Anxiety, "Concerned Consciousness" and Their Manifestation in the COVID-19 Pandemic in China

*Téa SERNELJ**

I can see your eyes now
Two crystals among Spring's rays
Like viewing two stars, without darkness
Viewing an oasis, without a desert
I am imagining your beauty
Your kindness and demure
But I dare not remove your facemask
Dare not reveal the scars of this era.
(Lei Mo 2020)

Abstract

The article examines the specifics of the Chinese containment measures of the COVID-19 pandemic and their social consequences at the beginning of 2021. The author analyses empirical psychological research results on distress and anxiety of people in times of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, and explores to what degree the individual feelings of anxiety in contemporary China are conditioned by the traditionally prevailing absence of faith in higher transcendent forces on the one hand, and social isolation on the other. It proceeds from Xu Fuguan's interpretation of the origins of a traditional Chinese concept of "concerned consciousness" (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識). The author shows that this concept can be compared to the feeling of anxiety, but highlights important differences which separate it from the anxiety as developed and understood in the framework of modern Western philosophy. The paper aims to provide some preliminary answers to the questions of whether and in what way such a traditional feeling of anxiety in the sense of a "concerned consciousness" manifested itself in the period of social isolation that was implemented as a part of the government measures for the COVID-19 pandemic in China. These questions are being investigated through an analysis of philosophical studies on concerned consciousness on the on hand, and a contemporary case study on the other. The results show that the specifically Chinese kind of anxiety, which is rooted in concerned consciousness, is tightly

* Téa SERNELJ, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Email address: tea.sernelj@ff.uni-lj.si

linked to the relational nature of Chinese ethics and the corresponding understanding of individual identity. In addition, it is connected with the traditional understanding of human destiny, which is not fatalistic or determinist, but rather based on autonomous decisions based on the social responsibilities of a free human self.

Keywords: The concept of concerned consciousness, *youhuan yishi*, Xu Fuguan, anxiety, China, COVID-19

Tesnoba, »zaskrbljena zavest« ter njune manifestacije v pandemiji COVID-19 na Kitajskem

Izvleček

Članek raziskuje posebnosti ukrepov zajezitve pandemije COVID-19 ter njihovih družbenih posledic na Kitajskem v začetku leta 2021. Avtorica analizira rezultate empiričnih psiholoških raziskav o stresu in tesnobi ljudi v času prvega vala pandemije COVID-19 na Kitajskem. Hkrati obravnava vprašanje, do kolikšne mere so individualna občutja tesnobe v sodobni Kitajski pogojena s tradicionalno prevladujočo odsotnostjo vere v transcendentne sile ter socialno izolacijo. Pri tem izhaja iz Xu Fuguanove interpretacije izvora tradicionalnega kitajskega koncepta »zaskrbljene zavesti« (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識). Avtorica pokaže, da lahko ta koncept primerjamo z občutjem tesnobe, a hkrati izpostavi določene pomembne razlike, ki to občutje ločujejo od tesnobe, kot je razvita in razumljena v okviru zahodne filozofije. Članek ponuja nekatere preliminarne odgovore na vprašanje, zakaj in na kakšen način se je tradicionalni občutek tesnobe v smislu »zaskrbljene zavesti« manifestiral v obdobju socialne izolacije, ki so jo na Kitajskem izvajali kot del vladnih ukrepov proti pandemiji COVID-19. To vprašanje je avtorica raziskala z analizo filozofskih študij o zaskrbljeni zavesti in na osnovi sodobnih empiričnih študij. Rezultati so pokazali, da je specifično kitajska oblika tesnobe, ki je osnovana na zaskrbljeni zavesti, tesno povezana z relacijsko naravo kitajske etike in vzporednega razumevanja človeške usode, ki ni fatalistično ali deterministično, temveč prej temelji na avtonomnih odločitvah, ki izhajajo iz družbene odgovornosti svobodnega sebstva.

Ključne besede: Koncept zaskrbljene zavesti, *youhuan yishi*, Xu Fuguan, tesnoba, Kitajska, COVID-19

Introduction

The article examines the problem of the increase in the feeling of uncertainty that manifested in China due to the coronavirus outbreak, and the subsequent use of social isolation as a governmental measure for its containment. In this context, I aim to illuminate the cultural specifics of the Chinese conception of this feeling of uncertainty and fear, which can be seen as a form of existential anxiety, although the concept itself is very different from the one which has been developed in the context of modern European philosophy. I believe that such a sense of anxiety is

very specific and typical of China because it is connected to the relational perception and conceptualization of the self as well as to relational ethics. In the European tradition, on the other hand, a conceptualization of anxiety as an inseparable mode of existence is fairly new, and we could claim that in its modern form, it is—to a great extent—based upon Heidegger's philosophy. For Heidegger, anxiety is an elementary mood of existence that reveals the finitude of *Dasein* that implies—*inter alia*—human existence as such (Wheeler 2020, 2). In Sartre's existentialist philosophy, the concept of anxiety is developed further, and it is produced from the awareness of the absolute freedom of the individual in which a person is fully responsible for his or her own actions and their consequences, which means that this freedom also determines their morals.[1]

As we shall see, the origin and conception of anxiety in China differ in essential ways from the ones in the West. Even though they can overlap in certain connotations, their distinctions are clearly evident especially in the fundamental paradigm on which Western and Chinese intellectual traditions developed. These can be seen distinctly through the very conception of the so-called "relational self", which will be explained in more in detail in the later parts of this paper, and which was developed in the Chinese ideational tradition. As we shall see, such a conceptualization of the human self is still being reflected in the mentality of the contemporary Chinese people.

In the first part of the article, I will present the socio-historical reasons for the creation of the concept of anxiety in China. This concept was analysed in detail and interpreted in a sense of "concerned consciousness" by the Taiwanese Modern Confucian Xu Fuguan (see Rošker 2020, 10). I will then connect this specific mode of psychological feeling of uncertainty with the traditional Chinese perception of the individual and the conceptualization of the so-called "relational self" and "relational ethics". In this regard, I will proceed from a supposition of the immense importance of the axiological connection of art, aesthetics and philosophy in the Chinese tradition and its significance for the psychological development of human beings, as revealed by Wang Keping (2020, 184).

In the following, I will explore the reasons for anxiety in the post-socialist period, i.e. in the time of transition into a capitalist economic-political system, which begins to develop in China at the end of the 20th century.

