Ancient Greek and Chinese Patterns of Definition:
A Comparative Study

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This study contributes to the understanding of the difference between Western and Chinese thought by comparing the cultural patterns of definition in ancient Greece and China, two cultures that have, in many ways, come to define the West and East. Current studies of the classical period of these two ancient cultures have focused on what the Greek and Chinese sages meant when they defined the fundamental concepts of their culture. It is argued, however, that the patterns of their definitions have a more subtle meaning than have the concrete definitions. This study, therefore, examines the patterns of definition developed or drawn on by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Greece and by Confucius and Laozi in China. The implications of these two cultural patterns are also discussed.

To place the text of an ancient Chinese sage side by side with that of an ancient Greek sage to compare the texts closely has often been an important way to understand the early developments in Chinese and Western thought. Significant and interesting comparisons of this kind are now available in areas such as East-West philosophy (Feng, 1985; Hatton, 1982; Li, 1993; Raphals, 1994; Raphals, 2003), ethics (Chandler, 2003; Cua, 2003; Fan, 2005; Plaks, 2002; Yu, 1998), religion (Puett, 2002), politics (Wu, 1978), education (Beck, 1999), science (Lloyd, 2002), logic (Reding, 2004), literature (Cai, 1999), and language (Bosley, 1997; Jullien, 2000; Reding, 2004; Yu, 1999; Yu, 2002). This study continues in this line of research by focusing on one overlooked aspect of the East-West dichotomy, that is, cultural patterns of definition. "Definition" is broadly defined in this essay in Aristotle's sense of defining a thing, as "an account of what a thing is" (*Posterior Analytics*, Bl0, 93b30).

One of the recognized contributions of founding cultural figures such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in classical Greece, and Confucius and Laozi in classical China, is the effort of these figures to define or redefine the fundamental concepts of their culture. Previous studies have focused on the contents of their definitions, for example, their concepts of virtue, love, shame, fate, human relations, primary concerns, and names, rather than the patterns of their definitions. This study holds that the patterns of definition carry more subtle messages about Western and Chinese cultures than do the concrete definitions, and consequently, merit our greater attention. Therefore, the cultural patterns of definition of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and of Confucius and Laozi are compared and contrasted, and the implications of these two cultural patterns are discussed in the concluding section.

The Greek Patterns of Definitions

Socrates and the Universal Definition

Socrates has been credited with being the first to concentrate upon "universal definitions" (Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book 1), and developed the dialectic method to formulate these

definitions. He is also the first in recorded history to give serious and systematic thought to such ethical questions as what piety is (*Euthyphro*), what courage is (*Laches*), what temperance is (*Charmides*), and what justice is (*Republic*). However, in searching for the answers, he was not satisfied with identifying particular moral actions. What he sought were "universal definitions." When Euthyphro defined piety for Socrates as "prosecuting any one who is guilty of murder, sacrilege, or of any similar crime," Socrates replied, "I did not ask you to give me two or three examples of piety, but to explain the general idea which makes all pious things to be pious" (*Euthyphro*, 5d-6d).

Socrates not only rejected Euthyphro's definition, he also challenged the traditional way of thinking. People were accustomed to think and speak in connection with concrete things. They thought and spoke of beauty in association with such things as beautiful flowers, or thought and spoke of piety in association with pious behavior. Socrates, with his emphasis on universal definitions, developed a new way of thinking based on pure ideas or concepts rather than on concrete things. This way of thinking is the thinking about thinking, or, thinking on a higher level.

Socrates sought, for example, the idea, or essence, of piety. An action would be considered pious only when it exemplified this idea or essence. A universal definition of piety needed to be constructed, then, to express this idea or essence. To do so, Socrates developed the dialectic method. The method describes a dialogue in which one party examines and attempts to find fault with the other party's definition of a thing. Because a true definition states the universal idea or essence of a thing, it can never be the victim but rather is the final outcome of such a dialectical conversation.

As Plato's early writings (Socratic dialogues) show, Socrates' use of dialectic is confined only to its negative function, that is, to refute the other party's definition and idea (e.g., Euthyphro's definition of piety). Socrates does not show us how dialectic can be used to construct a positive definition. We see positive applications of dialectic only in Plato's later dialogues, especially in the *Phaedrus*, which gives a full account of the "dialectic procedure of collection and division." The development of this dialectic method owes much to Plato's theory of Forms. Although Socrates remains the main character in Plato's later writings, I accept the dominant belief that the theory of Forms and the dialectic method of recollection and division reflect Plato's own philosophical development.

