
AXIAL AGE, CHINA AND THE MEANING OF TRANSCENDENCE

轴心时代、中国与超越的意义

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ABSTRACT

The notion of an Axial Age shaped by Karl Jaspers after the World War II has been evaluated in various ways within the field of intellectual history, not only in the West but also in China: concretely can this concept be applied to Chinese tradition and if so, what does it mean in Chinese culture? Specialists on China in the West have different answers to these questions.

Following the translation of Jaspers' book into Chinese, several Chinese scholars have integrated this concept of an Axial Age in their reflections about Chinese Antiquity.

This concept of an Axial Age matters because this concept affirms humanity's universal openness to transcendence. However, because this notion was argued in a Western context, it always possesses the risk of projecting foreign constructions on Chinese tradition. From a Chinese perspective, it has to be reconstructed taking into consideration the specificities of Chinese tradition and the ways Chinese scholars speak about it, if it is to suggest a universal claim.

When Karl Jaspers published his book, *The Origin and Goal of History*, in 1949, and formulated his concept of the Axial Age, he may have been far from imagining the future this notion would have, as it became matter for heated discussions in the West during the sixties. Forty years later when a translation of his book was published in Chinese (雅斯贝斯 Jaspers, 1989), something similar happened.

But, what is an “Axial Age”? Why does Jasper’s Axial Age matter in China? It matters because this concept affirms humanity’s universal openness to transcendence. However, because this notion was developed in a Western context, it always carries the risk of projecting foreign constructions on Chinese tradition. Minimising this risk involves taking into consideration Chinese perspectives on the Axial Age and universal claims about it.

At the beginning of *The Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers states: “It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. [...] Man, as we know him today, came into being” (Jaspers, 1965, p. 1). Jaspers defines this historical stage as achieving an ability for humanity to step out from the mythical age, and thus to enter into the age of transcendence. Humanity became specifically human, which for Jaspers means the emergence of an ability to *reflect* upon experience. It involved an *ethical turn* in religion:

This overall modification of humanity may be termed *spiritualisation*. [...] Rationality and rationally clarified experience launched a struggle against the myth (*logos* against *mythos*); a further struggle developed for the transcendence of the One God against non-existent demons, and finally an ethical rebellion took place against the unreal figures of the gods. Religion was rendered ethical, and the majesty of the deity thereby increased. [...] For the first time, philosophers

appeared. (Jaspers, 1965, p. 3)

To give a firm base to his argumentation, Jaspers provides examples coming from Greek, Jewish, Indian and Chinese backgrounds.

In the West, especially in the field of religious studies, this notion of an Axial Age is often used when researchers try to build up a global or comparative narrative of religious history. Robert Bellah’s is a good example of this kind of reformulation:

In the first millennium BCE, theoretic culture emerges in several places in the old world, questioning the old narratives as it reorganizes them and their mimetic bases, rejecting ritual and myth as it creates new rituals and myths, and calling all the old hierarchies into question in the name of ethical and spiritual universalism. (Bellah, 2011, p. xix)

THE AXIAL AGE IN CHINA

In *The Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers does not provide an analysis of each cultural area included in his systematisation. In the case of China, he specifies the Axial Age like this: “Confucius and Lao-tse were living in China, all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being, including those of Mo-ti, Chuang-tse, Lieh-tsu and a host of others” (Jaspers, 1965, p. 2).

In China the small States and cities had achieved sovereign life under the powerless imperial rulers of the Chou dynasty; the political process consisted of the enlargement of small units through the subjection of other small units. (Jaspers, 1965, p. 4)

Hence, philosophy and new political organization are key-points. A third feature, a new way to consider knowledge of “nature”, completes this picture.

Nevertheless, within Jaspers’ work, beyond these two remarks, there is no specific

analysis of China. Though Jaspers mentions such examples as Confucius and Laozi, most of the time, his reference is to “China and India” as examples of a global dynamics.