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1   Sartre claims that anxiety gives a lucid experience of the freedom which is, although often concealed, characteristic of human existence as such. For him, freedom is the displacement of the consciousness from its object, foundational "nihilation" or negation, with the help of which consciousness can comprehend its object without losing itself in it: to be aware of something, means to understand that you are not it (the object). This "no", however, develops in the very structure of consciousness as being on its own (Crowell 2020, 3).

In the last part of the article, I will provide a case study and examine a concrete example of an outbreak of anxiety in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, attempting to place it in a fruitful relation with some of the ideational remnants of Chinese (mainly Confucian) intellectual tradition, especially regarding Xu Fuguan's interpretation of the traditional concept of "concerned consciousness" (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識), as well as the traditional Confucian idea of the mandate of heaven (*tianming* 天命), which is conceptualized as a remedy for such feelings of impermanence, existential uncertainty and unpredictability.

The Origin of the Concept of Concerned Consciousness (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識) in Ancient China

In his work *The History of the Chinese Theories on Humanness* (*Zhongguo renxing lunshi*) published in 1963, Xu Fuguan[2] gives his interpretation of the origins of the concept of anxiety that developed in the time of the transition from the Shang to Zhou dynasties which was the consequence of socio-political transformations influenced by the transition from a nomadic to an agricultural society. The establishment of this new social order influenced the development of a system of ethics that was based on the absolute moral responsibility of every individual.

According to Xu, the specifically Chinese feeling of anxiety in the sense of what he called "concerned consciousness" developed when people began to address their problems through their own activity and personal aspirations. People were forced into this at the time of the transition from the Shang to Zhou Dynasties when traditional deities lost their credibility that they held until that time and people could no longer project their concerns on external, supernatural forces. Remedies designated by original Confucianism in this context were "the improvement or completion of one's 'self' (*cheng ji*)" and "ruling with virtue (*de zhi*)".

Such a specific feeling of anxiety led Chinese tradition to seek virtues and values and consequentially practicing morals. The feeling of anxiety leads to discovery, understanding, and the transformation of people themselves (Xu 2010, 12–14). It

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2   Xu Fuguan is one of the representatives of the second generation of modern Confucians, that lived in the 20th century in Taiwan and Hong Kong and worked on revival of original Confucianism, its social ethics and morals. However, Xu Fuguan, who was primarily a historian and sociologist who studied the political and social aspects of Confucianism and, like other modern Confucians, sought to include Confucian ethics in the context of modernization and democratization of Chinese societies. The contents of the first two chapters of this article are in part taken from my book on Xu's aesthetic theory, in which I explored Xu Fuguan's theory of Chinese aesthetics (see Sernelj 2021).

is a psychological state in which a person feels responsible for overcoming concerns based on his/her own efforts. Anxiety originates from moral consciences and is actually the feeling of responsibility, reactiveness, awareness and self-reflection which leads to ideas such as respect, dedication and the manifestation of a moral character (Rošker 2021, 330). According to Xu Fuguan's interpretation (see Xu 2010, 21ff), the origin of anxiety stems from a person's awareness of their responsibility to themselves and the world. This consciousness arises from the uncertainty that established itself with the downfall of shamanistic and animalistic pantheon religions of early Chinese antiquity at the transition of the Shang to Zhou dynasties (around 1066 BC). These uncertainties are solved when a person becomes morally autonomous (Xu 2010, 20).

In a religious, faith-oriented atmosphere a person leans on faith in salvation. He/she transfers all their responsibilities to God and is thus less worried. Their confidence arises from their faith and trust in God. Only when human beings take responsibility for themselves will they feel anxiety and concern. This feeling includes a strong will and the spirit of self-reliance and personal responsibility (ibid.).

In his explanation of the emergence of concerned consciousness, Xu Fuguan thoroughly explains the connection between the decay or decline of "primitive" religions and the creation of the idea of moral self, which fall into the basic characteristics of the Chinese (especially Confucian) intellectual tradition.

Anthropomorphic deities were known by the Chinese during the Shang (or Yin, approx. 1600–1066 BC) and Zhou dynasties, but Confucius and Mencius transformed the originally anthropomorphic form of "Heaven or Nature" (*tian* 天) into the concept of "Mandate of Heaven" (*tianming* 天命) which was a moral or ideological concept. Confucians were therefore not interested in personification of the "Way of Heaven" (*tiandao* 天道) and its transformation into an external anthropomorphic God. They were more interested in the method of its individual internalization than in its symbolic forms of creativity.

Xu Fuguan saw the reasons for different concepts of ethics in Chinese and Western societies in different ideological reactions to similar conditions of social transitions.

In his view, all cultures had their earliest beginnings in religion, originating from the worship of God or gods. The peculiarity of Chinese culture has been that it soon came down, step by step, from Heaven to the world of men, to the concrete life and behaviour of people. This preoccupation with earthly matters had

started during the Zhou dynasty[3] (1459–249 BC): the spirit of self-conscience was beginning to work, and people developed clear will and purpose. They were moving progressively from the realm of religion to the realm of ethics. Since that early stage, the Chinese people were free from metaphysical concerns. Unlike the Greeks, who at the same critical stage in history moved from religion to metaphysics, the Chinese moved from religion to ethics (Bresciani 2001, 338).

With the concept of a specifically Chinese feeling of anxiety, Xu Fuguan provided a fruitful foundation for further development of many aspects of Modern Confucian philosophy that were later on elaborated by his colleagues and followers. According to Bresciani, Xu also showed in detail how the concept of this kind of what he called "concerned consciousness" (i.e. *youhuan yishi*) was developed by the Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong) and how it became known in Chinese culture later on through Confucianism (ibid.).

Broadly speaking, the Zhou dynasty was a successor of two different types of culture: it was a fusion of an agrarian system which represented the typical production and reproductive form of the defeated Shang dynasty (1600–1066 BC) on the one side, and of the hunting and food gathering system which represented the socio-economic mode of production in the society of predominantly nomadic invaders on the other. The conceptual world of the Shang dynasty was based on the cult of fertility, and its economic system of cooperation and division of labour within the family clan, whereas the nomadic religion of the Zhou invaders was founded upon the cult of Heaven.

In a cultural sense, both of these production modes were the heritage of the Zhou society. The mixture of elements of agrarian and nomadic religions was a result of their collision. The cult of ancestors as a type of ritualized worship that combines both aspects gradually became a common thread throughout all periods of Chinese history (Bresciani 2001, 23ff).