Plato and the "Ideal" Definition

Ian Walker states that Socrates' concept of what an idea is, expressed in the *Euthyphro*, already contains "an incipient Theory of Forms or Theory of Ideas" (1984, p. 115). One important difference between Socrates' concept of what an idea is and Plato's theory of Forms is probably that the latter contains not only the notion of what is true and universal, but also the notion of what is ideal and perfect. The Forms find their origins in the minds of the gods. In the *Republic*, for example, Plato identifies three levels of beds (10, 595a-602b). They are the pure form of the bed, the actual bed, and the picture of the actual bed. The pure form of the bed is made by the gods, and therefore the only ideal and true bed in the world. All actual beds, whether big or small, yellow or brown, made of wood or iron, are short of perfection. They vary according to the will of those who produce them. The picture of a bed portrayed by a painter is even further away from the ideal and truth. Because of these three

levels of beds, there are three ways to answer the question: what is a bed? A carpenter would probably answer the question by simply pointing to the actual bed he had made, a painter would draw a picture, while a philosopher would try to generalize and define the fundamental features of bed: that is, the "bedness" of the bed. Plato believes that only the philosopher is capable of achieving the true knowledge of what a bed is, because he allows his mind to ascend from the visible world to the intelligible world and finally to the stage where his mind can deal directly with the Form of the bed. Plato goes further than Socrates in emphasizing the transcendent aspect of thought. In his ideal republic, only the philosopher king can rule and educate others.

With this theory of Forms in mind, Plato seeks a procedure to produce a definition that is not only universal but also ideal. In the *Phaedrus*, he announces such a procedure: the dialectic procedure of collection and division (*Phaedrus*). According to this procedure, to define what X is, one should collect all of the possible dimensions of X "under a single form, seeing it all together"; then, divide it into species until discovering a type of X that shares its name with others but is "divine." In the same dialogue, Plato has Socrates generally (but not formally) follow this procedure to define love. After criticizing the view of Lysias, who assumes love is an evil passion precluding the lover from practicing self-restraint, Socrates (Plato) offers his own definition. He proceeds with a generic concept of madness, and views love as madness. Then, he discusses two dichotomous species of madness. He first defines love as irrational madness. This madness originates from man's own desire, and is directed toward physical beauty. This definition, however, is not any better than Lysias's definition, because it fails to connote love as something "sent from heaven for the advantage both of lover and beloved." Then Socrates (Plato) turns in the opposite direction, viewing love as divine madness, "a gift of the gods." He is now closer to defining love. But Socrates (Plato) does not stop at this second definition, because divine madness can be further divided. After observing three types of divine madness, Socrates (Plato) arrives at the fourth, and what he believes to be the highest, type, and takes it as the ideal definition: love is the divine madness that is directed towards true Beauty.

Whether or not Plato's definition of love is accurate or exhaustive, that is, reaching the limit of division, is less significant than the fact that it introduces a pattern, or form, of definition. I call this pattern the genus-species pattern of definition. The pattern consists of two basic elements, the genus (madness) and the species (the divine madness directed towards the true Beauty), as "natural" products of the dialectic procedure of collection and division. Insofar as the procedure is considered to be valid, this is the pattern to which one should hold. To define something becomes then an intellectual and scientific inquiry, which is difficult and laborious. This holds especially true for Plato's student, Aristotle.

Aristotle and the "Natural" or Scientific Definition

By departing from his master's world view and basic concepts, Aristotle brings great changes in the notion of knowledge and in the pattern of definition. The world of Aristotle is "the dynamic realm of *becoming*," in contrast with Plato's "static realm of timeless *Being*" (Stumpf, 1971, p. 86). Unlike Plato, who emphasizes what is ideal, Aristotle emphasizes what is natural. To Aristotle, the world is not that which always "is," but rather is in the process of becoming. Thus, what "is" to Aristotle is what comes to be. Aristotle seeks to know what

causes this "coming to be." In other words, Aristotle attempts to know the *what* of a thing by understanding the *why* of it. He claims, "We only think that we have knowledge of a thing when we know its cause" (*Posterior Analytics*, B2, 94a20-1). However, Aristotle does not go so far as to view a cause as the natural event antecedent and external to the thing being caused, as the modern scientific mind would (Lear, 1988, pp. 29-35), nor does he refer to the gods as the designers of everything, as does Plato. He stands between the two, taking a teleological approach to explain the why of a thing. In doing so, he has to go back to the what of a thing. According to Aristotle, the cause of a thing is in the thing itself or, more exactly, in its nature (*Physics*, B8). The nature of a thing is nothing but its distinct form, which is given either by nature or by man, and is not designed by gods. In the *Physics*, Aristotle explains that although nature has no "purposes" in the sense of "the reason for," it always has "ends." For example, a tree grows leaves to protect its fruit, and sends its root down (not up) for nourishment. It generates "such and such" a form both by nature and for the sake of something. Human art, in general, either imitates nature or completes what nature cannot carry out to an end (B8. 199a8-33). It is at the point of a thing's nature that "the why and the what converge" (Lear, 1988, p. 29).

