

Member's News

Tu Weiming: 'I Know My Own Shortcomings Too Well' A Report from the 2nd Spiritual Humanism Symposium (Beijing, 19-20 October 2019)

'I thank everyone for dropping their other engagements and coming from far and wide to pay their respects, but I am afraid that the idealised Tu Weiming I have heard in some of your descriptions of me is a long way from the limited purveyor of Confucian wisdom I know myself to have been. I hope I can begin to fulfil your lofty expectations in the eternity that awaits me.' Speaking at the Closing Ceremony of the 2nd Spiritual Humanism Symposium, on the eve of his 80th birthday, the Director of the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies (IAHS) at Peking University jokingly admitted to an admiring audience of past and present colleagues that he was entering a 'difficult phase of transition'. The pioneering Confucian intellectual, who in his heyday packed out Harvard undergraduate lecture halls like no Chinese scholar before him or since, uttered these words 58 years to the day after his mentor Tang Junyi had famously lamented that the fruits of Chinese culture were 'scattered and withering'.

The symposium effectively doubled as a birthday bash; guests each found their own ways to celebrate Tu's sprawling legacy. Many of the Chinese attendees had contributed to the thousand-page, Chen Lai-edited tome *Rujia Disanqi de Renwen Jingshen (The Humanistic Spirit of New Confucianism)*, while others, including Wu Genyou, Chen Xia, Peng Guoxiang, Hu Zhihong, Wen Haiming, He Jun and Fang Xudong, prepared papers specially for the conference. Several dozen English contributors from around the world, including Herta Nagl, Stephen Angle, Ralph Weber, Huang Yong and other leading international lights in Chinese and Comparative Philosophy, added a worthy cosmopolitan touch to the event, which was organised by a team of doctoral and postdoctoral fellows from the IAHS. Absent colleagues from the Institut International de Philosophie (IIP), the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie (FISP), and other friends from as far afield as Brazil and India also sent their regards.

The 150-strong list of participants was comprised of research scholars active in the spheres of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Comparative Religion, Dialogue Among Civilisations and beyond. Many had enjoyed the privilege of Tu's direct supervision and guidance over a 50-year academic career; others were among the hundreds of East Asian students to have benefitted from Tu's time in charge of the Harvard-Yenching Institute

between 1996 and 2008 to further their studies abroad. As well as looking firmly to the future of Confucian humanism, this symposium was also about remembering and celebrating the past - in particular, one man's profound influence on countless students and colleagues.

How can local knowledge and experience attain universal significance? This is the question that, more than any other, has accompanied Tu Weiming on his lifelong intellectual journey. The Confucian emphasis on 'learning for the self' finds its embodiment here, in a man revered in equal measure for his warmth, charisma, dignity and conviction.

1985: Confucius Causes a Storm at Peking University

Prof. Chen Shaoming (Zhongshan University) and Peking University President Hao Ping both met Tu Weiming for the first time in 1985. Chen remembers the august event on Chinese traditional culture organised at the Party School in Beijing by Tang Yijie; a 92-year-old Liang Shuming topped the bill, while a 45-year-old Tu Weiming was the youngest of the invited panelists. Tu's willingness to handle all the questions from the floor - which were far from fawning to a 'Taiwanese-American' scholar of Confucianism at the Party School in Beijing in 1985 - left a deep impression on all those present, not least on Tang and Chen themselves. Hao, meanwhile, freshly graduated from the Peking University History Department, remembers poking his head into Tu's lecture on Confucian philosophy: 'The reaction to this lecture within Peking University was phenomenal.' It was the first time since Liang's famous appearance in 1923 that such a public lecture on Confucianism had been held on campus.

The Reading List on Zhuangzi

Chen next met Tu a decade later, at the 9th International Chinese Philosophy Conference in Boston in 1995; after the event, Tu invited the Mainland Chinese delegation back to the Harvard-Yenching Institute for a longer chat. Chen still remembers the warmth of Tu's praise for his contribution at the conference; the young doctoral student soon found himself under Tu's supervision as a Visiting Student: 'He wasn't put out at all that I had chosen to study Zhuangzi; on the contrary, he gave me a long list of the secondary texts he considered authoritative.' The experience of studying under Tu set Chen in excellent stead for his future career; as he frankly admitted, it was the broad vision he acquired under Tu's wing that emboldened him to tackle subjects as daunting as 'Zhuangzi and the Enlightenment' (Chen's symposium paper was fittingly titled 'Confucianism and Freedom').