The account is much more developed in Bellah’s or Roetz’s works. When Bellah describes the Axial Age in China, he insists on the continuity of the writing system and the cultural symbols between pre-axial culture (Shang and Zhou dynasties) and the Axial Age (Spring and Autumn period). Confucius, referring to the idealised past of the Zhou, emphasised the critical distance separating it from the political disintegration of the *Spring and Autumn* period. With the collapse of the traditional ritual system, he hoped to bring

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order and soften struggles for power between lineages (Bellah, 2011: p. 405). Confucius called for a renovation, namely, to go back to the “spirit” of rituals: “To *turn away* from the world, to *turn inward into the self*, and finally to *return* (*fu li*) to society or break with it for ever — this is the pattern of response of Chinese thinkers to the crisis of ethical life.” (Roetz, 1993: p. 267).

Within this pattern, the meaning of being a scholar/official (*Shi* 士) and a nobleman (*Junzi* 君子) changed: nobility was redefined according to ethics, and not familial kinships regulated by rituals (Bellah, 2011, p. 408). Of course, Confucius himself was a *Shi* and a *Junzi*, but he was also a master concerned with the intellectual and spiritual training of his students for political

responsibility. The challenge for Confucius was to make his disciples adopt an attitude of humaneness (*Ren* 仁) for both personal and social ethics.

The new balance introduced by Confucius between humaneness and rituals yielded a universal call to a new ethical life, something deeply religious according to Bellah: “There is one unmistakably religious term that does not appear often in the *Analects*, but that is nonetheless present at certain key moments, and that is *Tian*, Heaven.” (Bellah, 2011, p. 419).

For Bellah, as well as for Roetz, Confucianism thus bears a universal meaning: “The *Analects* does contain an ethics based in part on universal values. [...] What I mean by ‘universal’ is an aspiration toward universality. Confucian ethics are intended to be human ethics, not Chinese ethics” (Bellah, 2011, p. 421). “Ideas of human dignity, equality, and autonomy were developed in China no less than in the Occident” (Roetz, 1993, p. 4). Therefore, according to Roetz, the distinction between Confucianism and western resources does not lie in “having” or “not having” these values, but in the way they are implemented:

Confucianism disposes of the ideas of equality, autonomy, social responsibility, and reciprocal respect. It moreover knows the utopia of a “Great Community” where such ideas might become reality. Yet, this potential is hardly employed to bring about structural change, but primarily to make the *given* world more human and prevent the necessary fulfilment of customary duties from its degeneration into opportunism and corruption. (Roetz, 1993, p. 279)

Bellah and Roetz thus use the notion of an Axial Age to describe changes in Chinese philosophical tradition, especially in Confucianism. A new ethical vision, critical and reflective, emerged. According to Bellah, in the whole of humanity, as well as in China, this vision is deeply religious. (Bellah, 2011, p. 476) Roetz insists more on the philosophical dimension

of the breakthrough. Both reject Max Weber's presentation of Chinese tradition as only a "this-worldly transcendentalism" where "salvation" is only political without a transcendental dimension (Bellah 2011, p. 476; Roetz, 1993, p. 1).

Their research also shows that more than sixty years after the publication of Jaspers' book, the concept of an Axial Age has withstood criticism. It should, however, be kept in mind that their reflections are related to a specific academic community concerned with the universality of

the "transcendental pretense". (Ames and Hall, 1995, p.xv).

This criticism cannot be ignored while reflecting on the Axial Age in China. It is a reminder that assuming that Chinese culture has a concept of transcendence--or, for that matter, does not have such a concept--just like any assumption a foreigner makes about another culture, must be understood differently, depending on the critic's perspective.

