

# Can Chinese Harmonism Help Reconcile the Clash of Civilizations? Reading Zhihe Wang's *Process and Pluralism: Chinese Thought on the Harmony of Diversity*

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*ABSTRACT: This short article discusses the Chinese concept of harmonism as developed in a book by Zhihe Wang titled Process and Pluralism: Chinese Thought on the Harmony of Diversity. This book develops themes in Whitehead's philosophy as they illuminate the concept of harmonism and constructive postmodernism.*

Samuel P. Huntington's famous 1993 article and 1996 book about the clash of civilizations called attention to the fact that in the twenty-first century, intercivilizational wars should be avoided because they would be practically lethal, primarily, just for the core states of civilizations themselves. The avoidance of major intercivilizational wars requires core states to refrain from intervening in conflicts in other civilizations (Huntington 308–321). This historical necessity shifts the center of world history in our days either toward mental and spiritual battlefields or peaceful developments. Human heart and mind become either a battlefield or a field of peaceful constructive work regenerating ourselves and our natural environment, as constructive postmodernism suggests. The real stake of world history in the postmodern era for all civilizations is to understand life and the world the most deeply and completely, and, on this basis, to develop the most powerful and effective forms of a motivating, realistic, and cooperative social consciousness. Promoting peaceful intercivilizational cooperation, Zhihe Wang's book *Process and Pluralism: Chinese Thought on the Harmony of Diversity* has outstanding potential.

Resolving interreligious conflicts is one of these burning issues. Wang's book points out that the traditional concept of Chinese harmony can offer a win-win situation for all religions by offering a perspective of peaceful coexistence, becoming more open to each other, and learning from each other. Historically, China is unique in that it cherishes the peaceful coexistence of three great religions: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Such a peaceful coexistence became possible by the Chinese attitude toward religions that is characterized by Wang as harmonism. Based on Chinese traditions, Wang works out systematically his novel theory of harmonism, which leads to a significant achievement in today's interreligious dialogue. For example, interreligious dialogue in the last decades has been dominated by the tension between religious particularism and universalism. Wang argues that harmonism offers a beneficial middle way between these two options.

Reading Wang's book opens unexpected perspectives for approaching and understanding Western religions better. When learning about Chinese religions, it becomes clear that *the very idea of religion* as it is known in the West can be and *should be broadened*. This is because it belongs to the nature of knowledge that it affords a synoptic view about reality. The relation between knowledge and reality is like that of map and the world. In order to serve well, the map should reflect the world as accurately as possible. It belongs to the nature of knowledge to discover new aspects of and perspectives on reality, to interface with reality, and to learn from it. The world itself, and humanity within it, changes and develops. Without knowledge, humanity would perish. The very tool by which humanity maintains its viability and shapes the future of the earth is, again, knowledge.

Religions represent a critically important part of humanity's knowledge. Wang sees religion, society, and ourselves as processes, rather than as substances. Western religion is primarily about beliefs corresponding to a verbalized, fixed creed or text. Chinese religion offers a beneficial difference. Its primary characteristic is a harmony that respects mental and spiritual aspects, a harmony that involves a natural attitude that fosters a good sense of life and preserves peace of soul. Verbalized arguments can serve "the benefit of all things" (Zhuang Zi, the cofounder of Taoism) when they are in harmony with our good sense of life. Accordingly, Wang begins his book with a poem titled "The Place Where We Are Right," written by Yehuda Amichai. The first part of this poem's message can be

interpreted as follows: When all our efforts are directed to prove that we are right, the result is, usually, terrible. In such a place, “Flowers will never grow / In the spring . . . / And a whisper will be heard in the place / Where the ruined House once stood.” The second part of the poem’s message seems to express the primary importance of an appreciation of life, taking care of all living beings’ right to preserve their emotional integrity, to preserve the love of life. This is a sort of biophilia that is exhibited when we see and enjoy the fact that “flowers grow / In the spring.” Something similar is expressed by the maxim “In any case, avoid eliciting bad feelings.” The priority of love and an appreciation for life is at the heart of harmonism.

Remarkably, a similar harmony played a central role in traditional Hungarian and East European cultures. For example, the Székely people (pronounced as Saykay, often referred to as Sekler in English, known in the Middle Ages as Scythians) are an ancient Hungarian people from Transylvania who preserve the most archaic form of Hungarian language and traditions and their own legal system based on community law. For example, in medieval Székely village community records it is written: “These are seemingly insignificant matters, but it is necessary to escape slander, anger, for the sake of a good sense of life; since that is a very, very big thing” (Imreh 253). Similarly, in the Chinese context, religion pertains more to attitudes and behavior rather than to formalized beliefs. Thus, a person’s religion, for the Chinese, is understood through how he or she feels and acts, what is in his or her heart and mind, and not simply what he or she believes. While beliefs are important, they are not central. What is central is the feeling of harmony and acting in the spirit of harmony. We may call Chinese harmonism an organic or life-centered harmonism.

