

A PERSONAL VIEW: CRITICAL THINKING AS CULTURALLY SPECIFIC AND UNIVERSALLY ANSWERABLE HUMAN RESPONSES TO REALITY¹

Shudong Chen²

Ever since I was interested in critical thinking, my mind has been penetrated with various arguments that underlie the general assumption or perceived facts that the East is weak and the West strong in critical thinking, however each argument may differ or even oppose one another in content and detail. Is Asia really weak in critical thinking compared with the West? Before we make such an argument or assumption, we probably need to define, first and foremost, what critical thinking *is* and in what terms we define it.³ So, what is critical thinking? Is critical thinking our critical response to reality? Does it mean search for truth, for human improvement, and for social advancement by means of reasoning? Does critical thinking ultimately refer to our self-conscious reflection on reality as well as our rational resolve to deal with problems that impede our lives? If so, anyone who lives and uses language involves him/herself in critical thinking regardless what culture

he/she is born into. Critical thinking is thus as universal and fundamental as our human survival instincts. If critical thinking, for Socrates, is the crucial means to make our lives worth living, for Descartes, it is the very mode of our being, "To know thyself," Confucius emphasizes the importance of critical thinking in *The Analects* as much as the ancient Greeks. If so, the great reflective and responsive power of our minds often remains unexplored inside our students and us, too, due to our inadequate understanding. To teach, therefore, means to activate this intellectual power through appropriate understanding and application. It means to turn the dormant power into a self-conscious, confident, and consistent effort, to make it an inexhaustible resources that

³ This assumption is also hinted at in *Manusya's* thought provoking "Call for Papers" for this issue.

As Asian countries are finding ways to improve the quality of their educational systems in order to survive in the contemporary globalized economy, the role of critical thinking has received a lot of attention as a means towards producing graduates who are "capable of thinking of themselves." This capacity, whatever it actually means, is perceived to be a key towards enhancement of competitiveness in many areas. However, attempts to teach Asian students to become critical thinkers have been very difficult to realize. This is due to fact that in many Asian traditions, there are deep rooted cultural traditions that *seem to discourage critical thinking* (emphasis added).

There are also various critical efforts to contend this general assumption or overgeneralization. Amartya Sen's essay "East and West: The Reach of Reason," *New York Review of Books* (July 20, 2000), is one of the recent examples.

¹ The paper is not primarily intended as an academic article but an essay in a way suggested by both Lukacs and Adorno.

² Assistant Professor of Humanities, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, KS 66210-1299, U.S.A.

supplies us with creative, sensitive, and intellectual energy for the benefit of the individual and society.

But the question is *how*, because critical thinking also indicates different things to different people. It implies differences in goals, ways, and effects. It is often culturally specific. Differences in cultures and religious beliefs often dictate or determine our acts, habits, and results of our thinking. Critical thinking follows not only logic but also cultural logic. For Plato, St. Augustine and Wordsworth, for instance, to think *critically* means to recollect or return to the lost memory of the ultimate Ideal. For Nietzsche, it means to "re-evaluate all evaluations of values."⁴ For Chuang Tzu, it means to flow with the ubiquitous Tao. Once we know how to understand and assess critical thinking in terms of the indispensable cultural constituents and logic that define and enrich critical thinking, we will awaken the sleeping power inside our students and ourselves. Otherwise, critical thinking would fail to deliver what it promises. Even worse, it might lead us on an endless, often harmful, process of self-glorification, -deception, and -indulgence, such as the arrogance of making oneself "the measure of all things in the world." Literature provides numerous examples of the negative results of reflection through literary characters, such as Hawthorne's Ethan Brand, James' Winterborne, Twain's Hank Morgan plus his collective "innocents," and Howells' Ferris and Vervains.⁵

Thus, if we take into consideration the dispensable cultural influences that shape critical thinking in terms of *premises* and *processes* and *contexts*, is Asia still weak in critical thinking? Or

⁵See Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand," Henry James's "Daisy Miller," Mark Twain's *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *The Innocents Abroad* or *The New Pilgrims Progress*, and William Dean Howells' *A Foregone Conclusion*. As a Connecticut Yankee, Hank Morgan, for instance, wipes out the entire ancient civilization he wants to reform. "The innocents" expose their problems in understanding and appreciating the Old World in perspectives, even though they make relevant criticism of problems that confront the Old World from their points of view. For them, the glory of ancient Athenian civilization is no more than bunches of broken bricks and Jerusalem a filthy little town. Traveling thus does not open their minds. Instead they remain further entrenched in their previous prejudices against the Old World. This is perhaps why for the wise man, as Lao Tzu suggested, "The world may be known Without leaving the house" and, for Emerson, "Travelling is fool's paradise." Or as Mark Twain sarcastically concludes, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts [...]. Always on the wing, as we were, and merely pausing a moment to catch fitful glimpses of the wonders of half a world, we could not hope to receive or retain vivid impressions of all it was our fortune to see." For Lao Tzu, see *Tao Te Ching: The Ways of Life*, Trans. R. B. Blakney (New York: The New American Library, 1955), p. 100. For Emerson, see "Self-Reliance," *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The New American Library, 1950), p. 165. For Twain, see *The Innocents Abroad* (New York: The New American Library, 1980), pp. 474-5.

