UNDERSTANDING THE "I" THROUGH THE CHINESE LANGUAGE
A CATHOLICISM-INSPIRED MEDITATION ON THE CHINESE CHARACTERS FOR "SELF"

通过中国语言了解 "我"
由天主教启发的对汉字"我"的沉思

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ABSTRACT

The following analysis presents Catholicism-inspired meditation on the Chinese characters for self-examination. It is a Catholic viewpoint, which may assist 21st-century Christians and non-Christians in their spiritual struggles. The goal of this analysis is to show that Chinese characters can tell us that the spiritual struggle to improve (ἄσκησις, áskēsis, in Greek) is inherent to the human condition. In that sense, we can see that Chinese tradition is not as foreign to Christian tradition as most may think.

Keywords: I, self, China, Catholicism, Chinese characters, Matteo Ricci, Personalism, Erasmus of Rotterdam, good, evil.

INTRODUCTION

Some ancient Chinese characters give useful insights on the human propensity for evil. For example, the Chinese pronoun for "I" ("我", pronounced "wǒ"), defined as a conscious thinking subject, is written by combining two characters: "手" (shǒu – "hand") and "戈" (gē – a dagger-like tool). That is, "I" is depicted as a hand holding a deadly blade. Yet the Chinese depiction of "I" ("我") appears to also be one of the best representations of our inner struggle with the temptation of evil, and to even transform it into good.

It is worth noting that Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote, in 1503, a treatise titled "*Enchiridion militis Christiani*" ("The Manual of a Christian Knight"). Tellingly, the Latin word "*enchiridion*" (coming from Greek *encheirídion*, derived from *chéir* "hand," with the prefix en- "in" – literally "that you hold in the hand") means "manual," but also "dagger" (as the one held by the "I"), which symbolizes the interior battles against evil (Erasmus, 1503).

The "Sound Of the Heart"

According to the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, who was the guiding spirit of the French personalist movement, in order to develop as a person the "I" needs to recollect to oneself and to listen to one's inner self (Mounier, 1947).

For "I" ("我") to use the weapon that the hand is holding, "willingness" (愿意, "yuànyì") is necessary. Interestingly, the second character in this word ("意",yì) is formed by combining the radical "心" (xīn) character (meaning "heart" – indicating that the word relates to emotions and thoughts) with the word "音" (yīn), which means sound. Literally, the Chinese word for "willingness" contains the meaning "sound of the heart" – that is, as mentioned by Mounier, the sound of one's inner being (i.e. the heart) to which the "I" should listen in order to improve (Mounier, 1947).

On World Communications Day 2022, Pope Francis spoke about the importance of listening: "There is an interior deafness worse than the physical one... Listening concerns the whole person, not just the sense of hearing. The true seat of listening is the heart." Listening to the sound of the heart therefore leads one to listen to one's own inner self.

Finding Redemption

Hence, as Mounier wrote, by listening to the inner self (the heart), the "I" develops and is therefore able to follow the moral path. "Moral" in Chinese is "德" (dé), and it means "to walk with a straight heart."

It is in this way that Cain's children can redeem themselves and draw closer to Abel, through repentance. How is this done?

In Chinese, repentance can be translated as "悔改" (huǐgǎi), which contains the word "regret" ("悔" huǐ). The word "regret," "悔" (huǐ), is formed, on the left, by the character of the heart, "忄 " (xin), and, on the right, by "每" (měi), which has the meaning of "often." In other words, people who feel regret often blame themselves in their own hearts. At the same time, the character "每" is also a variant of the character "母"(mǔ), meaning female or mother, as if indicating that regret provokes the same excruciating feeling of a mother's broken heart. Furthermore, the word repentance “悔改” (huĭgăi) is also constituted by the character “改” (găi), which means change. Hence, repentance can be defined as a change that starts in the heart.

The German theologian and Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserted that if the person (the “I”) becomes aware (by listening to the “sound of the heart”) of his/her own guilt, this same person will develop a guilty plea that will lead, through “walking with a straight heart,” to change, conversion, and redemption (Bonhoeffer, 2017).

The word “redemption” can be translated into Chinese as “救赎”, (jiùshú), which is composed of the characters “救” (jiù), meaning “to save” and “赎” (shú), meaning to redeem or ransom. The first part of the word redemption is “救” (jiù). From the perspective of the structure of the font, the right side of the word consists of the character “攴”(pū), which refers to a person holding a weapon or tool to strike with, and on the left side consists of “求” (“qiú”), meaning fur, that is, the fur of the killed beast. Therefore, from the etymological analysis, the word “救” (jiù) means to kill a beast to save someone's life. Hence, in redemption, the same hand of the “I” is now using a weapon to kill the beast – a biblical symbol for evil – in order to bring salvation.

Choosing Between Good and Evil

In this regard, the “I” has the “freedom/liberty” (自由, zìyóu,) to choose between good and evil . The word “自由” is composed of the characters “自”, meaning “oneself,” and “由”, meaning to let, allow, follow, pass through, or even walk. In other words, “自由” means to make one’s own decisions, to be oneself, to follow or obey one’s own will – that is, “being oneself” due to one’s own decisions, rather than because of external forces.

