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## Humanism and Despotism Jaspers and Hegel on Chinese History and Religion

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the work of Hegel and Jaspers on Chinese religion and history, in order to more fully understand their respective philosophies of history. For Hegel, the historical development of Asian culture is actually *pre-historical* in that there is no progress to freedom, but only "the repetition of the same majestic ruin." Hegel understands China as "the realm of theocratic despotism" grounded in the religion of heaven and centered on the state religion of the Chinese Empire. Thus Chinese thought is the best exemplification of Hegel's famous claim, "the East knows that one is free; the Greeks know that some are free; the Germans know that all are free." Jaspers has a very different understanding of historical development and the nature of Chinese thought. While Hegel understands China as the absolute beginning of the movement of spirit from East to West, Jaspers sees China as one of the revolutionary origins of history in the *Achsenzeit*. Jaspers claims to have turned to Chinese Confucianism at the very moment that National Socialism was ravaging Europe, "sensing there a common source of humanity against the barbarism of my own environment." Jaspers embraces Confucian humanism as a source of existential meaning and relational communication.

### China and Historical Inevitability

"Whither China?" has been an important question in the West at least as far back as the Cold War. Much of the debate about the direction of China has been economic, and is closely tied to the political structure of the People's Republic and its openness to Western-style reforms. One of the central questions in this debate has been the relationship between economic liberalization and the adoption of capitalism, and it has been something of a mantra that economic liberalization leads inevitably to political liberalization. To wit, where markets are open, hearts and minds will be as well. With the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union,

the reunification of Germany, and the "new rise" of China as an economic power in the Asia-Pacific region this assumption has undergone a new scrutiny. In some quarters, the linear trajectory from free markets to free states has taken on a near messianic gloss; witness Fukuyama's Hegelian-Marxist manifesto on the world-historical triumph of democratic capitalism as the putative end of history (though to be fair, Fukuyama himself has backed away from much of this rhetoric).<sup>1</sup> Global economic entities such as the World Bank, and

<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: The Free Press, 1992.

regional trade agreements such as NAFTA, all operate politically on the firmly held belief that free markets can and should range freely across borders, and with increased prosperity comes increased freedom.

Depending on whom you believe, contemporary China is either busy proving this dictum right, or putting the final nail in its optimistic coffin. In China, the economic reforms proposed by Chou Enlai and implemented by Deng Xiaoping, begun in the 1970s and aimed at establishing China as a global power by the early twenty-first century, have often been understood in the West as a necessary facet of the inevitable liberalization of China's government. Encapsulated in his "Four Modernizations" of agriculture, industry, technology, and defense, Deng's reforms have indeed led China into an unprecedented era of economic and political power, but largely without the expected overt shift toward political liberalization or even democracy.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the debate about the role of an increasingly open China was raised in the West even before the reforms of Chao and Deng. In the 1970s, Robert Scalapino's thought represented a leading edge of Cold War thinking about the future of China democracy: "barring some internal catastrophe, China will play an increasingly large role in the international relations of the Asian-Pacific region. Any return to isolation appears improbable." Given this, Scalapino continues, "If we can assume that China is destined to become an increasingly important force in international politics ... and further that the contest between 'extremists' and 'moderates' within China is likely to be recurrent, the American interest clearly lies in seeing the latter group prevail." Why? Scalapino puts the problem in terms that still define the ongoing question of China's economic and political role in the new century: "To these ends, it is essential that China's involvement in the international order be continued, since that

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough discussion see the relevant sections in Andrew J. Nathan, *China's Crisis: Dilemmas of Reform and Prospects for Democracy*, New York: Columbia University, 1990; Tan Qingshan, *The Making of U.S. China Policy: From Normalization to the Post-Cold War Era*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992; Richard Evans, *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China*, New York: Penguin Books, 1997.

encourages, *indeed makes inevitable*, the complexities of policy that challenge extremism."<sup>3</sup>

However, in the subsequent decades China has been able to shift important sectors of its economy to a capitalist mode without the assumed advances in political freedoms. What has been called the development of autocratic capitalism in China is sometimes put forward to challenge the inevitability of liberalization. This discussion has taken the form, for example, of an ongoing and much publicized debate within the pages of the journal *Foreign Affairs*, and the back and forth has assumed a very definite Hegelian tenor (due in part to Fukuyama's idiosyncratic reintroduction of Hegelian categories into contemporary political discourse). But it is also a tribute to the ongoing fecundity of Hegelian philosophy of history. What has brought Hegel into this conversation is his supposed belief in the idea of historical inevitability, though with decidedly mixed results. On the one hand, the claim that there is an inevitable trend towards liberal democracy in authoritarian regimes "is actually quite weak and may even be getting weaker.... Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in China and Russia."<sup>4</sup> Gat notes that "China and Russia represent a return of economically successful authoritarian capitalist powers, which have been absent since the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945, but they are much larger than the latter two countries ever were."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand is the idea that history does indeed march in one direction, and that is towards political and economic liberalism. "The foreign policy of the liberal states should continue to be based on the broad assumption that there is ultimately one path to modernity—and that it is essentially liberal in character," insist Deudney and Ikenberry. "Liberal states should not assume that history has ended, but they can still be certain that it

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<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Scalapino "China and the Balance of Power," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1974, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 349-385.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs, "Development and Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2005, Vol. 84, No. 5, pp. 77-86.

