

Introduction

Wen (文) is a term whose sophistication and significance for the Chinese tradition parallels that of *Dao* (道) and *Qi* (气). It is a term that designates everything from natural patterns to the individual units that make up Chinese writing, to literature, to human culture itself.¹ I argue that *wen* became such an important term to Chinese civilization because embedded in the term is the Chinese philosophy of culture and humanism. As Wing-tsit Chan writes, “If one word could characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophy, that word would be humanism—not the humanism that denies or slights a Supreme Power, but one that professes the unity of man and Heaven. In this sense, humanism has dominated Chinese thought from the dawn of its history” (Chan 1963, 3). It is because of a profound and dominant humanism in the Chinese tradition that the term *wen* became so ubiquitous. *Wen* embodied the ideal of Confucianism: attaining humanity through culture while recognizing that we are part of a natural continuum. It embodies the Confucian vision of harmony between humans, human culture, and the natural world. Whereas the philosophy of culture originated in the eighteenth century with thinkers such as Vico, Herder, Voltaire, and Rousseau, Chinese philosophy (notably the Confucian tradition), since the beginning of philosophical speculation, orientated itself around the question of culture. How culture was justified can be seen in a philosophical reconstruction of the etymology of the term *wen*. *Wen* is both humanism and the *form* of humanism—it is the totality of cultural forms through which we achieve our humanity.

There is pressing contemporary need to think about culture, especially culture under the Confucian-Cassirerian mode. The context for a philosophical defense of culture is the colonial world order that was so disastrously unable to accept the plurality of cultural orders and

the legitimate sovereignty and agency of human beings to create their own cultural forms. Through its “discovery” of the American continent, Europe encountered previously unimagined diversity. It was this confrontation with diversity that precipitated the first formulations of “international law,” on the basis of which the Amerindians were robbed of their sovereignty.² The universalism of international law was claimed by the father of international law, Francisco de Vitoria, on the basis of two assumptions: one, that the cultural differences of the Amerindians were a sign of their deviance from international law (universalism); and, two, that international law (universalism) was Roman law writ large.³ This stillborn, troubled first encounter with cultural diversity has left a lasting legacy; mainstream academic philosophy, in the Francisco de Vitorian mode, still assumes the fact of universalism and is worryingly insensitive to the empirical existence of diversity. For mainstream academic philosophy, culture is irrelevant to philosophy, just as the existence of cultural difference was of no consequence for the Spaniards’ vision of universalism. What cultural difference that exists is parsed as either nonessential or deviant and so of no consequence to a putative essential sameness. (Cultural) diversity is not real, only sameness is. The inability to dignify cultural difference as real has led to the more worrying (historical) phenomenon of parsing difference in racial terms. Given the empirical fact of human diversity but the simultaneous refusal to attribute this diversity to a human agency capable of establishing its own terms of engagement with the world, diversity was parsed in ontological terms. During the heyday of empire, whole swathes of natural scientists and philosophers theorized the racial origins of human difference.⁴ For these thinkers, the fact of (cultural) diversity can only mean that not all humans are equal on the great chain of being or the ladder of civilization. Due to this history, mainstream academic philosophy currently utilizes impoverished resources for understanding difference or pluralism. What this book offers is a way of thinking about human beings that emphasizes their agency to create different *cultures*, which then become, to a large degree, constitutive of their identities. There are no “ifs” in history: we cannot ask what the world might be like *if* we had preserved more of the civilizations and cultural forms that were erased due to their inability to conform to a putative “universal.” What we can do, however, is strive not to repeat the same history. To do this, we need a systematic worldview in which human beings are defined by their culture. This is a better definition of the human being than either emphasizing our

fundamental sameness (i.e., we are all rational animals) or ontological difference (i.e., we belong to different races of varying worth). Defining the human being in terms of culture assumes that (1) the existence of culture is a sign of the (creative, spontaneous) agency of that group of people, and (2) cultures are dynamic and can change. As “symbolic animals” (in Cassirerian terms) or people of *wen* (in Confucian terms), we are inherently *cultural* beings, and implicit in this definition is a way of thinking about personhood that gives an important role to pluralism in our identities while acknowledging a fundamental commensurability. As cultural beings, we differ because we have different cultures, but we are fundamentally commensurable because we are all symbolic animals. That we have culture is a sign of that fundamentally human capacity to create culture. Culture avoids the deceptive universalism of defining the human being in terms of rationality, as there are as many different reasons as there are different cultures. Culture also avoids the peril of reifying perceived differences into underlying substances. What difference exists between cultures is a creation of human spontaneity, as opposed to a sign of essential, ontological difference such as race. Culture avoids the pitfall of that imagined, dichotomous other beloved by defenders of universalism—a babelesque relativism in which there is no possibility of commensurability between cultures. The empirical fact is that there has *always* been a plurality of cultures and that cultures, through mutual engagement, absorb and transform each other. The very fact that different cultures adopt each other’s characteristics is evidence of the possibility of cultural translation. Just as mutual understanding (translation) is possible between different languages, so is mutual understanding possible across different cultures.

