DOI 10.3868/s110-003-014-0034-x

The Great Civilized Conversation: Education for a World Community. De Bary, Wm. Theodore New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. 416pp. ISBN 978-0-231-16276-0

Together with Jacques Barzun, Lionel Trilling, and Mark Van Doren, William Theodore de Bary stands as one of the four faces of liberal learning at Columbia University. When the university was under siege by students protesting its entanglements with the Pentagon and its real estate holdings, de Bary became the voice of reason (and Confucian equipoise) by creating a university senate that gave students an opportunity for a “civilized conversation” with university authorities. He later served as provost and is currently John Mitchell Mason Professor Emeritus. His principal scholarly focus is Neo-Confucianism and late-Ming thought, and he made Columbia a major center for the study of Asian culture. Of his many studies of Chinese thought, *The Liberal Tradition in China* (1983) and *East Asian Civilizations: A Dialogue in Five Stages* (1987) are his crowning achievements.

The *Great Civilized Conversation* is a collection of 19 essays (six were published previously) featuring an exploration of the core curriculum and the meaning of the “classics,” an extended treatment of Confucian “liberal learning,” and a set of tributes to four paragons of liberal learning. The title would seem to have several layers of meaning. It commemorates the pre-WWI “Great Books” seminar conducted by John Erskine which staged a dialogue among the Western classics themselves and engaged de Bary and his fellow students in lively discussion. De Bary also has in mind another dialogue between East Asian cultures, with Korea and Japan as the Rome to China’s Greece. At a deeper level, we can imagine this “Columbia Confucius” in conversation with the classics, showing us how to understand them as guides for living, or as the Neo-Confucians did for restoring a lost culture.

De Bary makes Zhu Xi (1130–1200) the centerpiece of his examination of Neo-Confucianism, and it no hyperbole to picture Zhu as standing at the pivot of Chinese civilization. He is the major interpreter of the Confucian tradition in the last eight centuries, and his ideas have been appropriated in Ming-Qing China, Tokugawa Japan, and Yi Dynasty Korea (the subject of one of de Bary’s essays).

His view became the commanding ideology across the premodern East Asian world.

Into a shapeless society suspended between nihilism and despotism, Zhu restored order and resurrected the ancient educational system of a sequential system of schools from the village, community, and district to the capital. In higher learning, he inspired the flowering of the “academy” or *shuyuan* 书院 system in which *jiangxue* 讲学 or “discursive learning” flourished between students and master. The *shuyuan* model signified independence from state control by means of the civil-service examination system, which Zhu Xi considered vapid and impractical.

De Bary is particularly drawn to Zhu’s credo of “learning for the sake of oneself” (*wei ji zhi xue* 为己之学) as opposed to “learning for the sake of others.” In what de Bary’s calls his philosophy of “personalism,” Zhu makes the self (*zi* 自) the source of value and locus for “finding the Way.” This entails eschewing selfishness (*zeji* 自己) and following the “Principle of Nature” (*tianli* 天理). This philosophy posits a corporeal as opposed to a transcendental self (as in Chan Buddhism) that engages in a centrifugal dynamic of self-renewal that extends outward to “renewing the people” (*xinmin* 新民), a theme that will reappear in the early Republican period with Liang Qichao, who invests it with two meanings: to improve what is original in the people and to adopt from other cultures what is lacking in his own and make a new people. The consistency or inconsistency with Zhu’s notion is not remarked on by de Bary, paralleling his silence about its origins in the Warring States’ period.

De Bary (given his characteristic interest in conversations across cultures) might well have remarked on the pronounced differences between this Neo-Confucian conception of self and the Western Enlightenment notion of an isolated individuality. Against the idea of an autonomous entity in conflict with society, the Confucian self is the center for a web of relationships and is an inextricable part of a human network of interaction. This is why Ezra Pound called it a “unwabbling pivot” (*zhongyong* 中庸), a personal center that broadens our knowledge in a social milieu or confluence of the life stream.

With Zhu Xi, Confucian learning completes a synthesis of body, mind, and spirit, culminating in the figure of the *junzi* 君子), the “knight of the Way” who can reshape the world through his self-development, or in ancient thought, *nei sheng wai wang* 内圣外王, “inner sageliness and outer kingliness.” In Wang

Yangming (the subject of an extended portrait by de Bary), it is formulated as the “unity of knowing and acting” (*zhi xing heyi* 知行合一), itself a recapitulation of Zhu Xi’s idea of the investigation of things” (*gewu* 格物). The goal of learning is to achieve an integrated personality, a heightened social conscience, a disciplined moral commitment, and a strengthened spirituality, recalling similar refrains in Plato, St. Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Marcel, and Heidegger.

Neo-Confucian humanism is at equal variance with the Western Enlightenment utilitarian strain of maximizing happiness and judging the worth of knowledge for its consequences. Unlike Zhu Xi’s conception of learning as a spiritual quest as well as an intellectual pursuit, radical Enlighteners stress the centrality of physical pleasure. Sensualism, says Charles Taylor (*Sources of the Self*), is what “made the Enlightenment radical. Confucianism does not perceive desire in itself to be bad; only when it is selfish does it distort learning and corrupt the mind. Extirpating selfish desires restores a brightness to the mind so it can comprehend the principle (*li* 理), the highest ideal of a thing, or the Supreme Ultimate (*taiji* 太极) (the quintessence of the universe), which unites the *li* of Heaven, earth, and the myriad things. Like a pearl in a turbid water, the *taiji* is within us, and all we have to do is make the pearl visible by jettisoning selfish desires.

