



BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

Tu Wei Ming

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Tu Wei Ming

BILL MOYERS: [*voice-over*] Whether in mainland China to lecture at Beijing University or in his classroom at Harvard University, Tu Wei Ming personifies the meeting of East and West. A student of modern thought and very much a modern man himself, his roots run back to Confucius, the philosopher of ancient China. To anyone who thinks Confucianism quaint or irrelevant, Tu Wei Ming will argue that the humanism of the old sage can help us sort out some contemporary ethical problems.

Ironically, it was in the West that Tu Wei Ming rediscovered the tradition of the East. Now his own ideas have excited vigorous discussion back in the world of his birth.

His family was living in Ku Ming, China, when Tu was born in 1940. When the Communists came to power, the family escaped to Taiwan. At 22, Tu came to the United States to study at Harvard, becoming in time a scholar of Chinese intellectual history, the author of five books [*Neo-Confucian Thought in Action, Humanity and Self-Cultivation, Confucian Thought, Centrality and Commonality, Way Learning and Politics*] on Confucian humanism, and an active voice in the dialogue on comparative religion. He is now a professor of Chinese history and philosophy at Harvard.

Several times in the 1980s he returned both to mainland China and Taiwan to lecture and listen. Before his departure for a year at the University of Hawaii's East-West Center, we talked at the Asia Society in New York City.

[*Interviewing*] Here we are on the verge of the 21st century, with all the world's major religions being 15 centuries old and older. Do you think, in this new era, these old faiths have anything to say to us?

TU WEI MING: Oh, yes, because they ask the ultimate, the ultimate question. They are not satisfied with our living as ordinary human beings, simply as economic beings, political beings and social beings. They want us to be more, and in fact, we want to be more. It is in this sense that religion is both extremely powerful, explosive and demanding.

MOYERS: But can religions that for so long excluded, that considered non-believers as "other," often persecuted them because they were other, can these religions find anything in common, do you think?

TU: It is a moral imperative that they share the common concern for the human condition, because, for the first time in human history, that whether human beings are a viable species is being questioned. Now, two very powerful forces emerge in the 20th century. On the one hand, we've become interdependent, the global village is emerging. So a kind of global consciousness is considered absolutely crucial for anyone, any intelligent person to look at the world. Ecological issues, nuclear annihilation, environmental issues, this all dictates the importance of global consciousness.

But at the same time, in the last 10 or 15 years, the emergence of a powerful search for roots, ethnicity, land, language, for the mother tongue or the fatherland, gender, and of course, religion is part of it. And I think we need to understand the interplay between these two on the surface contradictory processes, the quest for interdependency and global consciousness on the one hand, and at the same time, this profound need for searching for one's own roots. To belong.

MOYERS: To belong to that which is like is, that where we are welcome.

TU: Right. The tradition that I'm particularly aware of, the Confucian tradition, assumes that each and every human being is embedded, in other words, fated to be a particular human being in terms of ethnicity, gender, the birth of—the place where you are born and your own socialization and so forth. I think the fascinating lesson in the Confucian tradition is how to transform our being embedded in a particular condition into potentiality and instruments for self-realization.

MOYERS: But how do you do it, for example? You are Confucian, you're not living anywhere near your geographical roots. Your—the culture from which you came has changed dramatically over the years since you've been gone. Your family is scattered, I presume. So—but you are still a practicing Confucian.

TU: In the sense that I'm capable of doing it. One thing is unique, probably, to the Confucian tradition. It's not a membership religion, so you do not become initiated as a Confucian, as opposed to some other religious traditions.

MOYERS: You get baptized into the Christian faith.

TU: You don't have that ritual. That's right. Sometimes it's even wrong to say, "I am a Confucian," in the sense that that I am a cultivated person or I am a scholar. Some other people may recognize you as such, but you don't make that kind of claim. Another interesting thing is, as a scholarly tradition, and it really doesn't have a founder. Confucius was probably the most important figure in shaping the Confucian tradition, but like Judaism, a lot happened before Moses, so a lot happened before Confucius. It's a scholarly tradition. It's a form of life, it's a way of learning to be human.

Now, returning to your earlier question. If you look at China, not in terms of just one geographic location, but cultural China, meaning not only mainland China but Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore or Chinese communities in southeast Asia, in Australia, in New Zealand, in North America and in Europe, this cultural China, many different people with different orientations, has been very much shaped by the Confucian project. Many people are not aware that they are Confucian, but they interpret their own human condition, they live by some of the basic Confucian ideas, and they transmit some of these values to their children.

MOYERS: It's in the cultural DNA, in a sense.

