Selected Papers of Beijing Forum 2005

Toward a Dialogical Civilization: Identity, Difference and Harmony

Tu Weiming (Harvard University)

and

Gianteresio Vattimo (University of Torino)

Part 1 (by Tu Weiming)

President Hao Ping, distinguished guests, fellow participants and once again Beijing Forum, I am pleased to attend this scholarly conference, and truly delighted to engage myself with Professor Vattimo in this biological joint venture.

I first met Professor Vattimo in Seoul at UESCO symposium on the dialogue among civilizations two years ago. And then this June through the good offers of Roger Ames, I moderated a dialogue between Vattimo and the American philosopher Richard Rotti at the East-West philosopher’s conference. I am happy to report that Professor Vattimo and I are invited to deliver speeches in Xian Dai in Japan on the occasion of the centenary of the founding of Tohoko University this coming spring. I cherish the hope that our dialogue will continue for the years to come.

Professor Vattimo’s book, The End of Modernity (《现代性的终结》) is available in Chinese. His reflections on Nichi, Haideger, post-modernism, ontology of actuality (《事实的存有论》) and weak thought, which if I’m understanding him correctly, defines as a mode of thinking that transcends quantitative regular analysis and liberates the human mind by philosophizing in the sciences of the spirit is reminded us in the 20th Century the conflict and tension of possible dialogue between natural sciences and sciences of the spirit, maybe profoundly meaningful. All these have been sources of inspiration for my own philosophical reflection. Those of us that take the humanities seriously as not only modes of scholarship but also as a way of life appreciate Vattimo’s tremendously powerful and persuasive voice as a pre-eminent European thinker but also as a public intellectual.

Of course real dialogue will take place this afternoon at Peking University and you simply cannot engage in the dialogue for 15 or 20 minutes. At this particular juncture, we would like to address some of our common concerns and aspirations. I would like to begin by sharing still evolving thought on the enlightenment mentality. I believe that the time is right for us scholars in humanities in particular to underscore in addition to economic capital, we should learn to accumulate social capital. In addition to technical competence we should learn to acquire cultural competence in traditional Chinese sense, literature, history and philosophy.

In addition to cognitive intelligence, we should cultivate ethical intelligence. In short we should be able to appreciate that in the 21st Century, a leader ought to be newest by spiritual values, and sensitive to religion and identity; when I say identity I mean all the premodulized that shape each one of us into a concrete human being, such as gender, language, place, age and religion. In indeed the time is right first try to transcend anthropocentrism and scientism, not a scientific rationality, but an outmoded ideology that is exclusively focused on the tangible and the quantifiable with no reference to quit human values and spiritual ideas that cannot be quantified that cannot be identified as tangible entities.

I think one of the major challenges to China’s spiritual and cultural identity is China’s ability to embrace market economy without turning the whole country into a market society. It is disastrous if academic institutions, mass
media, city organizations and even families that will eventually be totally marketized. On the 7th of November I have the privilege of delivering a speech at UNESCO in Paris; the topic is Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality and Anthro-po-cosmic Perspective. I would offer my abstract as an opening statement in this dialogue. I’ve already given the fax to Professor Vattimo.

Enlightenment can be perceived as a cultural movement originated in the West since the 18th Century as an ideal for the human community yet to be realized. Professor Harbamas’ work is related to this; or as a mentality characteristic of the modernistic motto of rounding throughout the world, especially in cultural China. My focus is the enlightenment mentality rather than the cultural movement in the past or an ideal to be realized. I would argue that enlightenment mentality is perhaps the most powerful ideology in world history. Both socialism and capitalism grew out of enlightenment so that market economy, democratic politics and civil society has the advanced economies move into knowledge societies, the dominance of science, especially information and communication technologies will be even more pronounced.

Max Webers perfected the view that modern society will be controlled by experts and managers since it is self-evident that the rise of technocracy in the military, government, multinational corporations, social institutions and even non-governmental organizations seems inevitable. Furthermore the underlying values such as liberty, nationality, human rights, dual-process law and dignity, independence, and autonomy of individual are widely recognized throughout the world as universalizable if not, totally universal values. The rhetoric of the enlightenment mentality suggesting that there is only one option for the future of the human community seems apparently true. However, the enlightenment mentality is also seriously flawed, I will say limited. Rooted in the anthropocentrism, dictated by scientism or instrumental rationality and driven by aggressive individualism, it is a form of secularism or secular humanism which suffers from inattention to religion and destructiveness of nature.

