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Abstract or Concrete Utopia? Concerning the Ideal Society in Chinese Philosophy and Culture

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Abstract: In seeking an appropriate approach to the ideal society in Chinese thought, the present study comprises two main parts. The first part deals with a debate in Chinese philosophy concerning the possibility of an inner or immanent transcendence as a way of defining Chinese culture. As this debate unfolded, it became clear that Chinese philosophers—especially on the mainland—do not regard the transcendent–immanent distinction as applicable to Chinese culture and philosophy. In short, this culture and its philosophy simply has no need for transcendence. Instead, other terms are needed, especially those drawn from a tradition that "secularised" them many millennia ago: moral cultivation, regeneration, home, and intimacy. In this light, the second part of the study deals with two approaches to the ideal society: the Confucian "Great Harmony [大同 *datong*]" and the short story "Peach Blossom Spring [桃花源 *taohuayuan*]". These terms are mediated by a treatment of the "Three Worlds Theory [三世说 *sanshishuo*]", developed most fully by He Xiu (129–82 CE). The outcome of this investigation is that the ideal society is very much part of this world. It can be known only through direct observation, empirical investigation, and it is achievable only by detailed planning. It is nothing less than home.

Keywords: transcendence; utopia; Great Harmony (大同 *datong*); Three Worlds Theory (三世说 *sanshishuo*); Peach Blossom Spring (桃花源 *taohuayuan*)

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How should one seek to understand Chinese approaches to the ideal society? One approach would entail deploying Western categories in an effort to understand Chinese culture and philosophy. Although this effort is fraught with misunderstandings, this has not prevented some from trying to deploy the Western concept of "utopia" and its underlying assumption of ontological transcendence to frame analyses of the ideal society in the Chinese cultural tradition. However, a more fruitful approach is to identify concepts and categories from the Chinese philosophical tradition itself, since these arise from the very same tradition—with its many contributions from diverse quarters—in which ideas of the ideal society arose.

With this in mind, the analysis that follows begins with a Chinese debate concerning an immanent or inner transcendence as a way of defining Chinese philosophy and culture. The reason for beginning here is that ontological transcendence was an initial defining feature of the Western concept of utopia (coined by the theologian and humanist Thomas More). As the debate over inner transcendence unfolded, it became clear that this Western-derived category ultimately failed to provide the framework for understanding core cultural and philosophical concepts. Instead, scholars urged a reconsideration of concepts such as 生生 *shengsheng*, 家 *jia*, 亲亲 *qinqin*, and 尊尊 *zunzun*, which may respectively be translated somewhat loosely as "regeneration", "household", "intimacy", and "respect." In this light, it becomes possible to analyse selected key moments in the long Chinese cultural tradition concerning the ideal society. Among many possible examples, in this study I focus on the Confucian "Great Harmony [大同 *datong*]" and the short story "Peach Blossom Spring [桃花源 *taohuayuan*]." These terms are mediated by a treatment of the "Three Worlds Theory [三世说 *sanshishuo*]", developed most fully by He Xiu (129–82 CE). Not only are these depictions of the ideal society knowable and achievable, but they also give expression to the desires for home, intimacy and respect, for generation after generation.

1. The Debate over "Inner Transcendence"

The first question to be addressed is whether ontological transcendence is applicable or indeed needed in a Chinese context, with its millennia-long cultural and philosophical history. I address this question by following the main contours of a significant debate among Chinese philosophers concerning the proposal of immanent or "inner transcendence". In what follows, I provide an overview of the initial proposal concerning "inner transcendence", deal with efforts at defence and elaboration, and then focus on the mounting criticisms of the concept.

1.1. Ontological Transcendence

The background to the following discussion concerns a defining feature of the 500-year history of the term "utopia" in the West, which carries the double meaning of being both "no place [*outopos*]" and a "good place [*eutopos*]" (More 1989). While one function of utopian literature and philosophical reflection as they have developed in the West is criticism of an existing society, a founding feature is the inaccessible and unknowable nature of the proposed "utopia". It is a better or perfect world, which is also a "no place". It cannot be experienced directly and cannot be verified through scientific investigation.[1] Of course, in Western utopian writing in the last couple of hundred years, we can see efforts to move away from this initial defining framework, but its traces are not so easy to negate or eradicate in such a short period of time. This point brings us to ontological transcendence, which—along with its opposite, immanence—is a structuring feature of Western philosophy and theology (Thomas More was a practitioner of both inter-related disciplines). By definition, ontological transcendence (Latin *transcendere*, meaning to surpass, cross over, and transgress boundaries) turns on God and the empirically unknowable heaven. As Ames puts it, "strict philosophical or theological transcendence is to assert that an independent and superordinate principle A originates, determines, and sustains B, where the reverse is not the case" (Ames 2011, p. 212; see also Hall and Ames 1987, p. 13). This superordinate principle cannot be known directly by the inhabitants of this mundane world. This is also the case with "utopia".

1.2. The Proposal

With this in mind, let us turn to the Chinese debate over "inner transcendence". The *locus classicus* for this concept is the work of the philosopher Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), who summed up the concept as follows:

> The Dao of heaven is high above, and has the meaning of transcendence. When the Dao of heaven is concentrated within a person, it is also inherent in human nature, and then the Dao of heaven is within [内在 *neizai*] (**immanent**). Therefore, we may use Kant's favoured words and say that the Dao of heaven is **transcendent** on the one hand and within [内在 *neizai*] on the other (**immanent** and **transcendent** are opposites). The Dao of heaven is both transcendent and within [内在 *neizai*], and this can be said to have both religious and moral significance: religion attaches importance to transcendence, while morality attaches importance to what is within [内在 *neizai*] (Mou [1963] 1997, p. 21).[2]

By deploying Kant, Mou Zongsan sought a Western philosophical approach to the question of Chinese philosophy. More specifically, he sought to frame his proposal for inner transcendence by deploying Kant's philosophy, especially the "transcendental [先验的 *xianyande*]", as the internal structures of the mind, which can be actualised in experience (Xu 2016, p. 167). Mou goes a step further: a reinvigorated Confucianism would be able to respond to and amend the defects in Kantian and Western philosophy.