Jaspers' notion—which was developed in the aftermath of WW II in Germany, as a reconstruction of Western traditions emerging from ancient Jewish and Greek cultures—matters because it provokes critical reflection focused on what it means to become fully human, a question to which no single culture can offer a definitive answer.

its values. Conceptual constructions achieved by Westerners about other cultures, always bear the risk of imposing a foreign framework on Chinese tradition. This risk explains why authors like Roger Ames and David Hall reject the utilisation of concepts like the Axial Age to describe Chinese tradition: "If comparative philosophy has anything to say about Chinese culture during the so-called Axial Age, it is certainly this: notions of "absoluteness", "transcendence", and "subjectivity", were of doubtful significance" (Ames and Hall, 1995, p.xiii). For Ames and Hall, the Western and Chinese traditions were shaped by different concepts, problematics, and classics, therefore these differences make the task of crossing (translating meaning) from one to another extremely challenging. According to Ames and Hall, the persistence in Western cultures of a transcendental pretense remains one of the obstacles to comparative studies:

These distortions arise from a failure to give adequate notice to the contrasting assumptions that shape the cultural milieu of China and the West. This failing is itself encouraged by the universalist impulse associated with Western rationality and

RECEPTION OF THE "AXIAL AGE" BY CHINESE SCHOLARS

Interestingly, in China, too, the notion has also been heavily commented on. Yu Yingshi and Chen Lai are examples of its reception in China. At the end of the 80s, Yu Yingshi was already exploring the "philosophical breakthrough" of Chinese thought. However, a complete evaluation of the notion of an Axial Age, integrating Bellah's and Roetz's reformulations, comes only in a later book (余英时, Yu, 2014). Yu Yingshi accepts the idea that Confucius, Laozi, and the other ancient schools of thought do constitute a Chinese Axial Age. This is a consensus view regarding Chinese History: "The Chinese Axial Age is generally understood as Confucius, Laozi and the miscellaneous schools put together; the fact Ancient China had already experienced an Axial Age breakthrough, is already something shared by all interlocutors"¹ (Yu, 2014: 16). Yu's work has the advantage of introducing a comparative framework between the West and China, that allows us to grasp the specifics of Chinese culture.

1 Here is the original quotation in Chinese: "中国轴心时代主要被理解为孔、老以下诸子学之与起; 古代中国曾经历了一场轴心突破, 已成为绝大多数论者的共识"

Though a philosopher, and not a historian like Yu Yingshi, Chen Lai also accepts the concept of an Axial Age to describe Chinese tradition, as both an experience of human limits and transcendence (陈来, Chen, 1996: p. 3). Like Yu Yingshi, Chen Lai uses this notion to contrast Confucianism with more ancient Chinese traditions.

Yu Yingshi's book investigates the specificity of the Axial Age in China through the evolution of the concept of "Heaven and man are one" (*tianrenheyi*, "天人合一"). A progressive Chinese enlightenment happened during the first millennium BCE through the evolution of

a spirit of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身): the union of Heaven and Humanity realised through the human being's heart-mind (*xin* 心) (Yu, 2014: 31). This is a continuum because all the Confucian elements of self-cultivation were already present in original shamanism. For example, shamans were practicing regulated diet or other exercises of cleansing the heart-mind as a form of sacrifice of the heart for the gods and ancestors (*xinzhai* 心斋). This background explains why self-cultivation could not but become central in Confucianism as expressed through the *Analects*.

According to Chen Lai, the core of the Axial Age experience—with an emphasis on

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the tradition of etiquette and rituals. Before the Xia dynasty (*xia* 夏) and during the Xia, it was originally a Shamanic religion (*wuxiwenhua* 巫溪文化), which then evolved into a natural and ritualistic religion (*jisiwenhua* 祭祀文化) where sacrifices were made to divinities and ancestors. Finally in the Zhou Dynasty, it became an ethical religion focused on regulation through etiquette and music (*liyuewenhua* 礼乐文化) (Yu, 2014, p.22). During the Western Zhou, religion achieved a process of becoming ethical, with the rejection of "traditional beliefs in spirits". For Chen Lai, Confucianism experienced a long process of internalisation and rationalisation of ethics, a process that was initially driven by practical reason (Chen, 1996, p. 14).

