

On Heidegger's Thingness and Chinese Ch'in Ideology

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Abstract: Heidegger's philosophy and traditional Chinese theories converge in the interpretation of the nature of things. However, due to the lack of relevance of any specific context, the theory of thingness itself fails to touch the essence of thought it wants to express. In order to find another entity so as to better understand the theory proposed by Heidegger and his way of argumentation, the Chinese Guqin (a Chinese musical instrument), with its unique and rich ideology and profound historical influence, has become the most suitable choice. Many texts around the Guqin, such as the works of Mohism, Taoism, Confucianism and contemporary researches, provide abundant evidence demonstrating that the Guqin music system under Mohist thought is unable to realize the nearness of things; Instead, the emptiness of Taoism and the fourfold nature of Confucianism establish the way of Guqin and reach its thingly character. This paper reveals a possibility to connect two different ideologies- Heidegger's philosophy and Chinese classical ideas- through entities, and offers an example for intercultural communication in the field of philosophy.

1. Introduction

Martin Heidegger's philosophy was constructed in the times when a great deal of turbulence - ideology and culture - was encountered by both the East and the West in the early 20th century. In such modern world where technology experience rapid change and development, metaphysical science has oversimplified the situation of the things themselves: treating everything as objective entities that are observable and manageable. Heidegger criticized the phenomenon of turning things into victims of technologization, believing that the technological world obscures the meaning of the existence of things because all the producing processes are monotonous repetition. To eliminate the compulsion of science, he called for a turn in thinking, and proposed that we should acknowledge with openness that the things exist in a way such that they are freely entering and leaving our daily world: as the things for things themselves. As some studies have dealt with, concealment and unconcealment are the key elements of Heidegger's theory of thingness. However, along with Heidegger's research, these works dealing with civilization dialogue do not reach the things due to the neglect of the specific context of Heidegger's thoughts in later period and the theories of certain traditional Chinese doctrines. [1]

This brings us to a situation where we need to find a breakthrough in the study of thingness. As indicated by Heidegger's later works, people start to wonder if there is any possibility of reaching "the other things"? [2] Definitely. It is Guqin, one of the most ancient musical instruments in Chinese history. It fits the purpose of this study for the following three reasons. Firstly, the Guqin culture traces its origin back to an early natural world without any as advanced technology as we have today, which means that it corresponds to Heidegger's later discussion on the prospect of the technological world. Second, Guqin ideology is closely related to some of the most influential philosophical schools on the trajectory of Chinese civilization since primitive times and some classical expressions can resonate with Heidegger's later studies. Furthermore, some modern scholars who love Chinese culture, such as Robert Hans van Gulik, have put so many efforts on research of Guqin building a strong foundation for the establishment of text interaction.

Based on the important role Guqin ideology plays in understanding the background and argumentation of Heidegger's thingness theory, this paper refers to some masterpieces from several

famous schools of thought such as Taoism, Confucianism, and Mohism as well as contemporary essays. They include *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, *Essay on the Uniformity of All Things*, *The Book of Qin*, *Mozi Antimusic*, and *An Essay on the Ideology of the Ch'in*. These texts with brilliant ideas aim to make a comparative study with Heidegger's philosophy and point out the way to the openness of things.

2. On the Way to Nearness

At the beginning of the chapter "The Thing," Heidegger brings the term "nearness" in by concerning the shrinking distance in time and space with the development of modern technology [3]. He argues that although it is feasible to "frantically" abolish all distance, "nearness" will not appear for it "does not consist in shortness of distance." [3] This is the general dilemma faced by technology, which, in the process of exerting human will over material resources, erasing all the natural boundaries between matter and taking everything out of its original order. As a result, "everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness." It is what Heidegger regards as the state of being "unsettling" due to the absence of "nearness." [3] People tend to get terrified since they do not realize the determined nature and potential outcome when an atomic bomb explodes, and they end up unfamiliar with neither the bomb nor the way the world works.