Aristotle defines "definition" in his *Topica* as "a phrase indicating the essence of something" (A5, 101b39). Why does Aristotle not enquire into "the nature of something" but rather, enquires into "the essence of something"? Hippocrates G. Apostle notes that "essence" and "nature" in Greek are two different words. The former refers to the form of a category of things, for example, the whiteness of whatever is white insofar as it is white, while the latter refers to the form of a physical object (1969, p. 353, 361). One reasonable explanation for Aristotle's using "essence" instead of "nature" is that he tends to think at a more abstract level and in terms of his logic when forming a definition. To Aristotle, to know a thing's nature or essence is to categorize it as a certain kind of thing. He seems to have been influenced by Plato in using the term "essence." However, his concept of essence is nonetheless the pure Form, and has no substantial connection with matter.

In his most important philosophical work, the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle criticizes earlier thinkers for their inappropriate ways of defining and explaining things. According to Aristotle, Thales, Anaximenes, Democrates, and other philosophers tried to define the what of things in terms of their material elements or constituents, whereas Socrates, Plato, the Pythagoreans, and others attempted to define things in terms of their intelligible properties (*Metaphysics*, A3, 983b6-7, 988a18). Both types of definition, however, express only a one-sided view. The former type of definition takes into consideration only one or a few elements of corporeal things, and not the existence of different kinds of essence or form. It fails, therefore, "to regard the essence or formula as a cause of anything" (A8, 988b30-3l). This definition is of little value, because saying that everything is water, air, or fire is meaningless. Although the latter type of definition assumes the Forms to be the patterns of things, at the same time it views these Forms as pure Ideas, without any substantial connection with physical things. Thus, to say that the Forms are patterns is in fact "to use empty phrases and poetical metaphors; for what is it that fashions things on the model of the Ideas?" (A9, 991a 20-24).

Aristotle was the first in the West to have a deep concern with the formula of a definition. He believed that "every definition is a phrase of a certain kind" (*Topica*, A102aS). A full discussion of this kind of definition is found in his *Topica*, in which Aristotle suggests

the use of a genus-differentiae pattern, or form, of definition: "the framer of a good definition must define by means of the genus and the differentiae" (Z4, 141b27-30). According to Aristotle, the genus aims at signifying what the thing is. It should be put first in a definition. For example, what is a body? It would be a mistake to define it as "that which has three dimensions," because that definition fails to indicate what it is that has three dimensions. Aristotle identifies five specific rules for the use of genus in definitions. Among the rules is the rule for observing whether there is a failure to put the subject into its nearest genus. The advantage of this rule is that "he who has put it [the subject being defined] into the nearest genus has stated all the higher genera, since all the higher genera are predicated on the lower." For example, he who calls a thing a "tree" can also call it a "plant." He cannot, however, call any "plant" a "tree." The second element that should be expressed in a definition is the differentiae. The differentiae always indicate the qualities of the thing, and do not constitute the species. However, "a specific differentia, combined with the genus, always makes a species." Eleven rules have been established for the selection of the appropriate differentiae. The basic idea is that all the corresponding differentiae (e.g., two-footed, featherless, capable of thinking, etc.) should be true and peculiar to the defined subject (e.g., man) and its genus (e.g., animal) (Z5, 142b20-6, 145b34).

What is the significance of Aristotle's introduction of this pattern of definition to the West? The genus-differentiae pattern represents a scientific and practical mode of thinking. By using this pattern of definition, one comes into contact with the concrete world. To define something becomes itself a science, and is not merely a method or means of intellectual inquiry. Aristotle states in the *Posterior Analytics* that one can establish a given science by reaching the definitions of its primary subjects (A13-15). Aristotle carries on this idea in the development of his systems of physics, biology, and many others. Based on this method of definition, he also develops systems of category and logic. Although Aristotle developed many definitions and conclusions that are now considered wrong, and some, even absurd, contemporary Westerners find themselves still under Aristotle's influence when determining the correct and intelligent way of answering the simple question: what is it?

In summary, the differences and similarities between Plato's genus-species and Aristotle's genus-differentiae patterns of definition are as follows. In principle, Plato's pattern of definition emphasizes the species, for this is the place in which he finds the divine and the ideal. In contrast, Aristotle's pattern of definition stresses the differentiae, the qualities by which he classifies things into genera and species. Plato is concerned with the relationships among species, and therefore his definition is horizontal. Aristotle is concerned with the connections between the subjects (species) and the genera, which makes his definition vertical. Despite this significant distinction, the two patterns share some fundamental characteristics. They both concern the essential form–the *what* and the *why*–of a thing, and depend on similar methods. Aristotle's pattern of definition adopts the scientific method of classification and division, which is close to the Platonic dialectical method of collection and division. Thus, it is seen that they share an analytic mode of thinking.

The Classical Chinese Patterns of Definitions

Confucius and the Ethical Definition

Confucius, generally regarded as the first professional teacher in China, attempts to define the world in terms of moral categories. He devoted his life-long teaching to defining or rectifying such concepts as humanity (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), filial piety (*xiao*), and the superior man (*junzi*). However, he used neither the Platonic nor the Aristotelian pattern of definition in his teaching. The world of Confucius is a dynamic world. Everything exists in this world by "behaving" in a certain way. What a thing is and how it behaves is determined by the Dao or the Way of that thing. Everything has its own Dao (Fung, 1960, p. 167). To know a thing is to know its Dao. Dao is the principle of a behavior or a pattern of behaviors, not the essential form of a thing. It is both moral and natural. The Dao of Heaven is to produce and maintain lives (*The I ching*, 1966, p. 381). In doing so, it shows its kindness and humanity (or benevolence), which Confucians consider as the highest virtue. The moral ideal of man is to be identified with the Dao of Heaven.