TU: It's a cultural DNA. That's a marvelous way of putting it. In the sense that education is absolutely crucial for self-development. We are human beings, to be sure, but learning to be human is an ultimate concern. I try to envision the Confucian project as a faith in the improbability and perfectibility of the human condition through

self-effort, but not effort by isolated individuals alone, by the community as a whole. So you can envision the Confucian process of learning to be human in terms of a series of concentric circles. The idea of the self at the center, extending itself to the family, immediate family in particular, but to other members of the family in the clan organization, to the community, to the state, to the world at large and beyond.

So to be human, in this case, assumes a responsibility which is not just social. It's even cosmological, in the sense that what human beings eventually will be able to do will have powerful consequences for the ecosystem of the cosmos as a whole.

MOYERS: What is the notion of a good man in Confucian thought?

TU: The good man is always a person who learns to become better, is always in the process of self-perfection or self-transformation. Very much in the tradition of, say, Emerson or Thoreau, the idea of a person in the dynamic process of trying to transform himself or herself.

MOYERS: How does one do that? How does one become better?

TU: One absolutely crucial area is that humanity is understood as sensitivity, or sensibility. It is not simply by the acquisition of knowledge from outside, or refining one's rational power, but also to train oneself to become more sympathetic, more open to other possibilities.

MOYERS: So the point of departure for being human is empathy.

TU: It's empathy, or sympathy, in that sense.

MOYERS: Which means?

TU: Which means to be able to experience the suffering of others and the joy of others, to know that one is not a loner, one is always in connection, not only in connection with other human beings, but with an ever-extending network with nature, with the ecosystem.

MOYERS: But in the last century, Confucian—Chinese roots of Confucianism were so assailed by the arrival of the West, religion, military technology, the market economy, political institutions, and even now, in the birthplace of Confucius, the ruling principle is not religious or ethical but Communism. It's not Confucianism, it's Communism.

TU: Right.

MOYERS: So are you satisfied that this cultural DNA still is infiltrating the consciousness of the Chinese today, and that you can identify with it?

TU: Both yes and no. And this, I think, is a story not just unique to China, but I think it's a very important story for human history as a whole. The emergence of the modern West, with emphasis on science, technology, market economy, political institutions and so forth, what I normally call a kind of enlightenment mentality, has shaped the universe in a particular direction. In fact, all the major spheres of values in the world today, or the important spheres of interest, are very much defined by the enlightenment mentality of the modern West. And in fact, the Chinese intellectuals, not to mention the Japanese and Koreans, they are just as affected and influenced by this mentality as many of the other intellectuals in other communities. So it has become a common human heritage. The Chinese intelligentsia,

whether Communist or non-Communist, in a sense has been very thoroughly westernized in that sense.

But this particular, particularly powerful mentality also has sort of pushed humanity to the brink of self-destruction with the danger of the destruction of the ecosystem as a whole—

MOYERS: You mean the western—

TU:—if it is narrowly understood as wealth and power.

MOYERS:—I started to say, you mean the western notion of the acquisitive, possessive individual?

TU: The social Darwinian, the Faustian drive to conquer.

MOYERS: And to get rich?

TU: To get rich, to become powerful. I think when Bacon defined knowledge as power, which is a major departure from the idea of knowledge as wisdom, either in the Greek tradition or the Judaic tradition or in the Confucian tradition. So something very fundamental had changed in the human mindset conditioned and defined by this very powerful force of organization.

MOYERS: So this idea of the individual and the aggression toward nature, you say is undermining our life support system?

TU: That's right. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that the Confucian tradition has been totally undermined in terms of the form of life, patterns of human interaction, understanding of authority, of leadership, of education. Many of these things continue to develop and even flourish, not necessarily in mainland China, but in Taiwan and in Hong Kong, in southeast Asian Chinese communities, in Chinese communities in North America.

MOYERS: Well, east Asia has moved to social Darwinism, it seems to me, as if it were the only game in town, and eastern Europe threatens to become—to be there right after them. I don't see a lot of evidence that eastern Asia—and I'm an outsider, of course—that they're holding on to those traditions. In fact, they seem to have grabbed the capitalist appetite as their own, with a vengeance.

TU: But that does not necessarily mean that, at a very deep spiritual level, they've accepted the social Darwinian mode of thinking or way of doing things as self-evidently true or even as meaningful. It's something you have to do, but it does not necessarily mean that it would give you the ultimate meaning.

MOYERS: The Marxists in your country, your late country, have looked upon Confucianists as ghosts and monsters to be slain every time they rise. But I understand that your lectures in China, and the articles that you've written for Chinese journals, have been instrumental in starting a—in putting that Confucian question back on the agenda in China, that the Communists are unable to slay these monsters and ghosts.

