



The Philosopher

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How "Chinese" Was Kant?

Steve Palmquist

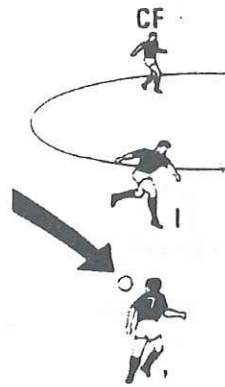
When Nietzsche called Kant the "Chinaman of Königsberg", were his mental capacities already beginning to slip, or was he just looking for laughs? Kant, after all, was German. He was born in the then bustling Prussian port city of Königsberg (now called Kaliningrad), lying on the Baltic Sea, about 75 miles northeast of Gdansk, across the Gulf of Danzig. Königsberg is over 5000 miles from Beijing, and even further from the now bustling Chinese port city of Hong Kong. Kant claimed his paternal grandfather had immigrated from Scotland, but there is no parallel evidence to suggest that any of his ancestors were Chinese. Moreover, he could not have had more than a minimal, second-hand knowledge of China, since he never travelled more than about thirty miles from his birthplace. Aside from reading, his only contact with anything Chinese would have been through the relatively large minority of Oriental merchants who lived in Königsberg. This did not stop him from writing about Chinese philosophy and culture on several occasions. But it is a far cry from his actually being Chinese. With such conclusive evidence so readily at hand, it might seem as if the answer to our question can be given here in the first paragraph: Kant, born into what was arguably the most "Western" of all eras in the history of Western culture, the Age of Enlightenment, was not at all Chinese, and any suggestion to the contrary would be foolhardy at best, unless it were intended to be merely a joke-albeit, in bad taste.

Of course, Nietzsche himself was not thinking of the sort of historical facts and influences mentioned above. He was rather alluding to a deeper level on which Kant himself was in some sense "Chinese". Although he never provides a clear explanation of just how his now famous epithet ought to be interpreted, a clue might be drawn from his general attitude towards Eastern cultures. In

general Nietzsche tends to view them as mediocre, self-satisfied, and rigidly moralistic. Thus, when he wishes to convey the notion that modern European man has ceased striving for greatness, he says: "we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian ..."

Most of Nietzsche's books are speckled with such cryptic references to Chinese/Asian culture. For example, in *The Will to Power*, he refers to "Chinese ossification" in socio-political matters, and later asks: "is our morality - our modern sensitive European morality, which may be compared with the morality of the Chinese - the expression of a physiological regression?" Such attitudes would seem at first to indicate that Nietzsche's habit of calling Kant "Chinese"- joke or no joke - was motivated by a desire to deprecate Kant in the eyes of his readers. But a closer look at Nietzsche's methodology, with its emphasis on perspectival reversal, reveals that it may be more appropriate to interpret such comments in a positive light.

In *Ecce Homo*, for example, Nietzsche confides that those at whom he pokes the most fun are often the closest to his heart. He specifies four principles upon which his attacks are based: (1) "I only attack causes that are victorious"; (2) "I stand alone"; (3) "I never attack persons"; and (4) "attack is in my case a proof of good will, sometimes even of gratitude." For a person who follows these guidelines, the habit of calling a German philosopher "Chinese" could actually be considered as a compliment! Indeed, it



Kant: The
Philosopher Footballer?

turns out that most of Nietzsche's references to China or the Chinese are not as negative as the remarks quoted earlier might cause us to expect. Elsewhere in *The Will to Power*, for instance, he groups the Chinese not only with the Jews, for whom he expressed some admiration, but also with his favorites, the Frenchmen, as all sharing the quality of "spirit"; for he maintains that "the Chinese is a more successful type [of human animal], namely more durable, than the European." Again, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he refers to "Asia's superiority in the instincts", with its strong influence on ancient Greek culture, and depicts orientals in general as effecting a deep "reversal" of Western values. Moreover, in the concluding section of the book (•296), he actually applies the adjective "Chinese" to his own writing, in a rather self-critical reflection: "Alas, what are you after all, my written and painted thoughts! ... What things do we copy, writing and painting, we mandarins with Chinese brushes, we immortalizers of things that can be written - what are the only things we are able to paint?"

