

A Misconception of the Chinese Conception of Friendship

The Conversation (15 June 2021) published an article by two British academics about two “competing traditions” – the Western and the Chinese – which they argue “make true friendship highly unlikely”. The authors are Professor Astrid H.M. Nordin (Lau Chair of Chinese International Relations, King’s College, London) and Graham M. Smith (Associate Professor in Political Theory, University of Leeds).¹ Their contribution is prompted by the recent summit of the G7² (an informal club of wealthy democracies, consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK and USA) held (10-12 June) this year in Cornwall, UK. As China is neither a democracy according to the G7 nor is it wealthy (it considers itself only as a moderately prosperous country/society³), it fails to qualify naturally to be a member, and was not invited although Mr. Narendra Modi of India was, presumably on the strength that India is recognized to be the largest democracy in the world.⁴ However, in spite of China’s conspicuous absence from the world’s top table, the final statement of the summit included a number of issues, which China would, naturally, perceive as a red rag to a bull; they cover the Hongkong disturbance, the Taiwan Straits, genocide and forced labour in Xinjiang, the lab leak theory of the Covid-19 epidemic in Wuhan, the Belt and Road Initiative. The US President, Joe Biden, considered it a good summit outcome as he had won over the Europeans to join with him in a more confrontational stance towards China. Charles Michel, European Council President said: “Liberal democracies and open societies face pressure from authoritarian regimes. This challenge has prompted us to join forces during the G7”.⁵ To this Nato added its heightened anti-China rhetoric, claiming that “China’s stated ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order.”

Just a few days before this slew of statements from the West,⁶ Xi Jinping was reported to have told senior (Chinese) Communist Party (CPC) officials: “It is necessary to make friends, unite and win over the majority, and constantly expand the circle of friends [when it comes to] international public opinion”; the country should be “open and confident, but also modest and humble”; to make clear to the world that the goal of the Chinese government is nothing but to secure “the Chinese people’s happiness and good fortune”.⁷

It is against such a background that Nordin and Smith have written their contribution published by *The Conversation*. Its main thesis is found in these two sentences: “On the face of it, it suggests the possibility of rapprochement between the rich liberal democracies represented by the G7 and the authoritarian Chinese state. However, despite appearances of a call for a closer relationship, there is more than one way being friends – and Xi’s idea might be somewhat different to what many in countries attending the G7 might expect.”

Nordin and Graham claim that the Euro-American tradition of thought understands friendship to be a voluntary and reciprocal relationship of equals. “Importantly, on this view of friendship, friends remain together despite – or even because of – their differences. Indeed, differences are seen as productive and enhancing of the friendship.” In contrast, they say that Xi understands friendship within the Confucian tradition (*Rujia* 儒家), a tradition that China is trying at the moment to revamp to make it serve the Chinese project of constructing an ideology of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Nordin and Graham argue that within a framework informed by Confucianism, as far as the concept of friendship is concerned, one would inevitably end with a hierarchical relationship between one party considered to be better/older/wiser than or in sum, superior to the other party which is considered to be younger, less wise, less elevated than or in sum, inferior to the senior partner. In such an unequal relationship, according to *Rujia* values, while the senior partner is duty-bound to care for and to help the other to grow and develop morally, the junior partner has a corresponding duty to heed and learn from such teaching and monitoring.

In their interpretation of Xi Jinping’s notion of friendship (in the domain of international relations), China sees itself as the elevated, the senior partner and the West as the junior, less elevated party. And they are surely right in claiming that the West would under no circumstances accept such a model of friendship nor would they find it

¹ URL = <https://theconversation.com/china-and-the-west-competing-traditions-make-true-friendship-highly-unlikely-heres-why-162781>, dated 15 June 2021. Retrieved 14 July 2021.

² Russia was part of it (when it was then referred to as the G8) until it was expelled following its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

³ The term in Chinese is 小康社会 *xiaokang* society. It reflects a fact about the Chinese economy and not about Chinese modesty *per se*. Even a quick glance at some of the graphs and figures for the two economies – Chinese and the most advanced, the USA – would bear this out. See, for example, Comparing United States and China by Economy which cites sources such as World Bank and International Monetary Fund (15 May 2021). URL = <https://statisticstimes.com/economy/united-states-vs-china-economy.php>. Retrieved 15/07/2021.