With a view towards the future, without a fundamental restructuring of its world view, the enlightenment can hardly provide guidance for human survival, let alone for human flourishing. The comprehensive reflection on critique of the enlightenment, especially the persuasive mentality it has agendae in China since the May 4 Cultural Movement of 1919 is in order. Building upon the inside already accumulated by the feminists, environmentalists, post-modernists, communitarianists, and religionists are intent to offer a humanistic vision both as a sympathetic understanding of the contemporary significance of the natural reason and as a judicious assessment of the blind spots of this denatured and despirited mentality. It is vitally important to note that in the cultural tradition of modern Chinese intellectual, enlightenment mentality is so much engrained in the light for the mind that traditional culture has been relegated to the background as merely a distant echo, especially in the habits of the heart of the Chinese intellectual.

Since the struggle to develop a full-fledged market economy, a publicly accountable democratic politic and vibrant civil society is far from being complete. The political and cultural elite in China is committed to the enlightenment project, to become modern, to become global. It is hardly ready to go beyond the enlightenment mentality indeed in its developmental strategy it takes the traditional Western model as the point of departure. As the persuasive logic and goals for developing society it is too much of a luxury to hug back to the feudal legacy for inspiration. Yet ironically the spirit of the time demands that for the survival and flourishing of the human community, it is imperative for intellectuals, including Chinese intellectuals to go beyond the limited and impoverished enlightenment mentality.

In the historical and comparative civilizational perspective, the surest and the soundest way to accomplish this challenging enterprise is to tap all spiritual resources available to the human community in order to formulate a broadly defined humanistic vision which can transcend anthropocentrism, scientism and aggressive individualism without losing sight of the liberating ideas and practices of the enlightenment as a movement, as an idea yet to be realized and as a mentality. The upsurge of the interest in the so-called excel age civilizations simplifies a spiritual term in philosophy, the epism-logical and linguistic terms have been successful in making the academic discipline of philosophy in the anguish speaking world the truly respectable professional discipline.

However my concern as statistics, ethics, and philosophy religion to the marginal position of analytical concerns, philosophical, professional academic philosophers comfortably and sometimes elegantly confine themselves to the cocoons of the technical competence for decades. Not surprisingly this style of philosophizing does not have much relevance to issues defining the human condition. As a result, very few philosophers became public intellectuals and for those who have the aspiration to perform public servers, their voice was often overwhelmed by the cultural
commentators, social critics and political economists. The time is right for a fundamental philosophical reorientation Asian and comparative philosophy can play a significant role in this critical moment.

Historically, none of the nature excel age civilizations in Asia, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism made clear distinction between philosophy and religion. Virtually all philosophical contemplation is embedded in spiritual insides and cultivation. Indeed without spiritual disciplines, sophisticated intellectual reflection is impossible.

The interplay between philosophy and religion or more precisely the confluence of this interested analysis and understanding is defining characteristic of the Asian modes of thinking. Actually as philosophically seasoned historians, such as the French academician Pierre Rado has convincingly demonstrated that to the Greeks, philosophy is a way of life, exemplified by spiritual exercisers. This is also how the Harvard professor Huily Paternen approached the four major Jewish thinkers, Maimonides, Rosenweig, Buber and Levinas. It seems obvious that the revival and flourishing of philosophy as a discipline in the humanities in the liberal arts education is a part predicated on its renewed attention to spiritual traditions all over the world.

I probably will add including additional traditions as well. Philosophers in close collaboration of friendly competition with colleagues in many other disciplines in history, in religion can be highly productive in developing their new ways of philosophizing in the 21st century. Needless to say this is also a wholesome practice of turning to the core and source of the philosophical enterprise. After all the philosophical enterprise is self-managed. The anthropo-cosmic perspective offered by Confucian humanism is historically significant for it addresses the ideal of universal ethic in the reality of culture diversity. I listed simply 7 items; these are just short hands.

First as a comprehensive and integrated humanistic vision, Confucian humanism encompasses nature and religion in its humanism. It assumes that a concrete living person is the center of relationships. As the center, the dignity independence and autonomy individual is an essential feature of the person. As relationships, sociality is indispensable for personal identity. The confusion idea of the person is rooted in body, home, community, world and cosmos and yet it seeks to transcend egotism, nepotism, racism, narrowly defined culturalism and anthropocentrism. Confucius regards the secular world as a secret by overcoming the exclusive dichotomies of body mind, spirit matter, and creator and creature.

The Confucius way of life embodies self, community, nature and heaven in an ethic of care and responsibility, is the Confucius idea of humanity. Humanity as the core value in Confucianism embodies heaven, earth and myriad things in its sensitivity and consciousness. This is what 仁者以天地万物为一体. Finally although culture diversity is taken for granted, the Confucian quest for harmony without uniformity, 和而不同 is predicated on the belief that great unity (大同) through the education of global citizenship is not only desirable but realizable.

