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Abstract: The discourse of *zhong* (centrality) has dominated the study of Chinese philosophy for more than 2000 years. *Zhong*, dictating the interplay of *yin* and *yang* motivated by *chi*, is the foundation of the paradigmatic assumptions of Chinese culture. In order to regulate the motion of *chi* to reach the holistic state of equilibrium, *shou zhong* (nurturing *zhong*) is considered to be not only the most effective way of cultivating self-competence, but also the key to the success of social interaction in Chinese society. This paper attempts to delineate the nature of *zhong* and further applies it to demystify the meaning of self and social/communication competence from a Chinese cultural perspective.

1. Introduction

The discourse of *zhong* (centrality) has dominated the study of Chinese philosophy for more than 2000 years (Wang, 1982a; Xiao, 2003). According to the *I Ching* (the Book of Changes), the Tao is manifested in the interaction of *yin* and *yang*, the two opposite but complementary forces of the universe, and *chi* is the substance of *yin* and *yang*, or the force that motivates the interplay of *yin* and *yang* (Chang, Chen, Chung & Holt, 2010; Chung, 2011). The Tao of *yin* and *yang* dictates a holistic ontological assumption, stipulating that heaven, earth, and humans are united as a great whole. In this oneness of the Tao, all elements in the universe are but a transitional, on-going process due to the movement of *chi* embedded in *yin* and *yang*, which prescribes that *yin* is a negative force and *yang* a positive force (Chen, 2006; Zhang, 2010).

Thus, to reach the state of equilibrium, i.e., *tai he* (great harmony), from the motion of *chi* or the interplay of *yin* and *yang* becomes the cardinal value and the ultimate goal of life and living pursued by Chinese people (Yu, 2005). In order to achieve this goal Chinese philosophers continue to argue that only through *zhong* can the goal of great harmony be reached. This paper aims to delineate the nature of *zhong* and uses it as the foundation for examining the Chinese self and social/communication competence.

2. The Nature of *Zhong*

2.1. The Two Faces of *Zhong*

It is assumed that the universe is characterized by nothingness (*wu*), emptiness (*kong*), vacuity (*xu*), void, unlimitedness, infinity, ultimatelessness, or boundlessness as the state of *wu ji* or

*zhon*g before being. Through the ceaseless process of "creative creativity" (Fang, 1981, p. 109), *wu chi* is developed into *tai chi* (the ultimate one); then from *tai chi* to *liang yi* (*yin* and *yang*, the two primary forces), to *si xiang* (the four images), to *ba gua* (the 8 trigrams), to 64 *gua* (the hexagrams), and to *wan wu* (the myriad things), which represents the origination, extension, and dimensions of space and time from the void of the universe (Zhou, n.d.), or the stage of the being-becoming of *zhong*. As Laozi said, "All things in the world come from being, and being comes from non-being" (Chap. 40. Tans. Wing-Tsit Chai, 1963a, p. 173). Li (1999) further interpreted *wu* (non-being) as the Tao that produces all things by following the way of nature. That is, from *wu ji* the forces of change and transformation are generated for the ontological existence of all things in the universe (Shang, 2015).

The state of *wu ji* was described as *hun dun* in Zhuangzi's *Nan Hua Jing* (see Huang, 1983), or *yin yun* in the Book of Changes (Zhu, 1974). Both *hun dun* and *yin yun* describe the saturation of chaotic and dense vital energy (*qi*) before the separation of the two forces of *yin* and *yang* in the non-being/pre-being situation, i.e., the state of *wu wei* (non-action), non-dichotomy of heaven and human or subject and object (Billeter, 2009). Hence, *zhong* infers both the static equilibrium of *wu chi* and the dynamic equilibrium between *yin* and *yang* in *tai chi*. More specifically, *wu chi* represents the state of non-being, *tai chi* is the state of being-becoming (which is developed from *liang yi* to the myriad things) of *zhong*. That is, *wu chi* (non-being/pre-being) and *tai chi* (being-becoming) are the two faces of *zhong*.