Hence, the “I” has the “freedom” that comes from within (i.e. from listening to the heart) to choose how to use the weapon to fight or support evil – that is, to choose between good (“善”, shàn) and evil (“恶”, è).

The question of whether human nature is “good” (善) or “evil” (恶) has been put forward throughout Western and Chinese intellectual history.

> Surely, Chinese characters give us a unique opportunity to analyze and meditate about the “I” and human nature in a new way. The media outlet *China Daily* writes: ‘Chinese characters have evolved over thousands of years. The quintessence of Chinese civilization and culture has thus been handed down from generation to generation. But they do not only express Chinese words in written form – as they also convey traditional and philosophical thoughts.’

According to Chinese philosopher Mozi (Mo Tzu), “human nature is inherently good.” In his theory of human nature, Chinese philosopher Mencius (Ho Hwang, 1979) does not mean that “human nature is inherently good” (人性本善), but that “human nature is to the good” (人性向善) - whereas for Chinese philosopher Xunzi, evil is part of “nature,” but this situation is not irredeemable. Xunzi says that “man will conquer the sky” by overcoming his instincts (Sohu, 2018).

Analogously, in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about the doctrine of original sin. He told his audience: "Each person is called to do good, and intimately wants to do it, but at the same time is driven by the impulse to do the opposite, to follow the path of egoism and violence, of doing what he or she wants knowing that he or she is acting against God and his/her neighbor." According to Benedict XVI, "this contradiction is experienced every day… The power of evil gave origin to a dirty river in our soul which is poisoning the geography of human history." Nevertheless, he said, from this contradiction "redemption must arise."

> The dictionary explains that there are contrasts, confrontations, and struggles between the two types of "I", represented by the two different Chinese characters. The "I" that holds a weapon (我, wŏ) is the exterior and ephemeral individual, while the "I" of the five mouths (吾, wú) expresses more the constancy of humanity in the individual. Yet both of them are battling – "resisting" – to find the unity of the person.

Yet despite knowing what is good, the "I" very often chooses evil, since our "自由" (zìyóu) freedom has been corrupted by the original sin ("罪", zuì) and by personal sins.

In the Epistle to the Romans (7:14–25), Saint Paul described this feeling: "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who does it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."

The Punishment

It is worth noting that the original Chinese character of the word "sin" ("罪", zuì) is "辠" (also pronounced as zuì), which means cutting one's nose off with a knife. The word "sin" includes therefore in its writing the concept of "punishment" for committing a sin/a crime.

On May 18, 2011, at the general audience, Pope Benedict XVI talked about sin and punishment, stating: "Evil, in fact, cannot be accepted, it must be identified and destroyed through punishment: The destruction of Sodom had exactly this function." However, Pope Benedict XVI added: "Yet the Lord does not want the wicked to die, but rather that they convert and live (cf. Ez 18:23; 33:11); His desire is always to forgive, to save, to give life, to transform evil into good."

The Confrontation Between the Two "I"s

In classical Chinese, there is also another word for "I": "吾" (wú), which is composed of the characters "五" (wŭ, meaning five) and "口" (kŏu, meaning mouth). According to the renowned Ricci Chinese-French Dictionary, the word "吾" (wú) representing the union of five mouths (openings), is derived from the Buddhist idea of the five Skandha (五蘊, wŭ yǜn), i.e. the five constituents (form, sensations, perceptions, mental activity, and consciousness as the basic elements of human existence) of the empirical person (a conventional "I" that is not permanent but is the fruit of the daily experience). Interestingly, as a verb, the same character "吾" means "to resist"; in that case, it is pronounced "yù".

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Conclusion

Mounier's personalism puts the self, the "I," which has to be cultivated and protected, at the center. In fact, the understanding of the "I" is the first step in our relationship with the "other" (Mounier, 1947).

Surely, Chinese characters give us a unique opportunity to analyze and meditate about the "I" and human nature in a new way. The media outlet *China Daily* writes: "Chinese characters have evolved over thousands of years. The quintessence of Chinese civilization and culture has thus been handed down from generation to generation. But they do not only express Chinese words in written form – as they also convey traditional and philosophical thoughts."

Yet these characters do not tell us only about Chinese people, since they describe the universal human condition.

In the spirit of the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, who is defined as "a paragon of cultural exchange between China and the West" (Choi, 2014), Chinese characters can give new input for a Catholicism-inspired meditation on the self for both Christians and non-Christians, whether in the West or the East.

Concerning the "I," the Chinese character "我" ("wǒ") gives a point of reflection on the internal conflicts to improve oneself (ἄσκησις, áskēsis, in Greek). The dagger, "戈", that the "I" is holding can become not a symbol of doing evil, but a new *enchiridion militis christiani*, to conquer peace within oneself and with others.

In this sense, we can see that Chinese tradition is not foreign to the Christian tradition. On the contrary, they can both coexist and inspire each other.

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