Thus, the idea is to draw transcendence down into this immanent world. For Mou, instead of the either–or opposition in Western philosophy between ontological transcendence and immanence, the transcendence in question is inherent in human nature. This is, he argues, not merely a core feature of Chinese (Confucian) philosophy but a better proposition per se. Thus, the "Dao of heaven" is thoroughly inner [内在 *neizai*] or immanent.

To continue the spatial metaphor, Mou Zongsan also emphasised the need for Chinese philosophy and culture to rise up to a form of transcendence:

> If China's cultural life, inherited and developed by Confucianism, is only the ethics and morality of this common (secular) world, without the dimension of transcendence, without the affirmation of a transcendent [超越 *chaoyue*] moral and spiritual entity, without the affirmation of the reality of divinity [神性 *shenxing*] and a source of value, then Confucianism does not become its cultural life, and the Chinese nation will not become a nation with a cultural life. (Mou [1955] 2005, p. 63)

In this slightly earlier piece, Mou suggests that Chinese culture must overcome its perceived lack of transcendence, for without transcendence, cultural life has no meaning or purpose. This type of transcendence is embodied in a "divinity [神性 *shenxing*]" from which moral value derives. Clearly, Mou adhered to a more esoteric Confucianism, seeking what he called elsewhere a "metaphysics of morals [道德的形而上学 *daode de xingershangxue*]" (Gao 2021, p. 18). The potential implications for utopia should be obvious: if Chinese culture were to find a form of transcendence, perhaps even one of a metaphysical type—and Mou and others suggested it could be found in the long Chinese tradition—then one would be able to identify a form of utopianism.

1.3. Defence and Elaboration

Quite a number of philosophers have sought to defend and elaborate "inner transcendence", so much so that it became for a time an assumed category of Chinese philosophy (Du 1989, p. 340; Han and Zhang 2018, pp. 14–15). The main efforts at elaboration entailed grand historical narratives, enhancement of the idealist and metaphysical bent of the proposal, stressing the process of overcoming—and thus transcending—one's limitations through self-cultivation, and a shift to the concept of "heaven and humanity unite as one [天人合一 *tianren-heyi*]".[3]

In terms of historical narratives, (US-based) Yu Yingshi suggested that cultures, which arose during the "Axial Age" of the first millennium BCE, shared a common idea of transcendence. Subsequently, they diverged: Western cultures developed a stark "outer transcendence [外在超越 *waizaichaoyue*]" and its philosophical first mover or God; by contrast, Chinese culture developed "inner transcendence", which has no need for religious institutions so as to mediate with the "City of God". Although Chinese culture affirms a "transcendent source of value", it "does not make any special effort to construct another perfect metaphysical world to determine values, and then use this world to reflect and promote the actual human world" (Yu 2004, p. 8; see also Yu 1992, p. 12; Gao 2021, pp. 16–18).

There was also a distinctly metaphysical emphasis, especially among those outside mainland China. Mou Zongsan attributed to the "Dao of heaven [天道 *tiandao*]" a quasi-religious status, while Du (1999) suggested that Confucianism has always had profound religious significance in terms of an "ultimate concern". Further, Tang's ([1953] 2006) idealist approach stressed that "天 *tian*" is a metaphysical moral entity, transcending all human society while infusing it all.

In a different direction, we find an emphasis on self-cultivation, so as to refine virtue and seek a more perfected life. While the nature and knowledge of life [生命 *shengming*] are seen as distinguishing features of Chinese philosophy, this life is not a given: one must engage in "cultivating one's moral character [修身 *xiushen*]", "self-cultivation [自我修养 *ziwo xiuyang*]", and "learning for the sake of self-improvement [为己之学 *weijizhixue*]".[4] While the whole process may be immanent to relational human existence, "inner transcendence is the effort and aspiration to transcend the finitude of the present world and achieve spiritual freedom" (Gao 2021, p. 21; see also Guo 2016, p. 33).

Finally, we see a move to connect "inner transcendence" with "heaven and humanity unite as one [天人合一 *tianren heyi*]", often translated as the "the unity of nature and humanity". For example, Tang (1991) sought to bring Confucianism, Daoism, and Chinese Buddhism into discussions about "inner transcendence", although the term was more of a

convenient label. In his work, we can see a greater effort to identify distinct Chinese philosophical terms. The "unity of nature and humanity" is one such term, which determines two other categories: "thought and action combine into one" and "sentiment and scene combine into one" (Tang 1981; see also Gan 2019, p. 162). These three concern the topics of truth (life), goodness (ethics), and beauty (aesthetics), and hence the significant emphasis on ethics and moral philosophy. For this reason, argued Tang, scholars are socially engaged, with a strong sense of social responsibility and historical mission.

1.4. Criticisms

In contrast to the elaborations of the proposed "inner transcendence", an increasing number of criticisms have been made, especially in the last decade (Zheng 2001; Ren 2012; Shen 2015, pp. 156–58; Xu 2016, p. 168; Gao 2021, pp. 17–18). Of these criticisms, I will focus on the contextual question of the initial proposal; its nature as a strategically defensive move; the mistake of using Western philosophical categories; the metaphysical misreading of Confucian thought; and the misreading of "self-cultivation".