⁴Friederich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/ the Asnti-Christ*, Trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 121.

does it mean that Asia need to import critical thinking from the West? If we assume that Asia is weak in critical thinking, then how can we explain the remarkable successes that many Asian students and immigrants enjoy in the West? All are from cultures presumably weak in critical thinking. What makes them compete so well in the West that demands enormous critical thinking skills to survive and succeed through fierce competition? Do they all become competitive critical thinkers overnight? How can we explain, for instance, why the Indians fare well in the U.S., according to John Stassel's last year's special report on ABC News, "Is America the NO.#1?" As the report points out, they often do better than average Americans one generation after their immigration to the country. If critical thinking is so vital for a nation or civilization to survive, can Asia survive for centuries without critical thinking? If Asia is weak in critical thinking, how can there be so many great thinkers, such as Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Chuang Tzu. Are they not as great as Socrates and Plato as critical thinkers? How can there be such enduring masterpieces of literature, such as *Bhagavad Gita* in a culture weak in critical thinking?

As critical thinking in ancient Greece is divided as pre-Socrates and pro-Socrates periods with its focus shifting from philosophical speculations on nature to the pragmatic study of human society, there must be different ways of pursuing critical thinking with differences in *orientation, focus, priority*. When we define critical thinking, it is often the issue of what paradigms or sources of references/traditions we refer to. We

may refer to, for instance, Continental or Anglo-American tradition. We may use Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and Hegel as our models. But do we also consider them as critical thinkers, Heraclitus, Vico, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Montaigne, Emerson, Carlyle, and Wittgenstein? If so, do we regard Ashoka, Akbar, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Chuang Tzu as critical thinkers? As there are as many paradigms of critical thinking and critical thinkers, we inevitably have as many hues, colors, shades and shadows on the spectrum of critical thinking across cultures as imaginable. For me, Montaigne, Carlyle, Emerson, and Nietzsche, are as great critical thinkers as Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Wittgenstein. So are Akbar, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Chuang Tzu. Of course, these eastern thinkers are different from their western counterparts in terms of discourse, tradition, and priority that condition as well as motivate their thoughts. They are, nevertheless, critical thinkers in their own rights and in their own cultural logic. If so, how can we argue that a culture or civilization that has produces so many influential critical thinkers is weak in critical thinking?

Following the general assumption that critical thinking is strong in the West and weak in the East, let me just pick Heidegger for the sake of argument. I choose Heidegger not only because he is a representative critical thinker in the West but also because he personifies significant points of difference *and* similarity between the West and the East in critical thinking. He exemplifies, for instance, how to understand and assess critical thinking in terms of content and

context. He is interested not only in thinking but also in thinkers. He examines not only the forms and modes of thinking but also the things we think of. Like Melville who wants his readers to see the whale in the sea not just in the museums, Heidegger emphasizes importance of "evaluat[ing] the nature and powers of a fish [not] by seeing how long it can live on dry land."⁶ By saying this, he underlies how often we miss the point in evaluating critical thinking only in terms of the form and formality of thinking at the expense of the vital contextual relationships between things and thinkers on the spot. As a result, "thinking," according to Heidegger, is "judged by a standard that does not measure up to it." He calls for "the effort [to] return thinking to its elements."⁷ As he also demonstrates in "Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger illustrates his points by referring to Van Gogh's work. Just like Van Gogh's shoes that could not *be* without the world it connects, critical thinking, as Heidegger emphasizes, would not occur without the fundamental *live* relationships that condition and motivate it. What is even more, as Heidegger might suggest, is the intimate relationship between critical thinking and creative vision. Could Heidegger still make an equally strong argument *without* Van Gogh's work? Is Van Gogh's work there just for illustration? No, it is more than a metaphor, an analogy, a good example. It is an essential part of Heidegger's critical thinking.⁸

