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Understanding the "I" Through the Chinese Language: Catholicism-inspired Meditation on Chinese Characters for “Self”

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Abstract: Some ancient Chinese characters give useful insights on humanity's 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. However, the Chinese depiction of "I" appears to be as well one of the best representations of our inner struggle with the temptations of evil and to even transform into good. This analysis presents a Catholicism-inspired viewpoint on the

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character, "我", which may assist 21st century's Christians and non-Christians, in their spiritual struggles. In fact, Chinese characters tell us that the spiritual struggle to improve is inherent in the human condition. In that sense, Chinese tradition is not so foreign to the Christian one as most people think.

Keywords: philosophy, religion, ethics, Chinese characters, redemption, freedom

Introduction

Some ancient Chinese characters ("漢字," pronounced as Hànzì in Chinese) reflect deep aspects of human nature, such as humanity's natural inclination to destroy things (and to destroy itself).

For example, the Chinese pronoun for "I" ("我," pronounced "wǒ"), defined as a conscious thinking subject and the essence of each one of us, 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.

In an article dedicated to the character "我", the media outlet *Qingdao Daily* questions: "Why is a murder weapon being used to define the pronoun 'I'? When did this usage first appear? A series of questions still require us to continue pursuing" (Qingdao Daily, 2013).

However, the Chinese character for "I" (meaning the ego, the self, the person) seems to reflect our innate propensity for violence. After all, as American playwright and anthropologist Robert Ardrey wrote: "We are Cain's children... Man is a predator, whose natural instincts is to kill with a weapon" (Barash, 2014).

It is worth noting that in classical Chinese, this interpretation of the word "我" (wǒ) has little usage. This analysis presents a Catholicism-inspired viewpoint on the character, though the debate in China on why the pronoun "I" is represented by a hand holding a murder weapon is still open. This article is an intercultural philosophical reflection, which may assist 21st century's Christians and non-Christians, Chinese readers and non-Chinese readers, in their spiritual struggles.



(Source: Dailyqd.com)

The "Sound of the Heart"

According to philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, who has been the guiding spirit of the French personalist movement, in order to develop as a person ("I"), like the poet and the religious man, it is needed to recollect oneself and listen to one's inner self.

In fact, 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, the sound of one's inner being, as mentioned by Mounier.

On World Communications Day 2022, Pope Francis spoke about the importance of listening. He said: "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" (Francis, 2022). Listening to the sound of the heart brings therefore to listen to our own inner self.

From Intent/Willingness to Repentance and Redemption

Intent and willingness come from the "sound of the heart" that the "I" is supposed to listen to in order 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.

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 side – by the character of the heart, "忄" (xin) and – on the right side – 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 as well a variant of the character "母" (mǔ) meaning female, mother, as if indicating that regret provokes the same excruciating feeling sensed by a mother's broken heart. Furthermore, the word repentance "悔改" (huǐgǎi) is also constituted by the character "改"

(gǎi),¹ which means change. Hence, repentance can be defined as a change that starts in the heart.

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 (by "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 by the characters "救" (jiù), meaning to save, and "赎" (shú), meaning to redeem, or to 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 is composed by the character "支" (pī), which means a person holding a weapon or tool to strike with, on the left side is composed by "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 (which is a biblical symbol for evil) in order to bring salvation.

It is worth noting that in *The Brothers Karamazov*, novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky tackles this same topic of repentance and redemption. In the book, Dmitri, the oldest Karamazov brother, who is innocent, takes the responsibility for the killing of his father, even though he had actually been killed by Smerdyakov, who is Old Karamazov's illegitimate son. Dmitri takes the blame because he had also wished for his father's death. During his time in prison, Dmitri goes through

¹ It is worth noting that the word change, “改” (gǎi), depicts a hand with the stick and a crying child.

a spiritual conversion and, feeling a sense of shared responsibility for humanity, finds redemption, giving an optimistic look at the nature of mankind.

Good and Evil

In this regard, the "I" has "freedom/liberty": (自由, zìyóu,) meaning being one's own master, with no restrictions or no restraint. The word 自由 is composed of the character "自", meaning "oneself" and of "由", meaning to let, allow, follow, pass through, or even walk. In other words, "自由", "freedom", is 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 external forces.

Intent and willingness come from the "sound of the heart" that the "I" is supposed to listen to in order 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.