Finally, the Confucian-Cassirerian conception of culture allocates human beings a position among the myriad things of the world that allows for both commensurability (or continuity) and uniqueness. We are continuous with all other living things in that we seek to express ourselves, but we are unique among all living things in that we have an especially sophisticated language. The Confucian-Cassirerian conception of culture reinstates the human being to an accurate position within the myriad things and so secures an ecologically sustainable self-identity for humanity. To defend the importance of culture as a philosophical paradigm, I draw on classical Confucianism and Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms. The classical Confucian conception of culture is one of the important elements in the longevity and success of the Chinese

civilization, while Ernst Cassirer is an heir to the spirit of Goethe, and the golden age of German humanism.

Historical Reconstruction of *Wen*

It is Cassirer's and Confucianism's humanism on which I wish to focus in this project. To do so, I will draw on a few related themes. Key to both Confucianism's and Cassirer's humanism is the human creation of "form": a dynamic, functional system for organizing experience,⁵ which is not derived from or modeled on a transcendent source but instead constructed by humans in coherence with their natural and social milieus. In the Cassirerian context, these forms include, but are not limited to, language, myth, science, art, law, and religion. In the Confucian context, these forms include, but are not limited to, the hexagrams of the *Yijing*, language, literature, music, and ritual.⁶ The metaphysical foundation for, or transcendental element of, this humanistic form is the inalienable expressivity of the phenomenal world to human beings. Via this form, the social human being is harmonized with the nonsubjective world. While the world is inherently expressive to human beings, it is only through the human creation of form that we can go back to the phenomenal world and order it in a way that enables meanings that extend beyond momentary affectivity. Simultaneous with the creation of form is thus an ordering of the phenomenal world that enables it to gain a heretofore unavailable stability and meaning. The truth, stability, and meaning of our world is thus dependent upon the forms of our own creation. The forms themselves derive their truth, stability, and meaning in relation to the (functional) law which in turn is derived from the internal coherence of the totality of individual forms. This philosophy of form is thus neither a realism nor an idealism: it is nondualistic. Truth, stability, and meaning (or the conditions of possibility of our humanity) are neither passively copied from an antecedently existing reality nor imposed by the ego. A symbolic form is, furthermore, not a *forma substantialis*; it is dynamic. This symbolic form is, lastly, not a preexisting-determined fact of the world; it must be created (*tun*) by the forming powers of the human spirit. We can only comprehend the world and ourselves through our own creations (*Gebilde*), and so the creation and maintenance of these creations is both descriptive of and the prescriptive task of human culture.

With this metaphysical-epistemological model of the genesis of meaning is a stress on harmony and personal cultivation. Without an already integral, preexisting truth, stability, and meaning to be copied from an antecedently existing reality, these aspects of reality need to be created and maintained. The human agent thus becomes the maker and keeper of this harmony. We are only able to do this by embedding ourselves ever more deeply in these forms, so that we may participate more meaningfully, and thus be capable of increasing competence in the guardianship and creative innovation of the space of our cultural forms, hence the stress on personal cultivation.

Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) is perhaps the European tradition's greatest philosopher of culture.⁷ Against the previous tradition that defined man in terms of his rational capacities, Cassirer posited that the defining attribute of man was his capacity for symbol making. Instead of the capacity for truth being the defining feature of human beings, it is the capacity for meaning. Consequently, whereas previously any possibility for our attainment of freedom lay in the attainment of truth, now it lies in our capacity for meaning-making. Meaning is dynamic, evolving, cooperative (between peoples as well as between people and the *forms* of meaning-making) and pluralistic. It is these symbols, or forms, or symbolic forms that allow us to achieve a freedom from the natural world of determinism, and so be free for our humanity—free for those distinguishing aspects that set us apart from the rest of the natural world. In his last speech, Faust says the highest wisdom is to recognize that “[h]e only earns his freedom and existence, who daily conquers them anew.” Cassirer comments that, while the meaning that life is endowed through this conquest might not constitute man's happiness, it does constitute “his distinctive dignity” (Cassirer 2007b, 527). Like the Confucian *ren* (仁), the epitome of humanity can never be reached, but our distinctive dignity lies in the actions that make us free for the infinite potentiality of our humanity.