In this way, Heidegger not only answers the question, "What is critical thinking," but also underlines what makes a critical thinker *a critical thinker*. What he says about critical thinking, for me,

parallels significantly with the critical thinking tradition in the East, particularly in terms of its emphasis on *context, things, and creativity*. From this perspective, we may argue that critical thinking is not *weak* but *different* in Heidegger as in Kant, and the differences underline particular perceptiveness or strengths in Heidegger's way of thinking. If so, we may also argue that critical thinking is not weak but different in the East because it follows its own tradition, social need, and priority. On the other hand, the East and the West, as shown in Heidegger's case, are not so far apart. Instead, they are still comparable and compatible regardless perceived differences. Ultimately, whether in the East or in the West, critical thinking, for me, always means our relation or "relatedness" to anything that we respond "to" and reflect "upon" through reasoning. Critical thinking would be impossible without these indispensable "to" and "upon." Critical thinking, therefore, means our response, reception, recognition, and readjustment "to" the indispensable, irresistible, and, often, indiscernible, influences of things that we reflect *upon*, places we reflect *in*, and personalities we reflect *through*. It underlines, in other words, our

⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, Ed. & introd., David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper, 1977), p.195.

⁷ Ibid..

⁸ See "Origin of the Work of Art," *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, Ed. & introd., David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper, 1977)

conscious or unconscious acknowledgement of the mind-animating power of places and things that attract and effect our activity as critical thinking. So, what is critical thinking after all? For me, it is our culturally specific, answerable reflection and response to reality.

Therefore, as we come to view critical thinking as culturally conditioned and motivated processes and experiences, then here is the question: "How can we help our Asian students develop their critical thinking in this way?" First of all, we should let our students understand the significant points of similarity and difference between the East and the West with regard to critical thinking. They should understand these similarities and differences in perspectives. Then we can ask our students to do what is most natural to them, to take advantage of the rich but often overlooked tradition in critical thinking within their own cultures. Once they know *where* and *how* to look for *what* they need starting with the neglected treasury of natural resources near at hand, they will also know *what* or *how much* they will need from abroad. They will strike the best deals for themselves like smart dealers in export and import business. They will think critically to enrich themselves through active trading for mind-refreshing ideas. To be critical thinkers, they need to combat cultural nihilism, on the one hand, and cultural nationalism, on the other hand, particularly when they are studying abroad in the West. They must overcome residues of new colonialism or Orientalism in their minds. They should not look for signs of intellectual weakness in the eastern

tradition by following *uncritically* the presumption that the East is weak and the West is strong in critical thinking.

For the same reason, neither should they turn 180 degree to argue for a completely opposite case in defense of the eastern cultures. If so, they are faring no better because, with equally blind enthusiasm, they are following the same either/or, superior/inferior black/white judgmental dichotomy, which is, in my opinion, not characteristic of Eastern mentality.⁹ By contrast, a traditional eastern both/and paradigm that emphasizes yin-yang interaction and balance might work better for them. Then, our Asian students will learn how to read for nuances, fine prints, and gray areas that demand and reward critical attention. We should therefore encourage our students to be critical thinkers in the rich traditions cultivated by Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Why cannot they be critical thinkers like Mencius, Akbar, and Wang Yang Ming or to be whoever they want to be? But they must *never* be the young man as Chuang Tzu describes. The ancient Chinese Taoist philosopher once told a story about a vain young man, who went to learn the

⁹ There are two ways to contend the general assumption. The first one is to argue that the East is as good as, if not better than, the West in critical thinking. To do so means to follow the same either/or dichotomy, as Amartya Sen somewhat demonstrates in his argument. See Note 2. Another is to underline that the East is equally strong in critical thinking but in different ways and, thus, needs to be measured in terms of different paradigms.

beautiful ways of walking in another country but had to crawl all his way home — because he neither learned the beautiful steps he desired nor remembered his original ones.¹⁰ Indeed, Asia is not *weak* in critical thinking, if we just stop looking for fish in others' ponds while there are plenty in our own. Asia, in other words, would be irremediably *weak* or *weakened* in critical thinking if we tend to see, uncritically, the fish in the West as fish and ours not fish.

With regard to the Asian tradition that requires critical thinking to address immediate social concerns, it may probably explain why Asian students adjust themselves well in the West. Are Asian students not critical thinkers who know how to respond to current situations in the foreign lands? Do their survival and success stories not suggest the values and strengths of the critical thinking traditions that we often overlooked because of the paradigms we use? So, once again, how should we teach Asian students to be critical thinkers? Once our students know how to evaluate the differences in perspectives, they will choose to act more self-consciously and confidently in pursuing critical thinking for the benefits of themselves and their societies. Critical thinking in Chinese tradition, for instance, is always valued as one's responsible response to reality. It's an answerable style that addresses immediate social concerns for reconciliation and harmony. Critical thinking

may be done, as Nietzsche would say, to reevaluate all evaluation, it may also be done to reevaluate our ways of evaluation. It could be confrontational as well as complimentary. To be a critical thinker, it certainly requires courage to take the road not taken. But it requires no less courage and vision to take the road well trodden to find the rare beauty overlooked.¹¹ This is what Confucius does as well as Zhu Xi (or Chu His).¹² They remain creative and critical thinkers by re/relating others' ideas. Besides, critical thinking also means to find disparity, to revolve it, or to live with it, if it does not go away. It means to get along with people and to exchange ideas through interactions, not just to think by ourselves. It is thinking as learning through socialization.¹³

¹¹ Robert Frost's "Road not Taken" may not simply emphasize how important it is to take the road not taken as thus generally interpreted. It underlies the unknown consequences of one's choices.