Hence, the “I” has the “freedom” to choose between using the weapon and not using it – that is, to choose between good (“善”, shàn)² and evil (“恶”, è).³⁴

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

² The literal meaning of the Chinese word for good, “善” (shàn), is to speak like a sheep, representing an auspicious connotation. Shuowen, the literary reference book of the Eastern Han Dynasty, said: “善 means auspiciousness”. From the perspective of the font’s structure, the character is composed on the top by “羊” (yang), meaning sheep, on the bottom by “言”, meaning “speak”, the ancient pronunciation is dàn. The sheep’s eyes are gentle and peaceful among animals, and its meat is considered to be healthy and delicious, so it is appropriate to use a sheep as a metaphor for goodness (善). From the etymological analysis of the overall structure of the word “善”, it is possible to understand that everyone praises the “sheep” for its gentle, tame and beautiful character. The original meaning of “善” is “good”, “tame”, and “kind”. Consequently, “善” is extended to “friendship”, “good at”, “praise”, “easy”, “familiar with” and other positive meanings.

³ The word evil, “恶” (è) is an ideogram. The character has an upper and lower structure and consists of two parts: on the top the word “亚” (yà), meaning inferior, and on the bottom “心” (Xīn), meaning heart. “亚” has the meaning of ugly, and refers to an ugly behavior; the character “心” at the bottom refers to a bad action coming from an evil heart. The earliest Chinese character dictionary Shuo Wen explains that “恶” has the meaning of sin, fault. In other words, the literal meaning of “恶” is “very bad behavior”, coming from the heart.

⁴The word evil, “恶”, can also be referred as “罪恶”, composed by the character “罪”(meaning sin) and “恶”.

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 incorrigible. Xunzi says that "man will conquer the sky" by overcoming his instincts (Sohu, 2018).

In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about the doctrine of original sin. He said to his audience: "Each person is called to do the 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 everyday... The power of evil gave origin to a dirty river in our soul which is poisoning the geography of human history." Nevertheless, from this contradiction "a redemption must arise." (Benedict XVI, 2008)

Despite knowing what is good, the "I" very often chooses evil, since our "自由" (zìyóu) freedom has been corrupted by 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 do 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 Chinese original character of the word "sin" ("罪", zui) is "鼻" (also pronounced as zui), 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.⁵⁶

On May 18, 2021, 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" (Benedict XVI, 2011).

Inner Struggle with the Temptations of Evil

The Chinese depiction of "I" as a hand holding a weapon appears to be one of the best representations of our inner struggle with the temptations of evil and to even transform into good. It is worth noting that Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote in

⁵ In Chinese the word for sin and for crime is the same, "罪", zui.

⁶ Qin Shihuang (秦始皇, which means the incipient emperor of Qin dynasty), the first emperor of China, thought that the character "鼻" (zui) to represent the word "sin" looked like the character "皇" (huáng) meaning emperor, in other words, himself, so he changed "鼻" to "罪". The original meaning of the character "罪" is a net for catching fish, and by extension, a net of law to catch wrongdoers. Up till now, people use the character "罪" modified by Qin Shihuang. "鼻" is a variant character of "罪" with the same pronunciation, but it has been largely abandoned.

It is also worth noting that people often use the word "罪過" (zuìguo), where "罪" refers to a crime or a sin, and "過" refers to a fault, a mistake or at most an unintentional crime. However, "罪" cannot be replaced by the character "過", since "罪" is more serious of a sin than "過".

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 symbolized of the interior battles against evil, in defense of the faith (Erasmus, 1503), helping us "to walk with a straight heart".

The Confrontation Between the Two "I's"

However, in classical Chinese, there is also another word for "I": "吾" (wú), which is composed of the character "五" (wǔ, meaning five) and "口" (kǒu, meaning mouth). According to the renowned Ricci Chinese-French dictionary, the word "吾" (wú), which represents the union of five mouths (openings), derives from the Buddhist idea of the five Skandha (五蘊, wǔ yùn), i.e., the five constituents (form, sensations, perceptions, mental activity, 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

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"

character "吾" means to resist (and in this case is pronounced as "yù").

The dictionary explains that there are contrasts, confrontations, and struggles between the two types of "I", represented by the two different Chinese character, 我 ("wǒ") and "吾" (wú). The 我 (wǒ) is opposed to the 吾 (wú), as the struggle of the two differs. The "I" that holds a weapon (我, wǒ) 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.

Conclusion

The school of philosophy of 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 relation with the "other".

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" (Choi, 2014).

Yet, these characters don't tell us only about Chinese people, since they describe the universal human condition.

Concerning the "I", the Chinese character "我," ("wǒ") gives a point of reflection for a new point of view on the internal conflicts within oneself. The Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci hinged his apostolate on two cornerstones: the study of Chinese literature and mathematical sciences, and the exercise

of Christian charity. In the spirit of Ricci, who is defined as "a paragon of cultural exchange between China and the West" (Lau, 2021), Chinese characters can give new inputs to a Catholicism-inspired meditation on the self, the "I", whose dagger, "戈", can become not a symbol of violence, but a new *enchiridion militis christiani*, to conquer peace within oneself and with others.

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