Is there any possibility of pursuing the "nearness"? With the failure to "encounter it directly," [3] Heidegger points out a path of "reaching it" through "things." In other words, the existence of "things" provides an entrance for humans to get in touch with the procedure of unconcealment from chaos where "everything presences." [3] The Chinese Guqin, in this sense, is included in the discussion of the function and meaning brought by the "things" in Heidegger's theory. [4] Guqin has been endowed with a unique but complex ideological system throughout its long history. The Guqin culture incorporates lots of thoughts from different schools. Among these ideas, there are some close and integrated parts, but there are also conflicts. Although the most modest claim is that the Guqin has inherited the essence of all, there are essential approaches to distinguish them through understanding the nature of it and appealing to the "nearness."

The interpretation starts with the structure of the Guqin. According to the *Wu-chih-chai-ch'in-pu*, the appearance of the Guqin contains the elements reflecting the law of the universe. [5] The size of the Guqin, which is "three ch'ih six ts'un and five fen," symbolizes "the 365 degrees of the celestial sphere, and the 365 days of the year." But more importantly, the distinction in location and shape of Guqin presents the fact that the symbolic nature images represent a status difference in social order. "The upper board is concave, symbolizing Heaven; the lower board is flat, designating Earth." [5] Likewise, "The front is broad; the back part is narrow, symbolizing the difference that exists between the venerable and the common." [5] Under these definitions, following the tradition from ancient myth, domination and obedience are placed under natural conditions and spontaneously formed by cosmic laws. It means that those engaged in playing the Guqin should admit the sacredness and rationality of power.

However, it is the social symbols that put the Guqin itself in an "unsettling" situation. As an art form, music should be able to develop freely without being interfered with by political or economic factors. Unfortunately, the concept of music in a traditional society inevitably arouses controversy due to its involvement in political ideology. Society itself, as a purposeful organization, is led by emperors to educate people through political practice. For ordinary people, coordinated political operations bring stable social circumstances along with the birth of various industries and better living conditions. This is the highest social welfare and the most realistic expectation, and therefore no reason of equal importance should hinder it. In his "Antimusic," Mozi criticized the phenomenon of building musical instruments for national affairs as an excuse to oppose social development. [6] The construction of musical instruments, in his view, is not as easy as gathering water from the plot or breaking down the earth walls because princes and nobles need to levy lots of money from all citizens to create bell, drum, harp, zither and sheng that can make sounds. Although the ancient holy kings also do this to produce ships and chariots, they serve as the vehicles for sailing on the sea and traveling on the ground. In this way, people gain benefits. For instance, gentlemen can rest their feet,

and civilians can release their shoulders and backs. Mozi believed that it is the public interest that allows people to give money without complaint, which is also the key factor contributing to his intolerant attitude towards music activities: they are useless in the functioning of the state and the survival of the people. [6] The potential confrontation between the beliefs of the school scholars and the social reality demonstrates that political power is exercised at the expense of the order of musical expression. The Guqin, as one of musical instruments unpopular with Mohist ideas, has been separated from all possibilities for it to manifest itself as a musical vehicle in the traditional society. Eventually, “it places everything outside its own nature.” Up to this point, as a response to the origin of the Guqin ideology, “nearness” remains absent. Nevertheless, it becomes accessible in the way of the Guqin. [7]

3. Emptiness Makes Things the Things

Revealing about “nearness,” Heidegger made it clear that “near to us are what we usually call things.” [3] He takes the jug as an example, and firstly explains the difference between a thing and an object. The jug, which consists of bases, sides and the handle, is “a vessel, something of the kind that holds something else within it.” [3] This property, Heidegger concluded, leads to the ability of the jug to stand by itself and to be “self-supporting.” Although it serves as an object when it becomes people’s perception or description, the “thingly character” of the jug remains in the self-standing vessel brought by the process of producing it. [8] The reason the jug can stand relies on its material component: the earth. This “setting” is the key to clarify it as a thing rather than an object. Under the standard of such distinction, Guqin also conforms to the characteristics of being a thing. It consists of a wooden body and seven silk strings, with each string corresponds to “a tuning peg made of wood, ivory or jade.” [7] Its appearance is the result of the careful work by a carpenter who arranges a pile of necessary materials in an allowed order to make the Guqin look like the way it should be. It is fundamentally the lute of the Antiquity that is self-supporting by placing immediately “on the earth” or “through the mediation of table” and fulfilling a certain purpose as a musical instrument.