¹² This translation of Confucius's autobiographical note in *The Analects* (7:1) illustrates the point. "The Master said, 'Following the proper way, I do not forge new path; with confidence I cherish the ancients — in these respects I am comparable to our venerable Old Peng.'" See *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, Trans. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (New York: Ballantine, 1998), p. 111.

¹³ The following quotations from *The Analects* may underline how important it means for Confucius to learn and think through social engagement. All the quotations used here and hereafter are from *Confucius: The Analects*, D. C. Trans. D.C. Lau. (London: Penguin, 1979). "Tzu-kung asked about the practice of benevolence. The Master said, 'A craftsman who wished to

¹⁰ Chuang Tzu, "Autumn Flood," *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, Trans. Burton Watson (Columbia UP, New York, 1964), pp.108-9.

Thus, to encourage critical thinking in and out classroom, we may teach our students how to think *contrarily* and/or *complementarily*, but we should, first of all, ask them to think *naturally*. To be a critical thinker in this way is very much a cultural issue. We can be critical but can also get along, as Confucius thus suggests, "The gentleman should get along with others but without being an echo"¹⁴ We can be like Socrates but

must not die his death.¹⁵ As teachers, we should teach students how to get along with society because we are

practice his craft well must first sharpen his tools. You should, therefore, seek the patronage of the most distinguished Counsellors and make friends with the most benevolent Gentleman in the state where you happen to be saying" (15:10). "Confucius said, 'He stands to benefit who makes friends with three kinds of people. Equally, he stands to lose who makes friends with three other kinds of people. To make friends with the straight, the trustworthy in words and the well-informed is to benefit. To make friends with the ingratiating in action, the pleasant in appearance and the plausible in speech is to lose'" (16:4). "Tzu-lu asked, 'What must a man be like before he deserves to be called a Gentleman?' the Master said, 'One who is, one the one hand, earnest and keen and, on the other hand, genial deserves to be called a Gentleman – earnest and keen amongst friends and genial amongst brothers'" (13:28). "The Master said, 'Even when walking in the company of two other men, I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good point of the one I copy; the bad points of the other I correct in myself'" (7:22). Such emphasis can also be observed in terms of how Confucius values poetry. One of major functions of poetry, for instance, is to socialize with people for harmonious relationship. See *The Analects*, 17:9.

¹⁵ There are, indeed, different ways of dealing with reality as reflected in Giordano Bruno, Galileo, and Descartes. The following quotations from *The Analects* may illustrate how Confucius can be *consistently inconsistent* or *inconsistently consistent* as he responds to reality. On the one hand, Confucius always puts his priority on social reform in accordance with the rites or the Way. It is quite self evident in *The Analects*, as he emphasizes, for instance, "He has not lived in vain who dies the day he is told about the Way" (4:8). He also says, "For Gentlemen of purpose and men of benevolence while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of benevolence, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have benevolence accomplished" (15:9). His devotion to social reform could also be observed in terms of his momentary resignation as he exclaims, "If the Way should fail to prevail and I were to put to sea on a raft, the one who would follow me, would no doubt be Yu" (5:7). But, on the other hand, however reform-minded, Confucius he still considers it necessary not to risk one's life in a state that is in danger or in peril, as he thus advises, "Devote yourself to study and hold fast to your faith" (my version) but "enter not a state that is in peril; stay not in a state that is in danger. Show yourself when the Way prevails in the Empire, but hide yourself when it does not" (8:13). According to the original in Chinese. "Devote yourself to learning and hold fast to your faith" is closer to the Chinese original than Lau's translation, "Have the firm faith to devote yourself to learning, and abide to the death in the good way."

¹⁴ See *The Analects*, 13:23. This is my own translation in accordance with Lau's version (p. 122) and the original in Chinese.

social animals anyway.¹⁶ In other

¹⁶ See Note 11. Also, these following quotations from *The Analects* underlie how important social life means to Confucius, however disappointed he is from time to time. Ch'ang chu and Chieh Ni were ploughing together yoked as team. Confucius went past them and sent Tzu-lu to ask them where the ford was. Ch'ang Chu said, 'who is that taking charge of the carriage?' Tzu-lu said, 'It is K'ung Ch'iu.' 'Then, he must be the K'ung ch'iu of Lu.' 'He is.' 'Then, he doesn't have to ask Where the ford is.'

