

ARTICLES

The Philosophical Roots of Western and Eastern Conceptions of Creativity

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Abstract

This essay reviews the philosophical roots and the development of the concept of creativity in the West and East. In particular, two conceptions of creativity that originated in the West – divinely inspired creativity and individual creativity—are discussed and compared to the two Eastern conceptions of creativity that are rooted in ancient Chinese philosophical thought — natural and individual creativity. Both Western and Eastern conceptions of individual creativity come from a theistic or cosmic tradition of either divinely inspired or natural creativity. However, a defining feature of the Western concept of creativity—novelty—is not necessarily embraced by ancient Chinese concepts of creativity, but does exist in both modern Eastern conceptions. Reasons for cultural differences are explored and discussed.

The influence of culture on people's conceptions of creativity has been one of the most exciting topics in the recent literature on creativity. It has attracted the interest of many psychologists (e.g., Lubart, 1999; Niu & Sternberg, 2002; Lau, Hui & Ng, 2004; Rudowicz & Hui, 1997; Rudowicz & Yue, 2000). A review of contemporary research has shown that people from the East and West hold similar, yet not identical conceptions of creativity. In general, Easterners are more likely to view creativity as having social and moral values, and as making a connection between the new and the old. Their Western counterparts focus more on some special individual characteristics in understanding the concept of creativity (Niu & Sternberg, 2002).

Does the concept of creativity have the same roots in the West and the East? What may affect contemporary people's understanding of this concept? To better understand the origins of the concept of creativity, this essay compares and contrasts two philosophical traditions in the world, representing the roots of thought in the West and East. When examining the differences in the concepts of creativity between the two cultures, we will focus on three questions: (1) What are the perceived origins of the concept of creativity? (2) Is novelty a defining feature of the concept of creativity? (3) Is moral goodness necessary in the conception of creativity? Table 1 summarizes the result of this comparison, and will be discussed in detail throughout the essay.

Table 1

People's Conceptions of Creativity across Times and Cultures

| | Western | | Chinese | |
|-------------------|---|-----------------------|--|---|
| | Ancient | Modern | Ancient | Modern |
| Genesis | God/gods/individual | Individual | Nature/individual | Individual |
| Defining features | Novelty Moral goodness Everlasting renovation | Novelty Usefulness | Moral goodness Everlasting renovation | Novelty Moral goodness Usefulness |

The primary goal of this paper is to examine the cultural differences in people's conceptions of creativity over time. To achieve this goal, the paper is divided into four parts. It opens with a brief introduction to Western concepts of creativity, including its philosophical roots and its development. Two Western conceptions of creativity will be discussed and compared: divinely inspired and individual creativity. This brief introduction and discussion will set the stage for a comparison with Chinese views of creativity. The second part of the paper will introduce Chinese conceptions of creativity and their philosophical roots. The third part will deal with some ancient Chinese views of creativity. Two kinds of creativity, natural creativity and individual creativity, will be compared with the two kinds of Western creativity, divinely inspired and individual. The last part of the essay will compare and contrast the two ancient views of creativity and discuss how these roots influenced modern Chinese people's understanding of this concept.

Creativity in the West¹

The word “creativity” is the nominal form of the English word, “to create,” meaning “to bring something new into being.” It is derived from the hypothesized Indo-European root, *ker, kere* (to know), via the Latin, *creare* (to make or grow). Like many other psychological concepts such as *love, intelligence, and emotions*, the modern concept of creativity has a philosophical tradition, and this tradition is based on philosophical inquiry into the origins of new entities and new ideas (Weiner, 2000).

Western philosophical inquiry into creativity can be traced back to ancient Israel and ancient Greece. Although this paper is not intended to address the entire richness of philosophical inquiry into this question (interested readers are referred to reviews of Albert & Runco, 1999; Szczepanski, 1978; Tatarkiewicz, 1977; and Weiner, 2000), some short introduction to this topic is necessary.

In the West, at least two kinds of answers have been provided to the question of “where creativity comes from.” The first answer is based on the belief that all things exist independently of human activity. Essentially, it is supposed that all creativity emanates from one God, or from the endless inspiration of many gods. Creativity in this aspect can be viewed as with divine origin. The second answer is based on the belief that humans are responsible for the existence of things, at least in certain realms, such as morality. This conception underscores individual (as opposed to divinely inspired) creativity, and is based on the notion that creativity originates in the human mind and in the human’s ability to bring something new into being (Wight, 1998). Creativity in this aspect can be viewed as individual creativity. The first kind of creativity—divinely inspired creativity—emerged first in the history of Western thought, although contemporary scholars, including almost all psychologists studying creativity, commonly focus on the second kind, namely, individual creativity.