Zhuangzi used "*xu shi sheng bai*" (only the empty/vacuous room can produce light/brightness) to interpret the nature of this from non-being to being-becoming process (see Huang, 1983). It shows that vacuity is the original state of the universe, in which the seed of production and reproduction is hidden. Pereira (1956) called this emptiness/vacuity "zero", which is a continuum, the unknowable quality of infinity, and the origin of all existences. In *Dao De Jing* Laozi further elaborated the point as follows:

> The thirty spokes unite in the one nave; but it is on the empty space (for the axle), that the use of the wheel depends. Clay is fashioned into vessels; but it is on their empty hollowness, that their use depends. The door and windows are cut out (from the walls) to form an apartment; but it is on the empty space (within), that its use depends. Therefore, what has a (positive) existence serves for profitable adaptation, and what has not serves for (factual) usefulness. (Chap. 11. Trans. James Legge, 1962, pp. 54-55)

Zhong is therefore the unification of the three co-centers of heaven, earth, and human (Wang, 1982a). In the stage of *tai chi*, *zhong* reflects that it is the origin and carrier of the force and energy of *yin* and *yang* (*liang yi*), and from there the human mind begins to develop space from the perception of physical arrangement and relationship between things. The extensional power and energy of the human mind relates one's own creation of space in time, and the ultimate goal of the expansion of human creation is to return to the original static state of *zhong*, i.e, *wu chi*, in which the three co-centers of heaven, earth, and human are united as one and immerse into the void. This is also the process of *rou shen cheng dao*, or moving from body to the Tao through the process of self-actualization (Lin, 1986).

2.2. Space, Time and Symbol in *Zhong*

The process of space extension from *tai chi* through the human mind begins to form structure and dimensionality of the space. It is the limited, knowable space based on the creation of the human mind and is under management of people. According to Pereira (1956), there are the horizontal plane (the quantity) and vertical plane (the quality) of space. The horizontal plane of space is the field of senses of human action and creation. It is the concrete, objective aspect of space. The vertical plane of space shows the connection with and the continuity of time. Through the perception of the human mind, individuals extend beyond the boundaries of their physical limitation and link themselves with the unknown world.

In other words, the convergence of the horizontal plane and vertical plane through the inner illumination of the human mind unites space and time, which affirms the human's position and secures a personal space in the universe, provides the foundation of isomorphic correspondence between the self and the universe or *zhong*. Moreover, the horizontal plane of space is the extension and dimension of the human mind in action, and the vertical plane of space is the continuity of time in terms of the dimensionality of space in hierarchical structure, which as well creates a sense of historical continuity. Therefore, one's spirit stirred by the longings of the soul through the action of mind, is running upward and downward, inward and outward in limitless space and across the timeless span of vastness in searching for a secure physical and spiritual place, aiming for the (re)unification with heaven and earth or to coalesce into the center of the universe or *zhong* (Yang, 1989).

This process of the human mind in creating the man-made space-time zone in the unknowable/boundless space, the zero, or the emptiness/vacuity through perception is expressed symbolically (Kahler, 1960). That is, this man-made space-time zone is a symbolic space. The amount of power and energy activated by the symbol is therefore the function of the human mind in action. In other words, symbol is the reality or being in space and time. This creative source of symbol constantly tries to transcend limitations of the known boundaries by opening up vistas into an ever-expanding space with the potentiality and possibility of returning to and identifying with the original face of the universe or *zhong*. In other words, when space and time or the horizontal plan and vertical plane reach the state of equilibrium or in a harmonious relationship through the continued explosion of new symbols, the human is reunited to a whole or a cosmological order on a transcendental level, which refers to the process from *wu chi* to *tai chi*, and from *tai chi* back to *wu chi* again; i.e., it is a cyclic, mutually transformative process between non-being and being-becoming of *zhong*. Symbols then form the structure and dimension of space and establish the continuity of time. The symbolic space represents the whole content of humans' experiences. It is the known space in the invisible *zhong*.