⁴ India was also invited in 2019.

⁵ URL = <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-europe-rebuke-china-economic-practices-g7-human-rights-xinjiang-coronavirus/>. Retrieved 14 July 2021.

⁶ An agnostic attitude is called for here as it is the only one relevant to adopt from the vantage point of this commentary whose remit is not to critically assess these assertions as empirical claims.

⁷ URL = <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-57327177>, dated 2 June 2021. Retrieved 14 July 2021.

remotely appealing. However, crucially relevant to the point under discussion, are Nordin and Smith right in presenting such a model as “the model of friendship” endorsed by *Rujia* thinking? They may not.

Before demonstrating that they may be wrong, let us first query a little their account of the Western concept of friendship in the personal domain. Nordin and Smith cite Plutarch in support of their understanding of Western friendship. However, whatever the merits and relevance of Plutarch’s view for other places and other times, it may no longer hold without important qualification for today. Friendship is a voluntary bond between two persons entered into at any given moment of time, but whose duration is subject to two main constraints: spatial locations and other more compelling bonds. A friend may move away from the neighbourhood, to another part of the country, go abroad many thousands of miles away. A friend may even not stray too far from the old neighbourhood, but s/he has over time taken on new duties and responsibilities, such as those which follow from marriage/long-term partnership, parent-hood, being primary carer for elderly or disabled relative. As time and energy are in short supply, the friend may have no choice but to down-grade the bond of friendship – romantic partnerships, parents, children take priority over friendship in the hierarchy of relationships. This moral ordering appears to be more or less universally accepted in societies in the globalized world of today.

Friends, long lost sight of because of other urgent demands of life, may be found again decades later – Friends Reunited was a portfolio of social networking websites, an internet start-up pioneered by a husband-and-wife team in the UK in the early 2000⁸ for this purpose. Citing the phenomenon of Friends Reunited in this context serves only to make the point that friendships, especially those made at a certain moment of one’s life such as during late adolescence/at the cusp of adulthood as fellow students, appear to have a firm psychological hold on a significant portion of adults in modern life. In other words, friendship in general, according to psychologists, is made amongst people with common interests, and that, when interests diverge, people spend less time together and drift apart – people actually enjoy spending time together with those who share their main interests. Common interests may also involve common values; if values diverge too much, friendship does not flourish so easily. Friendship is also cemented when the parties are more or less equal, with each being perceived to contribute roughly the same amount to the relationship – for instance, a very rich friend and a very poor friend may find it difficult to sustain a true long-lasting friendship, as they cannot participate in the same range of activities without embarrassment, awkwardness and lack of self-consciousness.⁹

If the psychology upon which the account above rests is correct, then Nordin and Smith may not be correct in endorsing Plutarch’s version of friendship or at least their interpretation of Plutarch.¹⁰ They write:

Importantly, on this view of friendship, friends remain together despite – or even because of their differences. Indeed, differences are seen as productive and enhancing of the friendship. This view is exemplified by Plutarch’s comment that “I don’t need a friend who changes when I change and nods when I nod; my shadow does that much better.” Friends disagree in such a way that they remain friends and, if necessary, disagree again in the future.

Well, the most recent major divisive issue in the UK, the Brexit referendum which yielded 51.9% to Leavers and 48.1% to Remainers did cause some families and friends to row and to fall out. YouGov Poll as reported by Yahoo News UK (12/11/2019)¹¹ claimed that one in eight Britons have had a row about leaving the EU with those closest to them. Nine per cent said they had fallen out with family or friends but had since reconciled, with 4% experiencing a still unhealed rift, slightly over three years after the Referendum on 23 June 2016.¹² It is not obvious that this kind of evidence can readily be reconciled with Nordin’s and Smith’s interpretation of Plutarch.

I hope the above brief account of friendship has been plausibly set out and argued and, therefore is not contentious. Let’s now briefly explore the Chinese conception of friendship together with some cognate notions such as comrades and fellow disciples. The characters used today for “friend(s)” in Chinese constitute a two-syllable word, looking like this: 朋友 *pengyou*.