Given the importance of culture for our ability to achieve humanity, the idea that *wen* enables or carries the Dao (*wen yi zai dao* 文以载道) became a dominant guiding principle for the Chinese literati throughout Chinese history. This mutual dependence on humanism (i.e., Dao) and the forms of humanism is expressed by Cassirer's own definition of humanism: “‘*Humanitas*,’ in the widest sense of the word, denotes that completely universal—and, in this very universality, unique—medium in which ‘form,’ as such, comes into being and in which it can develop and

flourish” (NHPC 22). In both traditions, what most essentially defines humans is that there is no fixed essence: humans are defined by their ability to become human through cultural forms. What defines us is our capacity for civilization, and the enabling condition of civilization is the symbol. It is in this sense that Cassirer famously said that man is a symbolic animal, not a rational animal (EM 26). This project will focus on the classical Confucian texts⁸ that employ the term *wen*: the *Analects* and the *Xunzi*. It will also focus on (Confucian) texts that center around aspects of refined human culture that the Confucians saw under the rubric of *wen*—texts on music (*Yue Ji* 乐记), literature (*Wenxin Diaolong* 文心雕龙), and poetry (*Maoshi Xu* 毛诗序); as well as the “Ten Wings” (十翼) and especially the *Xici* (系辞), which provides a philosophical justification for the beginning of writing and civilization. It will look to other key texts in the Confucian canon, which is particularly sophisticated in articulating the relationship between human beings and the wider cosmic order: the *Zhongyong* (中庸) and *Daxue* (大学). What we will see is that the same paradigmatic relationship applies in the hexagrams, poetry, language, and ethical forms. A humanly created *form* is needed to consummate what was already implicit in either the world or the self. Conversely, there is always an assumption that the innate tendencies of either things or the self, tend toward externalization and only fully exist after the various cultural forms have manifested their potentiality. The fact that it is only the cultural forms of civilization that consummate “nature,” it is argued, is the Confucian understanding of *tian ren he yi*. The ideal of *tian ren he yi* that I refer to does not seek to make humans identical with *tian* and vice versa in order to unite them. It overcomes this dualism. I will show that *wen*, because it reconciled human culture with a natural continuum, because it is the *form* in which one realizes humanism, and because it embodies humanism *per se*, explains its omnipresence and privileged status in classical Chinese discourse.

This project is, in part, an exercise in philosophical translation. While it will be demonstrated that there are historical or metaphilosophical reasons for the comparability of the Confucian and Cassirerian project, the two intellectual traditions inevitably use different vocabularies. The translation of Confucianism and Cassirer into each other’s discourses will be mutually complementary. Cassirer will provide a vocabulary of critical idealism that will better situate the Confucian project of culture within the map of Western philosophy. Conversely, the sophistication of Confucian humanism will better draw out the ethical undercurrent

of the Cassirerian project that—as a German Jew in exile until the last days of his life—became central to his last writings. The ultimate aim of this project, however, is to transcend the national boundaries in which contemporary philosophy conceives itself. Aspiring to write *meaningful* philosophy for the entirety of humanity or from the perspective of humanity, from our point in history onwards, requires the philosopher to speak to the human experience at large. A truly universal philosophy, at the risk of stating the obvious, cannot be written from within the confines of one's own national tradition. We are no longer in a colonial situation, in which the traditions of others can be maligned and dismissed as non-“philosophy.” Philosophy is an activity that characterizes all human beings, that is, a systematic attempt to think about the human being's relationship to the world. A truly “universal” philosophy needs to earn its name by actually seeking to include the totality of humanity. This project aspires to be philosophy written under such a cosmopolitan mode.

The Contemporary Relevance of Cassirer and Confucianism

In the opening chapter of *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, Cassirer talks about “the crisis in man's knowledge of himself.” What Cassirer diagnoses as the crisis in man's knowledge of himself, is not dissimilar to Nietzsche's proclamation that “God is dead” (Nietzsche 2006, 5, 69; 2001, 120). One of the consequences of the Copernican overthrowing of the Aristotelian-Christian ontology was that there was no longer a meaningful way to approach the question of the nature of man. This crisis in man's knowledge of himself was not merely a theoretical problem needing the right solution, but an existential one that threatened the “whole extent of our ethical and cultural life” (EM 21–22). Cassirer sees much of philosophy from the Renaissance onwards as providing a new means for grounding our knowledge of ourselves. While this European existential crisis signaled the beginning of “modernism,” the Chinese tradition has been secular from its formative beginnings. Cassirer's “modern”⁹ solution for this metaphysical and existential vacuum, like Confucius and Confucianism, was culture. For both Cassirer and Confucianism, the twilight of the Gods is already actuality; but, instead of nihilism, this is, on the contrary, a reason for optimism: our fates are utterly in our own hands. For both Cassirer and Confucianism, the mark

of our distinctive dignity—one can say freedom—is that the process of being human is never complete. Humanity is at once completely in our own hands and an asymptotic hypothetical that we will never reach. It is this infinite potentiality that is the source of our freedom.