Among scholars born after 1970, Prof. Chen Yun of East China Normal

University spoke on behalf of his colleagues Yang Guorong, Yu Zhenhua, Fang Xudong and others in stressing Tu Weiming's influence on their development. In Chen Yun's own case, it was contact with Tu's *Renxing yu Ziwo Xiuyang* (*Human Nature and Self-Cultivation*) and *Zhongyong: Lun Ruxue de Zongjiaoxing* (*Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*) which spurred him to publish his own *Zhongyong Sixiang* in 2007.

The First Students

Harold D. (Hal) Roth, Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University, was one of Tu Weiming's first batch of students at Princeton in 1968. Roth recalled his young Taiwanese lecturer's enthusiastic presentation of Wang Yangming in particular, but it was contact with the third chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, 'Essentials for Nurturing Life', which played a decisive role in Roth's intellectual development as a scholar of Daoism.

Professor Edmund S.T. Kwok, the Chief Academic Advisor to the Beijing Institute of Technology, Zhuhai (ZHBIT), was one of many Chinese students to study under Tu at UC Berkeley in the 1970s. After meeting Tu at a conference in Hawaii with fellow mentors Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan in 1972, Kwok went on to complete his doctoral thesis on Weimar-era German intellectual history under Tu's careful watch. In an emotional presentation, Kwok emphasised Tu's direct influence on his career as an educational innovator and reformer.

From Respectful Engagement to Polite Refusal

Ralph Weber, Assistant Professor of European Global Studies at the University of Basel, Switzerland, has devoted himself to the study of Tu's thought since his time as a doctoral student in the late nineties and early 2000s. Recounting nearly two decades of contact and exchange with Prof. Tu, Weber stressed his subject's rare willingness to field difficult and critical questions: 'His mixture of personal warmth and intellectual openness keeps you in a constant state of feeling like you need to raise your own game.'

In his Keynote Address at the Opening Ceremony, Prof. Guo Qiyong of Wuhan University showed copies of handwritten letters he had exchanged with Tu Weiming, including one from 2001 in which Tu had politely refused Guo's offer to organise a conference on Tu's thought in Wuhan: 'If I can produce some concrete results in the next eight to ten years, maybe I will have earned the honour of such a conference. But I feel like it's too early and undeserved at this point.'

‘Peerless Among His Peers in Encouraging Critical Reflection’

Cheng Chung-yi, Professor of Philosophy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and a Yenching Visiting Scholar at Harvard in 2002-2003, recalled his time with Tu in the United States as if it were yesterday. In his first semester, Tu gave the former student of Liu Shuxian three books to read - the *Bai Hu Tong*, the *Beixi Ziyi* and the *Mengzi Shuyi Shuzheng* - on the grounds that these three books together told an important story of the development of core concepts in Confucian thought. On his return to Hong Kong, Cheng decided to teach a course on these same three books. ‘In the second semester,’ Cheng recounted further, ‘we read the Guodian Chu slips together.’ Ding Sixin, now Professor of Philosophy at Tsinghua University, was one of several present at the Symposium to have been part of the same reading group. Owing to his expertise on the subject, Tu asked Ding to take the lead: ‘We all disagreed on everything.’

Cheng described his year under Tu’s roof in Boston (most of the discussions, indeed, were held at Tu’s house) as ‘one of the happiest of his life’; whenever advice was sought, discussions would end up lasting an hour or more. In attempting to summarise Tu’s legacy in one sentence, Cheng offered this: ‘Philosophical insight always has a certain dynamism about it.’

‘A Coming to Life’

Speaking at the symposium banquet on the evening of 19 October, Peking University President Hao Ping expressed his institution’s gratitude for Tu’s service, but also recalled his own time as an exchange student at the University of Hawai’i in 1991, where he had the chance to study with a great Confucian scholar who was on sabbatical from Harvard: ‘The breadth of Prof. Tu’s scholarly horizons, together with his personal charisma, brought the work of the university’s East-West Center to life for me.’ Summarising Prof. Tu’s involvement in academic discourse on the Chinese Mainland since the beginning of the Reform and Opening Up period, President Hao expressed his pride at having been involved in Tu’s renewal of the conversation around Cultural China: ‘After more than thirty years of concerted effort, we can now see that New Confucianism has a firm footing in contemporary Chinese academic discourse. Tu Weiming’s contributions in this area, starting in the 1980s, have been nothing short of visionary.’

