

Listening as an Indispensable Access to Dialogues Among Cultures

Yuxin Jia & Changyuan Liu
Harbin Institute of Technology

This article proposes that globalization is fundamentally and primarily cultural globalization, which leads to heterogeneity or unity in diversity. Unity in diversity predisposes equal dialogues among cultures. Cultural dialogues not only lead to “us and others” reciprocity, beneficial interaction, and mutual formation and constitution but also help resolve global crises and problems. However, this paper argues that dialogue across cultures is accessible through *listening*. Even though the Western cultural tradition pays attention to the *active listening* aspect of dialogues, it seems that the greater concern is with persuasive talks than modest listening to others. Listening in the Chinese cultural tradition is an indispensable access to effective dialogues, which in turn leads to harmonious relations and thus social harmony. The authors, on the basis of an insightful study of Confucian concept of listening in the discourse of “unity in diversity,” elaborate on what listening is all about in the traditional Chinese culture and philosophy. They also propose that listening of the Chinese cultural tradition can serve as an ethical and moral code of universal value for the building of dialogues across cultures.

Interconnectedness, interdependence, and multiculturalism are the defining characteristics of globalization today. They are also the defining characteristics of cultural globalization as globalization is primarily and fundamentally cultural globalization (Giddens, 1990; Jia, 2009).

We must be acutely aware of the consequence or the overwhelming power of the interconnectedness and interdependence brought about by globalization. However, it has brought us not only mutual dependence, benefic interaction, mutual reciprocity, and intercultural identification—it has also brought us unprecedented uncertainty and anxiety caused by such destructive events as war, hatred, dispute, conflict, disaster, financial crisis, and so on.

Cultural conflicts caused by globalization attract the attention of humanity. Is globalization heading towards conflict and termination of civilization? Or is it heading toward benefic interaction and mutual reciprocity? The world is experiencing a critical moment. At this crucial juncture, the United Nations calls for “Dialogues among Civilizations”, which obviously predisposes dialogues among cultures. And as we have realized, the more serious the conflict, of any kind, the more compelling the need for dialogues.

Dialogues among civilizations predispose intercultural dialogues. All the cultures in the world are dynamic rather than static and all the cultures in the world are *dialogical*, *communicative*, and beneficially interactive, mutually reciprocal, mutually formative, and mutually constitutive. Cultural dialogues serve as the departure point for building harmonious global relations, mutual reciprocity, and thus global order and peace.

Even the discourse of human rights, for example, which is regarded as “the common language of humanity,” and as the moral and legal imperative for humanity, requires re-interpretation, re-defining, and transformation as the value of human rights, as well as other

so called universal values, may fail to grow on many non-Western cultural soils. We must recognize that the discourse of human rights and the discourse of the values of the non-Western cultures are “*dialogical, communicative* and, hopefully, mutually beneficial, as it is a dynamic process rather than a static structure” (Tu, 2006, p. 70).

The peaceful rise of China has changed the present world status quo: the Western monopoly on the discourse of speaking in the world arena is shaking. China has become one of the most powerful speakers in resolving global conflicts and problems and the rebuilding of world order. All other non-Western cultures are asserting and claiming for their legitimate right of voice and thus facing global challenges just as significant. Dialogues between and among different cultures are imperative, imminent, and are occurring.

History and the current global development have proved that dialogues are a decisive and an indispensable mechanism for, or approach to, resolving global crisis, overcoming natural disasters, cultural conflict, negotiating differences, and building global harmony and global peace. Cultural dialogues may serve as the departure point for us in our joint building of global flourishing and harmony.

Realizing the necessity and importance of dialogues in the age of globalization, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama, when visiting China, claimed that they came to China to listen and to have dialogues.

The Rhetoric of the Dialogues from the Perspective of “Unity in Diversity”

The developmental trend of globalization, as mentioned earlier, is toward the co-existence, benefic interaction, and “us-and-others” reciprocity. Or stated differently, globalization is heading toward “unity in diversity,” which is a buzz word of the Chinese tradition in describing a harmonious society.

In the Chinese cultural tradition, “unity in diversity” predisposes cultural dialogues between and among different cultures and only through cultural dialogues can people of a given culture rethink and know in depth one’s own culture, broaden the vision of the world, extending cultural identities, cultivate cultural awareness, and implement benefic interaction and “us and others” reciprocity so as to jointly develop a peaceful globe as one of “unity in diversity”.

However, “unity in diversity” predisposes equality and differences; without differences there is no need for dialogues while if there is no equality, there will be no dialogues. Equality between different cultures is the prerequisite for effective dialogues.