China of the twentieth century suffered a comparable “crisis in man’s knowledge of himself.” By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Chinese people were compelled by the historical course of events to confront Western culture. The followers of radical scientism, a doctrine espoused by the leaders of the May Fourth Movement (1919) saw classical Chinese culture as that which had historically held back intellectual progress and was directly responsible for China’s demise in the face of foreign aggressors. The May Fourth Movement is symptomatic of the profound intellectual malaise, urgent sense of cultural inferiority and panic about the fate of China that paralyzed the Middle Kingdom at the beginning of the century. This potent mix led the May Fourth Movement to a radical rejection of traditional Chinese learning and an almost visceral obsession with westernizing China. Right at this point, however, Liang Qichao, the leading scholar in China, returned from a research tour in Europe, and wrote a book about what he had seen at the end of the Great War of 1914–1918. Liang’s pessimism about Western culture woke many Chinese intellectuals from their vision that westernization would be the panacea to cure all China’s ills. New Confucianism arose as a response to the profound intellectual crisis that shook China to its core following the humiliations of colonialism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I think that the New Confucians were right that Confucianism, as a philosophical humanism, is not only a necessary philosophy for modern China but also of relevance for the modern world. The New Confucian’s answer to the threat of westernization, which they identified with instrumentalization and utilitarianism (i.e., one side of Kantian freedom/determinism paradigm), was Confucianism. A large part of the Confucian project, which is relevant to our contemporary times, I argue, is the Confucian conception of culture.

History has remembered Cassirer as a philosopher of the exact sciences, and not as a political or spiritual leader. Nor has history been kind to him. Some of Cassirer’s most successful students—Leo Strauss, Hans Blumenberg, Edgar Wind—reneged on Cassirer’s vision. Rudolf Carnap characterized Cassirer as “rather pastoral.” Isaiah Berlin judged him “serenely innocent,” and Adorno called him “totally gaga.” As Edward Skidelsky, the author of Cassirer’s first English biography con-

cludes, Cassirer's "thought remains, when all is said and done, a stranger to our age" (Skidelsky 2008, 7). Even if we "look back with nostalgia to a liberal such as Cassirer, whose interests were not confined solely, or even principally, to politics but spanned the breadth of human civilization"; his "humane and happy dream," when all is said and done, "was only a dream" (237). Cassirer's vision for the harmony between the various fields of human endeavor and for philosophy as the keeper of this harmony is today dismissed as naively optimistic. In the symbolic encounter between Cassirer, Heidegger, and Carnap at Davos in 1929, the only loser was Cassirer. Carnap (along with other members of the Vienna Circle) later emigrated to the USA and lived long enough (1970) to see analytic philosophy established, while Heidegger, despite all the scandals, captured the imagination of postwar Europe¹⁰ and became a seminal influence on the dominant intellectual trends of the twentieth century: post-existentialism, structuralism, postmodernism, and deconstructionism. Cassirer died in 1945, after twelve years in exile, never having stayed in one place (England, Sweden, and the USA) long enough to establish his influence.

Confucianism is similarly looked upon as an innocent idealism or optimistic humanism too naive for the rigors of "modernity."¹¹ It is often seen as nothing other than a collection of utilitarian norms constituting a banal pragmatism, or it is understood as another "world religion."¹² Few people appreciate the humanism that lies at its heart. The Confucian-Cassirerian optimism in human beings and culture is not a naive one. The optimism that they share is one where we do not need to put our own fates into the hands of some extra-human law, be that scientific, natural, legal, or religious. No scientific, natural, legal, or religious law can have the ultimate authority in determining what we *should* do.¹³ Neither Cassirer nor Confucianism ever gave us the idea that we can become the best versions of ourselves through terms that we ourselves have made—culture; and therein lies their optimism. By placing Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms in dialogue with the Confucian philosophy of culture and vice versa, I hope that a stronger case will be made for a humanism conceived through a philosophical defense of culture. It is culture—the idea that we become what we are through forms of our own creation, and for which we are wholly responsible—that will help us to survive.

Cassirer felt a deep personal attachment to Goethe.¹⁴ In her memoirs, his wife tells of his intense, lifelong devotion to Goethe.¹⁵

Toni Cassirer's assessment of Goethe's intellectual influence on Cassirer encapsulates many of the themes of this project. The ultimate goal of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms is to give philosophical form to the feeling of liberation that Goethe's works inspired in him.¹⁶ For me, it is as if Cassirer rewrote Goethe's life and works, or indeed Goethe's spirit in (systematic) philosophical, as opposed to literary, terms:

His interpretation of history; his feeling for nature: his ongoing endeavour to broaden his outlook, to extend his knowledge to almost all areas in order to strengthen his judgement, and to protect it from one-sidedness, to keep it pure from influences of personal experiences, to dissociate it from current events—all this derived from Goethe. His firm belief in the values of the human personality, the longing for form and harmony, the abhorrence of violent destruction—of both his own and of the surrounding world—his abhorrence of ideological, political, or religious slogans—in short, the quintessence of his being, came from Goethe. I understood Goethe through Ernst and Ernst through Goethe. (T. Cassirer 1981, 87; my translation¹⁷)

I think Cyril Connolly put it very beautifully when he wrote in *The Unquiet Grave*, “For me success in life means survival. I believe that a ripe old age is nature's reward to those who have grasped her secret. I do not wish to die young or mad. The true pattern of existence can best be studied in a long life like Goethe's” (Connolly 1951, 10). If we wish to die neither young nor old, then the philosophy of Cassirer—the Goethe of our times—as well as the philosophy of a tradition characterized by peace, longevity, and tolerance, bears study. As Leibniz observes in his preface to the *Novissima Sinica*, written during the period 1697–99—a century that saw the Thirty Years War, Second Northern War, and Nine Years' War—the Chinese tradition has excelled in civil philosophy in a way that exceeded the European tradition:

But who would have believed that there is on earth a people who, though we are in our view so very advanced in every branch of behavior, still surpass us in comprehending the precepts of civil life? Yet now we find this to be so among the Chinese, as we learn to know them better. And so if we are their equals in the industrial arts, and ahead of them in contemplative sciences, certainly they surpass us (though it is

almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals. Indeed, it is difficult to describe how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other peoples, are directed to the achievement of public tranquility and the establishment of social order, so that men shall be disrupted in their relations as little as possible. (Leibniz 1994, 46–47)

I believe that what Leibniz saw as a laudable ability to adapt to the present life on the part of the Chinese can be accounted for through a reconstruction of their philosophy of culture. There was a comprehensive theoretical foundation that gave coherence and legitimacy to their practical philosophies, and it is an account of this theoretical foundation that I hope to provide.

For Cassirer, there are real consequences to our inability to conceive of philosophy as anything other than a contemplative science removed from culture, seeking only to understand transtemporal truths. Cassirer does not shy away from criticizing academic philosophy's failure to do its duty as the keeper of humane culture in the run-up to World War II. He saw the profession split down the middle between the antithetical extremes of *Lebensphilosophie* and logical positivism. It was no accident for Cassirer that logical positivism, which so easily led to mere technic and the mystical thrownness to our fates found in *Lebensphilosophie*, was so easily co-opted for the ends of political extremism. None of these philosophical schools took upon themselves the task of caring for the overall form of culture. They believed there was either *one* ultimate supracultural panacea, or an Archimedean point from which to objectively assess all human activity, and that was going to solve the problems of humanity. In their narrow focus on one domain, they became paralyzed in the face of the complexity of human culture as a whole. In Cassirer's eyes, both *Lebensphilosophie* and logical positivism gave way to the dogma that there is an a priori beyond the fact of culture itself. In Cassirer's view, and this is a view that I share, this is regression to the security of a God-principle as the ultimate explanation for all of human phenomena. It is fatalism as opposed to a humanism that holds that we make our own fates; and this fatalism infantilizes our human capacities.

This famous dualism which gripped German intellectual life is parodied in Thomas Mann's novel of ideas *The Magic Mountain* in the form of Naphta and Settembrini battling for the soul of Hans Castorp (who

symbolically represents Germany). Hans Castorp was ultimately lost to humanity not because Castorp couldn't overcome Naphta and embrace Settembrini, but because Settembrini did not offer a truly compelling vision of humanity. His enlightenment rationalism was antinomistically opposed to the other dimension of humanity represented by Naphta. What was not presented in the novel was a figure like the Goethean Cassirer, someone who gave form to human experience in a way that reconciled these two positions.¹⁸ Cassirer perhaps could have rescued Hans Castorp from his torpor, because Cassirer recognized the necessity and value of *all* human experience. In one dialogue between Hans Castorp and the sanatorium's director, Hofrat Behrens, Hans Castorp speaks of giving up the distinctively human dignity of conquering daily anew our freedom and existence:

“And if one is interested in life, one must be particularly interested in death, mustn't one?”

“Oh, well, after all, there is some sort of difference. Life is life which keeps the form through change of substance.”

“Why should the form remain?” said Hans Castorp.

“Why? Young man, what you are saying now sounds far from humanistic.”

“Oh, but form is so finicky [ete-pe-tete].” (Mann 1955, 266–67; modified)

Form is indeed so finicky, and so for so many of Mann's Nietzschean and Schopenhauerian protagonists¹⁹—Hans Castorp, the Buddenbrooks, and Adrian Leverkühn—they could not achieve form and so freedom. It is through form that we achieve freedom, as the title of Cassirer's 1916 *Freiheit und Form: Studien zur Deutschen Geistesgeschichte* tells us. It is the human ability to give form to experience that rescues us from unfreedom (our biological determinacy) and makes us free to be a human being in the world. If I may borrow Toni Cassirer's elegant turn of phrase, I understood Confucianism through Cassirer, and Cassirer through Confucianism. In both, it is through (cultural) forms that we achieve our freedom and humanity.

Existing Literature on *Wen*

There is, so far as I know, no philosophical works in the English language specifically on “culture” in Chinese philosophy. There are significant reasons for this. By and large, comparative works in the English language tend to take philosophical themes of pertinence to the Western tradition as a point of comparative orientation. Until recently, however, culture has not been perceived as a domain proper to philosophical enquiry.²⁰ Traditionally, Western philosophy has been a quest for certainty, and culture, understood as mere *doxa*, was irrelevant to the discipline. It is because culture has been peripheral to the concerns of Western philosophy that there has also been correlatively little work on culture in Chinese philosophy.