The 2nd Spiritual Humanism Symposium also served as a reunion for many other Chinese scholars who had lived and worked at Harvard (and elsewhere abroad) under Tu’s direct or indirect guidance. Prof. Chen Yinchu, Head of the Chinese Department at Fudan University, was moved to see his former classmate Guo Yi (now a Professor at Seoul University) for the first time in two decades; William Guanglin Liu and Guo Wu, Professors of

History at Lingnan and Yunnan Universities respectively, also recounted their stints at Harvard with no shortage of emotion.

Youngchan Ro, Prof. of Religious Studies at George Mason University, went so far as to organise an academic forum at Georgetown University in June 2019 in honour of Tu's influence in American academic life. As Hal Roth expressed it, Prof. Tu's unique manner with his students left a deep impression on those who themselves pursued careers as educators.

It was in this profoundly personal way, Roth and others argued, that Confucianism was gradually able to increase its resonance on Tu Weiming's watch, both within China and beyond.

Respecting Heaven, Earth and Humanity: The 'Cosmic Person'

Tu's longstanding concern for the ecological dimension of human civilisation is reflected in Spiritual Humanism's emphasis on the four dimensions of Self, Community, Earth and Heaven. Mary Evelyn Tucker of Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies spoke movingly at the Closing Ceremony of Tu's influence beyond the confines of academic Sinology. His support for her own research and teaching had been, she said, 'beyond sagely'; nature may be physically external to individual human beings, but it has 'living value' for us. Tucker even suggested the label 'cosmic person' for the Confucian ideal which Tu had, in her view, succeeded in embodying.

Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business EMBA alumnus and Shanghai-based investment firm Chairman Shi Yongmin also thanked Prof. Tu for assuming leadership of the CKGSB's Humanities Program in 2012: 'Prof. Tu has constantly sought to pass on what he knows to entrepreneurs; his work on recovering the tradition of the "Confucian Entrepreneur" (*Rushang*) has left its mark on the Chinese business community.' The 7th Annual Discourse on Confucian Entrepreneurs, held under the auspices of the 2nd Spiritual Humanism Symposium on October 20, was a reminder of this important dimension of Tu's work in the past decade since his return to China.

The Way of Heaven: Dialogue Among Civilisations as a Solution to Human Problems

Heaven is the highest dimension in Spiritual Humanism; equally, the human conversation with Heaven requires a constant broadening of dialogue among *human* civilisations. The 2018 World Congress of Philosophy (WCP), held in Beijing for the first time under the aegis 'Learning To Be Human', was made possible by Tu Weiming's explicit efforts. Prof. Herta Nagl-Docekal of Vienna University, the Vice-President of the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie (FISP), praised the work of the

Chinese WCP Organising Committee and pinpointed Prof. Tu's own Wang Yangming Lecture ('Spiritual Humanism: Self, Community, Earth and Heaven') as the highlight of the congress as a whole. Hao Ping also thanked Tu for his help in making the 24th WCP the biggest of all time: 'Prof. Tu led our bid for the nomination, chose the title 'Learning To Be Human', and oversaw preparations from beginning to end.'

At the Opening Ceremony of the 2nd Spiritual Humanism Symposium, Prof. Yao Xinzhong of Renmin University described Prof. Tu's academic concerns as encompassing 'the entire history of human civilisation and human thought. His work is both firmly Confucian and brimming with a universality that harmonises with the best in other traditions.' Prof. Yang Guorong of East China Normal University went further still, suggesting that Tu had actively helped to rescue Chinese culture from both theoretical and practical oblivion; Spiritual Humanism, he said, was a framework which represented a 'self-confident' Confucianism capable of dialogue on equal terms with other civilisations.

'It's Extremely Hard to Face Up to One's Own Mortal Limitations'

After two days of intellectually and emotionally intense exchange among more than a hundred grateful and admiring experts, the last word at the symposium rightfully belonged to Prof. Tu himself: far from following Confucius's own stereotyped journey towards the asymptote of perfection and self-satisfaction ('at seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart'), Tu's own eighth decade, he confessed, had been fraught with the dawning twin realisations of dwindling powers and a quickening of time. Chen Yun's quotation of Rilke's tribute to Michelangelo at the Closing Ceremony left its mark on a group of younger scholars moved to tears afterwards; like the original Renaissance Man himself, Tu Weiming has endeavoured to take the burden of responsibility for a whole epoch upon himself.