God, or "the ultimate ruler" (*Shang di* 上帝), who represented the highest religious entity in the Shang (Yin) culture, did not yet refer to interpersonal or human ethics (Yang 2007, 2). According to Yang Zebo (ibid.), this fact clearly demonstrates that the religion of the Shang period was still at an early stage of development, and thus limited to the sphere of the nature. This radically changed after the defeat of the Shang (Yin) dynasty by the Zhou invaders. In Yang's opinion, the reason for the transformation from the prevailing natural religion to a

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3   Similar to the prevailing currents of Western historiography which have seen the Ancient Greek society as a "cradle of Western culture", the society dominated by the Zhou dynasty was understood as the "cradle of (Han)-Chinese culture" by most Chinese historians (Xu 2010, 20).

system of morality could be found in the "concerned consciousness"[4] of the ruling class, which in turbulent times of political and social chaos wanted to ensure their power and to justify it through this ideology (ibid., 3).

As explained by Xu, the authority of the Heavenly Mandate in the period of the reign of You (795–771 BC), at the time of the transition from the Western to the Eastern Zhou dynasties, was already completely loosened due to inefficiency, corruption, nepotism and the exhaustion of the population by the ruling class, which led to the downfall of the belief in an anthropomorphic deity *Tian* or *Shang di* (Rošker 2013, 174).[5]

Chen Lai (1996, 4) points out the reasons for this turning point in Chinese history. He claims that this transformation did not emerge because people recognized their own limitations and were therefore directed towards the search for some kind of transcendent and infinite existence which could have led to the establishment of a monotheistic religion, but on the contrary: they recognized the limitations of deities, and thus focused upon the real world and upon problems connected to the regulation of society and of human relations. Thus this important shift in Chinese history did not manifest any kind of a "breakthrough towards transcendence"; instead, it has marked a "breakthrough towards humanities" (Chen 1996, 4).

All this indicates an important difference in the intellectual and spiritual development of Chinese and European cultures after the "axial period" (see Roetz 1993).

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4   Here, Yang's idea of "concerned consciousness" refers to Xu Fuguan's concept, which was explained above. However, in Xu's study, this specific kind of anxiety does not only pertain to the ruling classes, but rather to all people in the transitional society.

5   We can argue that traditional faith-based concepts that represented the fundamental parts of dominant beliefs in the early Zhou dynasty after the establishment of a new culture, which included agrarian as well as nomadic elements, almost entirely disintegrated. This shift was very significant, since it showed that ancient China at the time was already defined by characteristics typical for the period that Karl Jaspers (2003, 98) described as the axial age. According to Jaspers, this period refers to the time between the 8th and 3rd centuries BC. When a significant qualitative change in thinking and perception of reality occurred simultaneously in different parts of the world, among which there did not necessarily exist any kind of mutual interactions. The conceptual shift refers primarily to the questions about the essence of human existence, where the question of transition from mythological belief to ethics and morality is at the forefront. In that period, people started to realize their own limitations; furthermore, the concepts of individuality, self-reflection and the practice of self-cultivation were formed. At that time there was a religious crisis in which monotheistic religions developed. According to some theoreticians (see Roetz 1993; Black 1992), Jaspers was, in his theory of the axial period, too generalizing and universal, since he wanted to limit the development of different cultures or civilizations to the simultaneous and unified development of mankind as a whole. In our case, Jaspers' theory is also problematic in the fact that in China a qualitative breakthrough in thinking, which relates primarily to the transition from mythological beliefs to ethics, happened much earlier (with the start of the Western Zhou dynasty, around 1066 BC) and not only with Confucius and Laozi (around 6–5th centuries BC).

While the latter ones stepped on the path of "more developed" forms or stages of religion, the further ideal development of Chinese society was not determined by any turn towards monotheism, but rather to the pragmatically defined search for an ideal social order. The reason for this orientation lies in the fact that a major religious crisis happened in China before the onset of the axial age, in which an anthropomorphic Heaven as supreme god and moral instance lost credibility.

And since this morally defined religion during the early period of the Western Zhou dynasty lost all of its moral appeal, it would be difficult to overcome the doubt that had already prevailed in the broadest strata of population and re-establish the theological mindset that would enable the development of monotheistic religion. Thus the supreme deity was replaced with a belief in the rational structure of the universe, while the concept *tian* 天, which previously denoted "Heaven" (in a spiritual sense), was simply turned into "nature" (Yang 2007, 3).

Xu Fuguan points out (2010,15) that the original Confucianism tried to establish an ethical basis for moral decisions in the idea of subjective justice, which should have replaced the previous fear of ghosts (or, in other words, the hope for the salvation in Heaven instead of the suffering in Hell) as a basic criterion. He points out that the reason for such a transformation lay in the higher level of spiritual development, in contrast to transformations that led to monotheistic religions that were based upon the idea of (external) God. In his opinion, this transformation led to humanism which is based on a rather high level of "self-awareness" (*zijuexing* 自覺性).

Although the Duke of the Western Zhou dynasty and his contemporaries considered the notion of concerned consciousness from the perspective of the individual's concrete social situation, which then determined his proper behaviour, Confucius transformed this idea and considered it from the perspective of the individual's moral self-reflection. As already mentioned, the idea of the responsibility that each individual carries for their own actions implicitly contains the spirit of egalitarianism. For Xu, this is an essential feature of the concerned consciousness (Huang 2018, 208).

The concept of anxiety is therefore the central notion of Xu Fuguan's interpretation of Confucianism. The significance of anxiety, as assigned by Xu, links important moral ideas of original Confucianism, such as filial piety, humaneness and rituals. For Xu, these moral concepts and proper behaviour, as their concrete consequence, are a manifestation of concerned consciousness. At first glance, this concept appears to us as something that preserves the political power of the rulers, that is, as the concept of political philosophy. But when

we look at it from his role in the cultivation of an individual's personal moral awareness, it becomes clear that it equally belongs to the sphere of moral philosophy (ibid., 220).

A Specific Form of Anxiety in a "Chinese Mindset": The Role of Concerned Consciousness in the Conceptualization of the Relational Self and Relational Ethics

Thus, according to Xu's interpretation, concerned consciousness, which can be seen as a specific kind of anxiety, is created with the realization that a person is himself/herself responsible for their actions and, of course, also for the consequences of his/her decisions. If the belief in external deities that function as forces that control human functioning while also judging whether these are good or bad ceases to exist, then a person has to lean exclusively on himself/herself and function in a moral ethics system which will function universally for the entire community.