The horizontal plane of space created by the human mind via the use of symbol (i.e., the objective constellation of symbols) can be illustrated by the six things (i.e., honors, riches, distinctions, austerity, fame, and profit) in the following statement in Zhuangzi's *Nan Hua Jin*g:

> Repress the impulses of the will; unravel the errors of the mind; put away the entanglements to virtue; and clear away all that obstructs the free course of the Tao. Honors and riches, distinctions and austerity, fame and profit; these six things produce

the impulses of the will. Personal appearance and deportment, the desire of beauty and subtle reasonings, excitement of the breath and cherished thoughts; these six things produce errors of the mind. Hatred and longings, joy and anger, grief and delight; these six things are the entanglements to virtue. Refusals and approachments, receiving and giving, knowledge and ability; these six things obstruct the course of the Tao. (Chap. 23, *Geng Shang Chu*. Trans. James Legge, 1962. http://oaks.nvg.org/zhuangzi22-.html#23)

The vertical plane of space created by the human mind via the use of symbol (i.e., the hierarchically concatenated structure of the dimensionality of symbols) also can be illustrated by the sequential process in the following statements, respectively:

When these four conditions, with the six causes of each, do not agitate the breast, the mind is correct. Being correct, it is still; being still, it is pellucid; being pellucid, it is free from pre-occupation; being free from pre-occupation, it is in the state of inaction, in which it accomplishes everything. (Zhuangzi's *Nan Hua Jin*g, chap. 23, *Geng Shang Chu*. Trans. James Legge, 1962. http://oaks.nvg.org/zhuangzi22-.html#23).

The point where to rest (in the highest excellence) being known, the object of pursuit is then determined; and, that being determined, a calm unperturbedness may be attained to. To that calmness there will succeed a tranquil repose. In that repose there may be careful deliberation, and that deliberation will be followed by the attainment of the desired end. (*The Great Learning*. Trans. James Legge, 1955, p. 2)

Next to the above is he who cultivates to the utmost the shoots of goodness in him. From those he can attain to the possession of sincerity. This sincerity becomes apparent. From being apparent, it becomes manifest. From being manifest, it becomes brilliant. Brilliant, it affects others. Affecting others, they are changed by it. Changed by it, they are transformed. It is only he who is possessed of the most complete sincerity that can exist under heaven, who can transform… Hence to entire sincerity there belongs ceaselessness. Not ceasing, it continues long. Continuing long, it evidences itself. Evidencing itself, reaches far. Reaching far, it becomes large and substantial. Large and substantial, it becomes high and brilliant. (*The Doctrine of the Mean*. Trans. James Legge, 1955, pp. 8, 30-31).

It is this process of the development of space and time via symbol creation on the basis of the interplay of *yin* and *yang* that demonstrates the being-becoming stage of *zhong*. The process also shows the production and reproduction of human activities as the effect of *zhong* that is embedded in the mutual interaction and relations between the two opposite but complementary, interdependent, and interpenetrative forces or interactants. Hence, *zhong* not only is "the great foundation of the world", but also dictates harmony (*he*) as the universal path, and when *zhong* "and harmony are realized to the highest degree, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish" (*The Doctrine of the Mean*. Trans. James Legge, 1955, pp. 2-3).

Zhong therefore provides the ontological existence and *he* (harmony) constitutes the

axiological and teleological assumptions of symbolic creation and maintenance of Chinese communication, through which Chinese culture emerges and develops. In other words, cultural space is developed as the accumulation of symbolic interaction over time, and its change involves modification, revision, and re-invention of the present activities that is embedded in the past and is the foundation of transformation to the future (St. Clair, 2015; St. Clair & Williams, 2014).

It is on this stage of the being-becoming of *zhong* we begin to witness and conceptualize human communication in action. The following sections stipulate the nature of *zhong* from this perspective and then apply it to examine the concepts of self and social/communication competence from Chinese cultural perspective.