Because the Dao of a thing is its moral principle, and one cannot be moral without behaving morally, to know the *what* of a thing is in fact to know the *how* and the *ought* of it. The whole message of Confucius's teaching is how a man ought to behave. But, first of all, what is man? Confucius pays little attention to mankind's natural characteristics, such as being two-footed, featherless, capable of thinking, and so forth. Instead, he emphasizes frequently that a man, as a member of mankind, should have a sense of humanity and righteousness. Although a man has feet to walk, a mouth to speak, and a brain to think, there is no difference between him and a low animal if he does not conduct himself and think according to humanity and righteousness. The model man of Confucius is *junzi*, translated as the "superior man," or the gentleman. The term "*junzi*" originally referred either to the son of a ruler or to a noble (Chang, 1983). Confucius changes the whole connotation of the term by defining it in terms of moral conduct rather than blood lineage or social status. "If a superior man abandons virtue, how can he fulfill the requirements of that name?" (*Analects*, 4:5).

To identify and define the moral relationships among human beings in the family, society, and state is what Confucius called "the rectification of names," and occupies the core of his teaching. When Confucius was asked by a disciple what he would first undertake were he to govern a state, the Master answered, "It will certainly concern the rectification of names" (*Analects*, 13:3). Confucius believed that the problems of society were the result of people not really understanding what they are: that is, a king does not know how to behave as a king; neither does the minister, the father, nor the son know how to behave. The chaos of society is the result of the confusion of definitions. But, how can one form correct definitions and determine names to enable people to understand themselves? Confucius's solution was to define things in terms of their moral principles, not in terms of their universal and ideal Forms (Plato) or their natural and essential characteristics (Aristotle). When Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about government, he replied, "Let the king be the king; let the minister be the minister; let the father be the father; and let the son be the son" (12:11). What he meant was, let the king, minister, father, and son be such as they ought to be. Only those kings, ministers, fathers, and sons who embody the moral ideals of these roles are the good and true kings,

ministers, fathers, and sons. The world will be in perfect order if each person lives up to his or her moral principle.

Is there any general pattern that Confucius follows to define a thing? Yes. Although he never specifies the formula of a definition, nor explicitly gives any method or procedure to create a definition, the way in which Confucius defines a thing is so clearly distinct from that of the philosophers of the classical period of ancient Greece that we have no difficulty identifying the features of his pattern of definition. In general, Confucius uses neither the genus-species nor genus-differentiae pattern of definition. His pattern of definition may be identified as a kind of operational definition, which consists of two basic components: the operative and the conditional. While the operative component is the foundation of his definition, the conditional is generally indicated implicitly. A typical example of Confucius's pattern of definition is seen in the twelfth chapter of the *Analects*. Chung-kung asks Confucius what humanity is, and Confucius replies, "It is, when you go abroad [the conditional component], to behave to everyone as if you were receiving a great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice; not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself; to have no murmuring against you in the country, and not in the family [the operative component]" (12:2). Several interrelated characteristics of this pattern are identified.

1. The pattern emphasizes doing rather than being. It can be formulated as "it is to do something," in contrast with the Platonic and Aristotelian formula "it is something." Confucius believed that an individual needs to do or behave in such a way in order to be a certain way, just as an individual needs to behave in a human way in order to be human. Confucius certainly believed in the existence of "universal ideas." For Confucius, the idea of humanity (*ren*) that is expressed in all humanistic actions, for instance, is what makes these actions humanistic. However, a definition of this universal idea is meaningless and inconsequential if it is manifested merely in words, not in actions.

2. Confucius's pattern of definition is usually situationally bound. It does not concern a general or universal way of acting. Rather, it emphasizes what is right and proper to do in a specific situation. Thus, this pattern often specifies a context or condition in which the preferred right and proper action takes place.

3. Implicit in this pattern of definition is that many other possible forms of human conduct can be considered as right and proper within the same specified situation. For example, Confucius defines humanity as "when you go abroad, to behave to everyone as if you were receiving a great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice; not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself; to have no murmuring against you in the country, and not in the family." This definition specifies one condition, "when you go abroad," and indicates only a few behaviors, such as "behave to everyone as if you were receiving a great guest" and "employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice," and so forth. It does not try to cover all of the possible human behaviors under this condition. The forms of conduct mentioned here serve only as examples. Socrates criticized this type of definition for failing to indicate the universal essence of the thing.