Contextually, many of the early proponents of modern Neo-Confucianism were non-mainland scholars. As young scholars or students, they fled with the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) forces under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-Shek) to the island of Taiwan or to the British colony of Hong Kong (Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, Fang Dongmei, Yu Yingshi, and Du Weiming—the latter two eventually spending their working lives in the USA). Not surprisingly, one finds little to no engagement with Marxist philosophy in their works, and some went so far as to suggest that Confucian philosophy was diverted by the Manzu (Manchu)—and thus non-Han—Qing Dynasty and "deviated" even further with the founding of the New China in 1949.[5]

Second, as Ren (2012) has argued, the deployment of Western philosophy, especially German idealism, was a defensive move. Having been under attack from Western philosophers at least since Hegel, with many opining that China does not have "philosophy", and feeling under even more pressure in the 1940s and 1950s due to Western "culture shock",[6] these non-mainland philosophers turned to German idealism, especially Kant, Hegel, and Schelling. The aim was to show not only that Chinese thought is a form of philosophy but, even more, that it is able to solve intractable problems in Western philosophy itself and perhaps even "save" it (Gao 2021, pp. 20–21). Yet, the cost was too high; by entering the discourse of Western philosophy, and its entanglement with theology, these Neo-Confucians ended up distorting Chinese culture and philosophy:

> This type of defence was undertaken under the comprehensive pressure of Christianity or Western culture, which inevitably meant a strategic analytic choice so as to avoid the pressure of cultural comparison. When this strategic choice occupies the core position in analysing the specific value of Confucianism or of Chinese culture, the distinct value Confucianism or Chinese culture may appear to be obscured. (Ren 2012, p. 31)

As Ren puts it more sharply later in the same study, the very concept of "inner transcendence" ends up distorting Confucianism (Ren 2012, p. 42).

The third problem follows from the preceding one: the viability or otherwise of deploying Western philosophical concepts, such as transcendence and immanence, for Confucian, and thus Chinese, philosophy. For more and more mainland philosophers, Chinese philosophy simply does not *need* transcendence or immanence. For example, Shen (2015, p. 159) points out that "immanent transcendence" is an absurd and unscientific way of speaking about Confucianism and Chinese philosophy. Instead of seeking transcendence in either a Western philosophical or theological sense, Confucianism's concern with the interconnected realms of individual disposition and socio-political realities entails a focus on the moral nature of human beings and their self-cultivation (Ren 2012, p. 39). In this way, Chinese philosophy also has no need for a series of problematic oppositions characteristic of Western philosophy: subject–object, agent–action, mind–body, nature–nurture, and so on. As Ames observes (Ames 2011, p. 213), this conception of a "relationally consti-

tuted person" has no need to appeal to categories such as "soul", "self", "will", "faculties", "nature", "mind", and "character". Ames continues: such person is embodied within the "social activity of thinking and feeling within the manifold of relations that constitutes family, community, and the natural environment … a configuration of concrete, dynamic, and constitutive relations rather than an individuated substance defined by some subsisting agency".[7]

1.5. An Early "De-Metaphysicalising" Move

By now, some readers may want to object, pointing out that the types of utopian literature, thought, and analysis in the West have moved well beyond the transcendent framework inherited from the theologian Thomas More. Instead of seeking but failing to achieve the transformation of humankind into a higher ethical principle via transcendent means, utopian subjects pursue social formations, laws, and institutions that are more just and rational. For example, in an influential work from four decades ago, Davis (1981, pp. 11–40) distinguished between four main types of ideal society: the unrestricted indulgence of "Cockaygne"; the escapism of Arcadia; the perfect moral commonwealth; and the "millennium", which comes at the end of history. While Davis's study concerns English utopian writing during a certain period, the examples given with these four types indicate that he sought a comprehensive categorisation of utopian writing across time and space. In light of the preceding analysis, it may be argued that while the last two categories still trade on the conceptualisation of transcendence, the first two—in very different ways—try to "secularise" the concept and perception of utopia in a way that is not so transcendent.[8] For example, and with an eye on later analysis, the examples given for Arcadia include the Hebraic prophets, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Montaigne's notion of "moderate men set in a world of natural bounty", and Northrop Frye, among others. In other words, the effort at producing a definition of utopia that covers all manner of examples includes within its orbit a much more this-worldly approach to the question of utopia—one that is at some distance from the transcendent–immanent distinction, which I explored above.

There are a number of ways in which we may understand these efforts, but one, which is pertinent to the present analysis, is that they may be seen as one manifestation of the tortuous path of "secularisation" experienced by the West since the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These questions have many dimensions, such as the precursor role of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, when secularisation meant the removal of property from the hands of the Roman Catholic Church, or the emphasis on this age and this time (from the Latin root of the word), to the broader notion that secularisation meant a move away from the dominant ecclesial and theological frameworks of society and culture, which characterised the European Middle Ages. It is in this context that we find the growing emphasis on materialism and immanence, in an effort to negate the role of transcendence and idealism. So too, it may be said, with some understandings of utopia, where the this-worldly and concrete concerns of writers such as William Morris belie and perhaps even overturn the transcendent emphases of their forebears. These are, to use Bloch's terminology, concrete utopias rather than abstract utopias (Bloch 1995, p. 145).

How does the Chinese experience compare? To stay with the term "secularisation" for a moment longer, we can say that Chinese society, culture, and philosophy underwent such a process almost 3000 years ago and that the West is very much a latecomer on the scene. However, I am wary indeed of using the Latin-derived "secularisation" for this process, since it risks "using Western categories in order to understand China [以西解中 *yixi-jiezhong*]" (Wang 2018, p. 26). Therefore, let me put it this way: scholars point to an early de-metaphysicalising move in Confucian thought. As Mou Zhongjian observes, Confucius put "heaven" aside and was concerned with "benevolence" or "two-person mindedness [仁 *ren*]",[9] so as to identify the source of virtue. Thus, "Confucius transferred the value source of social morality and ethics into people's hearts by promoting benevolence through rites, and turned the heteronomous focus of religious rites into autonomous self-

discipline" (Mou and Zhang 2000, p. 172).[10] Others point out that the de-metaphysicalising move began earlier: during the early days of the Zhou Dynasty in the 11th century BCE, a depersonalisation of "heaven [天 *tian*]" had already begun.[11] These moves took place under the auspices of the fabled Duke of Zhou [周公 *Zhou Gong*]. While one finds references in the earliest layers of the *Book of Songs* to a "Lord on High [上帝 shangdi]"—taken over from the earlier Shang Dynasty—these began to fade with the Duke of Zhou, who saw the need to move from the ignorance and superstition of the earlier ideas inherited from the Shang Dynasty to a focus on "valuing and emphasising human affairs" (Gu and Yu 2014). The effect was that the focus turned very early indeed to human affairs, thus avoiding the need to shape the spirit of Chinese culture in terms of religion or transcendent categories. While Daoism was concerned more with the principle or root of the world, Confucianism saw heaven as a model of social order focused on morality and ethics: both the inner moral statutes [仁 *ren*, or "two-person mindedness"] and outer social order [礼 *li*, "ritual"] are intimately connected (Ren 2012, p. 45; Xu 2016, p. 169).