TU: The question is complicated by the fact that some people believe that a problem in China today, the actual issues concerning the political culture in China, are somehow connected with the confluence of two traditions, Confucian feudalism, with too much emphasis on the group, on authority, on *[cross-talk]* concern for rituals—

MOYERS: On rigidity.

TU:—and so forth, and the Stalinistic notion of dictatorship. So the

marriage of these two forces constitute the brutality of the Chinese regime. And even though my sense is that description of the Confucian project is too restricted, I think they're basically right. That's a problem. That's one of the reasons why Confucian culture, the negative side of Confucian culture, needs to be critiqued, analyzed, very thoroughly to understand, so to allow the more positive side that we've been discussing here to emerge.

MOYERS: Friends of mine who have lived in China say that as beautiful as the Confucian idea is aesthetically, in terms of form and ideality, it is nonetheless very stifling in practice because the free spirit of the West does not feel at home in this network of kindred ties and father and son and husband and wife.

TU: That's right.

MOYERS: You just get smothered in this tissue.

TU: You can also say that about a highly ritualized society of South Korea or Japan or even Vietnam, because these are also societies under Confucian influence.

MOYERS: But Westerners admire the tradition from afar, but when they get there, they feel smothered.

TU: That's right. But I think that ought not to be the case, in fact. Simply because there's a major difference, even in traditional China. The debate has been going on between the Confucian idea of five relationships and the Confucian idea of the obligation of the three bonds. We know the Confucian idea of the three bonds is the authority of the ruler over the minister, the father over the son, and husband over the wife. So you have all these things we are fighting against by the feminists, in terms of a male orientation, by of course the liberal democratic thinkers, in terms of authoritarianism, and by some scholars who think that primordial tie between father and son will have to be overcome for the ego to be fully developed, you know, not necessarily in the Freudian sense, but in a very broad psychoanalytic sense.

But the five relationships, as we understand it, really talk about a mutuality, in terms of basic [*unintelligible*] human relationships. The relationship between father and son is defined in terms of affection, ruler and minister in terms of rightness, husband and wife in terms of division of labor, friendship in terms of trust and sibling relationships in terms of sense of sequence. So I think within the Confucian tradition, you have a major conflict between the five relationships defined in terms of mutuality and support, and the three bonds, as a kind of mechanism of ideological control.

MOYERS: Well, that—stop right there, because what I hear you saying is that Confucianism promotes the three bonds, ruler over subject, father over son—

TU: Politicized Confucianism.

MOYERS: All right.

TU: As an ideology of control.

MOYERS: All right. And father over son, and husband over wife. At the same time, it promotes the five relationships, which are a counterforce to those original impulses.

TU: Right.

MOYERS: Which is a way of saying that every religion contains the seeds of its own contradictory division.

TU: Oh, yes. Yes. So what I see is, within the Confucian tradition, the continued struggle and conflict between one type of force, especially the political leadership, that wanted to use the Confucian ethical ideas for a mechanism of ideological control. What is happening now? We have to be patriotic Chinese, don't criticize the government. We have to be obedient, we work hard, we try simply to follow the rules and do not raise any kind of rebellious questions. On the other hand, this always, being a major tradition in Confucian humanism, that is to understand politics not simply as distribution of power, but to try to moralize politics, try to argue that only the people who are exemplary teachers ought to be politically influential.

MOYERS: Teachers.

TU: So how to moralize politics has always been a major concern of the Confucian intellectual. And how to use Confucian ideas of ethics to develop a stable society has often been the concern of those who are in power in east Asia. But we even see that going on today. Before the Tiananmen massacre, many of the students who mobilized themselves, in arguing against the current regime, first, they didn't evoke any western ideas of democracy or freedom. They basically talked about the public accountability of the government. They talked about corruption of the government. They focused their attention on the inability of the government to develop itself as really the leader of the land. So the students considered themselves as the conscience of the people. That's one of the reasons why not only citizens of Peking but government officials and members of the security police were moved, because the students used a language which is very deeply rooted in Chinese consciousness. They are not representing their own interests. They are really the voice of the people.

MOYERS: Is that Confucianism?

TU: Very deeply rooted in Confucianism.

MOYERS: Because the intellectuals are supposed to be the eyes and ears of the people.

TU: The eyes of the people. And also this very old saying, "The heaven sees as the people see, and heaven hears as the people hear." And if the intellectuals, which always constitute a very small minority, if they manage to articulate the voice of the people for the well-being of the society as a whole, they in fact perform an important function, not only social, but cosmic, in the sense that they help the people to be able to raise their concerns. And the government will have to respond to that particular kind of challenge.