Divinely Inspired Creativity

The notion of divinely inspired creativity emerged earlier than did that of individual creativity. Indeed, the origins of the modern Western conception of creativity can be traced to the notion of divinely inspired creativity. The idea of divinely inspired creativity is that all living things somehow emanate from a divine force, which may be either one God or multiple gods. There are at least two cultural roots for this

¹The essay takes the conventional view of the concept of “the West” as the culture of Europe and the people who share the same root or have religious link to Europe. Geographically speaking, it includes most parts of Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

notion of divine creativity. First is the Biblical idea of God's creation. Creativity in this tradition means "to beget" or "to bring into being" (*ex nihilo*). The second is the ancient Greek expression of "the inspiration from the Muses" (Tatarkiewicz, 1977; Weiner, 2000).

According to Biblical tradition, humans do not have the potential to create something new; they simply follow in the steps of God (Boorstin, 1992). The resources of various entities, including human beings, are from God's creation. The first sentence of the Hebrew Bible expresses the original creative act: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). And then, the Bible tells us the process of how He created the heavens, the earth, the living beings, and everything else. From the description in the Book of Genesis, we can comprehend the notion that there are at least three features of God's creation: (1) there is one creator of everything, God; (2) God brings new things into being from a void or nothingness (*ex nihilo*); and (3) God's creation represents all goodness, including moral goodness (Weiner, 2000).

In contrast, ancient Greek culture does not have the concept of "God's creation." Neither is there only one God in the ancient Greek mind (Tatarkiewicz, 1977). The philosophical speculations on the origins and nature of things were enormous and diverse among ancient Greek philosophers, and an inclusive introduction to these speculations is beyond the scope of this paper. There are also many gods, including the "gods of invention" – the Muses. The word corresponding to *creation* and *creator* in ancient Greek is that for "invention" (*poiein*). Although the word *poiein* refers to poets, many Greek thinkers, including the great philosopher, Plato, believed that all human activities and destinies are controlled by the will of gods. Even artists, such as painters, poets, and sculptors, do not make new things. Rather, they merely imitate things that already exist in nature (Plato: *Republic*: 597- 598). Plato insisted that great works of poets are entirely inventions of divine Muses. According to Plato, the poet, "when seated on the tripod of the Muses, is not at that time in possession of his senses, but is like some spring that readily lets flow whatever comes up from within" (Plato: *The Laws*, 719). Poets, therefore, bear only limited responsibility for their work. This idea is actually similar to the Biblical concept of God's *creation*, namely, that creativity comes from an entity outside humans. People do not invent; gods do. In this tradition, any creativity beyond the external will of the gods could even be regarded as bad, potentially dangerous to society, or immoral (Plato: *Republic*, 602,606-07).

It should be also noted that, like the diversity of philosophical inquiry into the origins of everything, the notion of individual creativity among ancient Greece was also complex, as are many societies

today. They encouraged creative exploration, but then killed Socrates for it.

The concept of creativity as divinely inspired was dominant in the history of Western thought for a long period of time (probably until the time of the Renaissance and even beyond). During Medieval and even early Renaissance times, the concept of creativity had been largely (but not entirely) connected with a divine entity. Humans do not create; God does. The most important creative activities in the West during this period were all Church-related, such as painting, sculpture, architecture, metalwork, libraries, universities, and theological speculations. For example, in Western medieval art, almost all of the themes derived from the stories in the Bible. In all these artworks, creativity was thought to come from God through humans. Indeed, for many important Western thinkers during this period, such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, humans were made in the image of God. We should all yield to God; there could hardly be a conception of human creativity as bringing something entirely new into being.

Individual Creativity

The main difference between the concepts of individual creativity and of divinely inspired creativity is that the latter is believed to originate with or at least to be inspired by one God or several gods, whereas the former is typically attributed to humans. Despite the fact that many Greek thinkers believed creativity to emanate from divine forces, they also believed that poets bear some responsibility for their works. Some Greek thinkers, such as Aristotle, even abandoned the idea that all arts merely imitate the work of the gods; therefore, Aristotle valued the artists' and poets' imitation of life or nature much more highly than did many of his predecessors. For example, Aristotle said, "It is clear that the general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature" (Aristotle: *Poetry*, 4). In the same book and section, Aristotle described the poets' activity of composition as that "through their [poets] original aptitude, and by a series of improvements for the most part gradual on their first efforts, that they created poetry out of their improvisations." It can be seen from this description that the idea of individual creativity existed in ancient Greece.

Although the idea of individual creativity existed in ancient Greek thought, creativity was thought to be limited to a few people, namely, the poets. Indeed, the notion of individual creativity was not widely appreciated and emphasized until much later, during the Enlightenment (Albert & Runco, 1999).