Rituals and music that were strongly emphasized by Zhou Gong in the Western Zhou dynasty formed the foundation of a system of ethics which was later improved by Confucius. The foundation of Confucian ethics is formed by the concept of humaneness (*ren* 仁), meaning the love for a fellow human. From the very structure of the character, we can see that the human (left radical) is always tied to the other (right radical, meaning two, duality or plurality). According to the oldest Chinese etymological dictionary *Shuowen jiezi*, from the first century AD, the character 仁 was also written as 忎, comprising of a radical (at the top), which denotes a large number or the number 1,000 and the character meaning "heartmind" (at the bottom). We can see from both characters that they are about a person's relation to others. The aforementioned dictionary, however, defines humaneness as the love for one's fellow people (relatives, family, see *Shuwen jiezi* s.d., 4927).[6]

The establishment of strong moral and ethical principles, developed by the legendary Duke of Zhou, was strengthened and expanded by Confucius (6th century BC), and functioned as a point of conciliation of anxiety within an individual on the one hand, and as a socio-political ideal on the other. In Chinese ideational tradition, the human personality is built on the basis of relations or relationships with other members of the community, primarily within the family and later with all the members of the community. In Chinese tradition, such a "self" (*ziwo* 自我) is always relational and not isolated and individualized in the sense of de-contextualization.

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6   仁，亲也.

In classical Confucian texts there is a division between the big self (*dawo* 大我) and the small self (*xiaowo* 小我). The small self refers to the notion of the self as an individual, consisting of human desires, needs and expectations, which is at the same time embedded in a broader, namely a social context, which is defined as the big self. The great self, however, is primarily about responsibility and duties within the community. In other words, in Chinese ideational tradition the individual self does not exist without its broader placement in society.

While the Western ideational tradition stems from the idea of a free and independent individual, the foundations of the Chinese social order are a network of relations and could therefore be labelled as the "ethics of relational virtue" (*guanxizhuyide meide lunli* 關係主義的美德倫理). This basic differentiation leads to great differences in ethical thoughts which dominated these two cultural and philosophical discourses, not only by their views of the relationship between the individual and society, but also by the relationship between reason and emotions (Rošker 2021, 325).

Li Zehou, one of the most important contemporary theoreticians of Chinese ethics and aesthetics, emphasizes that traditional Chinese societies were structured as networks of relationships that connected individuals who were not established as isolated and independent entities, but rather as so-called "relational selves", i.e. these people were, in fact, interpersonally connected and their social relationships defined their identities to a large degree. Li stressed that a concept of the human "self" as such, always found in certain concrete situations and social environments, is connected to Chinese, and especially Confucian, traditions where the conceptualization of a person focus on relationships. This also means that chosen functions, failures and achievements of every person can be understood only by considering their interactions with others (see ibid.).

As pointed out by Rošker (2021), Li Zehou uses the term "relationalism" or (*guanxizhuyi* 關係主義), which emphasizes morals based on social relationships, and not on the foundations of individualism, as such, it is the typical product of the Chinese worldview.

Due to the Confucian view of the "one world", people valued interpersonal relationships and earthly human emotions even more. They mourned the finite nature of life and death. Their search for the meaning of their existence resulted in them finding it in the middle of their actual life with fellow human beings. In this way, they found infinite infinities within the finite and discovered that it is possible to achieve liberation in this world (see ibid.).

The conception of the relational self is already clearly shown in the Confucian ethic of five relations (*wulun* 五倫) found in the work of *Mengzi*, which forms

the fundamental structure of familial, social relationships, and those of relatives in which an individual is embedded. This structure is not only based on the rationalization of interpersonal relationships, order of ethics and responsibility, but also includes emotions:

> There must exist a love between fathers and sons, proper morality between leaders and their subjects, differences between husbands and wives; the elders should have precedence over the young, and there must be trust among friends.
>
> 父子有親，君臣有義，夫婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信. (*Mengzi* s.d., Teng Wen gong I: 4)

A vital part is played by filial piety (*xiao* 孝), or deep respect of the family, when it comes to interpersonal relations (Rošker 2020).

According to Xu Fuguan, the Confucian filial piety is a source of co-humaneness, which is the foundation of humanism and at the core of Confucian morals. He writes:

> Humaneness means being a human. It does not come from the will of the gods, but is the essential character of a person, for human character is already endowed with the virtue of humaneness. (Xu in Huang 2018, 210)

Filial piety originates from the love children have for their parents and represents a source humaneness. In this context, the practice of filial piety is followed by the practice of humaneness. According to Xu's interpretation filial piety is the source of Confucian moral behaviour and the foundation for all other virtues.

Xu believes that Confucian thought emphasizes filial piety also and mainly for socio-political reasons. According to him, there is a strong connection between filial piety and the patriarchal clan system. In Chinese antiquity, where the ruling family and the patriarchal clan coincided, the role of filial piety was to prevent the risk of overthrowing the ruler, i.e. the preservation of political power (ibid.). In this sense, filial piety can also be seen as a remedy for personal and political anxiety.

According to Xu, Confucian thought has two main components. The first is the theory of inner morals, which is based on the doctrine of the goodness of human character; this is precisely what separates humans from animals. According to this, people are capable of transforming themselves to become beings permeated by the virtue of humaneness (see Xu 2010, 186). Thus, a person can become a noble person (*junzi*) showing responsibility to the world.

The second component concerns inner morals and their manifestation in the form of everyday interpersonal interactions. With the practice of these orderly interpersonal relationships a person can honestly nurture the "love for others". The internal morality based on humaneness and the practice of human interactions are inseparably connected, because in this context, an individual's inner world and external reality are united (ibid.). For Xu, Confucius was the first person to develop the idea of an individual's inner moral world, the infinite nature of humaneness directed to the external reality in which it is also concretely defined. This enables people to live in the world of reason. A moral subject inhabits every individual, without the remnants of old religions.

The uniformity of the external and internal worlds of a human being, pointed out by Mengzi, is seen by Xu as an infinite process where the absence of borders is what causes people to be in a constant state of concern. For him, this type of concerned consciousness is tightly and inseparably linked to the concept of humaneness (*ren*) in the sense of social empathy. He explicitly writes:

> The fundamental expression of humaneness is precisely this concerned consciousness.
>
> 仁的基本表現還是憂患意識. (Xu 2010, 184)

This type of concerned consciousness can be seen as a form of anxiety, even though this anxiety differs from the Western, individual-based feeling, which is not only existential, but also private in its very nature. Given the fact that in China the individual identity has never been constituted as an isolated self, separated and independent from one's fellow human beings, the human self has a relational ontological basis. In this sense, a person's very existence is determined in a relational way (Ames 2020, 174ff). Thus in China anxiety as a basic form of being in the world does not pertain to the individual, but rather to communitarian existence. Indeed, as every human being is interdependent in their relation to other people, each individual existence as such is determined by collective concerns.