1.6. Towards Philosophical Terms from the Chinese Tradition

To sum up: In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of non-mainland philosophers drew upon Western philosophical frameworks in order to argue that Chinese culture and philosophy should be seen in terms of an ontological transcendence—embodied in terms such as "heaven [天 *tian*]" and the "way [道 *dao*]"—which is immanent in human and social life. They proposed the concept of immanent or "inner transcendence [内在超越 *neizaichaoyue*]" as the way to describe this distinctive feature of Chinese philosophy. The proposal found quite a few scholars seeking to defend and to elaborate further features of the concept of inner transcendence. At the same time, there were also critics of the very possibility of using the oxymoron of "inner transcendence" to speak of Chinese philosophy. Over time, these voices became more numerous, especially among mainland philosophers. We are left with the following question: if the proponents of "inner transcendence" are correct, then it may be possible to propose a type of utopia in the Chinese cultural tradition, albeit one that is inner rather than external. However, if the critics are correct—and it seems to me that they are correct—then Chinese philosophy has no need for the problematic category of transcendence. Further, if we accept the argument—especially with an eye on utopian literature—that the West has made much more recent attempts to dispense with the category of transcendence, then the Chinese experience predates this process by 2000 years or more. However, this raises a whole new question: what categories are appropriate both for understanding Chinese philosophy today and the approaches to the ideal society?

By way of transition to the next section, I would like to mention briefly two emphases, which will contribute to a philosophical framework for my considerations of the "Great Harmony [大同 *datong*]" and "Peach Blossom Spring". The first emphasis picks up from the earlier discussion and concerns the long tradition of moral cultivation, which seeks to break through one's self-limitations, so as to produce a more virtuous person and society. As Ren (2012, p. 40) observes, the relation between present reality and the pursuit of ideals is as follows: "the fundamental way for Confucianism to resolve this confrontation is immediate, temporal, direct, and internal, but it does not seek philosophical or religious 'transcendent' goals". Immediate, temporal, direct, and internal: these are the key terms we need to keep in mind in the discussion of the Great Harmony.

The second emphasis arises from some important developments in the last decade or so. These concern the deployment of terms and concepts that come out of the Chinese tradition. Notable here is the concept of 生生 *shengsheng*, which literally means "life–life" or "birth–birth", and it can perhaps be translated as "regeneration".[12] In contrast to Western philosophical discourse and its concern with individual "being", the repetition of the character 生 *sheng* indicates the basic reality of relatedness. Let us take the perennial question: what is the origin of humanity? A Chinese answer is that a man and a woman meet, and a child results (Yao 2021, p. 151). A rather lapidary observation, but it has immense implications: instead of an isolated and aggressive individual as found in the Western tradition,

we have a relational order of difference (Sun 2014; X. Sun 2018; Shen 2015, pp. 152–54; Zhao 2016, p. 100; Yao 2021). From here, a number of other categories follow, such as 家 *jia* or "home" and "household", 亲亲 *qinqin* or "intimacy", and 尊尊 *zunzun* or "respect" (Sun 2019, 2020; Yao 2021, pp. 152–57). The semantic fields of these terms are extremely rich, speaking of human interconnection and the integrated relationality of differential existence. Many of the works published in the last decade concerning these questions deal with how the ancient Confucian categories may be transformed in light of the rapid process of Chinese modernisation, and how they can be understood in light of the collective emphasis of sinified Marxist philosophy. I suggest that these concepts—regeneration, home, intimacy, and respect—provide us with further elements for understanding the Chinese conceptions of an ideal society.

2. The Great Harmony: A Verifiable Topos

By way of introduction to what follows, I would like to ask whether a term for utopia can be found in Chinese. The short answer is yes: 乌托邦 *wutuobang*, which both echoes the sound of "utopia" and expresses its meaning. However, there is a problem: this is a loan word and not a distinctly Chinese term. This is not to say that there is no concept of a better society, a harmonious world in which contradictions are non-antagonistic. Two terms from the Chinese tradition are far more appropriate: 大同 *datong* and 桃源 *taoyuan*, or more fully 桃花源 *taohuayuan*. While the first means the "Great Togetherness" or "Great Harmony", the second refers to "Peach Blossom Spring", a famous story in the Chinese tradition.

2.1. The Great Harmony and the Book of Rites

To understand the meanings of 大同 *datong*, we need to go all the way back to the Confucian *Book of Rites* [礼记 *Liji*], which was compiled during the third and second centuries BCE. The *locus classicus* is as follows:

> When the Great Way [大道 *dadao*] was practiced, all-under-heaven was as common [天下为公 *tianxia wei gong*]. They chose men of worth and ability [for public office]; they practiced good faith and cultivated good will [修睦 *xiumu*]. Therefore, people did not single out only their parents to love, nor did they single out only their children for care. They saw to it that the aged were provided for until the end, that the able-bodied had employment, and that the young were brought up well. Compassion was shown to widows, orphans, the childless, and those disabled by disease, so that all had sufficient support. Men had their portion [of land], and women, their homes after marriage. Wealth they hated to leave unused, yet they did not necessarily store it away for their own use. Strength they hated not to exert, yet they did not necessarily exert it only for their own benefit. Thus selfish scheming was thwarted before it could develop. Bandits and thieves, rebels and traitors did not show themselves. So the outer gates [外户 *waihu*] were left open. This was known as the period of the Great Unity [大同 *datong*] (translated by Nylan 2001, p. 196).[13]

This is one of the most well-known texts in the long Chinese tradition. Much has been and could be said about the text, but my concern is quite specific: 大同 *datong* is clearly an "ideal community or an ideal state". This entails that "everything in the world is for the public and not for a special someone", and "capable and virtuous talents" are selected from the masses rather than relying on inheritance (Han and Zhang 2018, p. 63). However, this is by no means an abstract or transcendent "utopia". Instead, we should understand it in terms of what is immediate, temporal, and direct.

