**harmony/和(Hé)**

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| Chinese Perspective | ZHAO Tingyang | 17 Feb 2022 |

In recent decades, the Chinese concept *Heh* (和) has been translated as “harmony”, but this is not a perfect translation. While Heh does mean harmony in a musical context, there is more to the word than that. It also means “compossibility” or “compatibility” when used as a cosmological or political concept.

Heh did in fact begin with music. In the earliest writings, at least 3,000 years old, the word Heh, found in oracle-bone or bronze inscriptions, originally referred to a musical instrument (龢) that helps to create a harmonious effect. In one classic Confucian book, *Li-ji* (The Interpretations of Norms and Rites), Heh is explained as “the harmonizing of sounds to make music softer to the ears”[[1]](#footnote-1), as the ears are the natural testers of harmony. In another early historical work, *Guo-yu* (The Documents of States), a story is told of a king of Zhou who wanted to mold an extraordinarily huge bell to represent national glory. A minister advised him not to do so because the sound it would make would be too loud to bear. He said that we should consult our ears, for “ears know harmony”[[2]](#footnote-2). Music is often considered to be the simplest example of harmony, as described in Tso-Chuan (The First Chronological History of China): the sounds of the clear and the chaotic, the great and the small, the long and the short, the quick and the slow, the joyful and the sorrowful, the hard and the soft, the high and the low, the emerging and the fading, and the thick and the loose are meant to make harmony in all good music[[3]](#footnote-3).

Soon thereafter, Heh was theorized and generalized, with its new writing (和), to become a metaphysical-political concept for the *compossibility* of all beings. This is similar to Leibniz’s theory, so much so that I shall use his concept “compossibility”, as well as the *compatibility* of all political existences, which presupposes the ideal political situation. Heh as a metaphysical concept is first found in I-ching (The Book of Changes), the first philosophical work in China, which was interestingly interpreted by Leibniz as an esoteric binary system of mathematics. It was defined in terms of the “universal compossibility” (太和) of “all beings existing well in their own ways without being harmful to one another”[[4]](#footnote-4). Lao-zi explains Heh as the complementary or reciprocal interwork of any two different factors in terms of Ying and Yang[[5]](#footnote-5), viewed here as a binary composition rather than a binary opposition. Heh developed further into a political/ethical concept in the Zhou dynasty (11th century BCE to 256 BCE). In the first chapter of Shang-shu (The Book of Political Documents), “creating compatibility of all nations and all people” is claimed as the greatest political goal[[6]](#footnote-6). It suggests an ideal world of Tianxia, a peaceful world system inclusive of all nations (see Tianxia).

An interpretation of the political effect of music is found in Li-ji. It realizes the earliest *politics of aesthetics*. Here it is stated that four things matter for the political: norms (rites) to control the desirable, music to soften the mentality, law to punish criminals, and government to manage national affairs[[7]](#footnote-7). It is believed that the noble men could “understand politics well with a good understanding of music”, and even “the political situation of a state could be perceived from its musical styles alone”[[8]](#footnote-8). Confucius insisted that proper music could relieve people from their restless desires. In this sense, music is a way of doing politics. Despite this, the ethical discipline of Chinese music has the side-effect of limiting musicians’ creativity.

The philosophizing of harmony has its roots in a significant debate (about 530BCE). As recorded in Tso-Chuan, a Duke said he preferred those who of the same mind with him more than those who differ with him since agreement creates harmony. His minister Yan-tzu, however, told him he had confused harmony (和) with agreement (同); where harmony means the reciprocal improvement of diversities whereas agreement reduces open possibilities to a poor singularity. In a simpler way, he explained that the harmony of many ingredients makes a tasteful soup thanks to their complementariness. Likewise, the harmony of a diversity of thought works in politics in that the opinions opposing those of a lord’s might be necessary to change or better the lord’s mind. … If a soup were made only with water and more water, would we find it delicious? And if music were monotonous, would we find it beautiful? Only one voice makes for poor politics[[9]](#footnote-9).

In another similar debate recorded in Guo-yu, harmony was further argued to be the necessary ontological condition for beings to exist and to be of any value. A historian, Shi-bo, explained to a Duke that the decline of the Zhou Dynasty was the result of later kings promoting a policy of sameness in place of harmony. He gave the following argument：Harmony allows beings to flourish, whereas sameness causes beings to die. Things would become nothing if they are reduced to the same. For this reason, the great kings would marry queens from other states, select ministers from those who have differing opinions, and use different things in different cases and different ways. … Monotone sounds boring, uniformity does not develop culture, a single taste is poor, and sameness does not create value[[10]](#footnote-10). It is said that a “harmony of diversities is the condition that allows everything to be something rather than nothing”[[11]](#footnote-11).