Anxiety in Contemporary Chinese Society

In the previous two parts, we examined social and historical reasons that led to the development of the concerned (or "collectively anxious") conscience in ancient China and its connection to the Chinese relational "self". As we have seen, such a self is not based on the concept of the individual as an independent subject, as is typical for the Western conception of the self. Rather, it emerges as

an organically integrated part of an inherent unity of familial and wider social relationships.

Hence the Chinese type of anxiety, as the deepest or even fundamental feeling of uncertainty of human existence, differs profoundly from its Western counterpart, as discovered by Heidegger's new ontology and later founders of existentialism. The Chinese type of anxiety is rooted in what Xu Fuguan calls concerned consciousness; it is a specific mental state or feeling within the Chinese tradition, which does not refer to the existential crisis of the individual. Rather, it is primarily developed from the reflection of one's own actions and their consequences in the context of an ethical behaviour that is formed within a family and spread to the wider community. In other words, the traditional Chinese feeling of anxiety is a key emotion guiding the process of questioning and self-reflection about the appropriateness of one's own moral character and the cultivation of ethical principles within a community, vitally connected to the elementary care and concern for others. Thus we can see that both traditional Chinese anxiety, as well as the conception of "self", are of a relational nature.

On the other hand, as pointed out by Zhang Li in her book *Anxious China: Inner Revolution and Politics of Psychotherapy*, published in 2020 as the result of many years of studying of the establishment of psychotherapeutic practices in China, anxiety appears to be a predominating by-product of the expansive economic development of the contemporary Chinese society that is most present in the urban middle class. In China's explosive development of its economy and neo-liberal free market, such individuals seem to have lost the connection to their families, their closest significant others, and hence, alienated from their relational self, a basic product of traditional Chinese socialization.[7]

Cities are spaces where new internet technologies, mass media, and global influences are at a person's disposal. In her research, Zhang points out that people in cities mostly describe their experience of life in a modern urban environment using two words, "turbulent" or "restless" and "anxious". Both, however, share an uncertainty with regard to reality, the future, and the precarity of life (Zhang 2020, 136). The Chinese urban middle-class today are concerned about the new property policies, the future of their children who face vast competition and have to fight to gain the best education which, of course, is expensive, yet the labour market still does not provide any guarantee that they will gain employment. Thus,

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7   In her article entitled "The Cultural Conditionality of Comprehension: The Perception of Autonomy in China", Jana S. Rošker (see Rošker 2012, 38ff) offers some empirical proof for the presumption according to which the nature of self-reflection and the consolidation of individual identity is still relational in nature.

most of them feel trapped and alienated from the world around them. In a world that has been developing and improving on a material level, the feelings of happiness, security, and contentment expected from this expansive development are not being produced (ibid., 37). Instead, people are plagued by confusion, emptiness, and uncertainty, even though they live materially comfortable lives. The difficult position of the Chinese middle-class was described by the author's informant in the following fashion:

> It would seem as though we have everything now, but in actuality, something important is missing. We live in a society lacking justice, security, and justice. Just look around you, the environment is worsening, food safety is questionable, health care is inaccessible ... How can a person truly be happy? (Zhang 2020, 37)

Therefore, the search for happiness is becoming increasingly common today as a project of the contemporary Chinese urban middle class that strives for a good and beautiful life (*meihao shenghuo* 美好生活) (ibid.).

Zhang points out that the Chinese of the previous century practiced different ways of searching for happiness in everyday life, although there has never been such an explosion of discussion on the subject of happiness and psychotherapeutic intervention as nowadays. In the past, the idea of happiness mostly arose in connection with the family, collective institutions, or the national state. Today, however, the search for or attainment of happiness is understood as a project of the individual, even though this individual is relational, i.e. intertwined in the familial and social context. This transition presents two important shifts: from the unified national focus on economic growth and material prosperity which we witnessed in the last three decades, and the shift to the psychotherapeutic regime of well-being that directs the questions of one's "self" and the meaning of life to the psychological and emotional experiences of individuals (ibid., 133).

The Chinese government is increasingly favouring this psychological approach to the "happy self" and life for two reasons: The first is the fact that it is supposedly less threatening to the *status quo* compared to other therapeutic approaches focused on the resolution of victimization, and empowerment. The search for happiness can, therefore, re-direct the attention of the people to personal matters and strategies of engaging one's self instead of questioning or even refuting the general social order. The second is the "happiness fever" (*xingfu re* 幸福热) which includes an element of individualization, as it probably will not transform into an organized mass movement. These usually individualist and self-centred practices are thus completely depoliticized, and even drain the collective revolutionary energy (ibid., 134).

In Xi Jinping's project "the Chinese dream" (*Zhongguo meng* 中國夢), the happiness and well-being of people (not only economic growth) became a fundamental building block of this new vision (Zhang 2020, 151). Chinese psychologists and psychological health experts quickly attached the significance of their work with the discourse of this dream, and articulated the psychological motivations of people with the official conceptualization of the construction of a harmonious socialist society (*Hexie shehui* 和諧社會). In this context, psychological care (*xinli guan'ai* 心理关爱) becomes a new and useful tool that fosters the feelings of well-being, stability, and social harmony beyond the aspirations for material wealth. While China experienced deep changes and social polarization during its economic and political reforms, there is a constant search for innovative ways to control society (ibid.).

Zhang believes (2020, 153–55) that it is becoming more and more evident that psychological counseling and other work in the field of psychological health is becoming a new form of political authority when it comes to shaping people's lives in post-socialist China. It became an indispensable part of developing and running all state organizations—the army, police, schools, universities, hospitals, companies, factories, etc. Instead of ruling through force and discipline, the most appropriate method of governing social institutions is through the mantra of *guan ai* 关爱 (loving care) or *ren ai* 仁爱 (benevolence). Thus, the political decision-makers call upon the familiar saying from the classical work of "historical writings" *Shiji* 史記: "If you are kind and loving towards your soldiers, they will be willing to die for you" (*Shi Ji*, s.d. IV, 12). The same can be said for the optimal relationship between the ruler and his people: The conquest of people's hearts is most important and most reliable to the ruler. Hence, in the official media today, the Chinese government is massively promoting loving care for its people. Some consider this a welcome experiment of the so-called "friendly governance" based on the notion of humanization (*renxinghua* 人性化), as opposed to past socialist rule, which was largely based on an emphasis on class struggle and political coercion. According to such observers, therapeutic management represents a form of kind management, defined by care, kindness and human feelings (*renqing* 人情). At the same, however, there is a rather sharp critique of this approach, seeing it as a subtle form of manipulation. Under the veil of care and benevolence, opponents see state power and control at work. Some also warn of the dangers of psychologizing social and economic problems through which politics nullify the need for structural change by using temporary and superficial corrections, and also in focusing on the need for change in an individual, but not in a political or socio-economic system (Zhang 2020, 155).