The Rhetoric of the Discourse of Dialogues: East Versus West

Rhetoric constitutes and is constituted by dialogues in the broadest sense of discourses. To Aristotle, as well as to many Greek and Western scholars, persuasion is what the discourse of dialogues all about. Rhetoric is, in the Western culture, an important means for persuading and changing others. Influenced by autonomy and self-centeredness, the exclusive dichotomous or binary framework of thinking and the thinking that the Western values and beliefs engendered by the Enlightenment Spirit as universal, the discourse of dialogue serves as an opening speech for persuasion and provides an ideal platform for spreading Western belief and values (Tu, 2006). Thus, the discourse of dialogues has long been a synonym of

changing, influencing, teaching, imposing upon, commanding, and even exercising hegemony over others. The discourse of Western dialogues is a product of teaching culture (Tu, 2006). The Western rhetoric obviously runs counter to the Eastern rhetoric predisposed by the concept of “unity in diversity,” which proposes benefic interaction, interdependence, mutual reciprocity, and intercultural identification.

The dialectic perspective emphasizes the aspects of relations and interconnectedness of intercultural contact, of which mutual reciprocity and benefic interaction between different and even conflicting cultures are especially important. To achieve mutual reciprocity and benefic interaction, intercultural dialogues are imperative. However, in the process of intercultural dialogues, listening rather than (persuasive) talk forms the core of successful dialogues (Starosta & Chen, 2003).

Listening as Indispensable Access to Effective Dialogues

In the Chinese tradition, listening is regarded as an indispensable access to dialogues. The article does not mean that the Western rhetoric tradition does not take listening into account in dialogues. In fact, it does. However, listening in the West does not carry the weight as it does in the Chinese tradition. At least, the meaning of listening is different across Chinese and American cultures. The Western rhetoric pays more attention to the power of persuasion than to that of listening while the Chinese culture pays more attention to the power of listening, the modest aspect of dialogues.

In the Chinese cultural tradition, the starting point for the discourse or rhetoric of dialogues predisposed by the concept of “unity in diversity” is listening, which can well serve as an indispensable access to a dialogue, leading to world-wide relations and global interconnectedness. Listening in the Chinese tradition is based on the highly valued concept of the Dao of *shu* (恕之道), which roughly means not only sympathy but also empathy. *Shu* grows out of the relational-self cultural value and the value of 仁 (*ren*), which emphasizes love for others and the building of harmonious interpersonal relationships. It is empathetic in the sense that it proposes putting oneself into the position of another and thinking of the world in that perspective. So, it has the meaning of altruism. Listening thus requires an attitude of open-mindedness and aims to establish interpersonal harmony. In fact, listening is the product of the modesty culture or it is a product of “learning culture” rather than teaching culture (Tu, 2006).

The cultural and philosophical message of listening can be discovered in the structural and semantic formation of the original Chinese ideographic character 聽 (meaning *listening*), as the Chinese characters are themselves metaphorical and philosophical concepts. According to the semantic and structural rule of the Chinese characters, the compound characters—ideographs in particular—are semantically and conceptually related, either wholly or partially, to the components that form or structure the given characters. They are related in such ways as, among others: 1) The compound character and the components are of whole-and-part relationship with the compound character being semantically and conceptually related, totally or partially, to each of the components or radicals that constitute the whole; 2) Semantically and conceptually, the character can possibly be either the result of the combination of the components that constitute the compound or the result of the interactions of the different components that constitute the whole; 3) Semantically and conceptually, the character and the

components possibly form cause-and-effect relationship. That is, the components or radicals that constitute the compound may serve as either the cause for or the effect of, for example, the concept expressed by the compound; 4) Each of the components can also serve as the means for how the cultural value or concept represented by the given character can be accomplished; and 5) Above all, the compound characters, especially the ideographs, may each be metaphorical concepts in the sense that they grow out of human bodily, social, and cultural activities and experiences and thus they themselves are the manifestations in general of human social activities in their interaction with the natural and social environment.

Now let us turn to analyze and interpret the formation of the ideographic character 聽 (*listening*) in terms of semantic and structural relationship between the character and the components or radicals that constitute the character, so as to see the cultural value of the Chinese tradition.

In the Oracle-Bone Inscriptions, the character 聽 (*listening*) consists of such pictographic components or radicals as 耳 (*ear*), 王 (*the highest ruler of the country*), 德 (*de, meaning virtue*), and 心 (*heart*).

As mentioned above, we can see that the character 聽 (*listening*) is semantically and conceptually related, wholly or partially to these pictographic components that make up the character.