An analysis of the evolution of the meaning of Heaven (*tian* 天), heavenly decree (*tianming* 天命), and humanity (*ren* 人) displays how the shamanic atmosphere was transformed to become philosophical. For example, *Tian* is not loaded with a godly meaning, but is a form of moral imperative. The mediation between Heaven and Humanity was changed from an attitude of service to the spirits (*shishen* 事神) through the shaman's figure (*wu* 巫), toward

filial piety, kinship among relatives, cherishing the people and insistence on virtue (Chen, 1996: 7)—indicates a Chinese perspective that puts focus on the people's needs and not on external transcendence. Virtue was always conceived as the most needed quality to assume political responsibilities. Both Yu Yingshi and Chen Lai explain that the transformation of shamanism, and the rationalisation process, were two features of the construction of a "highly advanced religion", a purely ethical religion.

Nevertheless, Yu Yingshi also insists on the inner transcendence (*neixiangchaoyue* "内向超越") displayed by Confucianism. As he argues, this is the main point of divergence with western traditions:

The most famous writing on spiritual exercises in the West is the work of the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola, the "Spiritual Exercises". We have already tried to compare this book with Zen Buddhist and Neo-Confucian records, and we can observe how inner transcendence and external transcendence are different. All the vocabulary regarding "Dao" (

道), “pattern” (*li* 理) is put on God, Jesus, Saints, all are external people, in the heart-mind (of the subject) there is only concupiscence and sin, this is obviously a total contrast.² (Yu, 2003, p. 618).

Yu Yingshi’s argument seeks to highlight the specificity of Confucianism and its universal value (as evident in his repetition of the expression “I believe”, *woxiangxin* “我相信”). He understands the history of Christianity – like the scholars mentioned above – though they are critical of it. For example, regarding the case of “inner transcendence” and XVIth century Christian spirituality, he misses the fact that for Ignatius of Loyola, as well as for Martin Luther, Thomas More or Teresa of Avila, the purpose of exercises in spiritual life was to let what they called “Christ” to be born again in their inner being, a process that is not without resonances with “becoming a Sage” in Confucianism.

Why does the Axial Age in China matter? People belonging to different academic communities will have different answers because the problems they try to answer, the reasoning they use, and what they expect to find in the “other culture” has been shaped by different traditions. But Jaspers’ notion—which was developed in the aftermath of WW II in Germany, as a reconstruction of Western traditions emerging from ancient Jewish and Greek cultures—matters because it provokes critical reflection focused on what it means to become fully human, a question to which no single culture can offer a definitive answer:

The question as to whether or not Chinese philosophy holds a universalist potential is of importance not only for China, but also for ourselves. It cannot be all the same to us whether humaneness and human dignity are nothing but the prejudice of a specific civilization, and have only relative validity in consequence, or whether

they are based on interculturally shared convictions. (Roetz, 1993, p. 6)

Roetz invites us to reconsider the meaning of transcendence and to reconstruct its meaning, as an ability to stand back and to “look beyond”:

It should be taken into consideration whether transcendence should not, first of all, be understood in *formal* terms so that different, but functionally equivalent ways of detaching oneself from the world, fall within its range. Specifically, religious transcendence seems neither to be a necessary condition for an objectifying and detached attitude towards the world; nor does it necessarily imply such an attitude. (Roetz, 1993, p. 22)

In other words, the notion of the Axial Age does not consist in attributing to Western or any other culture a cultural superiority, but on the contrary in recognising in different cultures a transcendence by which they criticise themselves and discover access to universality. It opens a space of dialogue, as no culture can offer a definitive answer to such questions of the meaning of transcendence. In order to establish a healthy dialogue between perspectives belonging to different traditions, the specificity of each culture and historical period needs to be respected. It is a matter of finding the appropriate distance (*jian* 间) that will foster mutual learning and not essentialise cultural identities. The purpose of comparative studies is not to create an abstract meta-system above cultures and time, but to activate cultural resources through dialogue in order to answer contemporary questions.

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² Here is the original quotation in Chinese: “西方最著名的讲修养的著作是耶稣会创始人罗耀拉(Saint Ignatius of Loyola)的《精神修养》(The Spiritual Exercises)。我们试将此书和禅宗及理学家语录加以比较, 即可见内向超越和外向超越是如何不同。一切的“道”、“理”都在上帝、耶稣、圣徒那边, 都是外在于人的, 而人心之内则充满了情欲和罪恶。这是多么强烈的对照。”

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