First, 大同 *datong* has a temporal and immediate reference, for it designates a historical era—one that is very much of this human world. Here, it is of the past, as the opening phrase of the stanza that follows indicates: the Way has "fallen into disuse and obscurity". The setting of the text is a discourse between Confucius and a disciple Yan Yan (known in the *Analects* as Ziyou). Confucius laments the current conditions in the state of Lu (in what

is now Shandong province) and offers his description of what conditions had been like in a better time.[14]

Second, the "Great Harmony" does not entail the abolition or disappearance of contradictions. It is not a "perfect" world, in which all contradictions are overcome. Indeed, the very concepts of "togetherness [同 *tong*]" and "harmony [和 *he*]" entail difference: not only is 和 *he* a musical metaphor, but it is a common conjunction ("and"). Diversity and difference there will always be, between human beings, societies, and states. Within societies, one expects contradictions, but also between societies, so that "diverse social rules and regulations are also established according to varied community environments", so as to facilitate interaction (Han and Zhang 2018, p. 63). As the *Book of Rites* puts it: "All things are nourished together without their injuring one another. The courses of the seasons, and of the sun and moon, are pursued without any collision among them [万物并育而不相害, 道并行而不相悖 *wanwu bing yu er bu xiang hai, dao bingxing er bu xiangbei*]" (Legge 1885, p. 326).[15]

Third, the text evinces a basic feature of human life: order is a foundational feature of human existence, although it always risks falling into chaos when vigilance is lax. To go deeper, it is natural and common for human beings to cooperate and organise (Yao 2021, pp. 150–51). Recall an earlier point: what is the origin of humanity? A man and a woman meet, and a child results. This entails an integrated relationality of differential existence, and thus, a primary state of organisation and cooperation in light of the differences between human beings. This approach offers a stark contrast to the biblically and theologically derived Western notion of a state of nature (Garden of Eden). While it may have been seen as a simpler time of human existence, embodied in the "noble savage" and the mythical ponderings over "America" (Locke, Rousseau, and so on), it was also seen as lawless, without social and state structures, and as a world of chaos and perpetual struggle of individuals against other individuals (Hobbes). Order must be found; human beings must enter "civilisation", laws, and the state; and all of these emerge from the chaotic state of nature. Not so for the Chinese tradition: these Western assumptions seem absurd and counter-factual. Instead, organised life in light of differences is the origin of human existence, so much so that "civilisation" and the "state" can be found at the earliest moments of Chinese history (Yi 2012). In sum, while Western thought sees order arising out of chaos, for Chinese thought, order comes first, and chaos is always a danger to be avoided.

2.2. The Three Worlds Theory

While the passage in the *Book of Rites* is the initial reference point for 大同 *datong*,[16] in this section, I turn to a crucial development a few centuries later in the work of He Xiu (129–82 CE) during the time of the Eastern Han Dynasty. He Xiu's proposed "three worlds theory [三世说 *sanshishuo*]" shows very clearly why a Chinese approach to an ideal society differs markedly from a Western transcendent utopia. The key work by He Xiu, which has survived, is a commentary on the *Gongyang* commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* [春秋 *Chunqiu*]—a text that also has traces of the hand of Confucius.[17] In a famous passage, He Xiu distinguishes between three worlds: the "decayed and disordered [衰乱 *shuailuan*]" world; one of "rising peace [升平 *shengping*]"; and the world of "great peace [大平 *daping*]" (He and Xu 1999, vol. 8, pp. 25–26).[18]

He Xiu's most important contribution was to identify the characteristics of these three worlds (Li 2013, p. 60). He picks up three terms, which appear in the *Gongyang* commentary and were initially elaborated upon by the influential Western Han scholar, Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE): what one "sees [所见 *suojian*]" with one's own eyes; what one "hears [所闻 *suowen*]" directly; and what is "rumoured [所传闻 *suochuanwen*]" (He and Xu 1999, vol. 8, pp. 25–26).[19] The first two phrases—所见所闻 *suojian-suowen*—are used together in Chinese to speak of what one has actually seen and heard by being in a situation. In other words, they concern direct evidence rather than hearsay. By contrast, 所传闻 *suochuanwen* refers in the *Gongyang* commentary to hearsay, which is distant in terms of time and place and therefore cannot be verified or trusted (Li 2013, p. 59).[20]

How are these three characteristics connected with the three worlds? The "decayed and disordered [衰乱 *shuailuan*]" world is characterised by rumour, gossip, and hearsay. For He Xiu, this world is full of chaos, and the difference between guilt and innocence was overlooked. Although a larger state may have officials, smaller outer states do not. Information about states outside one's own is non-existent, and even the records within the country are of dubious quality. Instead, this world is full of rumours concerning skulduggery, assassination, intrigue, and inappropriate social behaviour in light of the rites. By contrast, the world that one has "heard" about directly, is the world of "rising peace [升平 *shengping*]". Here, we find that there are records, and thus laws, which follow the ability to hear and know, and this world unites all of the Chinese people. This world is an improvement, but it is not ideal: outside, there are still the "foreign tribes [夷狄 *yidi*]" to the east and north, and the leaders and people do not always follow social rites and appropriate behaviour. The world, which one "sees" and verifies directly, is the one of "great peace [大平 *daping*]", which would later in the tradition become known as the "greatest peace [太平 *taiping*]".[21] Here, the world is one, whether distant or nearby, large or small, while the inner being and motives are "especially profound and auspicious [尤深而祥 *you shen er xiang*]". All social rituals are followed, and righteousness and "two-person mindedness [仁 *ren*]" are deeply embedded in society (He and Xu 1999, vol. 8, pp. 25–26; see also Chen 2020, pp. 84–85).