However, before we attempt to deconstruct the word to get as its various meanings, let us first recycle a piece of folk etymology and tell a simple allegorical tale for the readers’ amusement. Once upon a time, there were two neighbours, one called Ah Peng, the other Ah You. They were as close as blood brothers; each cared for and helped the other. They gathered wood for a living. One day a storm blew down Ah Peng’s shack. Ah You was

⁸ It did lead to some abuses. The punters moved on to Facebook. It closed in 2016.

⁹ See A. Lickeman 2013. The True Meaning of Friendship. Psychology Today. URL = <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/happiness-in-world/201312/the-true-meaning-friendship> . Retrieved 15/07/2021.

¹⁰ Plutarch was discussing the difference between a true friend and a flatterer and not exploring the concept of friendship *per se*.

¹¹ Yahoo!news. 12/11/2019. Remainers twice as likely as Leave voters to fall out with family and friends over Brexit. URL = <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/remainers-leave-voters-fall-out-family-friends-brexit-095802300.html>. Retrieved 12/08/2021.

¹² URL = <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/remainers-leave-voters-fall-out-family-friends-brexit-095802300.html> . Retrieved 15/07/2021.

deeply troubled. He invited the homeless Ah Peng to share his house, which fortunately had managed to withstand the weather better. He also used whatever he could spare from his meagre earnings selling the wood he had gathered to help his neighbour to rebuild his house. Hence, *pengyou* stands for friends. Note that in this narrative, the two friends were equal, both equally poor and equally vulnerable in economic terms – there is no talk, explicit or implicit, about a hierarchical structure of superiority and inferiority.

As a matter of fact, each of the two characters in this two-syllable word on its own historically has meant something different. 朋 refers to those who studied with the same master or teacher. The seventy-two pupils of Confucius were all *peng*, as they all acknowledged Confucius to be their master, and Confucius had accepted them to be his students. *Peng*, therefore, stands for “fellow disciples.” As such, they stood as equals to one another but as inferiors to their teacher Confucius.

The Chinese language in its long history has used various (non-alphabetic) scripts. We now show the character 朋 in four different scripts with the oldest mentioned first: *Jiaguwen* 甲骨文 (Oracle Bone), *Jinwen* 金文 (Bronze), *Xiaozhuan* 小篆 (Lesser Seal) and *Lishu* 隶书 (Clerical).



In 1, it appears clearly as a necklace of jade pieces, according to some scholars. To other scholars, 朋 is a measure word – it refers to shells, used as a form of currency in archaic times. It represents two strings of shells, each string with some shells – see 2. In archaic/ancient China, jade and shells were equally precious. A necklace of jade pieces or two strings of shells suggest not only that the pieces are linked to one another but also that what are linked are very precious. It was not the case that jade was considered more precious than shells or vice versa; both are equally precious. So was the relationship between the fellow students of one master.

While 朋 refers to fellow disciples, 友 *yǒu* refers to comrades. The various forms for 友 *yǒu* in 1, 2, 3, 4 are shown below:



In the first three scripts, two right hands are involved. Ancient times were very violent and people always carried a weapon when they travelled. When travellers met and they meant no hostility, each would lay down their respective weapons, each putting their hands forward, with the hands always in the same direction. This would imply that they would have stood side by side. This gesture would establish a friendly attitude. Naturally, the character/word developed from this gesture came to represent being friends with another. In turn, it lends plausibility to the interpretation that it means “people helping one another to achieve a common goal.”

In 4, although two hands are still involved, one hand has taken the form 𠂇 which is the left hand, and the second hand the form 又, which is the right hand. It seems to stand for a gesture of greeting – when two people meet, they shake hands.



Above is a picture of such a greeting shown in a rubbing of a stone carving of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), looking much like a modern handshake, but not quite, as the person seated on the left seems to be using his

left hand and the person seated on the right his right hand, which is exactly what 4 says. Together the two hands make up *Yinyang Wholism*. However, the different forms, between them, yield the connotations of the word in terms of mutual help, warmth and goodwill (amongst equals).