4. This pattern of definition, however, gives Confucius the freedom to adjust his definition according to the situation. For example, in response to the question, what is humanity? Confucius varies his answer to different questioners and under different circumstances. To Chung-kung, he gave the definition cited above. To Fan Ch'ih, his answer was "to love all men" (12:22); to Yen Yuan, "to subdue one's self and return to propriety" (12:1); to Tzu Chang, to be able to practice five things: "gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness" (17:6); and to Tsze-tung, Confucius replied, "When you are living in any state, take service with the most worthy among its great officers, and make friends of the most virtuous among its scholars" (15:9). This approach suggests that there are many, equally valid definitions rather than one fixed and standard definition of a particular subject.

Laozi and the Paradoxical Definition

Laozi, founder of the Daoist school, favors nature rather than ethics. However, Laozi's notion of nature is not the same as Aristotle's: it is predicated on spontaneity, and is not teleological. Whereas Confucius believes that there are various Daos, Laozi believes that there is one single Dao, which is the ultimate reality of all things. This Dao is, in fact, the principle of nature (spontaneity). "The law of the Dao is its being what it is" (Laozi, 1962, p. 68). Whereas Confucius argues that things *exist* in the world *by behaving according to their moral principles*, Laozi claims, in contrast, that things *behave* in the world simply *by being what they are*. Laozi suggests that one follows the Dao simply by following one's own nature. That means that one does not take any purposeful or arbitrary action. Rather, one behaves only in the way that nature has fashioned one. For example, when birds fly high or fish swim in water, they are not performing actions, they are fulfilling their nature. According to the *Daode jing*, "the Tao [Dao] in its regular course does nothing (for the sake of doing it), and so there is nothing which it does not do" (1962, p. 79). The ancient sage kings, it is said, ruled by modeling the way of the Dao. A sage king claimed, "I will do nothing [on purpose], and the people will be transformed of themselves; I will be fond of keeping still, and the people will of themselves become correct. I will take no trouble about it, and the people will of themselves become rich; I will manifest no ambition, and the people will of themselves attain to primitive simplicity" (1962, p. 101).

Laozi was the first in ancient China who held a strong negative attitude toward definitions. While Confucius regards the rectification of names as the beginning of right behaving, Laozi thinks of it as the beginning of hypocrisy. Because the Dao is the principle of nature (spontaneity), what is, simply is. This "is," however, is such a natural state that it cannot be described in language. The *Daode jing* opens thus: "The Tao [Dao] that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name" (Laozi, 1962, p. 47). As the enduring and unchanging Dao cannot be talked about or even named, then how is it possible for it to have a definite meaning? So-called definitions have nothing to do with the ultimate principles of things. They only describe what man thinks them to be. Nature says little (Laozi, 1962, p. 65). Nature itself has no meaning. It has no sense of what is good or bad, or of what is beautiful or ugly. Meanings and values are given by man. In doing so, man imposes upon nature limitations, thus making nature no longer what it originally is. It becomes something else. Those who identify themselves with the Dao of nature embrace all things. As such, they do not need

definition. Definition distorts nature. It will mislead men if they take it as "knowledge" and as a guide for action. For Laozi, the highest attainment is "to know (*Dao*) and yet (think) we do not know," while the disease of knowing is "not to know (and yet think) we do know" (Laozi, 1962, p. 113). One fundamental problem of human beings is that they have too much "knowledge" of the second type (Laozi, 1962, p. 108-109) .When men behave according to their "knowledge" rather than according to their natures, they are acting. The more they do so, the farther away they are from the Dao. Laozi says that when knowledge and intelligence appeared, "there ensued great hypocrisy" (Laozi, 1962, p. 6).

However, a contradiction arises. Laozi clearly realizes that the Dao is nameless and indefinable, yet he uses the term "Dao," and throughout the *Daode jing* he attempts to describe what Dao is. How does he resolve this contradiction? By providing a new pattern of definition: the paradoxical definition. The pattern can be formulated as "to do something is not to do something." In the *Daode jing*, this form is expressed in a somewhat different way, as the following excerpts illustrate:

> He whose (desires) are few gets them; he whose (desires) are many goes astray (1962, p. 65).
> He who displays himself does not shine (1962, p. 67).
> He who grasps things loses them….
> (It is the way of the Dao) to act without acting ... to taste without discerning any flavor; to consider what is small as great, and a few as many ... (1962, p. 106).

This kind of "definition" appears throughout the *Daode jing*. In actuality, this is not a definition at all. A definition should be, first of all, definite in meaning: A is A; A cannot be B, C, D, … and so forth. However, according to Laozi, a paradoxical definition is the only definition that is acceptable if a definition has to be used.
A paradoxical definition is intended to bring everything back to the real Dao. For Laozi, the world is already carefully but mistakenly defined, and these misleading definitions are unfortunately taken for granted. The only way to rectify misleading definitions is to use paradoxical definitions. A paradoxical definition is self-contradictory; hence, it serves to rectify a misleading definition as it not only contradicts itself, it also functions as the negation of the negation. While definition negates the original Dao, paradoxical definition negates itself as a definition. With the use of paradoxical definition, a thing comes back to the indefinite or, in Laozi's own terms, "returns to its root," that is, the original Dao (Laozi, 1962, p. 59).