Part II (by Gianteresio Vattimo)

Now thank you very much professor Tu Weiming. We discovered that we agree on many points. For instances I could simply accept all what he just he said everything from a European point of view. But let me first of all apologize for not speaking Chinese, and also I feel so glad to speak here in this ceremony here in China in Beijing, also because I belong to a generation of Europeans who consider China 20, 30, 40 years ago as a possible model of feudal civilization. I share for a while attitude of many young Europeans who adore Chairman Mao as a prophet of a new really free society. I know that this is not solely a mythology today and maybe for Chinese people now period was a difficult period to cross. But I even see that also China of today which threatens or promises, depends on ones of you to become the new great eudemonic power in the next hundred years, for instances. Also this China which is more liberal, earlier President Bush said before, also this China takes the advantage of the modernization which was the worst or the best now period of representatory. This is just a personal souvenir. I don’t know whether many of you share it or not. But I really think that today China is the China which is the result of the progress and transformations and the changes that went in the last 50 years. So that is why I’m really emotionally called by this opportunity to talk in this Hall of the People. What I want to say by this that Europe and probably all over the world have witnessed China of today some expectations which are analogies to the ones we had in the 60 and 70’s. I mean, it is a matter that we don’t expect China to become simply another industrial, strong power competing with the United Sates for imperialistic domination of the world. We expect that also because of its tradition, this tradition which professor Tu named before. China will be a new form of possible eudemonic power. For instance, also
because China has the possibility to emerge in the international context. I will say that this possibility depends on the new conditions of our civilization, internet, communication, mass media and so on. In this new situation we can no longer think of the eudemony of traditional types, especially upon military force, mechanical means of action upon nature and so on. Much of the new civilization will be a civilization of communication, what some of them will call it the struggle of civilization clash. By the way it will be very well if we simply a conflict, a struggle among civilizations, among cultures, not among powers, among physical and military powers. The new form of eudemony in the future world, we hope, will be a subtle conflict ways of life as we could say in German: “Weltanschauung”—views of the world, which is rather like the struggle between representative and abstract painting in the museum, for instances. Nobody will struggle against somebody else because he is part of representative painting and the other one is abstract painting. This is not only a matter of tests but a matter of way of life. I live like that you live like that. The very danger for the future and we learn these from the past. The very danger for the future is an obsolete culture which believes that truth belongs to it that God is with us. This was the rising the Nazi truth on the belts. Post-modernism is the theory, and also Professor Tu Weiming was so kind to cite my books. But post modernism, especially the discovery that there is no truth, there is only, or fortunately, happily different interpretations of the world, which means that nobody has the rights to impose its own truth upon other people. So white civilization is no better than the yellow one. By the way, less and less than the other one and so on and so forth. This attitude which the world as a conflict of interpretations, a conflict of interpretation is nevertheless a conflict, a struggle, a different proposal of view in the life and the world, but it is exactly only a conflict of interpretation, the truth will be reached not when somebody as God, but when the different people interpret the world agree with each other. So the truth is not the beginning; it’s the end. It’s something which is created by social dialogue and so on. I would say this is the task or the endeavor of the future possible eudemonic country like China threatens or promises to become. There is also a very old tradition of wisdom in China which probably Westerners know, share and understand better. In this new situation exactly because of the up-search of the communication society, it will be more and more important to persuade people and not to oblige them, to submit them, to imperialistically oblige them to share our positions. Already now even the terrorism cannot risk the media power, with the consensus power. There is no sense to imagine that a bomb destroys the Western capitalistic order. But it becomes news which enforces people, which excites people we say to people that this power is not untouchable. So also this very cruel and very unacceptable attitude in the world of terrorism is related to our society of communication. You have to develop against this extreme realism of terrorism; we want to heal real people; we have to develop the other aspects, the communicative participation, discussion and possibly consensus are to develop. In this situation it’s clear that humanistic sciences, not hard sciences but humanistic philosophers, artists, religion people so on acquire a greater importance because was called another time profits without weapons. OK, we welcome the “profits”. We’ll preach the truth without imposing it in front of people with physical and military powder. So in this new situation, I think that even the philosophers can help, we usually say in Italian that psycho analyst is the last step before going to Rude, Rude is a place for Christian miracles. Now I know that philosophers are more or less like psycho-analyst, I mean if you don’t take any other course, go to a philosopher. But in the new communication society, we become more important. I am not indicating any increase in my salary but I indicate a possibility for humanistic period to be more important in our society. And I think that China, having a different tradition, not only Confucianism, but also the more recent tradition of Maoism and saw-and-sword can become a sort of new possibility. We always bet on a new agent so now I am betting on Latin America for many reasons and I start to bet also on China and I hope I’m not losing my bet. By the way, I hope that new China, the new world also bets on philosophers again.