<sup>5</sup> Azar Gat, "The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007, Vol. 86, No. 4, p. 59.

is on their side.<sup>6</sup> Finally, focusing specifically upon China, Inglehart and Welzel write that

although many observers have been alarmed by the economic resurgence of China, this growth has positive implications for the long term. Beneath China's seemingly monolithic political structure, the social infrastructure of democratization is emerging.... Although economic development requires difficult adjustments, its long term effects encourage the emergence of ... more democratic societies.<sup>7</sup>

There is no clear consensus on the direction China is moving, though at least one thing is clear—the assumption that liberal democracy must surely follow market liberalization no longer has the unchallenged status it might once have had.

These debates are much more complicated than I have described in my brief outline, of course. I bring them up to illustrate the way in which considerations of the philosophy of history have made their way into contemporary discussions about China, often with an overtly Hegelian cast. Though my own reading of Hegel is decidedly against the "end of history" view, it is surely appropriate for Hegel to figure in these debates, for he offers a profoundly teleological and linear (if not inevitable) view of history. Moreover, China figures importantly in Hegel's schema for both a philosophy of history and a philosophy of religion. This is also true of Karl Jaspers, for personal as well as philosophical reasons, as we shall see. For both men, there is no foregone inevitability about history, but there are definite trajectories which follow from the weight of previous historical events and ages. Often, Hegel is willing to be far more sanguine about the future than Jaspers, but even Hegel is unwilling to declare that there is some grand inevitability about the progress of freedom beyond his own day: "I am about to be fifty years old, and I have spent thirty of these fifty years in these ever-unrestful times of hope and fear. I had hoped that

for once we might be done with it. Now I must confess ... in one's darker hours things are getting ever worse."<sup>8</sup> For his part, Jaspers lived and wrote in a time that saw not only the rise of German fascism—which he claims was his impetus to seek out a new "spiritual abode" in "Chinese humanism"<sup>9</sup>—but also the possibility of atomic destruction. Jaspers saw a hope for the future in the development of a world philosophy which embraced both oriental and occidental forms of thought; for Hegel, history had moved beyond Asian forms of thought and the future was to be found only in the development of spirit in the New World, or possibly in Russia.<sup>10</sup> Chinese history is a point of serious contention between these two great philosophers: for Hegel, Chinese despotism remains a necessary yet superseded relic of humanity's past struggle to attain freedom; Jaspers on the other hand, sees Chinese humanism as a way forward for a benighted Europe, locked in the grip of National Socialism, and leading toward what Jaspers calls "the dawn of world philosophy" (PW 298).

### History and the Future

The rise and fall of empires is a perennial topic for historians of ideas. As an empire grows and establishes itself, a sense of momentum and inevitability intrudes itself upon the thoughts and feelings of the populace. Notions of destiny or divine favor begin to appear, the actions which gave rise to the destinal assertions are themselves taken over by those assertions, and the progress of empire becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: we are chosen, because we triumph; we triumph, because we are chosen. Once this fateful back-and-forth begins, any major shift in the trajectory of empire requires explanation. When such explanations claim to get at the truths behind the events, they become meta-accounts, attempts at explaining the finite by the infinite, or the particular

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Myth of the Autocratic Revival: Why Liberal Democracy Will Prevail," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009, Vol. 88, No. 1, pp. 77-93.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, "How Development Leads to Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2009, Vol. 88, No. 2, pp. 33-48.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy and the World: Selected Essays*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Washington, DC: Regnery, 1963, p. 295. [Henceforth cited as PW]

<sup>9</sup> G.F.W. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. John Sibree, New York: Dover 1956, p. 86. For Hegel's comments on Russia's possible future, see *Letters*, p. 569. [Henceforth cited as PH]

by the universal. One of the first attempts at a meta-account of human history in the West was written by St. Augustine in his seminal work *The City of God*. Augustine proposed to explain the events of secular history by way of Christian theological history. He declared two humanities, "the one consisting of those who live according to man, the other of those who live according to God. And these we also mystically call the two cities ... of which one is predestined to reign eternally with God, and the other to suffer eternal punishments with the devil."<sup>11</sup> Augustine's two-cities metaphor offered an explanation to contemporary Romans for the defeat of their city, namely, they depended upon the pagan gods for succor, but only those who live in the eternal City of God can depend upon eternal life. The City of Man is opposed to the City of God; the course of the interactions of these two cities traces the course of human history from its beginning in the mythic past, to its end in the fiery consummation of the *parousia* of Christ. The City of Man begins in fratricide (the murder of Remus by Romulus) and ends in destruction (CG 15:5, 19:28), whereas the City of God begins in fratricide (the murder of Abel by Cain, Gen. 4:1-16) and ends in glorification and peace (Rev. 21:1-4). By mapping theological history onto human history, Augustine is able to tell a story with immense explanatory power while at the same time bequeathing to the Christian world of the future a means by which theological time and historical time are explicated in terms of each other.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century appearance of philosophies of history is another example of the occurrence of meta-accounts triggered by the rise and fall of great empires. In the case of many Enlightenment philosophies of history (such as Voltaire's 1756 *Essai*), the empire was an intellectual one. Human reason had triumphed once and for all over religious superstition, so the tale went, and new accounts were needed to explain the new world. The various German philosophies of history, leading up to and culminating with Hegel, drew on this intellectual tradition as well, but had the added historical impetus of the revolutions of the 1770s-1790s and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in the Napoleonic Wars of 1806 to