The importance of *wen* or culture for the Chinese tradition has not gone unnoticed, however, in sinological scholarship. Despite this, there has been a significant inability to appraise why *wen* or culture was so significant for the Chinese tradition. The inability of existing scholarship to take seriously the Chinese philosophical ideas about culture, I argue, reflects a failing on the part of (Anglophone) philosophical discourse to give theoretical legitimacy to the concept of “culture” itself. The inability for sinological scholarship to take culture seriously betrays two related philosophical assumptions. (1) In sinology, as in philosophy, the operative assumption has been that culture is merely *doxa* and as such is closely allied with its political manipulation through rhetoric (as with the Sophists whom Plato attacks for this reason in *Gorgias*). (2) Sinology has labored under a positivism²¹ that takes for granted the fact/value distinction. There is a realm of “facts” that can be empirically and universally understood through the methods of modern scholarship (i.e., the social “sciences”). Under this view, there is no originary spontaneity to “culture” for creating different values that differ across different cultures. Under the positivism embraced by mainstream sinology, human beings and national cultures are reduced to the common denominator of the social sciences. This inability to see culture as anything else than mere dogmatism/ideology cannot therefore see *wen* as anything other than merely ideology. In some ways, Cassirer’s project of culture was conceived as a means of overcoming the reduction of culture through methodologies that pretended to be universal and value-free.²² Cassirer’s project of culture is thus important in that it can help dignify the plurality of different cultures.²³ We can see these assumptions in operation in the two examples below.

Mark Edward Lewis is evidently aware that the pervasiveness of *wen* in classical Chinese intellectual life is glaring for anyone familiar with Chinese culture. “Writing permeates our images of China.” He informs us, “An urban scene distinguished by column upon column of graphs, visual arts defined by the brush and graphic line of the calligrapher-painter, a political order controlled by a mandarin selected for textual mastery, a religious practice relying on written documents to communicate with the spirits: at every level of life script holds sway” (Lewis 1999, 4). How is it that we explain this reverence for literacy throughout the span of Chinese history? In his (empirically magisterial) study, Lewis is guided by the conclusion that *wen* gave the theoretical support for the vision of an empire in which all future members of the upper echelons were educated or indoctrinated. *Wen* thus became a self-perpetuating prophecy that was upheld by those with power. *Wen* as this “soft power” or the software of the state was more resilient than its hardware, and, together with the economic dependence of its adherents, secured its longevity. The “intellectual commitment of the local elites” (4) to *wen*, is reduced to a purely utilitarian calculus. The explanation for the importance of writing in Lewis’s *Writing and Authority* thus redounds to the link between writing and state propaganda. The extent of the Chinese empire was greater than the central state had the physical means to govern, thus the centrality of writing lay in its ability to buttress “the vision of an empire” that could be spread across space (“between the imperial system and the localities”) and time (survive “the collapse of each of its incarnations”) (4). “The implanting of the imperial vision in local society in the form of the written language and its texts” (4) is thus the reason why writing came to define Chinese civilization. The extent of the meaning of writing in early China is thus ultimately exhausted by “the uses of writing to command assent and obedience,” and through examining “the types of writing employed in state and society to generate and exercise power” (1). To stress so overwhelmingly that one of the defining elements of Chinese culture was a result of political-utilitarian motives is to deny that there is any objectivity to “spirit” (*Geist*).²⁴ This ends up playing into orientalizing stereotypes of the Chinese as unfree, passive, half-humans (because they were denied a crucial aspect of their humanity) who have always lived under oppressive regimes. Divorced from a vision of subjective agency in which the subject (in concert with others) spontaneously creates her own meanings, the Chinese tradition is reduced to the vision of man found in the deterministic half of the

Kantian dualism. By not conceding that the Chinese were makers of their own meaning (and therefore freedom), one is making the Kantian dualism between freedom-determinism into geographical fact.²⁵

Likewise, in one of the most recent books to deal with Chinese writing, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture*, Andrea Bachner (2014) “uses the sinograph to analyze what binds languages, scripts, and medial expressions to cultural and national identity” (14). Since the “‘value’ of a script has always been determined by its potential to fulfill specific social and ideological functions” (3), the pride of Chinese culture—its writing—is reduced to a “script politics” (3), to “national language politics” (7). Any national pride in the sinograph is only a manifestation of “Chinese nationalism” tapping “into an age-old cultural tradition, reconstructed as a cultural whole, as a basis for political unity” (9).²⁶

The problem with this kind of “hermeneutics of suspicion” about *wen* is that the Chinese tradition did not have a comparable (Platonic) divide between Truth/Doxa; and as such did not see culture as secondary upon Truth, and so see it as closely related to ideological control. We are at a loss to understand *why* the Chinese tradition took culture so seriously if we see it merely as an arm of the political. Another problem is that the “hermeneutics of suspicion” was a term coined by Paul Ricoeur to characterize the skeptical or critical attitude about tradition found in the likes of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. The great irony is that this hermeneutics of suspicion—used to critically assess one’s *own* tradition—is used by a dominant strand in the Western tradition to critically assess the Chinese tradition. In this way, and under the context of colonialism and neocolonialism, the application of the hermeneutics of suspicion becomes a tool (on the part of many Western scholars) to delegitimize the cultural, intellectual, sociopolitical coherence of China as a historical entity. The application of the hermeneutics of suspicion to the Chinese tradition on the part of Western academe becomes a form of orientalism.

