. Jung says that Wilhelm's "comprehending devotion [to his work of translation] is in itself witness to a rarely great spirit" (page 140).

Jung credits Wilhelm with having "the '*communio spiritus*' [Bakan's communion], that most intimate transfusion and interpenetration which prepares a new birth [presumably for Western culture]" (page 140). (I will discuss Bakan momentarily.)

Jung says that "Wilhelm possessed in the highest degree the rare 'charisma' of spiritual motherhood" (page 140).

Jung says, "[I]t is Wilhelm, who, as though chosen from the soul of Europe, brings us a new light from the East. This is the cultural task to which Wilhelm felt himself called. He recognized how much the East could give toward the healing of our spiritual need" (page 145).

Jung says, "Wilhelm fulfilled his mission in every sense of the word. . . . With the completion of his task [of translation], his mission reached its climax, and, unfortunately, its end also. . . . I came near to Wilhelm only in the last years of his life, and then I could observe how, with the completion of his life-work, Europe and the European man [and woman] drew closer to him, beset him in fact. At the same time, there developed in him the feeling that he might be standing on the brink of a great change, a transformation whose nature it is true he could not clearly grasp. He only knew that he was faced with a decisive crisis" (pages 150-151).

Jung says that "Wilhelm's life-work is of so great a value to me because of . . . [what it] dimly shadowed forth to me from out of the confusion of the European unconscious" (page 151).

Now, in the Chinese tradition of thought in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, yin and yang are two opposite reality principles. Yin represents the reality principle of Darkness, and yang represents the reality principle of Light.

But Freud discusses only one reality principle: the ego (which is equivalent to the spirit of yang). Thus the ancient Chinese way of thinking of two opposite reality principles is radically different from Freud's way of thinking about only one reality principle. (See Baynes's summary on page 73.)

But is this difference important for understanding human psychology?

I would say, "Yes, it is extremely important." Consider, for example, Carol Gilligan's famous book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982) and the equally famous book *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* by Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule (1986). I know, I know, those women authors do not explicitly state that they think there are two reality principles. Nevertheless, they come close enough to intimating that there are that I should mention their books here.

I should also mention here that Jung had an extraordinary number of women followers – and allies in advancing his work -- including his independently wealthy wife Emma, Antonia (Toni) Wolff, Cary F. Baynes (our translator), Beatrice Hinkle (mentioned on page 102), M. Esther Harding, Kristine Mann, Eleanor Bertine, Jolande Jacobi, Barbara Hannah, Marie-Louise von Franz, Aniela Jaffe, and others.

Briefly, Jung says that the two opposite reality principles in ancient Chinese thought are important.

In plain English, Jung says that we in Western culture have been culturally conditioned for centuries now to think in terms of only one reality principle – the reality principle that the ancient Chinese referred to as yang. Feminists tend to refer to this historical cultural conditioning in Western culture as “patriarchy.”

As a result of his diagnosis of our Western cultural conditioning, Jung thinks that we need to start thinking in terms of both of the ancient Chinese reality principles.

As I will explain below, David Bakan of the University of Chicago in effect discusses two reality principles, which he refers to as agency and communion.

In any event, the Gospel According to John begins with darkness and light imagery:

“In the beginning the Word [in Greek, “Logos”] already was. The Word was in God’s presence, and what God was, the Word was. He was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; without him no created thing came into being. In him was life, and that life was the light of mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never mastered it” (John 1:15 REB; translated by David M. Stanley, S.J.).

If you have a concrete imagination, you might think that if God speaks, as Genesis says, then God speaks the Word, and the Word in turn brings all things that came to be into existence. (Incidentally, when God spoke, it may have sounded like a big bang – as in the big bang theory.)

First, in effect, I want to use the imagery in this passage to construct an allegorical interpretation of the conceptual constructs that Jung works with in his perceptive commentary on Wilhelm’s translation of the ancient Chinese work that is known as *The Secret of the Golden Flower*.