3. *Zhong* and Self and Social/Communication Competence

3.1. Being-Becoming of *Zhong*

Two traditional definitions of *zhong* catch our attention for applying them to the present analysis. First, according to Wang (1970), the Chinese character 中 (*zhong*) can be construed as the integration of *wu chi* and *tai chi*. The space of the rectangle of中assembles the circle (i.e., O) of *wu chi*, representing the non-being, nothingness, or emptiness mentioned above. The rod of中 (i.e., |) is the *s* line that results in the emergence of *yin* and *yan*g (i.e., it separates the O into two opposite but complementary entities), and therefore transforms *wu chi* into *tai chi* as shown in Figure 1 (in which the dark side refers to *yin*, and the white side *yang*), representing the stage of being-becoming of the universe. That is why *The Doctrine of the Mean* describes *zhong* as the great foundation of the world from where the myriad things originated. It is the origin, the center, and the middle way of human interaction dictated by the quality of impartiality based on the interplay of *yin* and *yang* forces (Xu, 1991; Yu, 2005).

Figure 1. The *Tai Chi* Model

Second, Tan (1981) indicated that the original pictographic form of中 (*zhong*) resembles a flag, which was used in China as a sign to assemble people together in a specific place when important events happened in ancient times. In other words, *zhong* refers to the center of human activities. Thus, centrality as the essence of *zhong* becomes the crucial concept for understanding Chinese culture and Chinese communication (Chen, 2006; Xiao, 2003). *Zhong* as the centrality can be illustrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4.
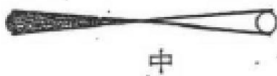

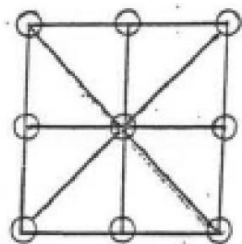Figure 2. The *Yin-yang* Model of *Zhong* (from Wang, 1982a, p. 143)

Figure 3. The *Jiu Gong* (nine-palace) Model of *Zhong* (from Wang, 1982a, p. 137)
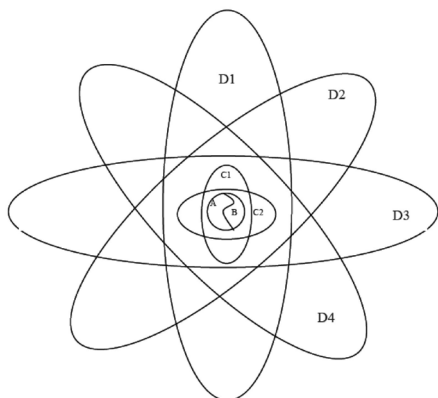

Figure 4. The Creative Creativity Model of *Zhong* (from Chen, 2009a, p. 24)

Figure 2 shows the equilibrium state of *tai chi*, constituted by the balance between *yin* and *yang*. It demonstrates that *zhong* is the centrality or integration of opposition and fellowship in human interaction (Wilhelm, 1979). Figure 3 manifests that *zhong* occupies the central position of the constellation of the nine points in the diagram. As stipulated in *Huang Di Jing* (annotated by Hangsheng Wang, 1982b, p. 139), the nine points position

> … in a square sharing the same central point. Each has to go through the same central point in order to reach another point. There are three points in a row in the front, in the rear, at right, and at left respectively. Every row has to share the same central point to make itself three. This shared central point is called the *zhong* of the universe. (translated by this author).

In other words, the central point or *zhong* is the axis of rotation, movement, interplay, and transformation between the two forces of *yin* and *yang* rooted in all things.

Figure 4 reveals the virtue of "creative creativity" specified in the Book of Changes (Zu, 1974, p. 96). That is, the interplay of *yin* and *yang* in *tai chi* produces and reproduces the patterns of all things in the universe following the sequence of *wu chi* to *tai chi*, to *liang yi*, to *si xiang*, to *ba gua*, to 64 *gua*, and to *wan wu* mentioned previously. It also was versed in *Dao De Jing*,

Tao gave birth to One,
One gave birth to Two,
Two gave birth to Three,
Three gave birth to all the myriad things.
All the myriad things carry the *Yin* on their backs and hold the *Yang* in their embrace,
Deriving their vital harmony from the proper blending of the two vital Breaths. (Chap. 42. Trans. John Wu, 1961, p. 87)

From a human communication perspective we see that the interplay of *yin* and *yang* resembles the interaction between person A and person B, and *shou zhong* (nurturing *zhong*, or the implementation of *zhong*) is the way to keep the dynamic equilibrium of the interplay or interaction between the two forces or the two interactants as illustrated in Figure 4. The next section first precisely enumerates the concept of *shou zhong* from the aspect of the personal cultivation of spirituality for self-competence, and then focuses on the delineation of *shou zhong* as the key to reaching competence in social communication.