Zhang emphasizes that the new phenomenon of "therapeutic control" should be seriously observed from several perspectives, examining its application and the various concrete effects it entails, and not just as a form of false consciousness or psychological manipulation foisted upon the population by politics (ibid.)

Some critics refer to the new phenomenon as "emotional capitalism", a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices shape each other (Yin 2021, 5). They claim that in this context psychologists and counsellors, armed with specific knowledge, have become experts in the field of improving interpersonal relationships and increasing productivity in the workplace. They explain the goal of this development as follows:

> It seems that psychologists offered nothing but profit enhancement, combating worker unrest, organizing worker-supervisor relationships without conflict, and neutralizing potential class struggles by packaging them in the benign language of emotion and personality. (Zhang 2020, 155)

Anxiety in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic as Reflected in Empirical Data

From the above, then, we can see that the Chinese state interferes very much with the mental health of its people. There is also much sharp criticism of its "loving care" policy, which seems relevant and even justified given the political strategy of the Chinese Communist Party. The argument that these are mechanisms to prevent any revolt or criticism of the political leadership seems particularly relevant. For let us recall that it was precisely the political leadership that covered up the first phase of the COVID 19 epidemic outbreak in Wuhan. Despite clear and multiple warnings of Chinese doctors on the appearance of unknown pneumonia, local political representatives (including the director of the hospital) withheld this information and even threatened these doctors for spreading rumours which could damage social stability.

What is most significant here is the fact that it is precisely the state which should be providing prosperity, harmony, and care for the Chinese people. People would sense trust, security, and care from the state if it were to actually function according to the principles of loving care. However, as shown by psychological research on the increase in anxiety, depression, indignation, anger, and hopelessness published in scientific journals,[8] the truth is very different.

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8   See for instance Shuai et al. 2020; Wang and Zhao 2020; Liu et al. 2020; Zahir et al. 2020; etc.

An essay entitled *The Impact of COVID-19 Epidemic Declaration on Psychological Consequences: A Study on Active Weibo Users*[9] (Shuai et al. 2020) has shown that there was also been an increase in negative emotions (anxiety, depression and indignation) and the sensitivity for social risks as well as a decline in positive emotions and life satisfaction after the proclamation of COVID-19 in China. People showed more concern about their own health and the health of their families and cared less about free time and friends. The use of data obtained from social media ensured the timely understanding of the impact of severe measures in the field of public healthcare and mental health during the epidemic. Therefore, staying home with the family and reducing recreational activities also meant a way to prevent the spread of the disease.

The survey also pointed out that people began to take more care of their health and sought psychological support from their families, which was also influenced by limited travel policies and regulations on self-isolation by health authorities and the central government. The confirmation of the assumption that COVID-19 could be transferred from person to person, in contradiction with previous reports, led to many people to be very dissatisfied with the inaccurate information published in provincial governments and ineffective regulations. These actions caused an increase in indignation and anger directed at the government.

Shuai et al. (2020) have also shown that it was precisely anxiety that was the most common psychological state among students. Although a lot of informants listed anger, outrage and fear, anxiety was by far the most commonly listed. The researchers also emphasized the dangers of post-traumatic stress that could carry long-term consequences, which also stem from the worsening economic state. Reports on the infected and deceased healthcare workers, everyday problems, social injustice, and corruption, the powerlessness of common people living in Wuhan, and the use of social media in times of social isolation caused depression, anxiety, stress, fear, frustration, and anger. Indeed, anxiety was one of the main mental states of people in China judging by the feedback of different hotlines for psychological advice (see e.g. Liu et al. 2020; Zahir et al. 2020).

While research on online mental health services in China during the COVID-19 outbreak has shown that there was an increase in the number of public and healthcare workers educating themselves on mental well-being through online social platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Tik Tok, and over 28 books on the subject of prevention, containment, and mental well-being connected to COVID-19 were published by the Chinese Association for Mental Healthcare as early as February 2020. Moreover, online psychological advice was established

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9   One of the largest Chinese social networks online.

on mass through the WeChat platform led by experts for mental well-being in healthcare institutions, universities, and academic societies in all 31 provinces and autonomous regions in continental China, ensuring free 24-hour services every day of the week. They also developed an online psychological system for self-help, including online cognitive behavioural therapy for depression, anxiety, and sleeplessness (again, using WeChat). There have also been several AI programs used as interventions for mental crises during the epidemic. Individuals who showed suicidal signs were recognized by the AI program through a system for tracking and analysing messages published on Weibo, with online volunteers then warned to act according to the acquired information.

Based on the above-mentioned research studies published in February, March, and May of 2020, we can see that anxiety and also anger were by far the most dominant feelings in this crisis, which stemmed, as we have seen, from feelings of uncertainty, fear of disease, family care, and the loss of trust in the political authority. Most people solace in their familial ties, in part also with the help of consulting groups. Here it is also important to take into account the fact that the outbreak of the epidemic happened at the time of Chinese New Year celebrations, or just before them, when the biggest movement of people in the world happens each year in China. This is one of the reasons why the epidemic spread so fast among the population, because, as we have already mentioned above, the government did not notify the population of the danger of the virus in a timely fashion or covered up this data.

The measures for containment of the epidemic that the Chinese government implemented were the complete suspension of all public life, social isolation and the complete shutdown of all border crossings in the epicentre of the outbreak of COVID-19, the city of Wuhan and the entire province of Hubei. These measures have, at first glance, proven to be an effective way to contain the epidemic, but the dark side of this apparent success has far-reaching social consequences. Of these, it would seem that the loss of the intimate sphere is most concerning. This intimate sphere allows a person to state his/her feelings, opinions, or perhaps even a (subtle) critique of political power through social media. As seen from the results of the research outlined above, consultants could make interventions with individuals through web platforms on the basis of the text messages such individuals had sent on those very platforms. Since China has introduced a strict system of control and censorship of messages that flow through these social media platforms, there is a fear that this control will become even more severe. It is clear to Chinese political authorities that in this situation, even if only for a brief moment, they lost credibility, and caused discontent and anger of the population over the concealment of data and the repression of those who

handed then this data to the public. Therefore, it would seem that an increase in censorship and control are highly likely, since this would act as a mechanism for preventing potential social unrest.[10]

All this raises the question of whether the Chinese government will continue to tolerate any other mental or emotional states with its Chinese Dream project, which should be run by a happy population. If there is already a diversified network of consulting groups that interferes in the sphere of privacy and controls it, it is only a matter of time before anxiety becomes listed as a deviant behaviour or emotional state that could potentially harm or even destroy the realization of a harmonious society.