My allegorical interpretation of Jung’s thought is straightforward: The Word (in Greek, “Logos”) represents ego-consciousness. The darkness represents the unconscious. God represents the psyche. But in the spirit of this allegorical interpretation of Jung’s thought, I think that we should capitalize Darkness.

Now, the passage from the Gospel According to John presents the Word as emerging as the victor over the Darkness. However, Jung says that the Darkness of the unconscious can at times emerge as the victor over ego-consciousness, which results in serious trouble for ego-consciousness. But he also thinks that ego-consciousness has historically been over-emphasized

in Western culture to the point of leaving many Westerners seriously out of touch with the positive potentialities of the unconscious.

Now, in the orthodox Christian tradition of thought about the so-called divine trinity, the mythic Jesus Christ is imagined to be the Word, the Son, the Second Person of the supposed divine trinity. The other two persons in the supposed divine trinity are imagined to be the Father and the Holy Spirit.

In terms of my admittedly fanciful allegorical interpretation of Jung's thought, perhaps orthodox Christians could surely imagine the supposed Holy Spirit as representing the positive potentialities of the unconscious. Or perhaps they could imagine the mythic Blessed Virgin Mary as representing the positive potentialities of the unconscious.

But there is no imagined personification in the supposed divine trinity to represent the Darkness – unless the Holy Spirit is understood as representing the spirit of the Darkness.

By virtue of the name Lucifer, Lucifer does not seem to represent the spirit of Darkness. However, in the Christian imagination over the centuries, much of what has been attributed to Lucifer/Satan could perhaps be understood as the spirit of Darkness. But this alignment shows just how serious any possible rehabilitation of the spirit of Darkness will be in Western culture.

Historically, Western culture has been deeply influenced by orthodox Christian thought about the Word, the Son, the Second Person of the supposed divine trinity. As a result, Western culture historically has favored ego-consciousness. By contrast, the unconscious has been relegated to darkness.

Jung famously claims that each person has in his or her psyche shadow stuff. This shadow stuff is in the unconscious. In his view, each person needs to somehow discover his or her shadow stuff and then somehow integrate it into consciousness.

But Jung diagnoses the situation of Western culture as a one-sided imbalance with too much emphasis on ego-consciousness and not enough attention to the resources available through the unconscious. So he thinks that we in Western culture need to work out a more balanced way of life to establish a positive working relationship with the unconscious. For the individual person, the positive relationship with the unconscious would presumably include discovering and assimilating his or her shadow stuff.

However, Jung sees the shadow stuff of the individual person as involving the personal unconscious. But he claims that each of us also carries in our psyches a deeper layer of the unconscious that he refers to as the collective unconscious. I gather that the collective unconscious is where yin is to be found.

In his introductory remarks, Wilhelm likens the “backward flowing” movement to the familiar Christian idea of metanoia (page 9; also see page 17; on page 9, Wilhelm also discusses certain passages from the *Gospel According to John*).

Traditionally, Christians have tended to think of *metanoia* as a one-time big turnaround in life – the kind of big turnaround that Jung likes to say involves *enantiodromia*. However, in different writings, the Canadian Jesuit philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984) has written about four different big turnarounds: intellectual, moral, religious, and affective conversion. Moreover, his devoted follower Robert M. Doran, S.J., writes about another big turnaround: psychic conversion. Now, each of these five big turnarounds most likely involves the “backward flowing” movement that Wilhelm refers to. So perhaps we could think of the “backward flowing” movement as being in the service of the greater good of the person’s psyche.

In the text proper of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, we read about both “non-action in action” and “action in non-action” (page 59).

Jesuits have long thought of themselves as contemplatives in action. For an accessible discussion of Jesuit spirituality, see James Martin’s book *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (2010).