Much has been and can be said about this influential passage and its role in the longer tradition (Chen 2016), but I need to restrict the points to what is relevant to my argument. First, the reader may wonder what the connection is with 大同 *datong* in the *Book of Rites*. The explicit connection would come much later, with the liberal reformism of Kang ([1935] 2010). He identified the "greatest peace [太平 *taiping*]" with the "great harmony [大同 *datong*]", although he attributed the connection to Confucius. However, Kang also attempted to develop a linear and evolutionary framework, moving from chaos, through rising peace, to the goal of "great harmony" and "greatest peace". Seduced by Western developments, Kang associated these three stages with absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, and Western liberal democracy. By contrast, since Jiang's (1995) "political Confucian" study of the Gongyang tradition, in which he urged the development of political structures arising from China's tradition and suited to its conditions rather than importing them from outside, scholars have emphasised more significant dimensions of the three worlds theory.[22] These include the methodology for interpreting the classics; China's unique resources for historiography and a philosophy of history, albeit always in light of modern developments, seeking the unity of the past and present; the three worlds not being simply historical stages but being integrally related; the connection with China's many diverse regions and nationalities, providing a historical theory for unity; a more dialectical approach, in which the risk of chaos increases the closer one comes to the Great Harmony; understanding the characteristics and risks of slipping into chaos, such as during the latter stages of the Qing Dynasty; providing insight into the economic, political, and social means—and assessing the criteria for—enabling a society in chaos to attain "rising peace" and "great harmony" (Chen 2007, 2020; Wang 2007; Xu 2011; Li 2013; Gao and Chen 2014; Chen 2016).

Let me pick up this last point, concerning the means and criteria for "rising peace" and "great peace" or "great harmony". Not only are these criteria cast in terms of the Confucian tradition's emphasis on social and individual requirements for moral cultivation but also in terms of what can be planned and is empirically verifiable. In this light, He Xiu's contribution enables us to identify why the concept of transcendence—as it has influenced the notions of utopia—is one of rumour, hearsay, mythology, and metaphor. For He Xiu and the whole Chinese tradition, the world of rumour and hearsay is one of chaos and disorder. By contrast, the better world for which one strives—great(est) peace or great harmony—is seen directly, and thus experienced and empirically verifiable. Even the lower level of rising peace is a world that one hears through being present: to see and hear what is about one entails that one is present and can verify and record. In short, it

is a world of empirical evidence. How does one achieve rising peace, and ultimately, the greatest peace or great harmony? As the tradition unfolded, the method continues to be implemented through careful research, planning, implementation, and reassessment, with the need to record such planning and ensure that it is empirically verifiable.

3. "Peach Blossom Spring" and 生生 *shengsheng*

In this final section, I turn to the ancient story known as "Peach Blossom Spring [桃花源 *Taohuayuan*]". While 大同 *datong* continues to be deeply influential, it can be argued that 桃花源 *taohuayuan*, or more commonly 桃源 *taoyuan*, expresses even more clearly the nature of Chinese thought on a better society.

3.1. The Story

The word designates not a state of society or of the world, but it is the title of a well-known short story. Written in an unadorned vernacular style, with only 314 characters, the translation is as follows:

> During the Taiyuan Reign of the Jin, there was a native of Wuling who made his living catching fish. Following a creek, he lost track of the distance he had traveled when all of a sudden he came upon forests of blossoming peach trees on both shores. For several hundred paces there were no other trees mixed in. The flowers were fresh and lovely, and the falling petals drifted everywhere in profusion. The fisherman found this quite remarkable and proceeded on ahead to find the end of this forest. The forest ended at a spring, and here he found a mountain. There was a small opening in the mountain, and it vaguely seemed as if there were light in it. He then left his boat and went in through the opening. At first it was very narrow, just wide enough for a person to get through. Going on further a few dozen paces, it spread out into a clear, open space.
>
> The land was broad and level, and there were cottages neatly arranged. There were good fields and lovely pools, with mulberry, bamboo, and other such things. Field paths crisscrossed, and dogs and chickens could be heard. There, going back and forth to their work planting, were men and women whose clothes were in every way just like people elsewhere. Graybeards and children with their hair hanging free all looked contented and perfectly happy.
>
> When they saw the fisherman, they were shocked. They asked where he had come from, and he answered all their questions. Then they invited him to return with them to their homes, where they served him beer and killed chickens for a meal. When it was known in the village that such a person was there, everyone came to ask him questions.
>
> Of themselves they said that their ancestors had fled the upheavals during the Qin and had come to this region bringing their wives, children, and fellow townsmen. They had never left it since that time and thus had been cut off from people outside. When asked what age it was, they didn't know of even the existence of the Han, much less the Wei or Jin. The fisherman told them what he had learned item by item, and they all sighed, shaking their heads in dismay. Each person invited him to their homes, and they all offered beer and food.
>
> After staying there several days, he took his leave. At this people said to him, "There's no point in telling people outside about us".
>
> Once he left, he found his boat; and then as he retraced the route by which he had come, he took note of each spot. On reaching the regional capital, he went to the governor and told him the story as I have reported. The governor immediately sent people to follow the way he had gone and to look for the spots he had noticed. But they lost their way and could no longer find the route.

> Liu Ziji of Nanyang was a gentleman of high ideals. When he heard of this, he was delighted and planned to go there. Before he could realize it, he grew sick and passed away. After that no one tried to find the way there. (Tao 1996, 1979, vol. 6, pp. 183–84)

The author of this story is the famous poet Tao Yuanming (c. 365–427 CE), who lived most of his life during the time of Eastern Jin Dynasty (266–420 CE). The story is believed to have been written around the year 400 CE, and it has come to be regarded as the first literary representation of the ideal form of everyday village life, and as such, it has given us the term 桃源 *taoyuan* to speak of such a world.