urge them onwards. Like Augustine, Hegel believed he was witnessing the dawn of a new age. In both cases, the end of an historical order which had seemed immortal and impervious to change elicited the need to explain the entirety of what had happened, and why, in historical terms. For Augustine, the explanatory framework was Christian theology, and so he produced a theology of history. For Hegel, theology had given way to speculative philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Hegel uses religious categories to explain history, but these categories are changed by Hegelian philosophy into *loci* of absolute reason and spirit. The providence which religious piety had meekly affirmed was revealed in Hegelian thought to be the very manifestation of absolute reason itself, *die Idee*, which expresses itself as thought, as nature, and as spirit.<sup>13</sup> As thought, the idea manifests as reason. As nature, it is expressed in the physical world. And as spirit, it attains its absolute sense in human society. In none of these forms, however, is *die Idee* able to transgress the bounds of actuality, including the nonexistent future. The trajectory of history is the proper business of the philosophy of history, but its final end is never fully realized in Hegel's thought.

However sanguine Hegel may be about the power of reason to know the inner workings of history, his eye is always looking to the past as it effects the present—the future is off limits to speculative philosophy. Hegel's role in casting his eye backwards over the sweep of history and declaring its meaning by way of his own philosophy is what Löwith means by calling Hegel a "prophet in reverse."<sup>14</sup> Given the tenacity and prevalence of the discredited Hegelian "end of history" thesis, Löwith's characterization is an unusual one.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> G. F. W. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, One Volume Edition, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, transl. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, J. M. Stewart, H. S. Harris, Los Angeles: University of California 1988, pp. 78-79. [Henceforth cited as LPR]

<sup>13</sup> G.F.W. Hegel, *The Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, transl. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University 1975, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Löwith, *Reason in History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1957, p. 58. [Henceforth cited as RH]

<sup>15</sup> See the essays by Grier, Maurer, and Harris in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, Jon Stewart, ed., Evanston: Northwestern University, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, transl. Marcus Dodds, New York: The Modern Library 1993, 15:1. [Henceforth cited as CG]

Nevertheless, Löwith is correct, because even though Hegel does herald a new apotheosis of historical events, he does not attempt to map out the future course of history. Löwith says that Hegel wrote as though he were "surveying and justifying the ways of the spirit by its successive successes" (RH 58). But the sense of progress which Hegel had was of a particular sort. To return to an earlier comparison, what is "really real" for Augustine is the theology of history, with history being the stage upon which theological truths manifest themselves. Hegel does not have such a passive notion of actual history; what is really real for Hegel is the concrete actuality of philosophical reason in history. History is a very real place with real losses and contingencies, and although Hegel maintains that the purpose of philosophical enquiry into history is the elimination of contingency or *Zufälligkeit*,<sup>16</sup> surely it is at least partially through contingency that human history resolves itself into whatever necessity is deemed evident. That is, reason is not realized in history in spite of the vicissitudes of human acts on the world stage, but because of such acts and through such acts.

### Hegel on China

The Hegelian necessity of history's march towards freedom begins with China. Using a somewhat crude but evocative geographical metaphor, Hegel says that "The history of the world moves from East to West, for Europe is the absolute end of history, and Asia is the beginning" (PH 103). Autonomous reason is nascent within Asian thought, but Hegel considers the entanglement of Asian philosophy with Asian religion the determinative factor in retarding the free progress of spirit in Chinese and Indian culture. "In the Eastern religions," he writes, "the first condition is that only the one substance ... shall be true, and that the individual neither can have within himself, nor can he attain to any value in as far as he maintains himself as against the being in and for itself." In other words, "he can have true

value only through an identification with this substance in which he ceases to exist as subject and vanishes into unconsciousness" (LHP 118). Hegel seems to believe the culmination of this nihilistic unconsciousness is Buddhist *anatman* (no self) and *sunyata* (emptiness), which consists in "uniting of oneself with this nothing, divesting oneself of all consciousness" (LPR 256). Despite his misunderstandings of Buddhist metaphysics, Hegel does allow that this is an activity which the self must pursue, and as such Chinese Buddhism is a more advanced form of the "religion of magic" than Confucian state religion or Daoism, both of which Hegel believes require an undifferentiated submission to the powers that be, whether natural, political, or supernatural. For Hegel, this earlier stage of Chinese thought represents an "unhistorical history" where there is no progress of freedom and, as it is marked by submission and undifferentiation, is in fact the "childhood of history" (PH 105). Hegel makes the best of contemporary sources (primarily French histories and Jesuit memoirs),<sup>17</sup> but since he cannot work from the primary writings of the Chinese philosophical schools, his account retains the limitations of his geographic conception of the movement of spirit from East to West.