One important reason that people's conceptions of creativity changed from an emphasis on divine inspiration to an emphasis on individual creativity was the influence of the Enlightenment, during

which people began to exalt individual rights and powers to understand the universe and to direct their own destiny (Albert & Runco, 1999; Szczepanski, 1978). These new thoughts of the Enlightenment were also accompanied by human success in various areas, especially in science and technology, such as in the achievement of new inventions and new discoveries. Essentially, individual creativity began to win widespread appreciation when individual creative ideas and products started to be officially honored by some European countries. For example, in the earlier part of the seventeenth century, Great Britain began offering prizes and even patents and copyrights for creative individuals and their solutions to technological problems (Weiner, 2000). Many important new theories and even new disciplines formulated in the nineteenth century had a significant impact on people's conceptions of creativity (Becker, 1995). These new formulations included Darwin's theory of evolution and Marx's theory of the history of humanity. The effect of these and other theories constructed in the nineteenth century was to radically change people's conception of creativity by delineating a concept of individual creativity completely separated from the creativity of a God or set of gods. The founding of modern psychology at about the same period further made possible the study of individual creativity (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999).

Besides the change of view of creativity from divinely inspired to individual, creativity also was conceived as an activity that could occur in areas other than poetry, such as in science, art, literature, politics, business, and even daily life (Kaufman, 2002; Simonton, 1997). In this light, the two central components of creativity are *usefulness* and *novelty*, regardless of where the act of creation emanates from and regardless of the domain to which it is applied. Creativity is also viewed as a property that belongs not only to a select few; everybody can exercise it. And its exercise can occur within the mundane experiences of life, not just in the formulation of significant scientific, artistic, or other achievements (Finke, Ward, & Smith, 1992; Martindale, 1999; Martindale, Hines, Mitchell, & Covello, 1984).

The switch to a concept of creativity as residing in the individual is the key to contemporary Western notions of creativity. These notions hinge, in large part, on the idea that creative individuals are willing to defy the crowd (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995).

Psychologists have for decades used worldview theory to interpret the cultural difference in human thinking, emotion and behaviors. The worldview theory usually refers to the dichotomy of social groups with respect to individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1975, 1977) or with respect to an independent-interdependent perspective (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Nisbett recently (2003) proposed that culture can influence not only our belief systems, languages, and social cognitive systems, but also how we perceive and think. Cumulative evidence

seems to demonstrate that people in the individualist culture focus more on the development of self, whereas people in the collectivist culture are more motivated to find a way to fit themselves in with relevant other – to become part of various interpersonal relationships.

This framework of collectivism vs. individualism could also apply to the notion of creativity. More specifically, in an individualistic society, such as society in the West, people may be willing to defy the crowd because a person's worth is defined in large part in terms of what he or she does individually. In contrast – as we will introduce in the following context – in a collectivistic culture, such as the culture in the East, an individual's sense of worth is defined in terms of the group, and, hence, they may not see the value of defying that group — defying the “crowd” — to be necessary to one's goal. In essence, one's worth is determined with reference to the group and if one alienates oneself from that group, one's worth may be seen as commensurately reduced.

In sum, people's conceptions of creativity in the West have shifted from an emphasis on divinely inspired creativity to an emphasis on individual creativity, followed by the formulation of scientific methods and measurements to study it. This individual emphasis has made creativity in the sense of defying the crowd a valued activity, at least in many contexts. Nevertheless, the Western philosophical tradition affects contemporary people's conceptions of creativity in the West, which importantly include the following features: novelty and originality, imaginative, and good (although the meaning of good refers usefulness or effectiveness rather than morally good). In response to the three questions addressed in the beginning, ancient and modern Westerners have provided different answers.

In answering the first question, about where the notion of creativity comes from, ancient Westerners were more likely to believe that creativity originates from a divine force, either one God or multiple gods, whereas modern Westerners are more likely to believe that creativity should be attributed to the individual human mind. In answering the second question, about whether novelty is the defining feature of creativity, modern Westerners have provided a positive answer. Ancient Westerners may have had a more mixed view, because God or gods might or might not approve of novel thoughts. Such approval would be especially unlikely if thoughts challenged the prevailing religious order. In answering the last question, about whether moral goodness is necessary for creativity, ancient Westerners were more likely to believe that moral goodness is necessary in creativity, because all God's creations are good, whereas this moral component is largely missing in the modern Western concept of creativity. The result can be seen in creativity gone awry, as in the case of the machinations of Nazi doctors or innovative weapons of mass destruction.

To what extent, if at all, does the evolution of the Chinese conception of creativity represent the same shift in thinking manifested in Western culture?

The Meaning of Creativity in Modern Chinese Society

The literal meaning of creativity in the Chinese language is “people’s ability and force to create new things” (“*chuang zao li*” or “*chuang zao xing*”) (Chinese Great Dictionary”² / Luo, Z. 1994),” which is similar to the definitions given by many English dictionaries. According to Liu (1995), a modern Chinese linguist, “*chuang zao li*” or “*chuang zao xing*” comes from a modern Japanese word, “*kozosei*,” which was translated from the modern English word, “creativity.” So it appears that the modern Chinese expression for creativity—*chuang zao li*—was in large part borrowed from the Western tradition, although the verb form of this phrase, “*chuang zao*”/ “to create,” does include the original meaning of “invention” and “bring something into being” in Chinese characters.