But have they achieved their thingness as things merely by being satisfied with the shape of the jug or appreciating the delicate appearance of the Guqin? Heidegger denied the effort to “reach the thing in itself” without considering what it means to be a thing. [3] It is not the material itself that is made into the bases, sides and a handle enables jug to function as the jug; in fact, it is the “holding vessel” determines the thingly character of the jug. [7] In other words, by virtue of the manufacturing process, the jug creates its full meaning as a vessel: it provides a space to accommodate, namely, void. This poetic interpretation builds a direct interaction with the Taoist text. The foundation of Taoism is to put forward “Tao” as a manifestation of the laws of the universe. “Tao” embraces everything and tries to reconcile them following the natural order. In the masterpiece *Daodejing*, Lao Zi, the founder of Taoism, proposes that utensils mixed with clay have the possibility of being filled as it is empty. [9] It is like building a house, and people can live in it only if it is empty inside. Heidegger’s discussion of the jug is in exact agreement with the idea of “emptiness” conveyed here. [9] Both of them analyze the essence of being a thing by defining the visible space that it holds after the making process. The space is real: one can estimate the size of the space inside a jug and the volume of liquid it can hold. It is in this sense that abstract “emptiness” fills the space.

In essence, “emptiness” represents the integration of physical characteristics and natural spirit. Recorded in another classic *Zhuangzi*, Taoist thinkers propose a concept called “sounds of nature” based on “sounds of earth” and “sounds of humans.” [10] The latter two are directly sensible. The music of the earth is its breath—the wind. When the wind blows, thousands of holes in the earth roar with rage. They make sounds like rushing water, flying arrows, shouting and crying. The sound echoes back and forth, like a performance. The music of human beings, on the other hand, is the sound when playing a musical instrument. But how about the sounds of nature? If the playing of all things comes from within, who makes them sound? The answer lies in the things themselves. Since everything in the world participates in the open feast of heaven and earth with its unique sound, it is

necessary to listen to their music from the perspective of their own characteristics. These characteristics constitute their thingness because they have realized their own nature. Bells and chimes made of stone will ring when they are struck, but in silence, one can hear the resonance of the sounds. Therefore, the Tao (the central concept of Taoism) is connected with all things, and the emptiness satisfies all of them. Through perceiving things in the world in a state of mutual awareness, the emptiness provides an abstract space to arrange them naturally. In such an order, the nature of things correspond to the will of nature. Playing the Guqin is a kind of practice of Tao. It is a means for “communicating directly with tao” because “its rarefied notes reproduce the “sound of emptiness.” [11] The emphasis on the necessity of the void constitutes the meaning of Guqin as the instruments leading to “a realization of eternal truths and cosmic harmony” in the Taoist system. Therefore, although the Guqin creates emptiness in a more complex way than the jug, it retains its thingly character due to the existence of the void.

4. Fourfold in the “Outpouring” and the “Harmony”

Heidegger also paid attention to the void of the jug with the involvement of physical space, and he attempted to separate the emptiness from the category of physical science. It is objectively true that the process of filling the void is an exchange: replace the air with liquid. But it deprives the “reality” of the void by taking the jug to a place where it has become a subject of scientific study. As Heidegger criticized, “Conceived in terms of physical science, that is what the void really is; but it is not the jug’s void.” [12] This is the flaw in holding the void in space that prevents the void of the jug from becoming “its own void.” It is not a problem for the void created by the Guqin since it is spared from dealing with the disturbance of the manifestation of the essential nature as a thing caused by physical understanding. That is to say, for the Guqin, the void has no static dimensions, but at the same time it contains everything in its nature after the creation of the invisible emptiness, reaching a point where physical science cannot impose compulsion.

Only by making sense about “what the jug holds and how it holds” one can truly recognize its “nearness.” [3] Heidegger indicated that the way the jug holds is in “a twofold manner” which is “taking” and “keeping.” To trace their unity, the jug pours out what it contains. It is the giving while the void reveals its nature for the first time. Giving gives the outpouring in the twofold manner the meaning as “the poured gift.” The jug becomes the jug and remains as the jug with the giving. Because the giving belongs only to the jug even though the void holds nothing, it is the unique thingness of the jug rather than other things. The outpouring of the gift presents with a great feast, inviting sky and earth, divinities and mortals: the spring enjoys the gift, accepting the bearing and nourishment from earth and sky and offering man the drinking and the gods the sacrifice. Starting from the ancient meaning of the word “thing” as “gathering,” Heidegger reveals the thinging process of the jug as bringing sky, earth, divinities and mortals in and integrating them into a whole. [3] Thus the interaction between the four elements takes place, and they depend on each other to construct a world with world significance. Earth is responsible for maintaining, sky for changing; divinities symbolizes sacredness, and mortals symbolizes being and dying. They are basically in a game of reflecting and being reflected off each other. Things stay within the fourfold, and so forms a thinging world and appear with their thingness. Finally, the nearness comes as the things remain their nature. [13]