Here is the thumb-nail characterization of those two expressions: “Non-action [achieved presumably through meditation and contemplation] prevents a man [or woman] from becoming entangled in form and image (substantiality). Action in non-action prevents a man [or woman] from sinking into numbing emptiness and dead nothingness” (page 59). The text goes on to explicate further points that are interesting, but it is too lengthy to quote the following text at length here.

Jung sees the ancient Chinese ideas of yin and yang as representing a far more balanced way of life – for the ancient Chinese. But he does not think that Westerners today should attempt to appropriate yin and yang. Instead, he thinks that Westerners today need to work out a more balanced way of life that is rooted in and honors Western tradition.

Without using Jung’s characterizations of Western culture, the American Jesuit cultural historian and theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003) studied what I prefer to style as the infrastructures of Western culture in his great body of scholarly work, most notably in his massively researched book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (1958). As a result of that perceptive book, Ong emerged in the late 1950s, the 1960s, and the 1970s (and later) as a great guru for those who listened to him.

In 1971, 1977, and 1981, Cornell University Press published three important books by Ong. In 2012, Cornell University Press brought those three books back into print on a print-on-demand basis. So three of his important books are now available to the younger generation of readers.

Ong constructs a conceptual framework to work with that is different from the conceptual framework that Jung constructs to work with. Based on the conceptual framework that he has constructed to work with, Ong thinks that contemporary Western culture may be moving toward a deep change from what it has been in recent centuries.

Ong likes to say that we need both proximity (closeness) and distance to understand something. So for us in Western culture to understand our cultural conditioning, we need both proximity (closeness) and distance. No doubt we Westerners have varying degrees of proximity (closeness) to our cultural conditioning. In many ways, Ong's impressive body of work can supply us with the distance we need to understand our Western cultural heritage.

No doubt Wilhelm's translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* gave Jung the distance he needed to understand both his own personal encounter with the unconscious and his European and Protestant cultural heritage. No doubt Jung's commentary on *The Secret of the Golden Flower* can, in turn, give many people in Western culture today the distance they need to understand their own Western cultural heritage.

Now, I should point out that David Bakan of the University of Chicago works with the contrast of agency and communion in his book *The Duality of Human Existence: An Essay on Psychology and Religion* (1966). I would say that for all practical purposes agency represents that spirit of yang, and communion represents the spirit of yin.

In any event, Bakan argues that we should avoid the extremes of being too one-sided in either way – too much agency to the exclusion of communion, or too much communion to the exclusion of agency.

I would say that those two extreme forms of being too one-sided represent the equivalents in Bakan's terminology to the two forms of one-sidedness discussed by Jung in his terminology: Jung's one-sided imbalance of too much emphasis on ego-consciousness corresponds to Bakan's one-sided imbalance of too much agency to the exclusion of communion, and Jung's one-sided imbalance of too much influence from the unconscious and too little from ego-consciousness. (Jung discusses these two kinds of one-sided imbalances on page 87.)

Now, Martin Buber discusses I-Thou communication in his famous book *I and Thou* (1923). I-Thou communication represents the optimal experience of communion (in Bakan's terminology). Ong never tired on championing I-Thou communication.

Various mystical experiences also involve optimal experiences of communion. Concerning communion, see, for example, Eloi Leclerc's book *The Canticle of Creatures: Symbols of Union: an Analysis of St. Francis of Assisi*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell (1977; French orig., 1970) and A. N. Williams' book *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (1999).

Now, the optimal development of agency combined with the optimal development of communion can be characterized as psychological androgyny.

However, in theory, we could also find cases of seriously sub-par agency combined with seriously sub-par communion. In colloquial language, such persons would be described as basket cases. But I imagine that psychiatrists have already figured out how to describe and categorize such profoundly sub-par persons, because psychiatrists excel in constructing descriptors. But I do not happen to know how they would describe and categorize such seriously sub-par persons.