Despite such interference of politics into the intimate sphere of people, it is becoming clear that intimacy does not stay in the domain of the individual but is always constructed by others, whether the closest family members or the wider community. In research done by Zhang Li, which confirms a part of Chinese (Confucian) tradition which states that an individual in his/her mental dimensions always stays embedded in relationships with others, where anxiety, spurred by the wounds of modernity in a sense of alienation brought forth by the capitalist economic system on the one hand, and the crisis we are facing in the COVID-19 pandemic on the other, is primarily reflected in the care we have for one another. In the next chapter, we will look at a concrete example that affirms this anxiety which stems from the care for another and is also calmed by it.

Case Study: *Letters from Wuhan*, a Conversation with a Young Philosopher

In the time of the epidemic and the complete shutdown of the city of Wuhan, I had a brief conversation with a young teacher of philosophy from Wuhan University. I was most interested in whether he experienced anxiety at this difficult time. As we shall see from our correspondence and his own published reports, anxiety is still relational in contemporary China. In addition, however, Ouyang Xiao, my correspondent, has connected the specific Chinese feeling of anxiety to another significant concept from the Chinese tradition, namely the concept *ming* (fate) or *tianming* (Heavenly Mandate or order), which has been already mentioned in the previous parts of this paper.

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10   Since the propaganda apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party already managed to plant the belief that the virus came from abroad amongst the people, the fear of rebellion was unnecessary. Of course, this was influenced by the all-encompassing, already established system of social control.

Wuhan, along with the province of Hubei, of which it is capital, saw the most drastic measures that also lasted the longest. The government practically locked down the entire province and implemented social isolation of all the population for three months practically overnight. Because this happened at the time of Chinese New Year celebrations many families became stuck between the four walls of their homes.

My correspondent (Ouyang Xiao), is an associate professor of Western aesthetics and comparative philosophy at the Wuhan University. His parents came to visit from the province of Sichuan for the Chinese New Year celebrations. Just two days after their arrival, i.e. from January 23, 2020 onward, they were stuck for almost three months in his studio apartment without a balcony. Ouyang Xiao published his experience of a three-month-long quarantine on his Facebook page, which was also published on the webpage of the Irish national radio.[11] However, in our correspondence, he talked more about his personal distress and opinions on the subject of anxiety. He stated the following on the experience of living with his parents in such a small space:

> Family means everything to me, it is only now in the last three weeks that I understand completely how connected we are or how we live together as a family. My emotions are their emotions, their health is my health. When I feel uneasy because of the newest news or simply because there is no sign that the quarantine might end, they also become stressed when they try to comfort me. The first thing I do in the morning is check if they are feeling alright. If I hear one of my parents coughing I will stay awake and attentive to whether it will continue or not. Whatever happens, the family stays together. My mother said: "I cannot imagine how worried we would have been if we were in Sichuan and you could not come home because of the city lockdown." In their eyes, I am always the one that needs their protection and I feel in my heart that I should be the one taking care of them since they are more vulnerable. Lately, I started hugging them and they like it. Unlike the Europeans, the Chinese usually do not hug, not even family members. I believe that if I am to be infected, there is only a small chance that they would not be. (Ouyang, Xiao, electronic correspondence with author, April, 2021)

He also commented on people facing the crisis and the general mood in the community by stating the following:

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11   Ouyang Xiao finished his PhD at Dublin University and is a correspondent for the aforementioned Irish national radio.

> Wuhan is still in this battle—we still have not seen a breaking point—however, panic is unnecessary. People here remain strong, they help one another. Lately, the government implements more and more regulations. The city is ruled by order, and I believe that it is only a matter of time until we defeat this virus. (ibid.)

He replied to my main question on anxiety by saying:

> If we think about others we can temporarily forget "ourselves". The fact that people love you and take care of you creates a feeling of joy that eases the pain caused by anxiety. Thus, it is not that anxiety could be stronger and more intense because of the care for others. In a healthy relationship where we take care of others, of course, others also take care of us. Perhaps the feeling that someone cares for you triggers a sensation of protection, safety; even though this protection cannot truly defeat the great threat (virus), it is still protection as such. Protection is a form of functioning, not the product of functioning. I believe that this radical case is not an example of overcoming anxiety, not in a sense that we would be able to nullify it, but rather coming to terms with it and re-directing it to some other level. We have to recognize the real unavoidable challenge, but still think of it in a wider context. Here we come to Daoist metaphysics and its wide discourse about life and death. If we face "death" or any other form of threat with people we love, it becomes a lot easier. The certainty we feel and witness in an intimate relationship (between parents and children, among lovers ...), mutual care for one another is shown in detrimental moments. We were also helped by prayers to God or a deity. Even I, an atheist, prayed. However, in the end, we were saved by the very change of the situation. Good news from the community and the government played a very important part here. (ibid.)

From this written record we can see that the feeling of anxiety and the fear of death and uncertainty tied to it evolved into one of the most fundamental Confucian values, i.e. (co)humaneness (*ren* 仁), which is based on the love and care for one another. The basis for this, as mentioned in the second part of this article, is the virtue of filial piety (*xiao*) or love and respect for parents (and children) and people in general. Thus, from this concrete case, we can see that, in China, anxiety is connected to care and concern for those one is close to. As stated by Ouyang, this care is mutual, and the feeling things brings calms and overcomes anxiety.

The feeling of anxiety or anxious conscience is, as seen in the first part, strongly tied to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the sequence of events in external reality. In his article entitled *Toward the Post-coronial: Thinking Life and Uncertainty Through Chinese Philosophy* published in Labont – Center for Ontology in 2020, Ouyang argues that this specifically Chinese feeling of anxiety is strongly connected to another traditional concept that also denotes very basic feelings. The concept of the Mandate of Heaven, or *tianming* 天命. This idea, which primarily described the function of external, anthropomorphic deities at the beginning of the Zhou dynasty, was later transformed or defined as the functioning of the cosmos in the sense of an absolutely good and harmonic entity by Confucians (Ouyang 2020)

