



A FROG IN A WELL

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Mao Zedong (毛泽东 Máo Zédōng 1893-1976) in his Little Red Book (毛主席语录; Máo Zhǔxí Yǔlù 1964) chapter 22 compared the short sighted to a frog who was at the bottom of a well:

In approaching a problem a Marxist should see the whole as well as the parts. A frog in a well says, "The sky is no bigger than the mouth of the well." That is untrue, for the sky is not just the size of the mouth of the well. If it said, "A part of the sky is the size of the mouth of a well", that would be true, for it tallies with the facts. "On Tactics Against Japanese Imperialism" (December 27, 1935), Selected Works, Vol. I, p. 159. (Quotations Chairman Mao ch. 22)

The anecdote about the frog was written in 1935 in a treatise about the conflict with the Japanese in mainland China. Mao was quoting an ancient Chinese story written by Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu 莊子 "Master Zhuang" late 4th century BC) chapter 17 'Autumn Floods'. The latter was one of the founders of Taoism. The story is proverbial in several Asian cultures.

While Chinese culture is remarkably different from European culture, a surprising point



of connection is Marxism (official philosophy of China since 1949). Karl Marx (1818-1893) wrote his dissertation on Greek philosophy (*The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, Jena 1841) and then went on to develop his class conflict a notion which he derived from the German philosopher Hegel (the teacher of his doctoral supervisor). It was first discussed in Plato's dialogue, the *Parmenides*, where he talks about the master – slave relation (Plato *Parmenides* 133a-134a): the first time the topic became an object of philosophy. Greek culture becomes one of the main points of contact between China and Europe, the Americas, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. This will be the case as long as communism is a point of reference in Chinese culture.

Plato also has a philosophical story about a well:

ὥσπερ καὶ Θαλῆν ἀστρονομοῦντα, ᾧ Θεόδωρε, καὶ ἄνω βλέποντα, πεσόντα εἰς φρέαρ, Θρακτὰ τις ἐμμελῆς καὶ χαρίεσσα Θραπαινίς ἀποσκῶψαι λέγεται ὡς τὰ μὲν ἐν οὐρανῷ προθυμοῖτο εἰδέναι, τὰ δ' ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ καὶ παρὰ πόδας λανθάνοι αὐτόν. ταῦτόν δὲ ἀρκεῖ σκῶμμα ἐπὶ πάντας [174β] ὅσοι ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ διάγουσι. τῷ γὰρ ὄντι τὸν τοιοῦτον ὁ μὲν πλησίον καὶ ὁ γείτων λέληθεν, οὐ μόνον ὅτι πράττει, ἀλλ' ὀλίγου καὶ εἰ ἄνθρωπος ἐστὶν ἢ τι ἄλλο θρέμμα: τί δέ ποτ' ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος καὶ τί τῇ τοιαύτῃ φύσει προσήκει διάφορον τῶν ἄλλων ποιεῖν ἢ πάσχειν, ζητεῖ τε καὶ πράγματ' ἔχει διερευνώμενος. μανθάνεις γάρ που, ᾧ Θεόδωρε: ἢ οὐ; (Pl. *Theaet.* 174)

*Why, take the case of Thales, Theodorus. While he was studying the stars and looking upwards, he fell into a pit, and a neat, witty Thracian servant girl jeered at him, they say, because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet. The same jest applies to all who pass their lives in philosophy. For really such a man pays no attention to his next door neighbour; he is not only ignorant of what he is doing, but he hardly knows whether he is a human being or some other kind of a creature; but what a human being is and what is proper for such a nature to do or bear different from any other, this he inquires and exerts himself to find out. Do you understand, Theodorus, or not? (Plato *Theaetetus* 174a)*

Zhuang Zi and Plato are making the same point: it makes no sense to look at a part and to neglect the entire. It is not good to look at the general picture without knowing the details. It is useless to understand the details without knowing the context. Anyone would agree.



Plato shortly after the story about the philosopher falling into the well indicates that the true philosopher is he who becomes similar to God according to his ability (Plato *Theaetetus* 176b). Plato was first person to coin the term theology (Plato *Republic* 379a). His interests were different from Marx who believed that religion was the opium of the people:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, 1843)

The use of the term opium appears to recall directly the recent Anglo Chinese war (1839-1842) also known as the 'First Opium War'. Marx was concerned by the negative aspects of the opium trade promoted by the west to the detriment of China. In his article of 1858, he wrote damning words about both parties:

While the semi-barbarian stood on the principle of morality, the civilized opposed to him the principle of self. That a giant empire, containing almost one-third of the human race, vegetating in the teeth of time, insulated by the forced exclusion of general intercourse, and thus contriving to dupe itself with delusions of Celestial perfection-that such an empire should at last be overtaken by fate on [the] occasion of a deadly duel, in which the representative of the antiquated world appears prompted by ethical motives, while the representative of overwhelming modern society fights for the privilege of buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest markets-this, indeed, is a sort of tragical couplet stranger than any poet would ever have dared to fancy. (Karl Marx in *New York Daily Tribune, Articles On China, 1853-1860*, [Trade or Opium?], September 20, 1858)

While Marxism may be just a superficial point of contact between western and Chinese culture. Chinese and Greek philosophies (e.g. Zhuang Zi and Plato) appear to reveal deeper common concerns as well as allowing differences to emerge by their common quest to solve humanities' oldest and unchanging questions and concerns.