A very popular story about friendship is found in an ancient text, *The Liezi* 《列子》.¹³ It is about two friends, one called Xu Boya 徐伯牙, the other, Zhong Ziqi 钟子期 who lived, it is said during the period of the Spring and Autumn Annals (Confucius also lived in those times). Xu Boya was a very accomplished musician playing the 古琴 *guqin* (Chinese zither). His friend understood his playing perfectly and appreciated it in the only way a true connoisseur and lover of the music could. Unfortunately, Zhong Ziqi died. Xu Boya was heart-broken, and grieved so much that he could no longer bear to play the *guqin*. In his grief, he smashed his instrument to pieces, and never played music again. From then on, the expression 知音 *zhiyin*, literally meaning “knowing the notes of music and its sounds,” has been used to stand for a rare friend who truly understands oneself in all aspects, what may be called “soul-mate” in English. An alternative expression with the same meaning is 知己 *zhiji* – one who knows you as you know yourself.

Friendship played an extraordinarily important role in ancient Chinese culture especially amongst the literary class. In their career, scholar-officials¹⁴ were constantly moved from post to post, to different parts of the realm, often having to leave family, not to mention friends, behind. With each new posting, they had to cultivate new friends amongst people who could share their literary passions, namely, doing calligraphy, writing/discussing poetry, appreciating painting (even if the talent for drawing them was absent). Off-duty, these activities would be carried out in convivial company helped on with wine and tasty snacks. This idyllic leisure life-style is best captured by a famous episode in the biography of China’s most celebrated calligrapher, Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303 – 361CE) who lived in the Eastern Jin 晋 dynasty. When he was governor of Kuaiji 会稽, he once (in 353 CE) organized an outing, to celebrate the Spring Purification Festival, a kind of picnic by a meandering stream with a pavilion in the vicinity (*lanting* 兰亭/orchid pavilion), near today’s Shaoxing, Zhejiang province for his family and friends. (The number of invitees recorded seemed to vary between 41 and 47.) The entertainment designed consisted of floating (lacquer) cups of wine down the stream as the party sat along its banks. Whenever a cup stopped, the friend nearest it had to drink up its content and then to compose a poem. It turned out that 26 of the party between them composed 37 poems. It fell to Wang Xizhi to record this happening; on this occasion he used the Running Script.¹⁵ That calligraphical record is extant today, referred to as *Lantingji Xu* 兰亭集序 (*Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion*). A more eloquent paean to the joys and pleasures among friends who were equals during their moments of relaxation as well as playful creativity has not been surpassed either in Chinese or other cultures in the history of world civilization, as far as I’m aware.

Below are two photos of possibly the idyllic location of this famous romantic picnic which I took when I visited the area a few years ago.

¹³ This text is said to contain the thoughts of the Daoist philosopher who lived circa 5th century BCE and who came to be referred to as Liezi as a mark of honour bestowed on him. However, modern scholarship, both Chinese and sinological, holds that the text itself, *The Liezi*, was compiled and emerged circa 4 CE.

¹⁴ Not all scholars (that is, members of the literary class) were officials, for reasons which include the following: selection for officials was based on very competitive examinations held initially at the local, then provincial/regional, and finally the national levels. The examination is called *keju* 科举; the success rate was not high. The unsuccessful candidates often became teachers/tutors; others turned to alternative occupations such as becoming physicians while yet others, family fortune permitting, became gentlemen of leisure, cultivating their calligraphy, pursuing activities deemed appropriate for the literary class. In some cases, successful candidates might turn down official appointments especially during periods when the Court and the official domain were perceived as corrupt.

¹⁵ This is *xingshu* 行书, also called the semi-cursive script. Calligraphers who wrote on paper with brushes (as opposed to those whose writing was carved in stone or bone) enjoyed greater freedom in the way they wrote. Strokes were permitted to run into one another and more rarely even characters were allowed to do so. Wang Xizhi is known down the ages as *shuxian* 书贤/the Sage of Calligraphy. For a video which shows a calligrapher in Hongkong demonstrating his skill in *xingshu*, see Chinese calligraphy: Running Script: URL = <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=what+is+running+script+in+chinese+calligraphy+docid=608031661154975121&mid=77B170ED197CAE6FFD8277B170ED197CAE6FFD82&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>. Retrieved 16/07/2021.

For an account of how that preface was found and survived to this day and for a sample of Wang Xizhi’s Running Script from it, call up <https://www.skyren-art.com/en/dingshimei/calligraphy/188-lan-ting.html>. Retrieved 16/07/2021.



