

Making Sense of the Oriental Mindframe

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Theme: [Culture](#)

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“Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don’t resist them – that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.” – Lao Tzu

“Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.” – Buddha

“Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance.” – Confucius

“Nothing hurts a good soul and a kind heart more than to live amongst people who cannot understand it.” – Hazrat Ali Ibn Abu-Talib

“Can we truly understand the oriental mind?” could be a rhetorical question asked by someone who doesn’t really expect an answer. It could even be a derisive query from someone who thinks that the “oriental mind” is a myth and thus understanding such a “mind” is a non-issue at all. In fact, in the present post-modern era called the Age of Information or the Third-Wave Civilization, the sweeping cultural influence of western science and technology has reached global proportions eclipsing what still remains in non-western cultural vestiges. What then is the sense in problematizing the “oriental mind”? Besides, a closer look at the matter brings us to the concept of the “orient” which geographically points to continental Asia that horizontally runs from the eastern and southeastern frontiers of Europe to the Pacific Ocean. To think of a monolithic type of people called “oriental” is highly inaccurate as we consider the multi-racial Asian stocks from the Arabic, the Caucasian, and the Indic to the Mongolian and the Malayo-Polynesian among others.

Or perhaps there has been a distillation of certain dominant intellectual and emotional characters in these tremendously multi-variegated Asian racial stocks that have evolved through time. In this connection, the superficial aspect of physico-racial differences doesn’t seriously count at all. It might even be of the essence to explore the issue of the “oriental mind” against the backdrop of the prominent Asian wisdom traditions that dominated past mainstream civilizations in this part of the globe and have in the process been generally absorbed actively or latently within the collective consciousness of the typical Asian whether s/he is Arabic, Hindu, Caucasian, Mongol or Malay. With the typical Asian in mind, we are treading on the idealism of Platonic variety — an amalgam of different virtuous qualities that constitute a philosophical Asian. Let’s call this the “Asian mind”.

But how do we understand the Asian mind? What do we mean by the word “understand” in the present context? In the western philosophical context which is basically discursive,

critical, and analytic, to understand is for someone to capture in unambiguous and precise terms what is being said by another. In this sense, the issue of understanding is purely on the discursive level. Meaningfulness is gauged in an exclusively linguistic focal point. One speaks, the other listens; one explains, the other clarifies and ascertains; one expresses her/his thoughts, the other understands. And now we rehearse the original question at hand: Can we truly understand the oriental mind? Taking the question in the western context is very limited for its fundamental concern is simply focused on utterances. In other words, the key issue here lies in what is said and one's understanding of it is wholly hermeneutical, i.e., a matter of correct interpretation which largely depends on one's mastery of a common language-game whereof both the speaker and the addressee are "natives". This is the point where west is west and east is east, so to speak.

Western understanding is linguistic while eastern understanding goes beyond the sphere of the spoken words. The "occidental mind" understands manifest statements while the oriental mind doesn't stop at what is spoken but tries to "get into" the realm of the other person who speaks. Understanding in the oriental sense is an act of probing into the other's inner person with deep concern on where the latter is coming from as s/he utters what comes out of her/his mind. The major concern of oriental understanding is therefore the unpronounced, i.e., internal, motivation of the other person in her/his utterance. If this is how we understand the meaning of "understand" in the question, "Can we truly understand the oriental mind?", surely we can indeed understand the oriental mind.

The oriental mind's presupposition is: We speak from experience. What therefore matters more is not solely what is spoken of (though of course, it has also its own degree of importance) but the experience — shallow or deep — that leads to the utterance. In this sense, the oriental mind is not quick to criticize and judge on the basis of what is said. What has been said could sound very offensive on the basis of a superficial evaluation but normally, the oriental mind doesn't get offended. The oriental mind is an exploring mind for it traces the depth of experience from which an offensive utterance emanated. This condition further describes the oriental mind as non-confrontational. The oriental mind is not offended and at the same time never offensive. It is not because s/he is scared to get into trouble; s/he simply believes that offenses and troublesome events don't solve problems but add more troubles and hence, more inconveniences, difficulties, and distress. The oriental mind doesn't put too much magnitude on words that have been said but on the experience — past or present — from which the person is coming while expressing her/his point.

The oriental mind is not only peaceable but tranquil amidst conflict and dissent. Discourse may lead to a linguistic understanding of what is being said but the oriental mind is more used to being reflective on serious issues with all the pros and cons considered. It doesn't however mean that s/he doesn't get discursive. Discourse is something normal in the human condition but the oriental mind puts more importance on reflection, even on meditation to refresh the mental capacity and get to much better and more enlightening insights. The oriental mind is therefore not only reflective but meditative. In the process, s/he doesn't only capture the "atomic" elements of a particular experience but also the total scenario where these elements are located as well as the past experiences — distant or recent- to which such particular experience is connected and hence a part of a much larger circumstance. In this way, reflection and meditation make the oriental mind holistic. S/he doesn't only see particular trees in a forest but likewise the entire landscape where the whole forest is located.

In this situation, the oriental mind is more synthetic than analytic. Of course, the whole is

made up of parts but what is the use of the parts if they are not put together to constitute the functional reality of an implement that serves life? This very thought makes the oriental mind pragmatic. What matters is not all discourse but action that enhances life. Inaction in a reflective/meditative state is not an end in itself but a significant path to meaningful action. True to the mystical character of the pragmatic oriental mind is the notion that “he who speaks doesn’t know and he who knows doesn’t speak.” With this in mind, the silent moment comes and it’s time for me to quit talking.

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