Part III

U: I think each one of us will spend another three minutes or so for just a short exchange for the sake of time. I really appreciate Professor Vattimo’s reference to 1968; I guess when many brilliant minds in the West simply identify themselves with the Maoism, with the Cultural Revolution. The new vision that is developing in Europe and the United States especially in the area of humanities about the promises of China is precisely Vattimo’s notion about weak thinking. Weak thinking is a form of reflection, which liberates the human mind from simply quantitative analysis. And this is related to my colleague Joe Nye’s notion about soft power. That is assuring as my values, my ideas of being appreciated by others, voluntarily with full commitment. That’s the extension of influence.
So in the age of communication and technology is not the military hide behind; it is not simply economic power or the political pressure. It is the persuasiveness of the meaning of life, of values, of the sense of shared aspirations, shared visions for the future. These powers generated in art, in literature, in philosophy and others will as important as the values and ideas generated by people in hard sciences. It is in this sense; I think maybe in the 21st century, among all the dialogues, among civilizations, there should also be a dialogue of dialogue between science and religion.

So one thing I want to pose to professor Vattimo, because as a post-modernist, it makes very clear you don’t have to pick and choose; you request for openness, for multiplicity, for all kinds of beings rather than the big beings so forth and he himself. If I interpret it correctly, also we turn to its own cultural rules, Catholicism, or Christianity. This is not only post-modernist secularist, but post-modern religionist, very different from rituality. Rituality really believes that religion is no longer significant; cultural identity will eventually be evaporated. What we have is hybridity. Hybridity means all cultural traditions mix together with no differentiation. Before he visited China, he said maybe only one language will count in the future. After he visited China, maybe two languages will count in the future. But anyway, that position is very different from Vattimo’s position. So I wonder you would be willing to share a bit of your personal intellectual and spiritual journey, why you are a Christian and at the same time, also a post-modernist?

Vattimo: Yes, I am a post-modernist exactly because I am a Christian, in many senses, why? Because what there has been with Christianity and we experience very strongly in Europe, especially in Italy, Spain and France, said basically Jesus came to review that it is more important to love one’s fellow men than to persuade him or to oblige him to a truth. There is a dictum, where probably Aristotle said, I am a friend of Plato, but first of all the truth. Now during the past centuries, in name of this Plato’s said this about the truth, (no recordings) my fellow men.

So it is not strange that the post-modernist oneself a Christian. Because, as a matter of fact, Christianity has liberated mankind from the power of objective truth. Imagine, all the formations of religions, not only Christian religion, but also Buddhism, Hinduism and so on, if measure it upon a purely referential idea of language, what would they give? I mean they wouldn’t give anything. What does it mean objective to be a Christian or to be a Buddhist, or to be a Confusion? It is like when you say I love you. What does it objectively mean? You measure your position of the past hours when I see you, I get the sort of intention. Absolutely unthinkable.

So, if we still keep to the truth inscientistic terms, we will never go over that. That is not a dialogue. Among scientists, of course, they corporate. But Mathematics is not specifically a human language. I mean, it’s just something which doesn’t involve any personal attitude, any personal affection. And so on and so forth. So in many senses, I am a, as professor Tu Weiming reminded, disciple of Martin Haideger, who said once with great scandal of scientist that science does not think. Why? This was already count, because Kant said that as science, knows, says phenomena, but the essential of life is to think of what makes possible the knowledge of phenomena. So God, freedom, coexistence of man and nature is absolutely nothing, which can be known positively through experiments and mathematical science. I think that all these as to be developed in the contemporary world if we don’t want to give all the power to the experts. I mean if everything is a matter of scientific knowledge, ok, not discussion, not democracy, even no love, because when I say I love you, what does this mean? Thank you.

Tu: Maybe I just end with one minute to comment. And I think we share one rather important mythological concern. Normally it is due to scholarship. It is important for you to be objective, to be dis-interested, but I think I should see that both of us are personally committed. We made a clear distinction between being personal and being private or being subjective. We are personally committed to somebody’s ideas we can get publicly accountable. They can be argued; they can be debated. Let me say in my undergraduate course of Confusion ethics at Harvard, I made a falling observation.

One-minute conclusion. Importance of liberty to be sure, but it has to be supplemented by the importance of justice, not just liberty alone but liberty with justice with the sense of righteousness. Importance of rationality, self-evident, but it has to be supplemented by the idea of sympathy, empathy and compassion, not just instrumental rationality alone. Due process of law and sense of civility, human rights, human responsibility, the dignity of individual and the sense of cultural and group solidarity. It is in this sense that I think Confucian humanism, on the right with emphasis on justice, sympathy, civility, responsibility and communal solidarity and liberal traditions with emphasis on liberty, rationality, due process of law, human rights and dignity of the individual can engage in a fruitful dialogue.