Tzu-lu asked Chien Ni. Chien Ni said, 'Who are you?' 'I am Chung Lu.' 'Then, you must be the disciple of K'ung Chiu of Lu?' 'Lu answered, 'I am.' 'Throughout the Empire men are all the same. Who is there for you to change places? Moreover, for your own sake, would it not be better if, instead of following a Gentleman who keeps running away from men, you follow one who runs away from the world altogether? All this while he carried on harrowing without interruption.

Tzu-lu went and reported what was said to Confucius. The Master was lost in thought for a while and said, 'One cannot associate with birds and beasts. Am I not a member of this human race? Who, then, is there for me to associate with? While the Way is to be found in the Empire, I will not change places with him' (18:6).

The passage from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* seems to coincide quite significantly with Confucius's response. "Zarathustra answered: 'I love man.' 'Why,' asked the saint, 'did I go into the forest and the desert? Was it not because I loved man all-too-much? Now I love god; man I love not. Man is for me too imperfect a thing. Love of man would kill me. Do not go to man. Stay in the forest! Go rather even to the animals! Why do you not want to be as I am – a bear among bears, a bird among birds?'" See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, The Portable Nietzsche*, Ed. trans. introd., Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 123.

words, we need to help our students to find out what they already have within themselves and within their cultures, while pointing out the critical tradition in the West. Then let them be themselves by learning from both traditions. Let them flow naturally in logic as well as in cultural logic. Success in critical thinking thus means success in reconciliation of principle, place, and personality. Like water, the favorite image of Taoism, critical thinking in Eastern way may incarnate itself in the forms of streams or steams; it may celebrate its mercurial existence in forms of falls, rivers, lakes, seas, or oceans; it may creatively shape itself into any conceivable geographical forms that resist, retain, contain its flows. With its tributary or watery tenacity, flexibility, and purpose, it ultimately overflows or outflows whatever obstacles temporally house or detain it. This tributary quality inherent in critical thinking in Asian context is hard to define but is actively present in the process of critical thinking. It is the supple or "tributary" expression of our unyielding ultimate ideal that responds to the problems of reality through our own vigilant self-conscious and responsive voice and vision.

From this perspective, we can see that critical thinkers in Asia are not just thinkers. They are also doers and adapters in the humble image of flowing water. They do not think only in consistency with their method, principle, and logic, but in consistence with reality, which is their ultimate method, principle, and logic — all in one. Is not Confucius a critical thinker when he self-consciously turns away from the issues of God and afterlife to focus on

immediate social problems?¹⁷ Is he not a critical thinker, as he, on the one hand, emphasizes the necessity to save one's life by avoiding any troubled states beyond remedy, but, on the other hand, glorifies death for principles or in pursuit of his social reform agenda? Is he not as much as a great critical thinker as Socrates being so inconsistent with himself? Is he not a critical thinker when he argues that honesty means that father should cover his son or vice versa for their wrong doings?¹⁸ No, Confucius knows what his priority is in deciding

¹⁷ This brief dialogue from *The Analects* best illustrates Confucius' attitudes regarding the matter, "Chi-lu asked how the spirits of the dead and gods should be served. The Master said, 'You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?' 'May I ask about death?' 'You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?'" (11:12). Confucius seems quite consistent with this issues according to *The Analects*, "The topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder and gods" (7:22) and "Fan Ch'ih asked about wisdom. The Master said, 'to work for the things the common people have a right to and to keep one's distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence can be called wisdom'" (6:22).

¹⁸ Confucius' thoughts on the definition of honesty is well reflected in the following dialogue from *The Analects*, which in some ways parallels or coincides with Plato's "Euthyphro." "The Governor of She said to Confucius, "In our village there is a man nicknamed 'Straight Body.' When his father stole a sheep, he gave evidence against him." Confucius answered, 'In our village those are straight are quite different. Fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. Straightness is to be found in such behavior'" (13:18).

whether to live or to die for what he believes in. He is a great critical thinker because he thinks in context, perspective, and with understanding of the needs and priority that reality defines and requires.¹⁹ As reflected in *The Analects*, Confucius is, indeed, *consistently inconsistent* or *inconsistently consistent* varying with the challenges he meets in reality. He defends, for instance, Kuan Chung, the same person whom he also criticizes in *The Analects*: Tzu-kung said, 'I don't suppose Kuan Chung was a benevolent man. Not only did he not die for Prince Chiu, but he lived up to help Duke Huan who had the Prince killed.' The Master said, 'Kuan Chung helped Duke Huan to become the leader of the feudal lords and to save the Empire from collapses. To this day, the common people still enjoy the benefit of his acts. Had it not been for Kuan Chung, we might be wearing our hair down and folding our robes to the left. Surely, he was not like the common man or woman who, in their *petty faithfulness*, commit suicide in a ditch without anyone taking any note' (emphasis added).²⁰