Confucianism/*Rujia*, since the early Han period, formally sanctioned three bonds which were hierarchically ordered in accordance with Dualist Thinking introduced by the philosopher called Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE). He was commissioned by the Emperor Wu (汉武帝 Hanwudi) to construct such an ideology for the newly established Han Empire, thereby ushering in a long era of imperial feudalism, lasting slightly over two

thousand years till the fall of the Qing dynasty at the beginning of the 20th century. He was a philosophical genius in the sense that he articulated and introduced for the first time the doctrine of Dualism into the Chinese Philosophy Tradition, some eighteen centuries before Descartes (1596-1650) articulated it for the Modern Western Philosophy Tradition in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* which was published originally in Latin in 1641.¹⁶ Dualism means that in each binary pair, the left-hand term stands for what is superior and the right-hand term for what is inferior.

Ruler/Officials
Father/Sons
Husband/Wife

In *Rujia*, these three dualist relationships listed above are called 三纲 *sangang*, constituting the fundamentals of *Rujia* political/social/moral philosophy. For our purpose in hand, it is critical to emphasise that the bond of friendship stood outside this hierarchical structure of the three bonds. *Rujia* thinkers after Dong Zhongshu did not see fit either to include it within this official hierarchical framework. Could it be that they realised that the Scholar-official Class needed a domain of activity free from such constraints so that they could relax amongst equals and thereby would be able to nurture their mental and spiritual health through cultivating relationships with people who shared their values, their literary preoccupations, their mode of creative relaxation. In that sense, one could say that friends in ancient China exemplified the dictum “birds of a feather flock together”, just as friends do today as earlier shown.

Academic commentators in the West who are not over-familiar with Chinese culture should be careful not to misrepresent its conception of friendship, mistakenly confusing it with the three official hierarchical bonds set out above. Such grievous misapprehension can and do have very dangerous implications for geopolitics today. Nordin and Smith hold that the Chinese conception of friendship is a relationship of inequality; of the two parties involved, one is the senior and the other the junior partner, with the latter having to defer to the former. This is the conception they attribute to Xi Jinping who also, in their opinion, would naturally regard China as the senior and the West the junior partner. However, such an attribution not merely misrepresents Chinese culture in respect of friendship but also makes Xi Jinping into a ruler who is sorely ignorant about his own culture. If the President of China had really meant to say that China is top dog, so to speak and the USA (the West) inferior to his country, then why did Xi Jinping not invoke the concept of suzerainty (宗主权 *zongzhuquan*), a concept used traditionally by Imperial China for nearly two thousand years with regard to some neighbouring states which were expected to pay tribute to China as a mark of their subordination to the Chinese imperium? Could Nordin and Smith imply that Xi Jinping would have loved to invoke the concept of suzerainty but was sly enough to disguise his intention by invoking the concept of friendship instead, albeit a distorted conception? Friendship sounds so much more friendly, you see, except that this is not the friendship as normally understood in the Euro-American tradition, and in that truly lies the cunning “superiority” of the Chinese ruler’s mind!

Minimally, such misattributions (explicit or implicit) to the Chinese President on the part of the two authors would amount to thoughtlessly pouring oil on a burning fire. Maximally, they could be construed even as intentional mischief-making which could feed into a new Cold War between the US and China, a conflict which the world could do without, surely. In any case, academics should regard careful and accurate scholarship as their highest value and should do their best to avoid careless or shoddy scholarship at all cost.

End

¹⁶ Outside political/social/moral discourse dominated by *Rujia*, the Chinese mode of thinking remained what I call the Contextual-dyadic mode, where polar contrasts are not considered to be mutually exclusive but to exist harmoniously as a *Whole*, as paradigmatically embodied by that pair of contrasts called *Yinyang* whose iconic image is shown below:



Dyadism in contrast to Dualism means that *yang* is not superior to *yin*, that *yin* is inferior to *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are different, but complementary to each other and together they form a harmonious *Whole*. Furthermore, what is *yang* in one context is not necessarily *yang* in all contexts; *mutatis mutandis*, what is *yin* in one context is not *yin* in all contexts. To characterise this kind of philosophical orientation, I have coined the term “Contextual-dyadism”. For a more detailed exploration, see my forthcoming *Modern Western and Chinese Philosophy: A Case Study of Intercultural Philosophy*.

Bibliographical Information

An earlier shorter version was submitted to *The Conversation* which, unfortunately did not respond in any way in spite of my chasing up the matter with the Editorial Contact on their website.

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