Laozi's pattern of definition–"to do something is not to do something"–emerges as the opposite of Confucius's pattern. Beyond the paradoxical element, however, the pattern does not add other new elements to the Confucian pattern of definition. Both are typical Chinese patterns of definition in that they share many of the same basic cultural assumptions. They focus on the *Dao*–the *ought* and the *how*–of behavior, rather than on the essential forms of things. They both assume that the world is a living system. A thing comes into this world for the sake of this system, rather than for the sake of itself. In short, the two patterns are not concerned with what distinct form (genus, species) makes a thing be itself, but with what function the thing should perform to help maintain the whole system.

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Implications of the Two Cultural Patterns

In offering "an account of what a thing is," a definition formulates a concept of the thing for one who requests to know this thing. In this sense, the two cultural patterns of definition discussed contribute to the development of what may be called the Platonic-Aristotelian system and the Confucian-Daoist system of concepts. The following section seeks to explain their contribution by comparing four aspects of the two cultural systems of concepts: their fundamental characteristics, their sources of meaning, their assumptions of the world, and their suggestions for the use of language.

The Fundamental Characteristics of Concept

Generally speaking, the Platonic and Aristotelian patterns of definition lead to a concept that is single-faceted in character, that is, the concept has only one true and proper definition. For example, what is a bed? Although the concept of bed can be defined in many ways, only the definition that survives the collection-division or classification-division method is regarded as appropriate and true. The genus-species and genus-differentiae patterns of definition assume that everything has an essence or basic form. If one correctly follows the procedure of collection and division of Plato or of classification and division of Aristotle, one will reach only this essence or basic form. The definition of this essence or basic form must be universally true regardless of the situation to which it applies.

In the Chinese classics, however, such a single-faceted concept is rarely found. Almost all of the important Chinese concepts are multifaceted, associated concurrently with many different definitions. Each definition is valid in its own terms, as already shown in Confucius's concept of humanity and Laozi's concept of the Dao. This is also true of other important Chinese concepts, such as justice (*yi*), propriety (*li*), filial piety (*xiao*), and so on. Confucius's pattern of definition assumes no single vision of the Dao (Way), because there is no "external ideal" about how one should behave in all circumstances. Because all the operational definitions provided in the *Analects* hold true only in connection with certain personalities and under certain circumstances, they are able to contribute to the profound understanding of the Dao.

Because a classical Greek concept is single-faceted, its intention and extension are circumscribed. The intention of a concept refers here to the essential characteristics of the concept, and the extension refers to the external objects to which the concept applies. The Greek patterns of definition, especially the genus-differentiae pattern, tend to allocate exclusively the members of a species. For instance, if "body" is defined as "a thing that has three dimensions," then only that which has three (not one or two) dimensions can be called a body. However, anything that has three dimensions is nothing but a body. It cannot be a body while at the same time being a plane or a line or a point. This is what George Kelly calls a "pigeonhole" type of definition: "What has been put into this pigeonhole cannot simultaneously be put into any other" (1963, p. 154). When the essence of a species is defined, the members of that species are determined.

As a classical Chinese concept based on a Confucian or the Daoist pattern of definition tends to be multifaceted, it is difficult to fix its intention and extension. The operational pattern of definition does not attempt to include all of the possible manifestations of the Dao

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in all possible situations. It serves only to show one or a few examples of the Dao. Thus, a definition is far from inclusive and comprehensive. As such, it always implies and invites new manifestations and interpretations.

The single-faceted concept and the multifaceted concept each has advantages and disadvantages. Having the intention and extension of a concept fixed through the genus-species and genus-differentiae methods of definition is a way of creating the impression of precision. The Greek patterns of definition suggest a logical and scientific way of understanding. A concept is clearly understood when its intention and extension are identified. Such a single-faceted and clearly defined concept is essential for the formulation of a scientific and logically sound theory. The single-faceted notion of concept, however, is not always good for the development of thought. When a changing situation requires new definitions and interpretations, a single-faceted concept can cause what I. A. Richards identified as the problem of "proper meaning superstition" (1985, p. 11), and become an obstacle to the emergence of a new outlook.

A multifaceted concept, in contrast, has the great ability and possibility of being adaptable to changing situations. It is a "living metaphor" and permeable to new definitions and interpretations. This explains the fact that up to the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese people still spoke and thought basically within terms of the basic categories established by the ancient sages two thousand years ago. Although the different philosophical schools in China traditionally argued with each other about the definitions and interpretations of these basic categories, they also came to each other for inspiration. Early Neo-Confucian philosophers, for example, were greatly influenced by Neo-Daoism and Chinese Buddhism in developing a metaphysics to restore Confucius's categories of thought.