3.2. An Arcadia?

At least two possible frameworks may be used to interpret "Peach Blossom Spring". The first is the Western tradition of "Arcadia", which Davis (1981, p. 22) defines as follows:

> Nature is generously benevolent rather than hostile to man but at the same time men's desires, in particular sociological ones, are assumed to be moderate. Thus there is a harmony between man and nature in Arcadia which parallels a social harmony between men of moderation. Arcadians tend to assume that, if the problems of material scarcity are resolved in a world of men of moderation, problems of sociological scarcity will also cease to exist.

If we follow this line of interpretation, we may also suggest that "Peach Blossom Spring" has some affinities with Western utopias since the 18th century. Some of these (such as William Morris's *News from Nowhere*) concern verifiable and known places, have clear historical references, and are as accessible or inaccessible as "Peach Blossom Spring".[23] Thus, there are clear historical references to the reign of Emperor Xiaowu (376–397 CE), whose personal name was Sima Yao and is indicated in the text as "Taiyuan"; to the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), when the people had initially stepped away from dynastic rule in a well-tried way for agricultural labourers, namely to remove themselves from the ruler's sway; to the Han, Wei, and Jin Dynasties, which followed the Qin Dynasty and bring us to the time of writing of the text. Further, the village is witnessed first hand by the fisherman. To use a phrase mentioned earlier, the fisherman has seen and heard—所见所闻 *suojian-suowen*—by actually being in the village. Of course, we must remember that it is a story rather than a historical report.

3.3. Home: Regeneration, Intimacy, and Respect

However, it seems to me that a more viable framework for understanding "Peach Blossom Spring" uses the categories mentioned earlier: regeneration [生生 *shengsheng*], intimacy [亲亲 *qinqin*], and respect [尊尊 *zunzun*]. These may be summed in the full semantic field of home or household [家 *jia*]. Thus, the story speaks of a way of life experienced by countless generations of Chinese peasants—as the text observes, "just like people everywhere". The people farm, have children and take care of the elderly, and have sufficient food and drink. This motif is notably persistent in Chinese culture, in the sense that the ideal life is that of the farming or peasant agricultural village, where society finds its roots and meaning. There is, of course, one difference: the villagers are hospitable and keen to know of the Chinese world outside their village, of the rise and fall of empires, but they wish no part in those imperial structures. The forerunners of the people met by our fisherman had decided to remove themselves from the first imperial dynasty that had united China—the Qin Dynasty—and desired to resume the age-old agricultural life and its social structures. Unlike the vast majority of Chinese peasants, who lived under one dynasty or another, this village has removed itself from living in such a way. They felt that the imperial structures of the harsh Qin Dynasty interfered with and threatened their way of life. It may be pointed out that the ideal was an emperor who enabled rather than undermined the peasant village, but too often, this was not the case.

Further, the life of the author Tao Yuanming is relevant. Although he had a number of stints at various levels in the imperial service, he longed for his home village. "Return" is a

constant theme in his poetry, and when he was finally able to return to his home village, he engaged in the daily work of farming. His poems are written in an unadorned and limpid style, speaking of moments of the day working the fields, the feel, sights, and experiences of village life—eventually coming to be recognised as one of the great influences in Chinese literature. However, I would like to emphasise the theme of "return" and the ideal of rural life, for in "Peach Blossom Spring", this motif comes to the fore. When the author was at last able to "renounce the imperial seal" and return to the village farm, he changed his personal name from Yuanming to Qian (潜), which means "hidden". Seclusion here is not escapism but simply means returning to live in one's home village, with minimal external interference.

4. Summary and Conclusions

The preceding text has argued, following Chinese scholars, that Chinese culture, philosophy, and literature have no need for either ontological transcendence (and its attendant opposite, immanence) or "*ou/eutopia*", in the sense of an abstract or transcendent utopia. In terms of ontological transcendence, I provided an overview of a significant debate in Chinese philosophy concerning the viability of using a Western-derived "inner transcendence". In the closing part of that discussion, I noted what may be called a "realistic turn" in Western analyses of utopia, and thus, a move away from the inherited categories of transcendence. However, in this respect the West is very much a latecomer on the scene, for Chinese society, culture, and philosophy made such a move more than two millennia ago. In light of this long tradition, I suggested that other categories are more appropriate. The first concerned the immediate, temporal, direct, and internal nature of moral cultivation, while the second turned to the categories of regeneration, home, intimacy, and respect. With these in mind, I dealt with some key ideas of the ideal society in Chinese thought: the "Great Harmony [大同 *datong*]", the "Three Worlds Theory [三世说 *sanshishuo*]" of He Xiu, and "Peach Blossom Spring [桃花源 *taohuayuan*]". While the "Great Harmony" and "Peach Blossom Spring" have become standard terms arising from the Chinese tradition to speak of an ideal society, He Xiu's contribution is crucial: this world is seen and heard [所见所闻 *suojian-suowen*] by being physically present. One can verify this world by direct empirical evidence. It follows that attaining such world entails concrete action, detailed planning, and assessment.

In closing, I would like to mention a story by Guo Moruo entitled "Marx Enters a Confucian Temple" (Guo [1925] 1985).[24] It tells of a meeting between Marx and Confucius, in which they discuss their proposals for a better society. While Marx speaks of communism and Confucius points out that the "Great Harmony [大同 *datong*]" from the *Book of Rites* is very similar to communism, a comment from Marx should be noted. In reply to "old comrade [老同志 *lao tongzhi*]" Confucius, Marx observes that his proposals are not a "figment of the imagination" and are certainly not "utopian socialism". The term used for "utopian" in this case is 空想 *kongxiang*—"empty thinking". In reply, Confucius indicates the concrete reality of his approach as well.