Back to the traditional society, in the development of music theory system, many interpretations of the meaning of Guqin derive from its exalted position among traditional instruments. Litterateur Ji Kang once composed an ode to the Guqin in response to the fact that Guqin are the best of all musical instruments. [14] First, the Guqin has strict requirements for those who want to have contact with it: only those who are open-minded, insightful, serene, and skilled can play, be content with it, enjoy its leisure, and analyze its moral and rational interests. Moreover, the music contains the virtues of the Guqin, making it free to express the emotions, wills and ideals of the player. These Guqin sounds reflected in different people show the utility of honesty, benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, honesty, prudence and distinguishing right from wrong. In short, the Guqin holds everything, overshadowing other instruments with its amazing ability to move and inspire. With the

noble Guqin as the medium, heaven and earth harmonize.

The involvement of heaven and earth implies that the Guqin also embraces a similar four-fold idea. In the traditional sense, “the significance of music appears to be twofold,” with one in its “universal, cosmological and superhuman aspect” and the other in “specialized, political, human aspect.” “In its universal aspect music is the harmony inherent in all nature, embracing heaven and earth.” [15] “One may experience the Harmony of heaven and earth, then one may be in communication with the virtue of the universal spirit” if he can let the music “come naturally.” [15] In this consideration, the fact that human beings and divinities have admitted themselves to the harmony and become a part of it avoids the additional discussion about them. Therefore, the Taoist idea of conforming to nature is the result of the fourfold as a unified whole through the void created by playing the Guqin. However, the practice of the fourfold is embodied in another order in the Confucian text *Annotations on Music* because politics requires a suitable ideological system to support it. [16] Although the low availability of Guqin music draws itself in “remoteness” due to the differentiation of social classes, Confucianism contributes to the formation of the way of the Guqin and makes its thingly character manifest. Besides the heaven and earth, it involves the existence of mortals and divinities out of respect for and obedience to power. In this system, the nature of Guqin, that is, music, is inseparable from rites. Both music and rites construct the four-fold. “Music is the harmony of heaven and earth, rites constitute the graduation of heaven and earth.” [16] It indicates that the interaction between heaven and earth is the integration of nature. It achieves the harmony by bringing about the appearance of things and arranging the order. As mentioned in *the Book of Rites*, “The Kings of olden times instituted rites and music in order to regulate human emotions.” With the harmony of heaven and earth, the ancient emperors and human beings follow the status that corresponds to their identities. Since kings are capable of regulating human emotions, they are the protectors of the people, namely, divinities. And “the Holy Sages composed music in order that it might correspond to Heaven, and they instituted rites so that they might correspond to Earth.” [17] The final purpose is to determine the order in which fourfold are set. They also reflect each other in the way when “rites and music are manifest and perfect.” [17] The thingness of Guqin, an instrument used as a ceremonial instrument, also becomes clear while reaching the nearness during the presence of fourfold. [17]

5. Conclusion

The possibility of linking Heidegger’s theory of things with Chinese philosophy is attempted by finding a representative entity that develops its own ideological system, the Guqin. The establishment of the way of the Guqin is based on the failure of realizing the nearness of things under the guidance of the basic thought of Mohism. The way, in the void of Taoism and the resetting of the fourfold in the Confucianism understanding, provides a bright path for the manifestation of the thingness of Guqin. Along with the interpretation of the way of Guqin, which corresponds to “the thinging of the things,” it successfully applies practical examples for the deduction of theory, thus proving it is an accessible approach to reveal the close relationship between Heidegger’s philosophy and Chinese classical ideology. In the future, valid cross-cultural examples and texts can be used to understand the origins and implications of philosophical ideas. By comparing and contrasting the ways of interpreting things in different ideological systems, this will promote the study of intercultural dialogue and communication in the field of philosophy.

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