Zhu Xi believes that anyone can realize this state of enlightenment and become a sage, because “enlightening virtue” is part of human nature and learning enables us to manifest this virtue in our daily affairs. The pivotal step is “cultivation of the personal life” (*xiushen* 修身), which is the root of moral behavior. The self, however, is part of an ever-widening network of interconnections and learns from the external world. Through the investigation of things, we experience a reciprocal form of knowledge, what Mencius called a mutual nourishment between the internal and external.

A similar coupling of intellectual (or rational) and moral cultivation impelled the founding of the University of Berlin (1810) as it attempted to harmonize *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung*. Inevitably, the “science of knowing” (as Fichte rendered the term) displaced the humanistic spirit in a modern university devoted to instrumental rationality and utilitarian imperatives. The incorporation of the Confucian goal of self-cultivation into the kind of cosmopolitan general education de Bary has in mind would serve as a valuable corrective to these obsessions and constitute a natural complement to the lost chords of Western humanism.

De Bary's subtitle is the subject of his lead essay composed almost 50 years ago in which he equates "an education for a world view" with a liberal education, although he misleadingly conflates this with "general education" or a core curriculum. The essay does not bear the weight of time well. Aside from proposing a program of study requiring all American undergraduates to take an introduction to Asian civilizations including study of a language, we are given very few specifics about how he would incorporate the study of the Chinese classics into a liberal education. For a distinctly transcultural liberal education curriculum, de Bary might have looked at an intriguing experiment initiated in 2008 at Boya (博雅) College in Sun Yatsen University in Guangzhou by Gan Yang. Students in their first two years (acceptance is highly competitive) take four courses in Chinese classics (*Shi Jing*, *Zuo Zhuan*, *Si Shu*, and *Shi Ji*), four Western classics (Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides, Plato, and Dante), two classical languages (Latin and Greek), as well as courses on Hebrew civilization, Western and Chinese painting, and classical musicology. The use of the discussion method of instruction at Boya seems to be an intentional reenactment of small group interaction at St. John's College (Annapolis, Maryland and Santa Fe, New Mexico), the home of the Great Books, *sans* Chinese classics. Currently the arrangement that fulfills de Bary's search for a "common humanity" in a multicultural core curriculum is available only in China.

The term "liberal" surfaces at many occasions throughout the essays, less captivatingly in the first section on the Columbia cavalcade of liberal education and more engagingly in de Bary's exegesis of Neo-Confucian educational thought. In the former, it is used in the sense of liberating a person for a better life by eliminating enslavement to base desire, gaining power over oneself, and in a Confucian context, transforming the world. In the latter, it is synonymous with Zhu Xi's "voluntarism" and his anthem of "learning for the sake of one's self" with its five-step methodology of "study, inquiry, pondering, sifting, and practicing" to inculcate self-motivation and self-responsibility. "Liberalism" is also expressed by the principle "broad inquiry" in the *shuyuan*'s "core curriculum" of rites and music, government, astronomy, geography, military strategy, and law.

De Bary is at his finest when articulating the essential features of Neo-Confucianism and weaving together the major strains in the complex ideas of the Cheng brothers, Zhu, and Wang Yangming. He refrains, however, from

offering dialogical illuminations about nascent strands of liberal learning in Song China and instances of it later in Western humanism, or considering how the so-called voluntaristic learning tradition interfaces with the ideas of Hu Shi in the first part of the twentieth century, or how it might be displayed in “education for a world view.”

De Bary’s concluding essay shows him at the height of his dialogic powers. As part of his tribute to Thomas Merton, perhaps the “worldliest monk” in the history of the Trappists, and a fellow sojourner at Columbia in the 1930s, he explores Merton’s spiritual interests in Daoism and Buddhism, and his comparative neglect of Confucianism, save for a section in *Mysticism and Zen Masters* in which he acknowledges the contributions of the Jesuits in sixteenth-century China. Merton is drawn to the remarkable Matteo Ricci (as Jonathan Spence will be later to his “memory palace”). Ricci’s dedication to mastering Chinese (vernacular and classical) led Ming scholar-officials to accept him as one of their own and his respect for the profundity of Chinese learning stands in contrast with Merton’s depiction of Confucians as “pedants, rigid and heartless conformists, or unprincipled crooks.”

In a tale of the road not taken, De Bary’s path diverges from Merton’s fascination with Eastern mysticism, listening for the sound of one hand clapping. De Bary listened instead for the sound of two hands clapping or clasping in support of humanistic learning and humane governance of the university “combining as best I could spiritual cultivation with public service.” A scholar that Zhu Xi, and Ricci, would have had a “great civilized conversation” with.

Richard A. Hartnett
West Virginia University (ret.)
E-mail: rhartnett42@yahoo.com