Substance-thinking considers substances as the ultimate self-existent blocks of reality. According to the prevailing Western philosophy, “the [modern] doctrine tells us that all there is to the world is a vast mosaic of local matters of particular fact, just one little thing and then another” (Lewis ix). In other words: there is no one great reality as a whole, but merely a heap of many little things. Such a scheme is ignoring the fundamental significance of relations between things, among them those universal and lawful relations of primary importance that prevail everywhere and everywhen.

A deeper approach shows that laws of nature, including laws of life, are laws of change. Even physical laws are expressed by differential equations

showing that all “little things” are changing permanently. Everything is changing. As Whitehead argues, every singular contributes to the changes by its own creative activity (*MT* 140, 146–148, 151, 166, 169). We should treat ourselves, our society, and our religions as processes. Accordingly, for Wang’s harmonism, the number-one rule is to regard religion as a process. Considering religion as a process bridging over centuries and millennia, we can become more patient toward all religions. Indeed, when we plant a seed in the ground, we have to give the flower some time to grow gradually. In the same way, we should treat our children with patience, since raising our children is a process, and we should allow them to make some mistakes. The same applies to human beings, societies, and religions. “According to *Yi Jing*, it is change that leads one to be open to others and communicate with others, and it is this openness and communication that leads to permanent prosperity” (Wang 3–4).

A second feature of harmonism is that we should hold an open, organic, and pluralistic perspective so as to see the world and to see others more accurately. It is very important to want to have a generous and hospitable mind. When we go for a big excursion outdoors, the enjoyment comes mostly from the fresh, new aspects of nature, meeting with the unknown. One should want to know more than one knows at present. And one needs to trust that there is something more in other people and in other religions beyond our limited expectations, and this “more” is potentially enriching our life.

Today there is too much slander, anger, and conflict in the world, and not enough good sense of life. Process philosophy treats the entire universe as an organic whole and treats other people and other creatures as parts of ourselves and we as parts of them. We are parts of the oneness. Today’s world really needs such wisdom. Scholars in China embody such an organic wisdom. We should treat each other by keeping in mind that we are parts of the oneness, and the bond between us is our most important treasure.

Third, we have to put ourselves into other people’s shoes. People are different from us. They grow up in different families, and they have different backgrounds. When we think very carefully, putting ourselves into other people’s shoes, we can see our problems from a different angle, and this can help in solving many difficulties. Thus, we can avoid many mistakes. Wang presents altogether seven rules of harmonism in the last two chapters of his book.

There is much more that could be said about this uniquely important and highly useful book. But my subjective evaluation of it would remain incomplete without mentioning that this book has changed my life. It opened fundamentally new perspectives by enabling me to realize how useful and vitally indispensable constructive postmodernism could be for developing an uplifting communal way of life. For example, the idea that actual reality consists of experiences, each of which unifies in itself its entire past, including all the universe of events, and creates a new unified experience from it, is really a mind-transforming concept showing that the entirety of history lives within us. Seeing so many great achievements of Wang's book, it comes to mind that including the ancient nature religions of Eurasia would enhance the merits of his work still further. Moreover, seeing the enormous potential of harmonism, it may be advisable to extend the scope of Wang's harmonism toward all the other fields of possible intercivilization conflicts, including diplomacy. Since the greatest danger in this age is the miscalculation of the steps of the other civilization, it is vital to understand the way of thinking of the other, less known one, which is, in today's Westernized world, the Eastern side. In this task, Wang's harmonism could have a primary importance.

In summary, we can regard this book as a work of comparative theology, as a multilateral philosophy of religion giving an overview of ultimate realities and suggesting what to do for the genuine fulfilment of our lives. As well it is a book of theoretical sociology enlightening us regarding how to find a stable and permanently reliable basis for the future of humanity. For all people who cherish the love of life, this book offers a rich variety of deep insights. Moreover, it is written plainly. This is a significant achievement because the book sheds light on the deepest questions.

Wang's book has been published recently in Hungarian by the publisher Pallas Athene Books. The book presentation is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELRdoWrzSUU&t=1s>.

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