Because Hegel understands Chinese thought to conflate political history with political theology, he says that China represents "the realm of theocratic despotism" (PH 112). His claim stems in part from a very real aspect of ancient Chinese religion, namely the so-called celestial bureaucracy. Headed by the Jade Emperor, the spirit world was conceived of as a place populated by spirits, ancestors, demons, and a host of tutelary divinities, all of whom had a ritual place in the well-ordered Chinese pantheon. In the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BC), oracle bone inscriptions depict a world in which the heavenly hierarchy mirrors the worldly hierarchy, and divine power underwrites secular power. "Shang religion was inextricably involved in the genesis and legitimization of the Shang state," according to Keightley:

All power emanated from the theocrat because he was the channel, "the one man," who could appeal for the ancestral blessings, or dissipate the ancestral curses, which affected the commonality.... If, as seems likely, the divinations involved some degree of magic

<sup>16</sup> G. F. W. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, transl. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University 1975, p. 28. G. F. W. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, transl. E. S. Haldane and F. Simson, Lincoln: University of Nebraska/Bison 1995), pp. 36-37. [Henceforth cited as LHP]

<sup>17</sup> See Hodgson's editorial comments in LPR, pp. 43-44.

making, of spell casting, the king's ability to actually create a good harvest or a victory by divining about it rendered him still more potent politically.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of divine legitimization for secular rulers is, as Keightley notes, not a uniquely Chinese idea. However, the way that such legitimization was developed in the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BC), which saw the birth and development of Confucian thought, is peculiar to the Chinese notion of the celestial bureaucracy:

After the leaders of the Zhou lineage had overthrown the Shang dynasty ... the Zhou rulers appealed to a concept called *tianming* [天命] or the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven, they said, charged certain good men with rulership over the lineages of the world, and the heirs of these men might continue to exercise their Heaven-sanctioned power for as long as they carried out their religious and administrative duties with piety, righteousness, and wisdom. But if the worth of the ruling family declined... then Heaven might discard them and elect a new family or lineage to be the destined rulers of the world.<sup>19</sup>

The Zhou taught that this was what had happened to the Shang, and Confucius, who in the time of the Eastern Zhou looked back on the earlier period of the Western Zhou as a Golden Age of virtue to be emulated, reinforced the idea of the *tianming* by speaking approvingly of it in the *Analects* (*Lunyu*, 論語).<sup>20</sup>

Hegel is aware of the concept of *tian* (天, heaven), but understands it more as a divinity than a cosmic order as such, and links it more to Daoist than to Confucian thought (LPR 236). Nevertheless, the idea that all secular norms must be brought into line with the sacred *tianming* is in accord with the broad outlines of Chinese state religion in the Eastern and Western Zhou periods, and in part fuels Hegel's claim

<sup>18</sup> David N. Keightley, "The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture," *History of Religions*, February/May 1978, Vol. 17, No. 3/4, pp. 211-225, here pp. 212-13.

<sup>19</sup> Burton Watson, David S. Nivison, and Irene Bloom, "Classical Sources of Chinese Tradition," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 1, eds. William Theodore De Bary and Irene Bloom, New York: Columbia University 2000, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Confucius, *The Analects*, transl. Raymond Dawson, Oxford: Oxford University 1993, 2:4; 16:8; 20:3.

that Chinese political history is a divine despotism. In theory, the Chinese emperor ruled his earthly subjects as the Jade Emperor ruled his heavenly subjects—as above, so below. According to Hegel, the development of religious thought from crude representations of the Jade Emperor to the more sophisticated Confucian ideas about *tian* eventually culminate in the purely abstract notion of the *dao* (道, way), the subject of the classic *Daodejing* (道德經) of Laozi. Hegel makes a distinction between the personification of the *dao* as "a distinctive god, reason" and *tian* both as a personified deity and "the power of nature bound up together with moral characteristics" (LPR 236). Hegel considers Daoism a substantive improvement over the naked *Sittlichkeit* of Confucian state morality as he understands it, but still considers Daoism too abstract and universal to actually allow for the development of human freedom: "The determinations of the *dao* remain complete abstractions, and vitality, consciousness, what is spiritual, do not... fall within the *dao* itself" (LPR 248). *Dao* as an abstract universal, and *tian* as the highest sanctioning power, unite in the person of the emperor for Hegel, and as such neither the political nor the religious situation of China can foster the advance of spirit; it is the spirit of a *person* rather than a *people*. "Chinese religion cannot be what we call religion," writes Hegel, "For to us religion means the retirement of the spirit within itself, in contemplating its essential nature and inmost being" (PH 131). Chinese state religion is a natural religion of magic for Hegel, by which he means a system concerned with the external manipulation of divine and earthly power. Chinese state religion as Hegel understands it can never lead to the development of historical freedom, and thus it must be transcended by higher forms of religion which allow for an inward movement of spirit.