The Confucians also transferred *tianming* as a cosmological principle to the world of people. It served as a reference for the moral and ethical functioning of every individual within the community. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that affected all of humanity, the Chinese understanding of catastrophes or natural accidents as the unpredictability of the cosmic or natural *tianming* becomes especially interesting. As explained by Ouyang, in reality, the Chinese understanding of catastrophes or natural accidents as the unpredictability of the cosmic or natural *tianming* means, the nurturing of an appropriate intuition which is not based on any ruling religious tradition when it comes to the relation towards change or uncertainty in human life. The *ming* 命 character has more meanings, which describe "naming" or "name", order, ordering, destiny of life, and cosmic law. Ming is conceptualized in the sense of impermanence, uncertainty and unpredictability (*wuchang* 无常) of life. The existential uncertainty that stems from *tianming* creates a feeling of fear and respect for the Heaven or nature/the cosmos *tian* 天 which is its end source:

> Confucius says: a noble man has three forms of awe, to cosmic law, to great people, and to the words of sages.
>
> 孔子曰：君子有三畏：畏天命，畏大人，畏聖人之言。（*Lunyu* s.d. 16:8)

As pointed out by Ouyang (2020) *tian* 天 can be understood as the appeal to the cosmos itself, instead of a personalized deity or supernatural being such as God or Allah in Western religious traditions, which is clearly shown by the quote of Mengzi, who defines *tian* as well as *ming* as follows:

> That, which is made without human activity comes from the heavens (*tian*). What happens without a human causing it is endowment (*ming*)
>
> 莫之為而為者，天也；莫之致而至者，命也。(Mengzi 9:6).

Even the Daoist classics similarly define cosmic endowment or law. *Liezi* states the following in the chapter "Li ming":

> I do not know, why it is as it is, that is *ming*.
>
> 不知所以然而然，命也。 (*Liezi*: Li ming)

These definitions describe the concept of *ming* as something which is completely beyond human influence, intelligence, and knowledge. Even Zhuangzi defines *ming* as something humans have no influence over. It is endowed or is the laws of the functioning of the cosmos (or *Dao*) as such:

> Among things that are the way they are under the influence of the earth, only the pine tree and the cypress are the best examples. Vividly green in summer as well as winter.
>
> 受命於地，唯松柏獨也在，冬夏青青. (Zhuangzi s.d. Nei pian, De chong fu, 1)

Ouyang actualizes the relation of Confucians and Daoists have with *ming* in the context of facing the dangers of the new coronavirus.

> Recognizing *ming* takes courage. Some find it difficult to accept that people are in fact vulnerable and powerless. Recognizing *ming* does not make us weak or unreasonable, however, it is a necessary step towards a true understanding of life. People have to admit this enormous existential characteristic of the human condition: uncertainty. In Confucian thought, without accepting or understanding *ming*, we cannot truly become human. (Ouyang 2020)[12]

Adapting our relation to life after accepting *ming* does not mean a fatalist or any other pre-defined relation. If the Way of Heaven (*tiandao* 天道) is distinct to Confucian thought then the human Way (*rendao* 人道) is the establishment of relations between the exertion or diligence or power (*li* 力) and *ming*. If a person does not exert him/herself or is completely passive in his/her relation to *ming* this is understood as *non-ming* (*fei ming* 非命) or *incorrect ming* (*fei zheng ming* 非正命). The negative consequences such as sickness, death, danger and so on that stem from such passiveness are not a manifestation of destiny but rather a consequence of one's actions or decisions caused and chosen by ourselves (*zi qu* 自取) (ibid.).

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12   不知命，無以為君子也。(Analects 20:3)

As stated by Mengzi:

> Therefore, the one that understands *ming*, will not stand under precipitous walls.
>
> 是故知命者，不立乎巖牆之下. (*Mengzi* s.d. Jin Xin I, 2)

A very interesting definition of the relation between human functioning and so-called destiny or the laws of the cosmos or Heaven can be found in the classic Yangzi fayan 扬子法言, written by the Confucian philosopher Yang Xiong from the Han dynasty:

> Someone asked what is *ming* and the master replied: *ming* is a Heavenly decree and not a matter of human functioning. Human functioning is not a matter of *ming*. And what is human functioning? The master replied: a human can survive or disappear, live or die and that is not a matter of *ming*. *Ming* cannot be avoided. Someone else asked: What about Yan Yuan and Ran Geng? The master replied: They could not avoid early death because of *ming*. But if one stands under a steep cliff that is about to collapse, when your every move would cause a catastrophe and any form of action would cause your death, is that *ming*? (Yangzi Fayan 7:11).

From this quote, it is clearly evident that *ming* is not about a form of destiny in the sense of some previous endowment or determination, but rather that humans alone are responsible for their actions and the consequences of these. In this context, *ming* can also be translated as destiny, although it is understood as the destiny that we hold in our own hands and is not subjected to external celestial forces. This is also pointed out by Xunzi in the following quote:

> Those that know themselves do not blame people. Those that understand *ming*, do not blame the sky. Those that blame people are empty and miserable and those that blame the sky are without goals and will. (Xunzi 4:6)
>
> 自知者不怨人，知命者不怨天；怨人者窮，怨天者無志。

In light of such views that developed in the bosom of Chinese tradition, we can perhaps better understand not only the situation of Chinese people who were engulfed with anxiety, but also the position in which we find ourselves, experiencing isolation, fear, and loss due to the pandemic, the effects of which hit us soon after the people of Wuhan.

Blaming China for "throwing" this new coronavirus into the world is reprehensible, however, as viruses do not know of a homeland, nor borders. Viruses are a part of nature, a part of our cosmos. They are truly life-threatening, and remind us of how vulnerable we are, despite the expansive material, technological and scientific progress we have made. Moreover, all the racism and Sinophobia that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that the world is not exactly one, and that people are not even close to being equal.

If this danger is also to be an opportunity, then we should see anxiety somewhat differently, as just an uncomfortable feeling. Since it was anxiety that overwhelmed us in the time of social isolation, the absence of social life and the everyday things we were used to, it has also shown what is most valuable in our lives. And this is our interpersonal connections, relationships with other people, because without them human existence cannot be given any meaning.

Conclusion

This article is thus, among other things, an ode to anxiety as a way of raising the awareness of human freedom and the responsibilities related to it. It has highlighted that the origin and psychological basis of the feeling of anxiety, which prevailed in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, was closely related to the nature of traditional Chinese self-reflection and the perception of individual identity, which was—in contrast to the consolidation of Western individuals—deeply rooted in and constituted by interpersonal, especially familial, but also social relationships. On the other hand, the article showed that such a "specifically Chinese" concept of anxiety is also intrinsically linked to the ancient idea of human destiny (*tianming*), which does not represent a fatalistic determinism, but can rather be understood as a form of autonomous human becoming, evolving upon the endless path of our common nature (*tiandao*).

Acknowledgement

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