Another way of “explaining” why the Chinese took culture so seriously in the sinological literature on the subject is to say that a continuous historical reason for its importance cannot be given. Martin Kern for example argues that, “*Wen* is neither static nor universal; strenuous claims on its unwavering continuity beyond the realities of social and intellectual processes never escape the aporetic nature of any suprahistorical concept, i.e., being itself a child of its times and hence

historically confined” (Kern 2001, 43–44). On this interpretation, *wen* is basically meaningless: each speech act involving *wen* is so unique that each use of *wen* is a private speech act. By so radically historicizing *wen*, Kern has reduced it to mere particularity, and we are prevented from seeing the *continuity* and thus meaning of the term. I think Kern’s kind of historicism (i.e., empiricism) is well criticized by Cassirer when he writes that, “But our wealth of facts is not necessarily a wealth of thoughts. Unless we succeed in finding a clue of Ariadne to lead us out of this labyrinth, we can have no real insight into the general character of human culture; we shall remain lost in a mass of disconnected and disintegrated data which seem to lack all conceptual unity” (EM 22). By focusing on merely the “particular,” Kern has not been able to offer a “universal,” and the particular thus remains meaningless.²⁷ Kern is marking as off limits the possibility that there is an explanation for why the Chinese tradition took *wen* so seriously.

For Cassirer, once we give up on the (humanistic) idea that there is a creative spontaneity of spirit that makes the world meaningful for us, then the *facta* of culture, “necessarily amount to their history, which, according to its object, would define itself as history of language, history of religion and myth, history of art, etc.” (PSF 1:84). The *facta* of culture would amount to a merely empirical description (of *disjecta membra*) that makes no claims to what these facts *mean*. Presciently, therefore, Cassirer has diagnosed the contemporary relationship between academic sinology, skepticism and positivism. For Cassirer, a necessary logical result of a naive realism (positivism) that regards the objects of reality as something directly and unequivocally given, is an attitude of skepticism. If cultural forms (language, art, history, etc.) are not understood as *organs* of reality, as possessing their own spontaneous law of generation, but as mere imitators of an already complete reality, then skepticism towards culture is inevitable. If we succumb to the ideology that meaning is objectively present in bare facts, then the meaning that different aspects of culture posit is merely a secondary addendum; and the reasons cultures posit these meanings will necessarily be understood as dogmatic and ideologically driven.

There is another problem with this radical historicism. Just as for Kant it is the transcendental unity of apperception that secures the reality of the self—otherwise the self would be merely an arbitrary succession of experiences and could not secure itself against (Humean) skepticism—it is the continuity of a tradition that secures the reality of

that tradition. When we repudiate that there is an originary spontaneity to traditions that create their own meaning (and thus continuity), then we rob them of their status as subjects. This disenfranchisement, *pari passu*, plays into the hand of orientalizing stereotypes while we repudiate what Cassirer calls our “ethical task”—that of finding meaning among the welter of phenomena.

To the detriment of the Chinese tradition, therefore, there has so far been no account of why culture was treated with such reverence. The Chinese tradition is treated as a “particular” that can simply be understood through “universal” methodologies (which is of course, in reality, anything but). The Chinese reverence for *wen*, under this positivism, is either inexplicable—leading to the orientalizing view of China (and the “Rest”) as a kind of Alice in Wonderland of pure whimsy that does not have a consistent logic, or this positivism explains this reverence through the methodologies of the social sciences. All peoples everywhere, under this assumption, are inherently selfish and all their actions only driven by a Hobbesian utilitarian calculus. The only plausible explanation for the reverence for *wen* is thus some nefarious, egoistic agenda. This lack of real explanation, while evidencing the governing assumptions of Western philosophy, is also a great shame for understanding the Chinese tradition. This is because culture goes to the heart of the Chinese philosophic worldview in the way that, for example, the appearance/reality distinction is a central characteristic of Western philosophy. In not giving an account of why and how culture was so crucial to the Chinese tradition, we have not really understood the tradition. This project will thus seek to redress this lacuna by (re)constructing a Confucian philosophy of culture through an imaginary conversation with an interlocutor—Ernst Cassirer—the greatest philosopher of culture in the Western tradition.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 will lay out six characteristics of Cassirer’s philosophy, as well as his interpretation of Western intellectual history. It is these six characteristics that lead to a valorization of the humanly created symbol. These six characteristics, as will be shown throughout the following chapters, is shared by Confucian philosophy.