According to the Chinese Great Dictionary, *chuang zao* has three meanings in ancient Chinese: (1) “to invent” (*fa ming*), or build something new; (2) to start, initiate, manufacture, or build (*zhi zao*); and (3) to create, produce, or write (*chuang zu*). All of these words have been used in Chinese literature for at least 1,500 years. However, although the phrase for “*chuang zao*” did appear in Chinese historical documents long ago, it was not a common word in the Chinese classics, at least up to the late-*Qing* period (during the late 19th to early 20th century). This claim can be verified through an investigation of the phrase “*chuang zao*” and its three synonyms in classical Chinese literature as revealed by a search of the database of “*Scripta Sinica*”³—a collection of Chinese classics and literatures. Relevant synonyms from the Chinese Great Dictionary include *fa ming* (to invent), *zhi zao* (to make), and *chuang zu* (to produce). Only a few entries for the phrase, “*chuang zao*,” were found in this database. In fact, only three entries can be found in the database of Chinese classics, which contains more than 130 million words. The three synonyms are also rarely found in the Chinese classics (18 entries for *fa ming* (to invent), 25 entries for *zhi zao* (to start and build), and none for *chuang zuo* (to create and write).

²The whole set of the Chinese Great Dictionary includes 12 volumes. It is regarded as an authoritative dictionary both in China and overseas.

³This is a database for Chinese classics and Literature, developed by the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. It includes Chinese classics and Literature from Spring and Autumn (722 – 481 BC) to late *Qing* (1904). For detailed information, please go to: www.sinica.edu.tw/~tdbproj/handy1

In fact, not one of the entries ever appeared in very important and widely known documents, such as Confucianist and Taoist classics.

One possible explanation for the lack of usage of the term *chuang zao* and its synonyms in Chinese classics is that creativity—particularly individual creativity—was historically an unimportant concept in ancient Chinese civilization, and thus was not appreciated by Chinese scholars at large. Another alternative explanation is that other equivalent, albeit more arcane, terms might have been used in ancient Chinese literature to describe the concept of creativity (both divine and individual). However, given the wide disparity between modern and ancient Chinese language styles, it is not surprising that different words or phrases have been used to describe the same concept. Closer examination of ancient Chinese philosophical texts will shed some light onto the origin of the ancient Chinese conception of creativity.

Creativity in Ancient Chinese Thoughts

There is no doubt that a certain kind of creativity, similar to the Western concept of divine creativity, was important in ancient Chinese thoughts (Berthrong, 1998). The word “divine” has to be applied cautiously in Chinese, because in the context of classical Chinese philosophy, there was no fully personalized “God” analogous to the Western concept, although the ancient Chinese did believe in a supernatural moral authority and potential creator/judge – *Tian* (Heaven). *Tian* was originally conceived of as a somewhat personalized god for the ancient Chinese people around 1200 BC, and was originally called “*shang di*” – the same word used in modern Chinese for the traditional Biblical concept of God. Even during Confucius’s time (551BC – 479 BC), the idea of *tian* or even the word *dao* / *tao*⁴ had not been completely depersonalized. Only when the word *tian* was replaced by *dao* in Taoist classics, such as the Dao De Jing /Tao De Ching (probably before 480 BC) and the Zhuang Zi/ Chuang Tzu (350 –320 BC), did the personification of *tian* or *dao* totally disappear (Cheng, 1991). This concept of *dao* exerted greater impact on Chinese people’s thoughts in the following two thousand years of history than did the original concept of *tian*. *Dao* (along with other, equally popular, words—*yin-yang*, *qi/ch’i* and *tai-ji/ tai-ch’i*) simply represented an ultimate force of nature in both Confucian and Taoist philosophies, which became orthodox in China. Thus, we should translate the concept of divine creativity to a word

⁴There are two Chinese spelling systems being used in discussing Chinese documents. One is *pinyin*, which is used primarily in Mainland China, and the other system is *Wade-Giles*, which is primarily used in Taiwan and oversea. This essay uses the system of *pinyin*, but also provides the *Wade-Giles* spelling when the word is first introduced in the text.

more appropriate in the Chinese context, “natural creativity.” The equivalent Chinese terms for the Western concept of creativity are *tao*, *yin-yang*, *qi*, and perhaps *tai ji* (*qi* and *tai ji* were not used much until the Sung dynasty: 960-1279AD).

Natural Creativity

The earliest document in this regard is the Book of Changes (*Yi Jing/ I-Ching*). It is thought to have been developed by King Wen during the period of 1200 - 800 B.C., based on the eight trigrams⁵ invented by Fu Xi (about 2852 BC), a legendary cultural hero, an emperor, and one of the most reclusive of sages. According to the Book of Changes, there is an ultimate origin of everything, namely *yin-yang*, and the change and interaction of *yin-yang* create the world. The concept of *yin-yang* was then interpreted as *dao* by later *Yi Jing* scholars (most of them Confucian) in the commentaries on the *Yi Jing*. For example, in Ten Commentaries on the Book of Changes (Chan, 1967; Hsu, 1937; Rutt, 1996), the relationship between *yin-yang* and *dao*, and how *dao* becomes the origin of everything are illustrated clearly in the following passage:

The successive movement of yin and yang constitute of Dao.