When Heh was developed from harmony to be a philosophical concept of compossibility or compatibility, it implied a principle of co-existence, that is, the compossibility or compatibility of all beings. It explains the Chinese *metaphysics of* *relations* which does not discuss *Being*. The question of Being would sound strange in a Chinese metaphysics that recognizes uncertain and infinite *changes* instead of an eternal or absolute Being. If asked to talk about Being---there being no such concept in Chinese philosophy---I suppose Lao-zi or Confucius would say that being is nothing but the state of changing, and there is nothing that could be *a thing as such* by itself since everything could only be defined in its temporal relations with other things. This means that it is the *relations-in-changing*, rather than a conceptual defined thing, that is reality. Based upon the relationism, it would be unreasonable to say “a thing *as it is*”, for a thing is always a function of the changing relations of where and when it is being referred to. A “thing” is merely a linguistic invention for convenience rather than reality. Relations are thus viewed as the ontological condition for a thing to be, so much so that *existence presupposes co-existence*, as I have previously argued[[12]](#footnote-12). The metaphysical concept of harmony has been applied to political practice as well as ethical life, for it implies the optimal cooperation.

I have tried to develop a modern explanation for harmony in terms of optimal cooperation. The cooperative strategy could be described as *live-and-let-live*, as Robert Axelrod strongly recommends[[13]](#footnote-13), while harmony implies the stronger strategy of *live-if-and only-if-let-live* or *improved-if-and only-if-let-improved[[14]](#footnote-14)* (related discussion see Ren and Tianxia). This leads to a meta-question underlying a cooperative game, that is, harmony requires something more than fair play. In a given game of no alternative, fair play is considered to be the best expectation. But fair play could conceal the maybe serious injustice of the game itself in the case that not all players agree to play *this game*. People need not only fair play, but also a fair game. In this sense, harmony excludes the dominating power in politics or economics that decide the game.

A student of Confucius summarized his teaching as “harmony matters most”[[15]](#footnote-15). This proposition has had the greatest influence on the Chinese mentality and its practices. For centuries, Chinese politicians and strategists recognize a “triple factor” for political success: the right time, a good position, and harmony with people. Harmony is considered the key factor. The concept of harmony has been also widely used in “worldly wisdom”. Popular sayings prove this: a harmonious family flourishes; harmony invites good fortune; and harmony makes a way, whereas disharmony makes a wall; etc. Traditional Chinese medicine is not the cure of illness but rather is expected to restore the harmonious state of a body against disease.

Generally speaking, the concept of Heh in terms of compossibility or compatibility means the political or economic strategies to develop a universally good institutional arrangement for a better co-existence of all peoples, while the usual understanding of Heh in terms of harmony advises to avoid conflicts. It might be said that the Confucian harmony leads to *positive wisdom* that encourages reciprocity, balance, and cooperation, whereas Taoism’s perception of harmony is closer to *negative wisdom* that considers the priority of risk-aversion, so as to be safer and flexibly fitted to any uncertain change.

1. Li-ji: ch. Music. 《礼记·乐记》 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Guo-yu: ch. Stories of Zhou, Part3. 《国语·周语下》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tso-chuan: 20th years of Duke Zhao.《左传·昭公20年》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I-ching: ch. Interpretation of Qian. 《周易·彖传·乾》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lao-zi: Dao-de-jing, ch.42. 老子：《道德经·42章》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Shang-shu: ch.1.《尚书·尧典》 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Li-ji:ch. Music. 《礼记·乐记》 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tso-chuan: the 20th year of Duke Zhao.《左传·昭公20年》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Guo-yu: Stories of Zheng.《国语·郑语》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Li-ji: ch. Music. 《礼记·乐记》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Zhao Tingyang: Ontologie de la coexistence : du cogito au facio. In Diogène, n° 228, octobre-décembre 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Robert Axelrod: The Evolution of Cooperation, Basic Books, New York, USA, 1985, chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It is a developed and improved version of Confucian rule. Cf. Confucius: The Analects, chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Confucius: The Analects, chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)