Hegel's final judgment upon Chinese religion and, *mutatis mutandis*, Chinese politics and history, is particularly bleak. "No inherent morality is bound up with the Chinese religion," Hegel writes, "no immanent rationality through which human beings might have internal value or dignity. Instead, everything is external, everything that is connected with them is a power for them, because in their rationality and morality they have no power within themselves" (LPR 249). Elsewhere, Hegel concludes that "everything which has to do with spirit ... is alien" to Chinese history (PH 138). For him, Chinese history represents the stage of human history in which

all authority is vested in a single temporal manifestation of divine power, namely, the state as a mirror and representative of the heavenly hierarchy. China is thus for Hegel a necessary but surpassed relic of human history, unable to raise humankind beyond a naked worship of external power and socially sanctioned rituals and norms.

Hegel represents probably the most important statement of progressive historicism in the modern period. His teleological schema allows for the emergence of new nations from older cultures, nations which allow their people to achieve a certain level of freedom, but which then founder on some internal flaw, which requires a new culture to rise and give birth to the next phase of spirit's progress. In this way, culture gives way to the nation-state; it is the nation which bears the weight of a people's spirit, a self-conscious society of laws and norms which fully exemplifies the ideal "We that is an I, I that is a We" structure of human life.<sup>21</sup> A serious problem with this sort of philosophy of history, however, is that it prefers tidiness to messiness, order to chaos, and plot rather than exposition. That is, it would rather tell the story than dwell on the characters. The characters of history, however, have their own, irreducible character, which is not amenable to linear characterization. What gets left out of teleological accounts is usually more important than what gets included. In fact, sometimes history itself can be a problem for the rich, thick description required to truly account for the spirit of a people, because history is chronology (the *logos* of *chronos*), and chronology is linear. As Duara writes, "the subject of History is a metaphysical unity devised to address the aporias in the experience of linear time: the disjunction between past and present as well as the non-meeting between time as flux and time as eternal."<sup>22</sup>

### Jaspers on China

Jaspers' philosophy of history is devised, in part, to overcome the limits of a linear account of human experience by allowing these aporias to remain within their particular civilizational contexts. He is explicitly

<sup>21</sup> G. F. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University 1977, p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History From the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago: University of Chicago 1995, p. 29.

critical of Hegelian linearity.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Jaspers does indeed thematize the idea of progress and development. In comparison to Hegel, what Jaspers presents is a contrast between teleological development and contemporaneous development, summed up in Jaspers' *Achsenzeit* thesis. Instead of the single, straight-line development from one culture to another, what Jaspers posits is a single Axial Age, situated for him roughly from 800 to 200 BC with the contemporaneous rise of the great civilizations in Asia, the Levant and Fertile Crescent, and Europe. In this schema, China is not a stage along the way towards European freedom and enlightenment. Rather, it is one of several independent *loci* of historical development with its own character, its own spirit, its own goals and ends and methods of development. Jaspers' axial thesis is an attempt to take seriously the concrete historical particularity of human experience. The axial age is "a new departure within mankind ... and not a development shared by the whole of humanity. The axial period does not represent a universal stage in human evolution, but a singular ramified historical process" (OGH 17). That is, Jaspers tries to take actual history seriously, including the aporias of contingency which Hegel set out to overcome. "I want rather to prevent the comfortable and empty conception of history as a comprehensible and necessary movement of humanity," Jaspers writes (OGH 18). At the same time, Jaspers and Hegel share the belief that the future development of human experience must remain open and is not amenable to philosophical reason: "I should like to hold the question [of the future] open and leave room for possible new starting-points in the search for knowledge, which we cannot imagine in advance at all" (OGH 18). Hegel makes almost identical statements in his own philosophical history, for example his refusal to speculate on the course of spirit in the New World. Yet Jaspers is interested in the future, though he does not make predictions. Part of his concern for the future stems from the horrors of the present which he saw around him—the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s, the use of nuclear weapons in the 1940s, and the Cold War proliferation of those weapons in the 1950s-1960s. The future was of concern for Jaspers because, unlike Hegel, Jaspers had a real fear that there might be

<sup>23</sup> For example, see Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, London: Routledge & Kegan 1953), p. 10. [Henceforth cited as OGH]

no future. This concern for the present and future course of human civilization is the context for his turn towards Chinese humanism (PW 295).