Therefore, Confucius does what Emerson would agree upon, because for Emerson, "A foolish consistency is the

¹⁹ The statement from Translators' Preface underlines the point. "Unlike many of his Western counterparts who have attempted to philosophize in an ahistorical and acultural manner, Confucius was deeply concerned about the pressing problems of his day" (ix). See Ames and Rosemont, Jr., *ibid.*

²⁰ See *The Analects* (14:17). For Confucius' criticism on Kuan Chung, see 3:22.

hobgoblin of little mind, adored by little statement and philosophers and divines. With constancy a great soul has simply nothing to do.”²¹

For the same reason, Gandhi also demonstrates how insightful he is as a critical thinker when he insists that the British be driven through non-violent resistance and compromises when the colonial government yields. He is an exemplary critical thinker for both his political idealism and pragmatism. His non-violence movement succeeds because he thinks in the rich Indian tradition and with thorough understanding of his enemy and his people. The same is true with Nehru. As Gandhi in “Hind Swaraj” and Nehru in “What IS India?” they both stand out as quintessential critical *and* creative thinkers who respond to the priority of real life and tradition.²² Besides, even with emphasis on thinking for social harmony, critical thinkers in the East, like their counterparts in the West, also characterize their critical minds and thoughts with unmistakable personality. Those who achieve thorough understanding of the traditions and cultures that nourish their minds and enrich their thoughts, such as Confucius and Gandhi, also demonstrate strong individuality and personality.²³ All critical thinkers have truly convinced me

that to be a critical thinker is to be *yourself*. Methods in critical thinking as exemplified by Confucius are not to be imitated but to be cultivated from our hearts and souls. We should let culture think through ourselves before we can think as persons. Like Nietzsche in *Zarathustra* and Emerson in “American Scholar,” does not Confucius suggest

²³ Like Jesus, who furiously overturns the table in Jerusalem, Confucius can also be as emotional as any ordinary person, according to *The Analects*, “Confucius said of the Chi Family, ‘They use eight rows of eight dancers each to perform in their courtyard. If this can be tolerated want cannot be tolerated?’ (3:1). Confucius also emotionally reveals his personality in the following passages from *The Analects*. ‘The Master said, ‘There is no one who understands me.’ Tzu-kung said, ‘How is it that there is no one who understand you?’ The Master said, ‘I do not complain against Heaven, nor do I blame Man. In my studies, I start from below and get through to what is up above. If I am understand at all, it is, perhaps, by Heaven’” (14:35). ‘The master went to see Nan Tzu. Tzu-lu was displeased. The Master swore, ‘If I have done anything improper, may Heaven’s curse be on me, may Heaven’s curse be on me!’” (6:28). ‘When Yen Yuan died, the Master said, ‘Alas! Heaven has bereft me! Heaven has bereft me!’” (11:9). For further references on Confucius personality in contrast, see also 11:8, 11:11, 10:17, 17:20, and 14:38.

²¹ See Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The New American Library, 1950), p. 152. See also Note 12.

²² See “Hind Swaraj” by Mohandas K. Gandhi and “What Is India” by Jawaharlal Nehru in *Classics of Eastern Thought*, Ed. Lynn H. Nelson and Patrick Peebles (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1991).

that his best disciples are the ones who learn *least* from him?²⁴ Lu Xun (or Lu Hsun), the well-known Chinese writer

²⁴ In *The Analects*, there are various such suggestions as in this quotation. "The Master asked, 'I can speak to Hui all day without his disagreeing with me in any way. Thus he would seem to be stupid. However, when I take a closer look at what he does in private after he has withdrawn from my presence, I discover that it does, in fact, throw light on what I said. Hui is not stupid after all'" (2:9). Also as Professor Roger Ames of the University of Hawaii suggested through his prompt email response to my request for his expert opinions, the following passages further underline how Confucius looked at this issue. "The Master said to Tzu-kung, 'Who is the better man, you or Hui?' 'How dare I compare myself with Hui? When he is told one thing he understands ten. When I am told one thing I understand only two.' The Master said, 'You are not as good as he is. Neither of us is as good as he is'" (5:9) and "The Master said, 'I never enlighten anyone who has not been driven distraction by trying to understand a difficulty or who has not got into a frenzy trying to put his ideas into words.' 'When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him a second time'" (7:8).