Chapter 2 will introduce the idea that, for the Confucians, the world is fundamentally expressive to people. Put differently, the “nature”—*qing*

(情) of the world tends towards manifestation in “patterns” (*wen* 文). The human creation of the sign is a *creative* consummation of the “nature” of things. The Cassirerian counterpart to this “expressiveness of the world” is his theory of “symbolic pregnancy”: the world is *always* phenomenologically meaningful. For Cassirer, as for the Confucians, it is only once we stabilize this symbolic pregnancy in a symbol, however, that humans can attain to a higher level of meaning and thus achieve civilization.

Chapter 3 will show how this paradigm of sign creation also applies to Confucian poetics. The self, under the Confucian view, is both *inherently* emotional—has *qing* (情)—and *needs* to express/manifest these emotions. Poetry and music are creative consummations of the *qing* and pattern of the self in the same way that the sign is a creative consummation of the *qing* and patterns of the world. The *form* of poetry/music, however, can only arise in a social context. For Cassirer, art is a golden mean between the emotionality/sensuousness of myth and the abstraction of religion. Art is able to affirm our emotional nature without merely languishing in, or making us a slave of, the emotions. This is art’s contribution to humanity.

Chapter 4 will show how this paradigm of culture as creative consummation is equally found in pre-Qin and Han theories of the origins of writing and literature. Humans manifest patterns (*wen*) appropriate to themselves, just as the myriad things in the phenomenal world manifest their own patterns. This chapter will also show that the “mutually participatory relationship between man and the cosmos” that underlies *xiang* is also to be found in the terms *wen* (文) and *li* (理)—two other key terms associated with meaning and representation.

Chapter 5 will show that, because, as shown in the previous chapters, external manifestation of an “inner” nature is inherent to the nature of all things, and the *wen* of humans (poetry, music, language) creatively consummate the self, culture becomes *necessary* for the fulfilment of the self. This understanding of subjectivity is termed a “functional” self, in the sense that the self is like a mathematical function that is dependent on the facta of culture (i.e., like the function depends on the mathematical series) for its existence. The self and the facta of culture become mutually dependent and determinative. The Cassirerian understanding of subjectivity, like Confucianism, is similarly “functional”: the self is its potential to take on, and creatively partake of, culture. There is no “essence” to the self separate from its manifestation; or its “essence” is its tendency to manifest itself in, and creatively partake of,

culture. Cassirer's "aesthetic individual," as just such a one who realizes her individuality through cultural traditions, is thus reminiscent of the Confucian understanding of self-realization. Carrying on the discussion from chapter 3, it will be seen once again how cultural forms arise from a social context and have fundamentally social telos.

Chapter 6 will pick up the discussion on pluralism outlined in chapter 1. It is *because* the myriad things have a latent order "within" them that they necessarily manifest that "order" is thus not *imposed externally*. Each thing manifests its own pattern or order, and so there are a *pluralism* of different orders. Acknowledging this pluralism did not, however, pose the intellectual threat of chaos to the Confucians. For the Confucians, the organic world is paradigmatic of a harmony among diversity. If each thing manifests its own order, then there are infinite orders in nature, but nature is harmonious; the flourishing of each individuality on its own terms need not impede the coherence of the whole. It is this paradigm of what I have termed an "organic harmony" on which Confucianism modeled its own thinking about "harmony in contrariety." Like Confucianism, Cassirer was also very serious about there being a plurality of orders, a "harmony in contrariety" among the symbolic forms. For Cassirer, the first historical figure who was able to reconcile individualism/individual liberty without conceding to the chaos of the whole, and so spearhead a paradigm shift, was Leibniz. Leibniz's *Monadology*—in Cassirer's eyes—came to have a profound influence on subsequent German thought. The stress on holism, becoming, and perspectivism found in the thought of Goethe's natural science, Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy of language, and Herder's views on history and cosmopolitanism are all indebted to the philosophy of the organic initiated by Leibniz. The *Monadology's* resemblance to Chinese, organic thinking will be pointed to, and thus a key reason for the similarity between Cassirer's thought and Confucian philosophy gestured toward.

A pervasive theme throughout these chapters is the lack of dualism in the Confucian tradition between form and matter; be this between meaning and its mode of representation/manifestation, or between the self and its mode of representation/manifestation. There is, as a result of this absence, no comparable hermeneutics of suspicion about representation, as representation *does* lead to the truth about phenomena/the self. It is because things always already tend toward externalization, and their manifestation is *not* a distortion of their "natures" that there are no epistemological or ontological difficulties in suggesting that a cultural

form completes these manifestations. In other words, there is an *interpenetration* of form and matter. In both the Cassirerian and Confucian understanding of language and meaning and the self and the means of self-realization/self-manifestation, we see this mutual dependency of form and matter. One can interpret this lack of dualism in Cassirer as owing to an organic/biological model of growth that was best articulated, in the Western context, by Herder. Under this model, the material manifestation of some inner *élan* helps define what is to be realized. The very manifesting of the thought, *Geist*, emotion, or human nature in cultural forms, helps *define* what was previously merely nebulous potential.