What issues from Dao is good, and that which realizes it is the individual nature

Its (yin-yang's) virtue is abundant because it renovates things every day.

Changes mean production and reproduction.

And that which is unfathomable in the operation of yin and yang is called spirit. (Chan, 1967, p. 20)

This passage has many other English versions.⁶ The one chosen here is one of the most popular English translations (Chan, 1967) although

⁵The basic component of the *Yi Jing* is a three-lined symbol called the “trigram”. Each of the three lines in a trigram can be either straight or broken. A straight line symbolizes Yang, and a broken line stands for Yin. Eight Yin-Yang combinations are possible with three components. The trigrams thereby depict the eight types of consciousness. The eight trigrams are regarded as basic symbols of Eastern philosophy. Interested readers are referred to the website of www.ichingwisdom.com/IChingWisdom/trigrams.html

⁶Another popular translation is the version of Thomas H. Fang (1980). The translation of this passage is “What is called Tao operates incessantly with rhythmic modulation of the dynamic changes and static repose. Thus, continuing the creative process for the attainment of the Good, and completing the creative process for the fulfillment of

it was also criticized by some Chinese scholars (Chang, 1970, for example) as a word-by-word translation that fails to provide a particular interpretation.

The idea of the life-producing mutability of *yin-yang*, as presented in the passage, can be seen thusly: the endless changes of *yin-yang* represent *dao*, which brings everything into being. The nature of *yin-yang*'s changes, or *dao*, is its ability to produce all goodness, including moral goodness. This idea was also clearly expressed in Lao Zi's/ Lao Tzu's *Dao De Jing*:

The Way gave birth to the One,
The One gave birth to the Two,
The Two gave birth to the Three,
And the Three gave birth to the ten thousand things.
The ten thousand things carry yin on their backs and wrap
their arms around Yang.
Through the blending of ch'i they arrive at a state of harmony. (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 42, translated by Lao & Henricks, 1989, p. 106)

Ancient Chinese also provided various theories to explain how the changes of *yin-yang* could create everything. Similar to the Biblical idea of God's creation, the creation of *yin-yang* movement is an organic part of Chinese belief systems. For example, according to Lao Zi, *dao* is the unity of two opposites, *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* mutually change from one to the other. *Yin* manifests *dao* as an inexhaustible source from which every form of energy or activity is derived, whereas *yang* manifests *dao* as a form of activity that is ever creative, but that has a beginning and an ending and therefore remains exhaustible. Thus, when *yang* exhausts itself, it will fade into *yin*, and when *yin* dominates, there is then greater promise of *yang* activity. In the process of *yin-yang* movement, everything was created.

There are other theories that explain the process of natural creativity in ancient China. Among them, the most appealing and influential theory was espoused by Zhu Xi /Chu Hsi (1020-1077), an important Neo-Confucian master in the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) (Chang, 1998). In his philosophy, the beginning of the universe is chaos and void, having neither sound nor smell, and is called *wu ji/ wu-chi*, or the Uncontrived Ultimate. This Uncontrived Ultimate becomes the Great Ultimate, called *tai ji* (equivalent to the concept of *dao* in Lao Zi's theory). *Tai ji* is the principle (*li*) of Heaven and Earth, from which all

nature is life. Superabundance is what is called the deed-act. Forevermore creativeness is what is called the supreme value. The unfathomed mystery underlying the rhythmic modulation of dynamic energy and peaceful repose is what is called the Divine."

creation springs. It represents the movement of two kinds of *qi* (matter-energy), *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* (see above) are initially similar in nature (called *xing/hsing*). This homogeneous *qi* gradually becomes differentiated and heterogeneous. The change and transformation of *yin-yang* is intrinsic and is not derived from an external source, as there is nothing external to *qi* itself. The process and product of *qi* toward differentiation and heterogeneity neither exhausts nor replaces the original and natural state of *wu ji*. The *yin-yang* movement differentiates the world and its entities according to their nature, and thus the Five Agencies (*wu xing/wu-hsing*) are formed. These Five Agencies, on the one hand, are highly visible forms of reality, such as water, metal, wood, fire, and earth; on the other hand, they are not specifically determinate particulars. Thus, they are not to be taken literally as types of things, but are to be treated as differentiated forces ready to be substantiated. Once the Five Agencies were created, everything could be created through the combination of these Five Agencies. Thus, in Zhu's theory, the concepts of *tai ji*, *qi*, and *li* (meaning "ritual" or "mete and proper action") all represent the force of natural creativity. As can be seen from the following passages, Chinese natural creativity has always been intertwined with individual creativity, and people tend to use these words to describe the creativity of individual products or persons. Thus, *tai ji*, *qi*, and *li* have been frequently used as the highest criteria for judging individual creativity in many domains, especially those of literature and art, with this use continuing to this day.