The *Achsenzeit* attempts to preserve the diversity of human historicity by breaking up the linear philosophies of history that precede it. Jaspers does have a concern for unity, but it is "the unity of the history of mankind, to which everything that has value and meaning seems to be related. But how are we to think of this unity of the history of mankind" (OGH 247)? The Jaspersian notion of human unity is centered on the idea of *communication*. "There is no one total truth, but truth meets in many historic forms. No community of all men can be achieved, therefore, by the universal profession of any sole and exclusive truth; it can be achieved only by the common medium of communication" (PW 282). Communication between and among human societies on their own terms and in their own ways is the basis for his concern for an emerging world philosophy, which might replace the parochial divisions between national systems of thought. Such a concern is at the heart of what Joanne Cho calls Jaspers' "postmodern and cosmopolitan standpoint." According to Cho, Jaspers combines a critique of Christian eurocentrism, an existential concern with the individual, and the idea of civilizational grafting to produce a philosophical faith in the possibilities of human progress. The *Achsenzeit* thesis is thus the framework for an emergent philosophical faith:

The axial age establishes continuity between civilizations, but it is not a sufficient category to fight against relativism. The most striking insight of the axial age is its clearly cosmopolitan intent.... It challenges Hegel's Eurocentric periodization of world history, which divided Christian and non-Christian religions. It seeks a new axis in profane history to give all cultures a common historical frame of reference.<sup>24</sup>

All this lies in the hopeful possibilities of the future, however. Jaspers' immediate concern is with the past and its baleful effect upon the present, specifically the impossibility of human flourishing under National Socialism. Jaspers writes that he turned to Confucian thought at the very moment that

<sup>24</sup> Joanne Cho, "A Cosmopolitan Faith in Karl Jaspers: Decoupling Commitment and Narrowness," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 2000, Vol. 37, No. 1, p. 46.

the Third Reich was swallowing the culture of Europe alive, "sensing there a common source of humanity against the barbarism of my own environment" (PW 295). Rather than seeing historical Chinese as a theocratic despotism, the axial thesis allows Jaspers to embrace Confucian humanism as a source of existential meaning and relational communication. Jaspers is no dilettante, dipping briefly into the "exotic East" to escape the familiar horrors of the West. Jaspers sees real problems for the course of Western humanity, and finds real answers to these problems in his study of Chinese Confucianism. From what does Jaspers turn? What are the specific problems that move him to embrace Chinese humanism in the 1930s? After the end of World War II and at the beginning of the Cold War, Jaspers sums up the issue thus: "The de facto conditions now determining humanity are three in number: technology, politics, and the disintegration of the connecting Western spirit."<sup>25</sup> These three provide the framework for Jaspers' critique of contemporary culture and make up "the barbarism of his own environment" both under National Socialism and then in the larger world of nuclear proliferation.

Jaspers writes, "The inescapable, identical repetition of work to the point of making man a cog in the machine ... is one of the fundamental traits of our time" (EH 74). His discussion of modern technology as a dehumanizing and potentially fatal construct, which absorbs humanity into an undifferentiated mass, is similar to Heidegger's lectures on the same subject, given roughly at the same time. "The age of technology makes questionable what we live by," Jaspers says, "it uproots us, and it does so all around the globe."<sup>26</sup> The advance of technology is a given—neither Jaspers nor Heidegger truly represents the Luddite opposition to human technology as such. Rather, both men share a fear of humanity's relationship with technology, and the way in which, as Heidegger puts it, "the essence of modern technology lies in en-framing."<sup>27</sup> En-framing (*Ge-stell*)

<sup>25</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Existentialism and Humanism: Three Essays*, ed. Hanns E. Fischer, transl. E. B. Ashton, New York: R. F. Moore Co. 1952, p. 74. [Henceforth cited as EH]

<sup>26</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago: University of Chicago 1961, p. 73. [Henceforth cited as FM]

<sup>27</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, transl. William Lovitt, New York: Harper 1977, p. 25.

is a Heideggerianism which speaks to the way in which technology, as a process which has been at the heart of human interaction with the world from the very beginning, contextualizes human being-in-the-world and as such comes to define humanity and human possibility (*das Gestell* simply means "frame," "shelf," or "support"). Technology is thus potentially dehumanizing and must be understood as such. Jaspers understands the problem in much the same way, though with a difference of emphasis: "Jaspers's concern was ultimately not with the objects of thinking ... but with ... how thinking illuminates the world and human situatedness in the world for the thinking person."<sup>28</sup> Technology, ill-used and ill-conceived, stands as a threat to human moral situatedness. Jaspers says that to remedy this one must "bring the essentiality of the individual back to the fore and to comply with it—to let man be himself again instead of merely running on functional tracks" (EH 76).

In the political realm, one cannot go back to some idealized pre-technological era. Jaspers will have none of the *völkisch* leanings of agrarian romanticism, nor will he countenance isolated withdrawal: "Indifference to politics is no longer possible. Everybody with a real part in life must take sides in the struggle for the coming political reality" (EH 77). Jaspers' sights are on the hope of a future humanism:

The great choice seems to lie between conditions of tyranny and the freedom to take chances ... between surrender to despotism and the security of a state of law. But there is no ultimate world order in sight, for there can be none. We must find the way for freedom and order to form ever new combinations, to check despotism and anarchy in new situations. [EH 79]

Communication will be the key to securing such a future free from tyranny. Arendt brilliantly elucidates what is at stake in Jaspers idea of political communication by pointing out the deep-seated reciprocity at work in Jaspers' understanding of communication as an avenue to truth:

"limitless communication," which at the same time signifies the faith in the comprehensibility of all truths and the good will to reveal and to listen as the primary condition for all human being-together, is one, if not the central idea of Jaspers' philosophy. The point is

that here for the first time communication is not conceived as "expressing" thoughts and therefore being secondary to thought itself. Truth itself is communicative, it disappears and cannot be conceived outside communication; within the "existential" realm, truth and communication are the same.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, Jaspers asks, "Can man break with his history? ... No. Man must know what he was, to realize what he can be. His historic past is an inevitable, basic factor of his future" (EH 81). Jaspers observes that the greatest factor in Western history for unified cultural norms has been Roman Catholicism, but acknowledges that the Church no longer has the ability it once had, though it "remains, a re-emerging rock, when the tides of creative life recede." Still, the Church "no longer wields an authority over the masses that would leave it with decisive power in a crisis" (EH 82). In fact, there is no single source for a "connecting Western spirit," which is Jaspers' invitation to investigate the conditions for a true *Weltphilosophie*. "Civilizations have perished before," Jaspers reminds us. "What is new today is that all of mankind is threatened, that the menace is both more acute and more conscious, and that it does not only affect our lives and property but our very humanity" (EH 83). His concern is not simply the nuclear threat; he has in mind a larger critique of technological manipulation and political homelessness that is similar in many respects to Heidegger's work. But the titles of works such as Jaspers' *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* (1958) make fairly plain the immediate face of the problem. In the defense environment of the early twenty-first century, the concern has (mostly) shifted from all-out nuclear devastation to pin-point acts of terrorism, but the feeling of dread is much the same. In fact, to the extent that nuclear weapons are still a serious threat, and the modern form of stateless terrorism represents something of a new version of an old problem, the dread may well be compounded. "Who would dare express optimism in view of the facts of our time?" Jaspers writes in 1952. "It is all so horribly right, what is being said about the calamitous present and possibly looming future" (EH 84). We inhabit that future. The great fear that fueled that generation has

<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Freedom and Karl Jaspers's Philosophy*, New Haven: Yale 1981, p. 163.

<sup>29</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World," in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, New York: Tudor Publishing Company 1957, p. 542.

perhaps passed, but a new one has risen to replace, or supplement, it. Was Jaspers prescient about the prospects of human life in the future?

That is an unfair question for two reasons. Like Hegel, Jaspers refuses to step into the role of prophet. If it turns out that things are as bad, or worse, than Jaspers feared they might be, that is only one possibility among many foreseen by Jaspers, and even then, he could not have known the form his bleak future would take—not in 1952, at the birth of a Cold War fought in a series of coming proxy hot wars between two world-striding empires. A more important reason that that is the wrong question to ask of Jaspers is that it does not take into account what he hoped for the future. A man can hope without being a prophet. "Prescience of perdition is never sure. To take heart in view of frightful probabilities, so as to dare the improbable—that is now fundamental to creative humanity," Jaspers tells us (*EH* 84). Jaspers' hope for the future, as mentioned before, was that "we are moving from the dusk of European philosophy towards the dawn of world philosophy" (*PW* 298). And that hope, for Jaspers, was located specifically in his understanding of Chinese humanism from the 1930s onwards.

Therefore the question, "To what does Jaspers turn?" leads back to his assessment of Chinese philosophy and history and Confucian Chinese humanism. Jaspers does not turn to the China of the 1950s consolidation of socialist power, nor to the China of the Cultural Revolution. This China had itself turned away from the China to which Jaspers turned, namely, the China of the classical period of philosophy inhabited by Confucius and his followers. Schwarcz and Mitter lay out the causes and effects of the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement in China to rethink the patriarchal and hide-bound aspects of Confucianism, but which led to the jettisoning of nearly all things Confucian as counter-revolutionary and backwards-looking.<sup>30</sup> Jaspers' Confucius, however, is the philosopher of *ren* (仁, human-heartedness), a word which will not translate felicitously but which consists of the character for "person" (人) and the number "two" (二), perfectly describing the notion of infinite communication which

Jaspers championed in his philosophy. Jaspers is well aware that there is not one "Confucianism," and so focuses on the Confucius of the *Analects*.

Opposing the Hegelian misconception of Confucian thought as an undifferentiated submission to the state, Jaspers embraces a Confucianism of communicative discourse based on humaneness, dignity, and virtue. Jaspers writes, glossing the more modern *pinyin* reading as *ren* as *jen* using Wade-Giles morphology, "the nature of man is called *jen*. *Jen* is humanity and morality in one.... To be human means to be in communication. The question of the nature of man is answered, first in the elucidation of what he is and should be; second in an account of the diversity of existence."<sup>31</sup> Properly understood, *ren* or *jen* will be naturally amenable to an existentialist such as Jaspers because *ren* preserves both the individuality of human *Dasein* while at the same time exemplifying the insight that existence is always *Mitdasein*, "being-with." *Ren* preserves the unity of humanity while respecting the fact of human diversity. "The nature of man is manifested in the diversity of human existence. Men resemble one another in essence—in *jen*. But they differ 'in habits,' individual character, age, stage of development, and knowledge" (GP 60). Thus *ren* is a Confucian adumbration of the world philosophy Jaspers seeks via his *Achsenzeit* thesis—human historical diversity working in its own way towards a greater communicative unity.