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Notes

1 Levitas (2010, pp. 2–4) attempts to dismiss this philosophical question as a "colloquial" approach to utopia before developing a universalisation based on Western premises. One would have expected a somewhat more rigorous analysis of the philosophical questions at stake.

2 All translations are by the author of this article. In this quotation, terms in English in the original text are rendered in bold type.

3 This well-known four-character saying derives originally from the work of Zhuangzi (c. 369–c. 286 BCE), one of the early thinkers in what is known as Daoism. Initially engaged in significant polemic with Confucianism, Zhuangzi's Daoist thought

came eventually to be absorbed within and influence Confucianism and Buddhism, with the result that "heaven and humanity unite as one" became a core cultural and philosophical concept. I have translated the phrase somewhat literally, but it has come to mean "the unity of humanity and nature", and thus, that humanity is an integral part of nature.

4 This four-character phrase is traced back to *The* Analects (1993, 14.24), where Confucius observes: "In ancient times people learned for the sake of self-improvement [*gu zhi xuezhi wei ji*]; nowadays people learn for show".

5 For example, Mou Zongsan was a vociferous anti-communist and Han nationalist, seeing his work as opening a third phase of Confucian flourishing. The first was from the time of Confucius to the Han Dynasty; the second was the Neo-Confucianism (in response to Buddhism) of the Song and Ming Dynasties; and the third began in the second half of the twentieth century.

6 I would add that the proposal of "inner transcendence" should not be seen merely as a response to Western philosophical and cultural pressure. It was also a response to the establishment of the New China in 1949, and then the tumultuous decade of 1966–1976 ("Cultural Revolution"), when all that was Confucian was condemned. The burden of "saving" Confucius was perceived to fall on the shoulders of the non-mainland philosophers.

7 The point elaborated in this paragraph raises the question as to how we should understand the Chinese term 超越 *chaoyue*, which is usually translated as "transcend". While 超 *chao* means to exceed or surpass, 越 *yue* means getting past, jumping over, exceeding, overstepping, and going through. However, as Ren (2012, p. 38) observes, one must be wary of making the simple step from linguistic terminology to philosophy. While 超越 *chaoyue* is the standard way to translate the Western philosophical concept of "transcendence", this is a translation of a foreign philosophical concept. Outside such usage, the word does not entail ontological transcendence.

8 One may also mention Levitas's effort (1990) to develop—with insights from Ernst Bloch, among others—a quasi-psychological category common to a supposed "human nature" of the desire for a "better life".

9 For this translation of 仁 *ren*, see P. Sun (2018).

10 Confucius (1993, 6.22) famously observed: "To devote oneself to the people's just cause, and, while respecting spirits and gods [鬼神 *guishen*], to keep aloof [远 *yuan*] from them, may be called wisdom".

11 The Duke of Zhou was venerated by Confucius as the ideal public servant: the duke carried out his duties in an exemplary manner until the underage regent and his nephew, King Cheng, could assume the throne. At that moment, the duke stepped back from his role as regent.

12 At times, we find the fuller 生生不息 *shengsheng buxi*—continuous regeneration.

13 One may also consult the classic translation by James Legge (1885, pp. 364–66), which may also be found in bilingual format at https://ctext.org/liji/li-yun (accessed on 13 September 2022).

14 The State of Lu was a vassal of the State of Zhou. In light of Lu's relatively long history (c. 1042–249 BCE), by the sixth century BCE, Confucius could look back on that history.

15 The online bilingual version, with James Legge's translation, may be found at https://ctext.org/liji/zhong-yong (accessed on 13 September 2022).

16 As also for 小康 *xiaokang*—in the sense of moderately well-off, healthy, and peaceful—and thus a level lower than 大同 *datong* (Boer 2021, pp. 139–64).

17 The *Spring and Autumn Annals* record events of the state of Lu (concerning which, Confucius offered his reflections on 大同 *datong*), from 722 BCE to 481 BCE. From Mencius's time (Chen 2020, p. 81), it has traditionally been assumed that Confucius edited the text due to grave concern about the decline of the world he knew and that he did so with "subtle phrasing [微言 *weiyan*]", which gave rise to an immense tradition of commentary on this most influential text. The three main commentaries, which have survived, are those of Zuo, Guliang, and Gongyang. It is the Gongyang commentary to which He Xiu provided his commentary. For a useful introduction to the annals and the commentaries, see Nylan (2001, pp. 257–306).

18 As one of the few works by He Xiu that have survived, its posterity was ensured by inclusion within the *Commentary and Sub-commentary on the Thirteen Classics* [十三经注疏 *Shisan jing zhushu*]. In this collection, He Xiu's contribution appears in volume 8, along with annotations by Xu Yan, from the Tang Dynasty (He and Xu 1999). It was He Xiu's work—originally entitled 春秋公羊解诂 *Chunqiu gongyang jiegu*—which enabled the original Gongyang commentary to be reconstructed. The text may also be found on a number of websites, such as www.guoxue123.com/jinbu/ssj/gyz/index.htm (accessed on 13 September 2022).

19 The three phrases appear on three occasions in the *Gongyang* commentary and found initial elaboration in Dong Zhongshu's commentary (Liu 2009, pp. 12, 58, 650; Miller 2015, pp. 10, 29, 276; Dong 2012, p. 15; 2016, p. 72; see also Chen 2020, pp. 83–84). For a detailed overview of the interpretive history, see Chen (2016).

20 He Xiu deployed the three stages to interpret the 242 years covered in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

21 The Chinese differs only in one small point: from 大平 (*daping*) to 太平 (*taiping*).

22 Jiang (1995, pp. 251–67) included a whole chapter on the "Three Worlds Theory".

23 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for these suggestions.

24 The reader may also consult a short story by Cai Yuanpei *New Year's Dream* [新年梦 *xinnian meng*] (Cai [1904] 1984), which devotes most of its text to extensive and detailed planning for the society to come.

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