There are some similarities between Chinese natural creativity and Western divine creativity. More precisely, at least the concept of natural creativity in certain theories in certain times (such as that in Zhu's theory) is somewhat comparable with the Western concept of divine creativity (Berthrong, 1998; Cheng, 1991; Whitehead, Griffin, & Sherburne, 1978). There are three common features shared by Western divine creativity and Chinese natural creativity: (1) they both represent the *ultimate origin* of everything; (2) the nature of this ultimate origin lies in its *endless producing and renovating changes*; (3) the nature of Tao/creativity is its *creating all goodness*.

However, some modern Chinese philosophers have suggested that these two concepts, Western divine creativity and Chinese natural creativity, are not identical and thus are not interchangeable (e.g. Hang, 1986). One important difference between them is that the Western divine creativity always involves newness, whereas the Chinese natural creativity does not necessarily imply producing newness. For example, Whitehead et al. (1978) stated that creativity is the principle of novelty. On the contrary, from the preceding review, it can be noted that the Chinese natural creativity is perceived as "ever-renovating" and "producing," or as unexpectedly developing into various genuine entities,

no matter whether they are new or old. Thus, novelty is not a defining feature in Chinese natural creativity, as it is in Western divine creativity.

Both Western divinely inspired creativity and Chinese natural creativity have had a great impact on the popular conception of creativity in each culture. As per the previous discussion, although the concepts of individual creativity and divinely inspired creativity in the West differ in their assumptions of the source of creativity, they share the defining feature of *novelty*, which may not necessarily be embraced in the Chinese concept of natural creativity. In the following text, it can be seen how Chinese natural creativity has a deep and continuing impact on the Chinese understanding of Nature and the process of individual creativity.

Individual Creativity

Ancient Chinese philosophers seldom directly broached the concept of individual creativity. This lack of mentioning individual creativity probably was a style that Chinese literati embraced as a means to appreciate the tradition. It may also be due to the fact that there was actually no difference between individual creativity and natural creativity in ancient Chinese thought. In fact, this lack of mention of individual creativity does not mean that human creativity and individual thinking were not important to the ancient Chinese. On the contrary, achieving the perfection of one's humanity, including achieving great levels of creativity, was a life goal for many Chinese literati, regardless of what schools of thought they represented (Cheng, 1991). The different schools of thought in Chinese philosophy differed in their understanding of the means to achieve perfection, or rather, their understanding of the process of creativity.

Throughout the history of Chinese philosophy, there is a theme shared by all schools of thought, which is the unity of nature with human thought. Simply put, in ancient Chinese thought humans and nature are actually the same. All the principles (called *li*) that apply to nature could also apply to *man*. Thus, humanity could experience the process of the development of the universe, just as could the universe itself, or every other being in the universe. For example, Mencius (Mencius, Lao, 1970), a great Confucian master, once said, "All ten thousands things are there in me. There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination, that I am true to myself" (Mencius, 7A: 4). He also said: "For a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature; and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven" (Mencius, 7A:1). Another important scholar, Lu Hsiang Shan (1139-1193), proclaimed: "My mind is exactly the universe and the universe is exactly my mind" (Lu Hsiang Shan's complete book, cited in Cheng, 1991). In this conception, it is hard to

differentiate human individual creativity from natural creativity. Chinese philosophy is rich in documents that discuss how human individual creativity can be achieved through experiencing and interacting with Natural creativity. The most influential theories come from such schools of thought as Taoism and Confucianism.

Taoism. Among all ancient Chinese schools of thought, Taoism has probably had the greatest impact on Chinese people's creative activity, especially in the domains of literature and arts (Chang, 1970). According to the Taoist classics, the creative process is the process of the inner apprehension of *dao*, when all the distinctions between subject (self) and object (non-self) vanish (see above). For example, Zhuang Zi once wrote a story in which two old men, Zi Qi/ Tzu-ch'i and Yan Cheng Zi Yu/Yen Ch'eng Tzu-yu, were sitting together:

Zi qi of South Wall sat leaning on this armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing—vacant and far away, as though he'd lost his companion. Yan Cheng Zi Yu, who was standing by his side in attendance, said, "What is this? Can you really make the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes? The man leaning on the armrest now is not the one who leaned on it before!

Zi qi said, "You do well to ask the question, Yan. Now I have lost myself. Do you understand that? You hear the piping of men, but you haven't heard the piping of earth. Or if you've heard the piping of earth, you haven't heard the piping of Heaven!" (*Zhuang Zi*, Section 2, Watson, 1964, p. 31)

In the story, Zi Qi reached the stage of "losing oneself," in which he could actually listen to the sound from heaven. Zi Qi did not write down what he heard from heaven; but if he did, the music must have been highly inspirational for him to reach the stage of sympathy between man and nature.