Now, by the time Jung had his great “Eureka!” experience, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) had emerged out of India as a great guru of another strand of the heritage of the East for Europe and the United States. See Roland Vernon’s book *Star in the East: Krishnamurti: The Invention of a Messiah* (2000).

About the same time that Krishnamurti was coming to the attention of many people in Europe and the United States, existentialist thought was in the ascendancy in Europe, with a certain spillover in the United States. By the 1950s and 1960s, existentialist thought had become a fad.

For highlights of existentialist thought, see the 550-page anthology *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*, edited by Maurice Friedman (1999; orig. ed., 1964). Friedman was an expert in Buber’s thought. Friedman has written book after book further exploring Buber’s thought.

Friedman writes of “Buber’s seminal concept of ‘confirmation’” of the otherness of the other (page xvi). No doubt Buber’s concept of confirmation of the otherness of the other is seminal, as Friedman say, but it is also extremely important not only in the context of psychotherapy but in any other context in life in which two or more persons meet for the purpose of dialogue with one another.

Today Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, strongly recommends dialogue in a great number of contexts.

Confirmation of the otherness of the other is the polar opposite of ostracism of the other. As a result, we can think of ostracism as involving exclusion, and of confirmation of the otherness of the other as involving inclusion. Exclusion versus Inclusion.

Now, by the end of Jung’s long and productive life in 1961, he himself had taken on the aura of a guru and sage – thanks in large measure to his great “Eureka!” experience in reading Wilhelm’s translations of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* and the *I Ching*.

Arguably the 1960s and 1970s in Western culture involved cultural breakdown and breakthrough. For example, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church inaugurated a new ecumenical spirit in its attitudes toward other religious traditions. Ong’s phenomenological and personalist account of Western cultural history also played a part in the intellectual ferment of the 1960s and 1970s. However, by the end of the 1970s, the fad for existentialist thought had gone into remission.

Now, as Jung says in his memorial tribute to Wilhelm, “What the East has to give us [in Western culture] should be merely a help in a work which we [in Western culture] still have to do” (page 146).

To that, I say, “Amen! We in Western culture today do indeed still have much work to do to integrate and synthesize viable strands of Eastern culture with viable strands of our Western culture. Come, let us in Western culture today work together with Anthony de Mello, S.J. (1931-1987), from India on this great task.”

See Anthony de Mello's posthumously published book *The Way to Love* (reissued 2012; orig. ed. In India, 1991). The year 2012 marked the 25th anniversary of his death – and the 100th anniversary of Ong's birth.

In connection with the practice of daily quiet time for reflection and awareness that Anthony de Mello recommends, I should mention here that Jung quotes a letter he received from a former patient. He reports that she writes that “[b]y keeping quiet, repressing nothing, remaining attentive, and hand in hand with that, by accepting reality – taking things as they are, and not as I wanted them to be, by doing all this, rare knowledge has come to me, and rare powers as well, such as I could never have imagined before” (quoted on page 126; I have here quoted only the first sentence of what Jung quotes from her letter).

Jung quotes what she writes in her letter to support his point that the “unconscious is still loaded with contents which must first be made conscious before [a person] can be made free of them” (page 126).

As I say, the 1960s and 1970s involved cultural breakdown and breakthrough. Breakthroughs to new syntheses probably always involve breakdowns of the old. In the theory of modern capitalism, the expression “creative destruction” is often used to characterize the driving force of modern capitalism. Of necessity, cultural breakthroughs to new syntheses typically also involve cultural breakdowns of the old ways and customs – in other words, creative destruction.

Which is not to say that everything that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the spirit of creative destruction was healthy and viable in the long run.

We should not lose sight of the long run. In the short run, popular fads come and go, as the fad for existentialist thought did. But we in Western culture today should work to build new ways and customs that are healthy and viable in the long run. No doubt this will be easier said than done. No doubt this building project will have to include the spirit of trial and error. In the spirit of trial and error, we will have to learn from our experiments with ways and customs that do not turn out to be healthy and viable.