## Conclusion

It is not difficult to understand what attracted Jaspers to the Confucian humanism of *ren* during the dark years of the Third Reich. Yet given the actual history of China during the twentieth century, it is fair to ask just how realistic Jaspers' assessment of China itself, and not simply Confucian humanism, actually was. On the one hand, Jaspers was under no illusions about the actual course of Chinese history. He deplored Chinese Marxism as a totalitarian nightmare which gutted Chinese culture of many of its historic values. As a nation within the sphere of Soviet influence, Jaspers also feared the nuclear threat that China might embody in the Asia-Pacific region. But he was hopeful:

<sup>30</sup> Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919*, Berkeley: University of California, 1986. Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World*, Oxford: Oxford University, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Vol. 1, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Ralph Manheim, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1962, p. 59. [Henceforth cited as GP]

Despite the Marxist doctrine now being talked there, it is entirely possible for China to find a way back to herself out of her age-old substance and then to realize the truth of her ancient tradition in new forms. After such a past, we may hope that in the age of technology China will produce her own new form of freedom. . . . If she stands today with totalitarianism against Western freedom, this might in the long run be a misconception of herself that can be overcome. [FM 115]

Only his belief in the Confucian humanism at the heart of Chinese thought could compel such a statement in 1958, the year which saw the start of the Maoist Great Leap Forward, which led to the massive famines of 1958-1961 and untold millions of deaths from starvation.<sup>32</sup> Of course, Jaspers could not have known of this. Still, by his own admission it was his faith in the possibilities inherent within Confucian humanism that carried him through the National Socialist years, and there is no reason to think that Jaspers would have wavered in that faith even had he known what was transpiring in China.

What of Hegel and Jaspers on today's China? If they could see the current status of the People's Republic, with its burgeoning capitalist classes, its attempts to control the free flow of information, its environmental degradations, its political and military entanglements with Tibet, Taiwan, and the Uyghur region on its western frontier, and its growing political role on the international scene, what might they say? No doubt both thinkers would see something of their own understandings of China in the modern situation. Hegel would note the totalitarian aspects of Chinese politics and likely understand it as a manifestation of China's fundamentally unfree spirit. Jaspers, on the other hand, would be encouraged by the gains that have been made in opening China to the West, though he would be discouraged by the economic rather than political tenor of this openness. Tu Weiming notes that there is a creative tension in Chinese Confucianism between its conservative and humanistic elements, between *li* (禮, ritual propriety) and *ren*.<sup>33</sup> On the one

hand, Confucian thought is interested in a sustainable status quo and deference to legitimate power. On the other hand, Confucius is clear that if people suffer or cannot advance under a given regime, it is not only a right but a duty to call the regime to account and, if necessary, challenge it or even replace it. Suffering is an indication that the *tianming* has departed from a ruler; ironically, Mao sometimes used this rationale in his bid for support among both peasants and intellectuals against China's imperial system which was seen as feudal, oppressive, and self-serving. Paltiel notes that Mao had an ambivalent relationship with the conservative and humanistic aspects of Chinese culture, and that this ambivalence is continued into the present day: "The modern Chinese political culture is revolutionary insofar as it has attempted to incorporate the achievements of the modern West. It is 'restorationist' insofar as it seeks to recover the prestige and world-historical significance of Chinese civilization in former times."<sup>34</sup>

Tu understands the tension between the proprietary (*li*) and the ethical (*ren* or *jen*) drives in Confucian thought as the struggle between "what is" and "what ought to be" (HSC 14). In a Hegelian vein, the tension is inevitable and dialectically fruitful: "*jen* as an inner morality is not caused by the mechanism of *li* from outside. It is a higher-order concept which gives meaning to *li*" (HSC 9). Similarly, "*li* becomes empty formalism if *jen* is absent. Furthermore, *li* without *jen* easily degenerates into social coercion incapable of conscious improvement" (HSC 13). One must have both a respect for propriety and a humane outlook on persons if one is to fulfill the mandates of Confucian humanism. Hegel focuses almost exclusively on the strict application of *li* in Confucian culture, and terms it a despotism devoid of the impulse towards human freedom; Jaspers holds out hope that the human-heartedness of *ren* can not only determine the direction of Chinese culture once again, but may also characterize human communication in the advent of a true *Weltphilosophie*.

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<sup>32</sup> Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*, New York: The Free Press, 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Weiming Tu, *Humanity and Self Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought*, Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979. [Henceforth cited as HSC]

<sup>34</sup> Jeremy T. Paltiel, "Confucianism Contested: Human Rights and the Chinese Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Political Discourse," *Confucianism and Human Rights*, New York: Columbia 1998, p. 275.