MOYERS: The paradox, though, is that the intellectuals who still, as you say, are espousing or at least revealing this tradition in Confucianism are a minority. The party runs China, and the party is mostly peasants, military and workers.

TU: Precisely the situation.

MOYERS: The illiterates of China.

TU: That's precisely the case.

MOYERS: So reality is frustrating the Confucian tradition, then.

TU: On the other hand, the other side, the sinister side of Confucian,

with emphasis on authoritarian control, obedience, all these ideas, don't use any kind of western ideas of democracy or human rights or so forth, you should exercise your duty because duty consciousness has always been pronounced in the Confucian culture, whereas rights consciousness, up to this day, has never been fully developed.

MOYERS: What do you mean, the "duty consciousness?"

TU: Duty consciousness, meaning that you have to prove you are a worthy member of the community as a whole to be able to voice your demands for a certain kind of rights and idea.

MOYERS: As over and against the right—to say, "I have this right to say"—

TU: No matter what.

MOYERS: Yes.

TU: Now, what we have in China, the tragedy, is this. The students, overwhelmed by the irresponsibility and insensitivity of the regime, using all these traditional symbols of patriotism, loyalty, filial piety and so forth to crush them, they became totally westernized. Therefore—

MOYERS: The Statue of Liberty was an expression of that.

TU: —the Statue of Liberty. They just couldn't see the powerful forces within, even though they used it. They couldn't see that. So they become totally westernized. And in so doing, unfortunately, they gave some of the most powerful weapons to their adversaries, because even the workers, the peasants, they couldn't fully appreciate what the students were striving for, but they could now hear the kind of in-authentic but still persuasive "politicized" Confucian voice which is obedience, duty, commitment to the goal of socialism and so forth. So unless a fruitful interaction becomes possible between liberal democratic ideas on the one hand, and indigenous resources in the Confucian culture as defining characteristics of the mode of protest of the students, the future of the democratic movement or democratization movement in China is still quite bleak.

MOYERS: So there has to be a fusion.

TU: A fusion.

MOYERS: Something of the West, but not so much of the West that it overwhelms the indigenous—

TU: It's not even just the conflict between the West and China. It's really a fusion at many different levels. Now, you may have to say the repertoire for human survival, in terms of symbolic resources, you have to be extended beyond the Europe-centered mentality. Despite the fact every one of us, and myself very much included, is a beneficiary of this mentality. I think more like a westerner than like a traditional Confucian scholar, no matter how I try to tap spiritual resources from my own tradition. I'm critically aware of that, and also I share that idea with many other scholars in China and Japan. So we are beneficiaries of the enlightenment mentality, of rationality, of science, of technology, of the market economy, of democratic institutions. But we are also critically aware that a Europe-centered mentality is limited. There are great resources, not only in Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, but also in American Indian spirituality, Hawaiian spirituality, Pacific Islands spirituality. These will have to

be tapped.

Look into the 21st century. What are some of the symbolic resources we have to tap into in order to formulate an integrated, coherent, humanistic vision?

MOYERS: [voice-over] From the Asia Society in New York City, this has been a conversation with Tu Wei Ming. I'm Bill Moyers.

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10/6/88 #119

Leon Kass — Part I (Physician, philosopher, scientist; his writings explore the moral implications of biology in the modern world)

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10/10/88 #121

Leon Kass - Part II
Sheldon Wolin (Political philosopher, professor, and founder of the *Journal Democracy*; Wolin writes about the meaning of democracy, the nature of power and the role of the state)

10/11/88 #122

E.L. Doctorow (Author of *Ragtime*, *The Book of Daniel* and other novels; Doctorow believes writers should be a nuisance to authority, because they prefer the uncomfortable truth to the comfortable lie)

10/12/88 #123

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (Professor of Education; her writings explore what makes some schools good and some teacher memorable)

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Peter Berger (Sociologist; Berger sees explicit links between democracy and capitalism, and has been studying the "economic miracle" of East Asia)

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James MacGregor Burns (Historian and political scientist; Burns' many books analyze the shortcomings and potential of the American political system)

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Isaac Asimov — Part I (Author of books of science, math, history, autobiography, and science fiction)

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Mary Catherine Bateson (Anthropologist; her most recent work examines the social consequences of the AIDS epidemic, and she is completing a book on how women make choices about their lives)

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John Lukacs (Historian, Hungarian native who came to the U.S. in 1946; in *The Passing of the Modern Age* and *Outgrowing Democracy* he analyzes America's vulnerability to changes in our national character since World War II)

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August Wilson (Playwright; *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *Fences* —