**INTRODUCTION**

With the rise of China, there is a renewed interest in understanding Chinese philosophy and society. Understanding ‘the Chinese mind’ requires a rearrangement of the most fundamental building blocks of Western thinking. These differences in thought can explain some of the differences between Chinese and Western sociology and anthropology.

---

**OBSERVATIONS**

- Chinese culture does not have a genesis story consisting of a deity or divine will that created the world or the Chinese civilization. Anne Birrell explains that Chinese mythology believes man came into existence by a sudden transformation of qi, the embodiment of cosmic energy that governs all time, matter and space, which differentiated itself into the dual elements of Ying and Yang, and all corresponding dualities.

- David Keightley shows there are big differences between the epic poetries of ancient Greece and China. The Greek tragedy focuses on an individual hero who ends up suffering because of his own deeds (like Odyssey). The Chinese protagonist is the anonymous but charismatic sage who allows things to unfold in their own way (like Laozi). The Greek hero acts for himself; the Chinese hero prefers harmony with his surroundings.

- Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions show that China has an exceptional collectivist society (people primarily act in the interest of the group) and pragmatic culture (in which truth is sought after for its practical use and depends heavily on the situation, context and time). The latest wave of the World Values Survey shows that Chinese attribute much less autonomy and freedom of choice to themselves, and have a more relativistic worldview compared to Americans.

---

**ANALYSIS**

Western thinking is dominated by a ‘universalist’ idea of thinking: everyone has the same cognitive processes that depend on the formal rules of logic, which apply and hold true for all. Richard Nisbett’s book *The Geography of Thought* criticizes this idea by showing how the Asian (primarily Chinese) and Western (primarily American) mind differ from each other.

On the most abstract level, Asian philosophy perceives reality as a dynamic and continuous process of changing and evolving substances. In contrast, Western philosophy perceives the world as a collection of discrete and individual ‘essences’ with accidental properties. For example, Chinese see a chair as a seamless whole composed of a single substance (wood) that can transform at any time (in a door for example), while a Westerner sees an object composed of various components (four legs, back and armrest). Between the different Chinese and Western metaphysics, there are four categorical differences: 1) attention and perception: a holistic (C) and an atomistic worldview (W), 2) assumptions on the nature of reality: substances (C) and individual objects (W), 3) methodology: a dialectical method for overcoming contradictions and perceiving how all things are interrelated (C) and abstract categories and logical rules for understanding essences (W), 4) controllability: a complex evolution of changing situations to which man has to adapt himself with a corresponding uncertainty and relativism – the ideal of the Tao (C) and the idea that man can control the static and unchanging world using abstract laws and universal rules – the ideal of the autonomous and acting hero (W).

The differences between these philosophies show in the way Chinese and Westerners think about the world and reality, through myths about the beginning of the world, cultural archetypes, and through the social reality of Chinese and Western societies. The independent and individualist nature of Western societies corresponds to its atomistic apprehension of the individual and discrete objects, while the collective and interdependent nature of Chinese society is in agreement with its holistic and contextual view of the world. In line with the idea of a static reality and abstract reasoning, Western anthropology emphasizes the importance of liberty and individual agency, in contrast to the Chinese view of man who focuses on (social) harmony and collective agency. Different minds realize themselves in different social realities, an idea we will further explore next week.

---

**POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES**

- Western companies that know how to play into the Chinese culture, for example Dutch entrepreneurs with an open perspective and social skills.
- Diplomats, generals and politicians that understand the ‘Chinese mind’.
- Social scientists and philosophers that can synthesize Chinese and Western thought.