Given the ambiguity of Nietzsche's references to things "Chinese", a more helpful clue as to the intentions of his epithet might be found by recalling that he saw himself as a psychologist at least as much as a philosopher (or more appropriately, an anti-philosopher). If Nietzsche was serious in suggesting we picture Kant with a Chinese face, he may well have been thinking as much of his personality as of his philosophical disposition. If so, it might be helpful to consider what meaning can be given, from a psychological point of view, to the notion of being "Chinese". However, I should point out here at the beginning that the term "Chinese", as used here, does not necessarily describe any particular Chinese person, but rather serves as an ideal generalization that sums up the characteristics or tendencies psychologists have found in most Chinese people, or (later in the paper) those interests and ideas that have tended to characterize most Chinese philosophers.



The Categorical Imperative...

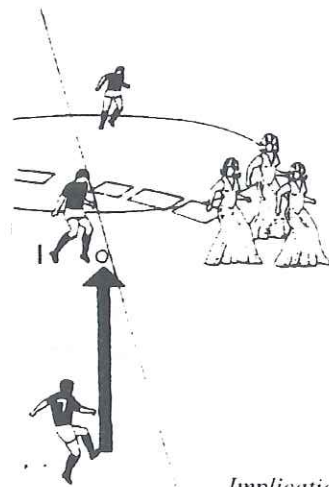
A recent book, written by Michael Harris, *Beyond the Chinese Face*, provides some insights. Bond, a Western psychologist who has lived in Hong Kong for many years, summarizes the socialization process for the typical Chinese child as being governed by five key concerns: "The Chinese child is brought up to regard home as a refuge against the indifference, the rigours, and the arbitrariness of life outside. This feat is achieved by indulging the infant, restraining the toddler, disciplining the schoolchild, encouraging the student to value achievement, and suppressing the divisive impulses of aggression and sexuality throughout development." There is no need to repeat here the many interesting points Bond makes with respect to each of these tendencies in Chinese parenting. And in any case we do not know enough about Kant's childhood to make any detailed comparisons. Nevertheless, what we do know is sufficient to suggest that this pattern of pampering the child at a young age, then gradually emphasizing the requirements of duty and increasing the severity of discipline as the child grows up, also describes Kant's upbringing to a significant extent. His infancy and early childhood seem to have been characterized, more than anything else, by a warm relationship with his mother, of whom he always spoke very highly. For instance, he once told his friend Jachmann that "she planted and tended the first seeds of good in me. She opened my heart to the impressions of nature; she awakened and widened my ideas, and her teachings have had an enduring, healing

influence on my life." Yet life grew increasingly harsh for young Immanuel, the second of nine children. Not only did four of his siblings die in infancy, but his mother herself passed away when Kant was only thirteen. A good deal of pressure also came from the school to which his parents sent him. From age eight, he began attending a special Pietist school set up by the king, called "Collegium Fredericianum". Discipline was so strict there that Kant "later told his friend Hippel, that looking back on that enslavement of youth filled him with terror and dread." The contrast between the early establishment of security at home and the harsh realities of discipline at school must have been enough to match the experiences of many Chinese children today. In this sense, then, his upbringing provides at least some initial, tentative grounds for thinking of Kant as being somewhat "Chinese".

The success of this kind of upbringing in Chinese cultures, even in their modernized forms, is to a large extent due to the people's deep commitment to "filial piety" - indisputably one of the hallmarks of any Chinese culture. Kant's parents raised their children in a simple, pietist form of life, encouraging an upright and close-knit family. This enabled Kant to claim later in life: "Never, not even once, have I had to hear my parents say an unbecoming word, or do an unworthy act.... No misunderstanding ever disturbed the harmony of the household." When their mother died, the siblings' relationships began to drift apart, and the gap widened still further after the death of their father just nine years later. In short, Kant's adult relationships with his siblings do not seem to have been characterized by much affection. Nevertheless, in spite of the gap that inevitably opened up between him and his siblings, perhaps largely as a result of his academic and scholarly career, Kant always held firmly to a surprisingly "Chinese" sense of his own duty as the eldest brother to look after the needs of his younger siblings. For example, at the age of 67, Kant wrote a letter (dated January 26 1792) to his brother, Johann, then aged 56, saying that in spite of his infrequent correspondence "I have

thought of you often and fraternally-not only for the time we are both still living but also for after my death" - a reference, no doubt, to the fact that he had included his brother in the will he had recently drafted. He then goes on to convey explicitly his own sense of duty toward the family: "Our two surviving sisters, both widowed, the older of whom has 5 grown and (some of them) married children, are provided for by me, either wholly or, in the case of the younger sister, by my contribution to St. George Hospital, where provision has been made for her. So the duty of gratitude for our blessings that is demanded of us, as our parents taught us, will not be neglected." Admittedly, we have no reports from Kant's neighbors that he was ever seen burning incense to his deceased parents during his daily walks after lunch: in this literal sense it would be absurd to regard Kant as being even a closet Chinese. Yet it would be just as inappropriate to deny completely the surprising resonance between the deep Chinese commitment to filial piety and Kant's own profound sense of duty to his family - a duty to which he held fast even when the inclinations of his own happiness might have tempted him to disown them.