Where does this experience of "lost-self" come from? Taoism tells us it starts when people begin to approach the realm of quietude and enter the realm of nonbeing. Through quietude, one strives to return (*fan*) to the deep root of his or her being, or rather, to preserve *dao*. As we discussed earlier, Lao Zi claimed that creativity comes from the *yin-yang* movement – the actualization of *yin* by *yang* and the "potentialization" of *yang* by *yin*. Thus, to be creative, one should preserve potentiality for action and not actually act out this potentiality.

How can people achieve high creativity through doing nothing? Chang (1970) explained how the Taoist idea of achieving high creativity could be manipulated through the "invisible ground of sympathy," in which people set themselves free from any old knowledge they had before, and enter the state where everything breaks through the shell

of itself and fuses with every other thing. That is the highest stage of creativity people can pursue. Once one has this great sympathy, he or she can be absolutely free to connect with the universe, and all he or she does is highly creative. The Taoist idea of returning and losing oneself has had a great impact on Chinese literati and their creative activity throughout Chinese history, especially in the domains of poetry and painting. The great Chinese poets and artists who, through meditation and self-cultivation, penetrated to this great sympathy produced a large amount of truly great works. They are thought to owe a great debt to ancient Taoist theory and its methods (Chang, 1970).

Interestingly, a modern psychologist, Csikzentmihalyi (1988, 1997), has proposed a similar theory about the creative process. He has said that when people are engaged in highly creative activity, they tend to be in a state of "flow," in which they are highly focused on their work without noticing events happening outside. Csikzentmihalyi has also mentioned that people can experience this "flow" during the utilization of many Eastern styles of meditation.

Confucianism. Confucian theory has been the mainstream and official philosophical theory in China for about two thousands years. Most people would say that Confucianism is naturally opposed to any individual creativity, because achieving moral goodness, *ren/jen* or benevolence, rather than creating novelty, is always thought to be the first concern of Confucianism (Lao, 1983). Confucius himself highly appreciated tradition, and proposed a model to his followers about how an ideal scholar could be produced through learning from tradition. If the idea of individual creativity simply means to bring forth something new, then it is true that mere novelty was not a valued trait in any of the Confucian classics, especially if it was not good novelty. Such novelties could be called "strange doctrine," and strange doctrine was harmful. As Confucius said, "The study of strange doctrines is injurious indeed" (The Analects, I. 17, Lao, 1983).

However, according to Confucian philosophy, highly creative activity always embraces goodness, because man is born with goodness, much like the universe is inherently good. Confucianism contends that a highly creative person not only satisfies his own needs as a human being but also will devote himself to other people and the interests of society as a whole. It is worth noting that, in fact, the process of creativity in Confucianism is the process of investigating this natural creativity from man's mind. Confucians viewed humans in terms of creative potentiality, in which humans are born with the potential to learn and a free will with which to determine their future. The nature in a human was called "mind," and mind is as the same as heaven or *dao*, representing the total universe. Born with natural creativity, though, mind is not simply a mirror, void of intent; mind needs continuing self-cultivation to function fully. Thus, for Confucianism, the process of individual

creativity is the process of self-cultivation toward enlightenment. For example, Confucius said:

No human ability is completely devoid of conscious knowledge. And nothing in the world is without its reason, its principle. But because man has not completely exhausted his study of the principle of things, his understanding is yet incomplete. Only by lengthy exertions will he come eventually to a complete understanding. But then, with complete understanding of the multitude of things . . . will the mind be opened to enlightenment. (*The Great Learning*, Chapter 5, Legge, 1953, p. 8)

Here can be seen the difference between the ways to achieve high creativity in Taoism and Confucianism. Taoism called upon people to lose themselves through doing nothing or to meditate for the achievement of sudden enlightenment. In contrast, Confucianism suggested that the creative process is actually a gradual learning process. Because it is a gradual learning process, it is important for people to learn and to act in order to achieve great productivity and high creativity. According to Confucius, to keep learning or keep refreshing old knowledge in the mind is necessary in the process of achieving perfection: “A man is worthy of being a teacher who gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in his mind what he is already familiar with” (Analects, II: 11). Here the meaning of “worthy of being a teacher” is to achieve higher level of achievement, and to know more about the universe. It is the level closest to perfection. Sometimes, when encountering difficulties, learning even supersedes thinking: “I once spent all day thinking without taking food and all night thinking without going to bed, but I found that I gained nothing from it. It would have been better for me to have spent the time in learning” (Analects, XV: 31, Lao, 1983).

What is missing from the Eastern notion of creativity is the idea of defying the crowd as an essential element. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, in a collectivist society, defying the crowd may be seen as less valuable than making contributions to the society and sometimes defying the crowd may even be seen as strange rather than as creative in the East. Of course, this tendency can occur in the West as well. But there appears to be more room for defying the crowd in the West than in the East, and hence such defying of crowds may be more central to the West than to the East.