However, a multifaceted concept has the problem of inaccuracy, and causes trouble for those pursuing the exact meaning of the concept. What did Confucius really mean by "humanity"? What is the exact meaning of Laozi's concept of the Dao? These questions have been debated for more than two thousand years, yet scholars today are still fighting to defend the suitability of their reading between the lines of the Chinese masters. These multifaceted concepts do not encourage a scientific and systematic way of thinking. How can one possibly build a scientific and logically sound theory with concepts that do not have a precise and consistent meaning? In China, Confucius and Laozi did not intend to teach scientific theories that emphasized the *what* and *why* aspects of human knowledge, as did Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece. Rather, they taught the principles of moral practice, the *ought* and *how* aspects of human knowledge, for the development of the whole person and of a harmonious society.

The Source of Meaning

The Platonic and Aristotelian definitions point to the particular form or species of a thing. For example, the form of man finds itself in the category of animal but as two-footed, featherless, capable of thinking, and so forth. The single-faceted concept of man gives a definite meaning, that is, its intention and extension, by being associated with this unique form. Whether this unique form of man was designed by the gods or, as Aristotle said, *in virtue of itself*, the form is everything that one should understand about the concept of man.

The form or the type is meaningful because it contributes to the logical understanding that what is true of a single form is true of all its kind.

In contrast, the Confucian and Daoist definitions point ultimately to an organic whole that transcends any particular form or species. For example, to define humanity, Confucius suggested that "when you go abroad, to behave to every one as if you were receiving a great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice…." Obviously, Confucius's concern is not these suggested actions but the process and the state of harmonious interaction. This is what Confucius really meant by humanity.

In the Confucian world, everything is part of an organic system. Each person plays a certain role within the system to which he or she belongs, such as a family, a community, a state, or a kingdom. The role thus is defined by the system. To define a thing is to describe how it should contribute to maintaining the system in which it exists, for example, how a son should perform to maintain a family, or how a ruler should act to manage a state. A definition is in fact a moral prescription of a certain role within a system or a certain pattern of action demanded by a system. It is concerned not so much with what the individual thing is, as with what is best for the system in which the thing exists.

The Assumption of the World

The genus-species and the genus-differentiae patterns of definition assume that there exists a formal and logical relationship among things in the world. What does the world look like under these patterns of definition? It is structured as a logical hierarchy. At the bottom are individual things. Above individual things are species, and above species genera. According to Aristotle's *Categories*, the genus is predicable of the species and the species is predicable of the individual, for example, "animal" is predicable of man, and man is predicable of the individual man. The individual is the subject of predicables, and is itself not predicable of anything further. Thus, it is the "primary substance" (5, 2a12-2b7). In this way, Aristotle establishes a formal or logical relationship among things. Every individual thing has a formal aspect of what it is. Aristotle posits a formal aspect of "manness"; thus, he can place other, individual men into the species of man. The species connects itself with the genus according to a logical relationship in which the latter is predicable of the former. However, this formal and logical relationship among things is the function of mind. It does not really exist in the natural world. There exists no species (e.g., the general man) or genus (e.g., the general animal) in nature. They exist only logically. Plato would argue that this formal and logical aspect of relationship is the true Form of relationship among things in the world, and that the real lies in the universal. Thus, the Form Man (manness) holds more truth than any individual person, and an apple in general is more real than, for example, a red apple. Although Aristotle believed that truth could be found in the actual world, the most real and essential in regard to what a thing was, for him, the species form of individual things.

The Confucian and Daoist patterns of definition neither assume this formal and logical relationship, nor assume that the world can be made known by dividing it into species and genera. The world under these Chinese patterns of definition is an organic system rather than a logical association of things. In this system, things are interconnected by an organic sense of interdependence, or what Confucius called humanity or benevolence (*ren*). This sense of interdependence explains why things act toward each other in certain ways.

The Function of Language

The Platonic and the Aristotelian patterns of definition suggest that language has its legitimate functioning in articulation. The Confucian and the Daoist patterns, however, recommend that the proper use of language is not articulating but rather, suggesting. While the classical Greek definitions articulate the most universal and scientific meaning of a concept, the classical Chinese definitions suggest only one or a few ways to understand a concept.

If truth lies in the formal and logical aspect of a thing, it is completely definable and even demonstrable. Both Plato and Aristotle believed that definability and demonstrability constitute the very nature of truth. For Plato, the Forms, or essences, that are ontologically independent of the natural world are definable. They are definable simply because they are definite in form and meaning. Particular things of a certain kind in the natural world, however, vary from each other by shape, color, size, and other aspects, and as such, they are indefinable. Because of this, no particular thing holds the truth of its kind. Thus, truth not only can be defined, but also be demonstrated through a certain method of formal reasoning. Plato's method is dialectic. It is a method involved essentially in the search for universal definitions (*Metaphysics*, M2, 1078b24-7). Like Plato, Aristotle believes that the world is teleologically organized, and that it is accessible by means of intellectual inquiry (Lear, 1988, p. 267). For Aristotle, the true understanding of the actual world, and of its species forms, in particular, requires formal reasoning, both inductive and deductive. How do we know that the form of a thing is essential, not accidental, to what the thing is? How can one be sure that the definition of man is really true of man in virtue of what man most basically is, not in virtue of anything else? These are logical questions for Aristotle. To answer these questions one necessarily engages in formal reasoning.