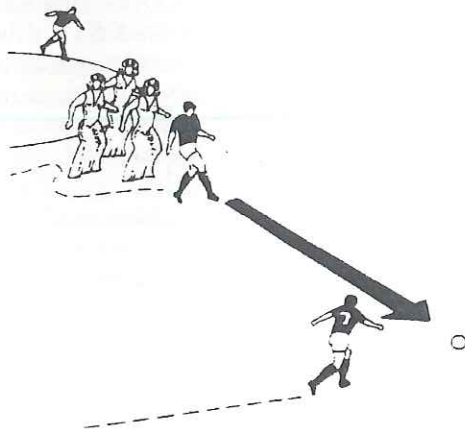
The most these initial reflections on



Implications

Kant's personality can do is to provide good grounds for taking this argument a step further, into the realm of Kant's own private beliefs and philosophical dispositions - provided we walk with care. In traditional Chinese societies the commitment to filial piety is intimately bound up with a belief in ghosts: the reason the deceased must be worshipped is precisely that their ghosts are still lingering around, and must therefore be provided for, pleased, and (if necessary) appeased, just as much as when their bodies were still alive. Kant's private beliefs are extremely difficult to talk about, because he himself rarely committed them to writing. He says in 1798 that, just as he has always recommended to others "a conscientious sincerity in not professing or obtruding on others, as articles of faith, more than they are themselves sure of", so also in his writings he has exercised the utmost care to express only what he can affirm with certainty.

In the first Critique he distinguishes between knowledge, belief, and opinion by saying the first requires objective and subjective certainty, the second only subjective certainty, and the third neither objective nor subjective certainty. Kant says plenty in his works about his own claims regarding knowledge and belief,



Inference

but very little about opinion - especially his own private opinions on "speculative" matters. Opinions can attain the stature of beliefs only if we see them as directly necessitated by the moral law in our heart. For instance, the question as to whether or not God exists is a question that surpasses all possible human knowledge; yet one's own personal answer should be more than a mere opinion, because God's existence is intimately bound up with our ability to see the moral law itself as ultimately rational. The question as to whether or not ghosts exist, by contrast, is quite independent (in Kant's mind, at least) from the rationality of the moral law. Hence, he is content for the most part to keep his opinions on this issue silent - for the most part, but not entirely.

In his younger days Kant went through a period of being openly attracted to ideas about the spirit world, especially those put forward by the mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1689-1772). This period of several years during the mid-1760s is actually something of an anomaly for the traditional, "two-part" account of Kant's life, as falling neatly into a "pre-Critical" dogmatism (before 1770) and a "Critical" period (from 1781 onwards), with a "silent decade" sandwiched in between. Biographers tend to treat the mid-1760s as a temporary conversion to Humean skepticism, in spite of the fact that Kant's interest in the spirit world during these years bore little if any resemblance to anything Hume would have countenanced. What is never adequately explained is how Kant passed from this sudden state of being a converted skeptic into the silent decade, sparked off by his "proto-Critical" Inaugural Dissertation of 1770. In this work he had presented for the first time, supposedly out of thin air - for it certainly did not come from Hume! - what he was later to call his "Copernican hypothesis": namely, the basic assumption that, when it comes to epistemology, objects conform to our mind rather than our mind conforming to objects. What the conventional account ignores is that the mid-1760s were for Kant anything but a

skeptical "hiccup"; rather they were marked by an internal struggle between the Swedenborg who enticed Kant with his mystical visions and the Hume whom Kant would later confess "first interrupted my dogmatic slumbers and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction".