Ralph Waldo Emerson's interesting relationships with his followers or disciples could also help to understand this issue from a different but related direction. Emerson, for instance, adamantly kept himself away from Transcendentalists or the movement that arose from his inspiring ideas like a father disowning his son. For Emerson understands, according to Henry James, the irony in his Transcendentalist friends' "fastidious and critical stand" and he "was not moved to believe in their fastidiousness as a productive principle even when they directed it

and critical thinker of the 20's and 30's, once said that first person who compared a beautiful maiden to a flower was a genius but the second an idiot. Once our students can understand this, they will be critical thinkers with improved confidence and skills. They will know how to personalize or "customize" what looks like a universally applicable reasoning process in *creative* ways. As teachers, we may often unconsciously tend to believe or want our students to believe that as long as we know certain methods/forms and then practice hard, we may become good thinkers. Unfortunately, many good college teachers are

upon *abuses* which he abundantly recognized." As a result, he "drops them, sheds them, diffuses them . . . as if there would be a grossness in holding him to anything so temporal as a responsibility." Emerson understands, as James also emphasizes, application of one's ideas in action inevitably means "violent reduction," the fate of which he would like to escape particularly with regard to his once sound but soon soured relationship with Henry David Thoreau, one of his most devout followers. For Emerson, as James also points out, Thoreau "must have had Emerson's moderating and even chastening effect" of reflective thoughts, but his application of Emerson's idea is "violent and limited." As a result, it "became a matter of prosaic detail, the non-payment of taxes, the non-wearing of a necktie, the preparation of one's food one's self, the practice of a rude sincerity — all things not of the essence." See "A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson," *Henry James the Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism*, Ed. Roger Gard (London: Penguin, 1987).

themselves unsuccessful or mediocre thinkers. In one way or another, they are just rules-describers or methods-talkers. For the same reason, the millionaires or billionaires who have made fortunes in the stock market are often not the stock-brokers, the professionals who seem to know the market better than ordinary investors. There is something quite similar here that connects teaching with stock brokering, *the power of personality* contextualized with the dynamic of financial world, which we easily miss when we are all too enthusiastic about methods. Similarly, our students should also know that critical thinking in Asian context could often be as *poetic, intuitive, inspirational* as logical. It is not just a matter of logic or reasoning. Critical thinking in the East is often done in poetic language. Confucius and Chuang Tzu, for instance, like to express their critical thoughts in poetic language. It is not because metaphysical process needs to be decorated with metaphorical flowery, but because critical thinking itself is creative and poetic.²⁵ With its vigor and rigor, subtlety and sophistication, critical thinking in the East is distinctive and effective in its own ways.

As we know how to discern significant points of similarity in difference and vice versa, we will notice that critical thinking in the East also underlines something universal – story telling, because critical thinkers in the East, like many of their counterparts in the West are often creative story tellers, too. Yes, as humans, we all love stories. We love stories as kids, as novel-readers, and as moviegoers. We grow up with stories; we are enlightened *through* them. Our civilizations bathe in great stories, such as legends and epics; they record our heroic deeds, inspire our imaginations, enrich our souls, and strengthen our morals. We, *however*, often take their importance for granted. Everyone *knows* that we cannot live without the sun that shines on us, the earth that nourishes us, the air that energizes us, the dew that refreshes us, the rains that shower us, the mist that refreshes us; but *not* every one pays adequate attention to these wonderful daily blessings. Similarly, we tend to forget how important the stories are in our lives in relation with critical thinking simply because they are *too* important. As teachers, we therefore have the responsibility to revitalize the indispensable sources of our knowledge, the narrative traditions, which, as Walter J. Ong often deplores, have become sadly overlooked in the West. We have the responsibilities, in other words, to tap in the strong intellectual and literary tradition in both cultures – East and West. If to teach means to inspire our students for critical thinking, not to bore them, we need to tell stories in the classroom. We respect Socrates, Plato, Chuang Tzu, and Confucius as great philosophers because they are quintessentially great critical thinkers

²⁵ This is why Confucius emphasizes the importance of poetry in *The Analects*, such as “The Master said, ‘Be stimulated by the *Odes*, take your stand on the rites, and be perfected by music’” (8:8) and “The master said, ‘why is it none of you, my friends, study the *Odes*? An apt quotation from the *Odes* may serve to stimulate the imagination, to show one’s breeding, to smooth over difficulties in a group, and to give expression to complaints’” (17:9). Here “to show one’s breeding” should be translated as “to observe” according to the Chinese original, “guan.”

who know how to enlighten their readers through engaging narratives. Plato's "dialogues" are full of stories. *Chuang Tzu* abounds in fascinating narratives. In *The Analects*, Confucius demonstrates how to teach through "relating." In his *Essays*, Montaigne emphasizes the importance of narrative by saying, "I do not teach, I only relate."²⁶ For good critical thinkers, stories or narratives, as Montaigne would also emphasize, often exceed their simple need for "example," "authority," or "ornament" because they "carry sometimes[,] besides what [the writers] apply them to, the seed of a more rich and bolder matter."²⁷ In classic rhetoric, we are *all* encouraged to use digression for storytelling. We love literature and movies because we love the stories *in* them that make us think.