Because the Confucian and Daoist world is an organic system, and because things in this system are not bound together in a formal and logical way, truth cannot be defined and demonstrated in the ways suggested by the Greek masters. The ultimate reality of this system is the Dao. According to Laozi, the Dao is the source of everything in the system, and has no fixed or distinct form: "The Tao [Dao] as it comes from the mouth, seems insipid and has no flavour … it seems not worth being looked at or listened to" (Laozi, 1962, p. 77). So, the Dao cannot be expressed exactly. If one is to talk about it as a thing, one can use only vague words or poetic language, as the following lines illustrate.

Who can of Tao [Dao] the nature tell?
Our sight it flies, our touch as well.
Eluding sight, eluding touch.
The forms of things all in it crouch;
Eluding touch, eluding sight,
There are their semblances, all right.
Profound it is, dark and obscure;
Things' essences all there endure (Laozi, 1962, p. 64)

In Confucius's *Analects*, the Dao appears to be more concrete than it is in the *Daode jing*. It is embodied in moral behavior. Confucius identifies certain patterns of behavior within a category of things. He can thus talk about the Dao of a superior man, the Dao of a filial son, the Dao of a government, and so forth. Confucius also speaks of the spirit and moral principle of these patterns of behavior, such as, humanity, filial piety, and justice. However, at the same time, he realizes very well that the spirit and moral principle can manifest itself in various ways in various concrete situations. Thus, when answering the question of what this spirit and principle really is, Confucius gives what he believes to be typical examples.

The West has followed Socrates' lead to search for the true meaning of things. This Socratic search, though traditionally regarded as a dialectical rather than a rhetorical inquiry, leaves a deep mark on the Western practice of rhetoric. Plato avers "there is no genuine art of speaking without a grasp of truth" (1999, p. 195). He asks how one can possibly persuade others to buy a horse if one does not know what a horse is (p. 194). A universal and true definition is thus the starting point of good rhetoric. Definition was an important and common topic of rhetoric of Aristotle and Roman rhetoricians (Aristotle, 1984; Cicero, 1968; Quintilian, 1987). This dialectical influence explains the tendency to subordinate rhetoric to logic in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Murphy, 1974).

The persistent inquiry into the true meaning and definition of things has been the dynamic of Western intellectual history. François Jullien observed that "each philosopher comes to say no to his predecessor" (2000, p. 371). The inquiry has led to the great intellectual movements in contemporary Western history. Francis Bacon, in the course of reevaluating and restructuring traditional learning, realized that the most troublesome of all falsehoods that delayed people from truth was "the names of things which have no existence" and "the names of actual objects, but confused, badly defined, and hastily and irregularly abstracted from things" (1620/1952, p. 112). The analytic philosophers of the twentieth century resolved to clear away all the past confusing and meaningless propositions (Munitz, 1981). A radical group of scholars including Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Deleuze took a postmodern turn, basically at the point when they discovered that words or signs could not give presence to the real world in a clear-cut and natural fashion (Best & Kellner, 1991). As Derrida puts it, "The meaning of meaning is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signified … Its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest … it always signifies again and differs" (1978, p. 25).

In Confucian China, we find another discourse, which emphasizes the ethical and rhetorical effect of "sublime words with deep meaning" (*weiyan dayi*). For the Confucian, words that produce such an effect have to be proper and sincere, the two basic requirements of Chinese discourse and rhetoric. To speak properly is to speak in accord with the general expectation of the role one performs in a particular context. If words and names are not proper, what is said will not sound reasonable (Confucius, 13:3). A Confucian gentleman is also requested to modify his words to establish his sincerity. Thus, "his virtue is extensively displayed" to move and transform other people (*The I ching,* 1966, p. 410). Due to these two requirements, rhetoric in the sense of proper and sincere use of language has long served in traditional China as an art of moral education and cultivation.

Confucius did not try to define the essential meaning of things, as did the Greek sages. Instead, he tried to raise a general and deep concern for humanity by using plain examples

and analogies. He thus demonstrated, in the words of Mencius, a perfect art of speech with "words which are simple, while their meaning is far-reaching" (Mencius, 1970, 7b:32). The Chinese cultural tradition encourages one to apprehend the wisdom of the ancient sages in a "living" way, that is, to experience the truth of their proverbial sayings "in a fresh, immediate way through one's own efforts" (Metzger, 1977, p. 61). The great adaptability and profundity of Confucius's teaching has allowed it to survive generations of interpretations and explorations. The Chinese turned away from Confucius's teaching at the end of nineteenth century, when the declining feudal autocracy enforced its interpretations to the extent that Confucius's living words were turned into ossified dogmas. The dogmas no long functioned as constructive guides for conduct. They unfortunately became, as the nineteenth-century reformer Tan Sitong observed, "toils" used by tyrants "to control people's bodies and minds" (1984, p. 151).

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