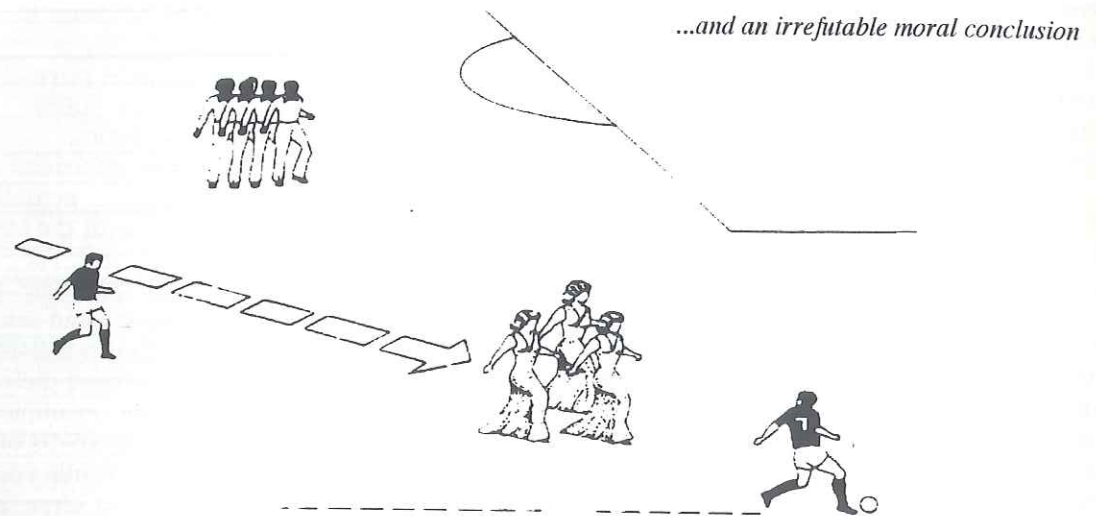
The outcome of this struggle is nowhere more visible than in Kant's 1766 book, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics*, which can be regarded as setting the tone for his entire mature philosophical System. Embarrassing and unbelievable as it may be to Kant-scholars who see their mentor as the arch-enemy of anything that smacks of mysticism, there are good reasons to believe, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, that it was Swedenborg far more than Hume who gave Kant the key inspirations for constructing his Critical System. In particular, Kant's reading of Swedenborg's writings was the true source of the amazing "Copernican" insight, first set forth by Kant in 1770. Of course Kant transformed Swedenborg's ideas in many ways, adapting their speculative-mystical emphasis to suit his Critical-practical preferences. One of the key differences, for example, is that what Swedenborg attributes to the "spirit world", Kant translates into the "noumenal world". And in Kant's hands this world becomes far more than just a dwelling-place for ghosts: it becomes the kingdom of reason itself, the true home for all rational beings.

Once again, it is necessary to emphasize that Kant's secret sympathy for Swedenborg, and the subtle influence of Swedenborg's ideas on Kant's mature thinking, do not imply that Kant held the opinion that ghosts exist in this world. Even though he probably never experienced the slightest fear that he was being haunted by the ghosts of his ancestors, it is generally accepted that Kant held some sort of private belief in a world of real spirits. That doesn't make him Chinese; but it does bring his general world view much more closely in line with the traditional Chinese world view than it is normally believed to be. In other words, we can say Kant was "Chinese", to the extent that

he felt a strong sense of filial piety and believed in a world inhabited by spiritual beings; but unlike most Chinese people, his belief in "real spirits", or ghosts, however firmly or weakly he may have held such an opinion privately, did not inform in any way his own public understanding of his moral duties.

In this sense, the most influential of all Chinese philosophers, Confucius, actually shares more with Kant than with the average member of most Chinese cultures. For Confucius had a surprisingly "Kantian" attitude toward private beliefs in ghosts and spirits. He never categorically denied their possibility; rather, he consistently emphasized their moral emptiness. In the *Analects*, for example, when Chi Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead, Confucius responded: "While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?" Chi Lu added, "I venture to ask about death." He was answered, "While you do not know life, how can you know about death?"

Chinese Kant-scholarship has long recognized a basic similarity between Kant and the major school of Chinese philosophy, neo-Confucianism. Confucius, along with most of his interpreters down through the centuries, largely ignored the metaphysical and epistemological questions that have generally taken center stage in the West. Instead, Chinese philosophers tend to emphasize the importance of acting on principle (or, according to the rites, called *li* in Chinese), with the result that most Chinese people value a person's collective duty as a member of society far above one's individual rights as a human being. Western philosophers, in stark contrast, have typically emphasized rights over duties, with both playing second fiddle to questions of reality and knowledge. Whereas Chinese philosophy tends to define personhood in terms of the duties placed on an individual by his or her position in the social hierarchy, Western philosophy tends to define personhood in more abstract terms of the rights accorded to any human being simply by virtue of being human. Kant actually talks a great deal about both duties and rights; but he clearly gives priority



in his System to duty. He put himself in the minority among Western philosophers by arguing not only that rights are an epiphenomenon of duty, rather than vice versa, but also that "practical reason" has priority over "theoretical reason". Both of these tendencies appeal to Chinese philosophers, because, quite simply, they are inherently "Chinese" tendencies. Comparisons of Confucian ethics and Kantian ethics have, consequently, served as the springboard for much cross-cultural dialogue, especially from the Chinese side.