Thus whether in the East or in the West, telling stories in the classroom helps both students and teachers live up to their potential as learners and instructors. Stories are good analogies that inspire our imagination and concretize our expression. All students in my classes, I believe, are potentially competent logicians or rhetoricians because they *use* the language to communicate and to make arguments. Similarly, they are also potentially competent critical thinkers because they, like all humans, are interested in sharing and exchanging their criticism of good or bad movie stories with classmates or friends. Therefore,

telling stories and asking students, particularly students from non-western countries, to tell stories in class will help them to become further conscious of the dormant potential inside themselves. It will make them eager to narrate and criticize what they feel and think not only orally but also in writing. From merely listening to stories, my students are often motivated to tell or to write stories and arguments ourselves. To teach classes through narratives for critical thinking has a great impact on teachers, too. It will *sensitize* teachers critically to the daily occurrences otherwise overlooked and make them further conscious of using "concrete" languages.

Personally, I find it a success every time I walk into classroom and start class by telling a five-minute story related to the materials to be covered as an introduction or a warming-up exercise. I tell stories from various resources, such as newspapers, books, or personal experiences. I often choose stories familiar to students but tell them in such a critical way as to encourage students to *see* different meanings in them, especially with regard to the subject to be discussed in class. From time to time, I re-tell various thought-provoking stories of both Eastern and Western origins, such as anecdotes from *Chuang Tzu* and biblical sources. For instance, I use story of Jesus on the Cross, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"²⁸ as

²⁶ Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, *The Essays*, Trans. Charles Cotton (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), p. 113-114.

²⁷ *Ibid.*.

²⁸ See Mark 15:34 and Psalm 22:1, The Holy Bible (New York: New American Library, 1974). For those students who are familiar with the biblical text, they often argue that Jesus is reciting the lines from the Psalm at the moment. Some make the same emphasis

an introduction to various paintings of Jesus on the cross, such as the one by Rubens, as the critical responses to the emotionally paradoxical situation from the artists' points of views. Is Jesus really suffering with such despair like an ordinary human? Yes, he probably should or must die this humanly way to move us with real human blood and agony. But, if so, the situation can also be scary and discouraging. Is he not divine and ready for the sacrifice? Are we as ready or stronger than the prepared Son of God for a similar ordeal?

Students often volunteer their own stories and/or responded with various critical questions and explanations afterwards. From time to time, I also ask students to prepare their own stories for provocative critical thinking relating to the subject matter. This strategy works well for my humanities and literature classes because all students, as I believe, love stories for fun and for reflection.

Ultimately, the lingering question is still how to define and value critical thinking. In this case, it is important that we know how beneficial it is for us to view or examine critical thinking in the West and in the East in terms of what paradigms we use. It is equally important that

after consulting their parents and even priests. But the question still remains, why? Dostoevsky also deals with this situation in *The Idiot* through Prince Myshkin's personal account of the bleak painting of Christ on the cross he sees in the poorly lit old house where Rogozhin lives and murders Nastasya Filippovna in the end. See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, Trans. & introd. Constance Garnett (Toronto: Bantam, 1981), pp. 395-6.

we not only examine critical thinking with reference to the critical paradigms we depend on but also define or re-define the paradigms themselves. We should, in other words, examine not only the actual context but also conceptual criterion we use to measure and assess the situation. Under a microscope, we may see great differences between the East and the West as often dramatized in various pithy stereotypes. But with a telescope, the difference may not be as dramatic as it appears. The traditions in critical thinking often vary not so much with itself but rather with our perceptions and expectations, the paradigms of our critique. Sometimes what really matter is not what we *measure* but what we measure *with*. From this perspective, we can certainly argue that critical thinking is not weak in Asia but rich in different ways that await further recognition, understanding, revaluation, and appreciation. It is also clear that paradigms of critical thinking changes in response to the overall social and cultural scenarios from one culture to another throughout history, and each nation must have its paradigms of critical thinking that sustain the nation and culture the way they are. As a matter of fact, I have survived as humanities teacher in the U.S., *not* because I have been reincarnated overnight in the West as a stronger critical thinker. It is because I have more opportunities to exercise and to hone the critical thinking skills that I have cultivated within myself as Chinese native.