The pictographic component 耳 (*ear*) looks like an ear in the Oracle-Bone Bronze Inscriptions, thus the primary meaning *ear*. The meaning of this character is to perceive sound by the ear. It has also taken the meaning of listening to or accepting others' opinions before making decisions and starting administering. This pictograph is placed at the first and most important place in the structure of the character, in the sense that it is the first thing that the eyes or the brain address both in writing and reading. This means, most likely, it acts as the prerequisite for, and is most closely related to, the concepts or values or whatever cultural norms or social conventions the other components or the society prescribes.

The pictographic component 王 (pronounced as *wang*) is placed under 耳 (*an ear*) in the Oracle-Bone Inscriptions and Bronze Inscriptions, 王 is a pictograph, referring to the highest ruler of a country, a state, or a monarch. It symbolizes power. Later, it became the highest title granted to a princess or minister of great achievements. In this light, 王 is a synonym of a sage (聖) (to be discussed later). 王 is also an important philosophical and cultural concept symbolizing harmony between nature and humanity, between humanity and itself in the society, and between one's soul/mind and behavior. Harmony is an important value of the Chinese cultural tradition. The character in form consists of three horizontal lines and one vertical line crossing them in the middle. The three horizontal lines respectively stand for *heaven, earth, and humanity*, with humanity in the middle, which indicates that it constitutes the center in terms of the relationships between or among heaven, humanity, and earth. The vertical line crosses the three horizontal ones in the middle and links them together, thus the configuration of this character metaphorically symbolizes harmony between nature heaven, humanity, and earth. The implication is clear: listening to others leads to harmony, which in turn makes a good ruler of the country. Or vice versa, harmony, as an important value, requires people to pay attention to listening to and accepting (different) others.

Another component which is part of the ideographic character of 德 (*de, meaning virtue*)

placed on top of the right, is regarded as high moral value. It refers to the most highly valued moral character of men, thus praiseworthy behavior. In other words, it stands not only for high quality of manhood but also for a prerequisite for people to obtain harmonious social and interpersonal relations between self and others as well as obtaining harmony between men and nature. So, it is the most important quality a man must acquire in the cultivation of the self. As the saying goes, “This virtue is harmony, and there is no virtue that does not embrace benevolence” (Wei, 1992, p. 16). In this way listening is semantically related to virtue, implying that listening to others can make a sage or man of virtue a man who embraces harmony orientation and benevolence. Stated differently, listening to others is the prerequisite for a man to embrace virtue.

It is interesting that in the structure of the character 德 (*virtue*), you can also find the character 心 (*heart*) placed on the bottom of the right, which most probably has to do with emotion and feelings—sympathy and empathy in particular—thus respectful listening has the quality of sympathy and empathy for others as the character 聽 (*listening*) is also related to heart.

In the formation of the character 聽 (*listening*), the pictograph 心 (*heart*), which was shaped like a heart in ancient times, is placed at the bottom on the right. This shows that semantically and conceptually *listening* is also related to *heart*. The pictograph 心 (*heart*) is a cover term for thinking, ideas, and feeling, as well as emotions. Characters with 心 as a component thus have to do with human thinking, ideas, feeling, and emotion. In this light, listening is related to the mind or thinking, ideas, and emotion: listening is on the one hand, a matter of the mind (meticulous thinking and ideas), and on the other hand, a matter of whole-heartedness and the attachment of emotion. Listening process is a matter of output of emotion and feeling on the part of the listener, who employs sympathy and empathy for different people. Of course, before we are sympathetic and empathetic, we must first of all be sensitive to differences and adopt the attitude of appreciating and accepting differences.

心 (*heart*) is an important Chinese philosophical concept. According to the Chinese cultural and philosophical tradition, innately, men are born with the heart of sympathy and empathy for others. Man inherently has the heart of benevolence 仁愛之心 (the source of *benevolence*), the heart of shamefulness for doing something wrong 羞耻之心 (the source of *justice*), the heart of respect 恭敬之心, (the source of *propriety* and *respect*), and the heart of telling right from wrong, intelligence 是非之心 (the source of *intelligence* and *critical thinking*).

聽 (*listening*) is semantically related and homophonic to the Chinese character 聰, which also has the components of 耳 (*ear*) and 心 (*heart*), thus related to the mind. 聰 means cleverness and wisdom. The Chinese saying, “Acute ears enable people to perceive and judge the things critically,” (耳聰目明) best characterizes the relationship between the ear and the mind. We should also note that the character 聰 (*wise* and *intelligent*), just like 聽 (*listening*) and 德 (*virtue*), all have 心 (*heart*) as a component and we remember that heart is a cover term meaning different things.