In sum, what are the ancient Chinese views of creativity? In ancient Chinese treatises, there were two kinds of creativity, natural and individual creativity. Although different in content, these two creativities are interrelated. On the one hand, individual creativity and natural creativity, in the Chinese view, are the same, insofar as humans can

behave or live in *dao* through a lifetime of self-cultivation or meditation. On the other hand, the nature of popular understanding of natural creativity has had a profound influence on our understanding of the individual creativity of ancient Chinese literati.

As in the West, the ancient Chinese view of creativity also affects contemporary people's conceptions of creativity. However, also influenced by contemporary Western ideology and ideas of creativity, Easterners' current conceptions of creativity possess features of creativity from both Western and Eastern traditions. These features include originality, imagination, intelligence, individualism, and goodness (including both moral goodness and usefulness). In response to the three questions addressed in the beginning, ancient and modern Easterners have provided different answers.

In answering the first question, about where creativity originates, both Ancient and Modern Easterners have been more likely to believe that creativity originates from the universe; therefore, to pursue the connection between the human mind and the universe, either through practice or from meditation, would lead the individual to a high level of creativity. In answering the second question, about whether novelty is the defining feature of creativity, the answer is "not necessarily" for ancient Chinese, but "yes" for modern Easterners. In answering the last question, about whether moral goodness is necessary for creativity, once again, both ancient and modern Easterners would provide a positive answer, and this feature alone would differentiate modern Easterners from modern Westerners in understanding creativity (Niu & Sternberg, 2002).

West-East Comparison on the Development of Conceptions of Creativity

In the preceding text, we reviewed the ancient philosophical roots of the conceptions of creativity in the West and East, their evaluation, and how each affects modern conceptions of creativity. Table 1 summarizes the difference in conceptions of creativity between the two cultures over time.

Examining both ancient Chinese and Western concepts of creativity, one can see the two sharing some common features. First, both Western and Chinese concepts of creativity emanate from a mystical tradition, either theistic or cosmic. In other words, creativity was universally believed to come from a source outside human beings. Humans do not create, but simply imitate God's creation (like the Western Biblical idea) or connect themselves to the heavens or Tao through meditation (like the Eastern Taoist idea). Rooted in Confucianism, the Chinese also believe self-cultivation can lead people to achieve a connection to heaven or greatness, and therefore, to a high level of creativity. Second, because both are attributable to a higher source, the concepts of

creativity, to both ancient Westerners and Chinese, possess the defining feature of goodness, including moral goodness. In the Chinese mind, such goodness also includes goodness to a collective being or contribution to the whole society.

There are also differences in the conceptions of creativity between ancient Westerners and Chinese. First, in terms of understanding the source of creativity, for ancient Westerners, there was an external personalized God, who brought everything into existence, whereas for the ancient Chinese, nature exists on its own; there is no external personalized God, and creation seems to come from within – the everlasting movement of the nature or Tao. Second, since ancient Westerners believe creation is from God, and God brings everything into existence from nothingness, there is a strong emphasis on “creation from nothing,” and this idea makes novelty a necessary feature of creativity in the Western conception of creativity. In contrast, for the Chinese, there is no clear beginning of the universe or Tao, nor a creator for it. The nature of Tao is its everlasting changes, which may or may not bring new forms of everything.

It is perhaps hard to attribute the lack of the importance of novelty in the ancient Chinese conception of creativity to the difference between divine and natural origins of creativity. Much of such difference may be attributable to the difference in cultural values between West and East. As mentioned previously, the key difference between an individualist and a collectivist society is in the relative level of emphasis on the independence of the individual from others. Since the Chinese have historically emphasized the importance of the collective interests of society, there was more of a need for the ancient Chinese to follow the crowd and to make connections between the new and the old, rather than defying the crowd; therefore, novelty may not seem to be necessary to the ancient Chinese notion of creativity.

The philosophical roots of creativity in the West and East also affect modern people's understandings of creativity in each culture. In the West, although the focus of creativity shifted from divinely inspired to the human individual, there is continuity between ancient and modern understandings of creativity, that is, on the emphases on novelty. In the East, the continuity between the ancient and modern understandings of creativity can also be observed; both ancient and modern Chinese believe moral goodness and contribution to society are important features of creativity. Given the fact that the modern Chinese term for creativity was probably derived from a Western tradition, and that ancient Chinese people had a different view than Westerners, the conception of creativity among contemporary Easterners was also affected by the contemporary Western culture. Therefore, the conception of creativity among contemporary Chinese shares with its Western counterpart the important features of novelty and individualism.

Searching for the roots of the conceptions of creativity is an endless task. Our essay only serves to disentangle two possible routes, and to examine the history and development of an important concept of increasing interest to psychologists.

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