For example, one of the most influential Chinese Kant-scholars in this century, at least among Neo-Confucians, is Mou Tsang San. In addition to translating and commenting extensively on the first Critique, Mou has put forward a widely discussed argument to the effect that Neo-Confucian philosophy fills a gap in Western philosophy left by Kant's rejection of the possibility of intellectual intuition. However, his attempt to defend intellectual intuition in terms of moral knowledge is based on a gross misunderstanding of Kant's exclusively theoretical notion of intellectual intuition. If the latter were allowed to apply to our moral life as well as to theoretical knowledge, then Kant's own insistence on the properly basic factuality of the moral law could

be regarded in much the same way. Moreover, if the filling of gaps is the reason for comparing traditions, it would be more legitimate to regard Kant's first Critique as filling a gap in the Chinese traditions, left by their tendency to neglect metaphysical and epistemological issues.

Kant's attractiveness to Chinese philosophers becomes even less surprising once we take note of the "Chinese" character of his emphasis on reason's "architectonic" structure. In the last few pages of his book on Chinese psychology, Bond lists five basic characteristics of any distinctively "Chinese" culture. The first and foremost of these is "a belief in the naturalness, necessity, and inevitability of hierarchy." One could hardly ask for a better description of Kant's concept of "architectonic", except that the Chinese see hierarchy as nature's way of structuring social relations, while Kant sees it as nature's way of structuring rational relations. Without going into detail here, it will suffice merely to provide a brief glance at the basic backbone supporting the complex hierarchy of relations that constitutes Kant's architectonic. Despite common assumptions to the contrary, Kant's first Critique does not occupy the highest

position in the hierarchy of his overall Critical System. The Critique of Pure Reason is the longest and most influential of the three Critiques not because the theoretical reason examined therein takes precedence over all other uses of reason, but because Western philosophers had traditionally taken it as such: Kant therefore needed to expend far more effort to demonstrate and refute the numerous errors into which philosophers had fallen.

Once it is properly understood, Kant's view of the role of theoretical reason can be likened to the role of the "younger brother" in the typical Chinese family: an important member indeed, but not one having the authority to make the truly significant decisions. The "older brother" in Kant's System is, as we have seen, the practical reason expounded in his second Critique. Most Kant-scholars are well aware of Kant's view that the disputes inevitably arising between practical and theoretical reason must ultimately be solved by the former—not unlike the responsibility the older brother has to clear up quarrels between himself and his younger brother(s). What few interpreters (Chinese or Western) have fully appreciated is the fact that neither practical nor theoretical reason is for Kant the ultimate authority governing the Critical System itself. On the contrary, the third Critique (and, it could be argued, Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason) reveal, as it were, the "father-figure" who ultimately has the last word: judgment, the application of reason in real-life experiences. This, Kant says, is the standpoint of "Critique" as such.

Rather than straying into a discussion of the many implications of the hierarchical relations in Kant's System, we could now identify Kant as a Westerner with some distinctively "Chinese" characteristics and tendencies, lending qualified approval to Nietzsche's reference to Kant as the "Chinaman of Königsberg". Clearly, we have not found enough evidence to merit the conclusion that Kant had a Chinese personality in any overly literal sense. His influence on Western thought and culture has been far too strong to make

that plausible. But we have sufficient reason to conclude that Kant stood on the borderline between these two ideals: something of a synthesis of the generalized, and perhaps to some extent fictional, conceptions of the typical "Chinese" and "Western" personality types.

Returning to Bond's model, mentioned near the beginning of this paper, we can therefore conclude our investigation by placing Kant just at the point where Chinese and Western tendencies cross. This is an inevitably tentative hypothesis. But it enables us to give a plausible answer to the question with which we began. How "Chinese" was Kant? Not very "Chinese", really. But he was "Chinese" enough to serve as the basis for some potentially meaningful cross-cultural dialogue, dialogue that can give us a glimpse of one world, where all philosophers—indeed, all humanity—can strike the transcendental balance he struck between theory and practice, between rights and duties, between the empirical and the transcendent, between East and West.

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This a specially shortened version of a longer paper discussing the issue in more detail.

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