What is interesting is the fact that in the Chinese culture, as mentioned just now, the character 耳 semantically is related to or semantically has something to share with the ideographic character 聖, the original form of which is 聖 (*sage* or *man of virtue*), as in the

formation of 聖 (*sage/ a man of virtue*) there is also the component 耳 (*an ear*) on the top and 王 at the bottom. Therefore, 耳 (*ear*), 王 (*unity of nature, man, and heaven*), and 聖 (*sage, man of virtue*) are semantically and conceptually related to one another and they are mutually definable and mutually formative in meaning. So much so that the formation of 耳 + 王 in the formation of the character 聽 implies the notion that before you become a sage or a man of virtue you must be ready to listen to and accept different opinions and ideas. Only in so doing, can one build harmonious relationships between men and nature and between men and men (the harmonious interpersonal relationship). In this way, the sage in the Chinese cultural context symbolizes a man of virtue as he is harmoniously related to nature and other people in the society. So, the importance of listening as the starting point for cultivating relation orientation is most obvious.

What is more, 心 (*heart*) is homophonic to the pronunciation of the character 新 (*new, fresh*). This implies that, while retaining its own cultural root and tradition, it allows for ever-widening circles of self-other definition—it proposes change, re-invention, redefinition, transformation, regeneration, and transcendence of the boundaries of one's originally ascribed behavior and its underpinnings.

When the pictograph 聽 (*listening*) is related to the making of a sage or a man of virtue, philosophically, it implies that a man of virtue should be a man that embraces 仁 *ren*, meaning humanity/benevolence, the fine quality of manhood (仁者人也, 仁者爱人) which is the development of sympathy and empathy as mentioned above. However, in the Chinese culture, 人 (*man*) and 仁 (*benevolence*) share the same pronunciation and both are homophonic to the sound of the character 忍 (*ren*), meaning *tolerance*. According to the semantic and structural rule, characters sharing the same pronunciation may totally or partially share or be related to the same meaning. So, in this way, listening implies the meaning of being tolerant to differences: As the saying goes, “A man of benevolence is tolerant to others” (人者忍也). What is more, philosophically, virtue in the Chinese cultural tradition has the meaning of being modest. Thus, the important role modesty plays in listening is also very obvious.

The semantic and structural formation of Chinese character 聽 (*listening*) shows us that the process of listening starts with the very pit of heart and needs all the efforts and attention of our heart. Listening means an act with our whole body and mind. Listening requires an attitude of open-mindedness and sensitivity to differences, and a readiness to tolerate, understand, respect, accept, and appreciate differences. Listening needs sympathy and empathy for others. It is a matter of the joint efforts of human act (behavior), cognition, emotion (affect), moral inclusiveness, and cultural awareness (awareness of own culture, the culture of others, etc.).

To interpret and sophisticate the concept of listening in the globalizing context, listening aims to establish benefic interaction, mutual reciprocity, and mutual formativeness. Listening is a dynamic process, meaning it should always be contextualized in the new emerging cultural and social reality, especially in the current globalizing society. Listening should renew, re-interpret, re-assess, transform, broaden, enrich itself, and in so doing its own culture and identities will transcend the boundaries of nation-state so as to adapt to the new context: the global society. In being contextualized, listeners should listen with their mind to listen critically. Listening provides a platform for equal dialogues and aims to establish harmony

and unity in diversity in the ever-globalizing world.

As such, listening can serve as the opening or an ideal access to equal dialogues between different cultures in today's ever-increasingly globalizing world and can help us build an ideal global society. Only through listening, seeking commonality rather than differences, and appreciating and accepting others, can we "achieve the betterment of ourselves and the betterment of others just as well, and be able to accomplish the betterment for us-and-others, and ultimately, the achievement of unity in diversity under heaven" ("各美其美， 每人之美， 美美与共， 天下大同") (Fei, 2007, p. 315).

In short, we can connect 聽 (*listening*) with the core concept of the Chinese culture 仁 (*ren*), which, as mentioned above, defines the finest quality of humanity, or quality that distinguishes humans from animals. 仁 (*ren*) has been translated into English as *benevolence*, *love*, *humanity*, and so on. However, these translated concepts can't convey the precise meaning of the concept of the Chinese tradition. The meaning of 仁 (*ren*) is at least twofold: human love for others and also sympathy and empathy for others, which is best expressed in the saying, "Don't do to others what you don't want them do to yourself." Anyway, the notion of the Chinese character 聽 (*listening*) advises one to embrace the finest quality a man should embrace, and vice versa, a man embracing the finest quality, like truly listening to others. And in terms of interpersonal relationships, the finest quality finds expression in the saying, "Benevolence does not separate from others and intelligence does not complain about them."

So, if equal cultural dialogues are the departure point for the building of an ideal global society, we must add that such dialogues are accessible through the initiation of listening.

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