3.2. *Shou Zhong* and Self-Competence

From the perspective of self-cultivation *shou zhong* (i.e., the implementation of *zhong*) itself is spiritually oriented in seeking the unity of heaven, earth, and human, and to achieve self-actualization as an embodiment of this spiritual cultivation, which is based on the perception or activation of the powerful human mind. The human mind forms a person's belief system that gives meaning to the world one lives in and creates reality through an intuitive, spiritual or rational process. *Shou zhong* empowers individuals to broaden and expand their thinking by eliminating the filters they use in the human world. It increases the mental ability of the self to scan the world in a broad perspective in order to achieve harmony, so that the self can return to the original static state of *wu chi*, or non-being, from the dynamic state of *tai chi*, or being-becoming.

As Laozi proclaimed, "Reversion is the action of Tao" (Chap. 40. Trans. Wing-Tsit Chan, 1963a, p. 40). To return to the fundamental unity or the emptiness through the inductive detachment of action embedded in the praxis of *cheng* (perfect sincerity) is specified in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (see Zhu, 1978). Thus, the self as a co-creator of the integrative whole of the universe with heaven and earth must be "ceaselessly edified, constantly liberated, and perpetually purified" (Chen, 2005), so that one can reach the state of "the universe and I exist together, and all things and I are one" (Zhuangzi's *Nan Hua Jing*, chap. 2. Trans. Wing-Tsit Chan, 1963b, p. 186).

This congruence between the intrinsic value of the self and the cosmic order, according to Cornford (1952), equips a person with the capacity of being mutually transmuted with the universe to reach the authentic arena of non-being. This is also the spiritual experience into the real self through the eye of contemplation mentioned by St. Bonaventure, in which the reality based on sense and reason (i.e., the eye of flesh and the eye of reason) is transcended, and the truth of self-liberation is revealed that diminishes the demarcation between time, space, and matter (LaNave, 2011).

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One of the most common methods of *shou zhong* in Chinese tradition is evidenced by the practice of *xin zhai* (the fasting of mind). As described in Chuang Tzu's *Nan Hua Jing*,

Maintain a perfect unity in every movement of your will. You will not wait for the hearing of your ears about it, but for the hearing of your mind. You will not wait even for the hearing of your mind, but for the hearing of the spirit (*chi*). Let the hearing (of the ears) rest with the ears. Let the mind rest in the verification (of the rightness of what is the will). But the spirit is free from all pre-occupation and so waits for (the appearance) of things. Where the (proper) course is, there is freedom from all pre-occupation; such freedom is the fasting of the mind. (Trans. James Legge, 1962, p. 209)

The process was echoed in the writing in Leizi, "As Kang Cang Zi said, 'My body is united with mind *(xin)*, mind with vital force (*qi*), vital force with spirit (*shen*), and spirit with emptiness (*wu*)' " (Chap. *Zhongni*. Translated by this author).

The stages of mind fasting for nurturing *zhong* are further correspondent with the following explications from different Chinese philosophers (Wang, 1982a):

1.   The stage of *zhi* (ceasing body activities to rest in mind): Keeping your mind (*hunpo*) and embracing the One without departing from them (Laozi *Dao De Jing*, chap. 10). [Corresponding to "Body is united with mind (*xin*)"]
2.   The stage of *zhuan* (concentrating in *chi*): Concentrating one's vital force to achieve the highest degree of weakness like an infant (Laozi *Dao De Jing*, chap. 10). [Corresponding to "Mind is united with vital force (*qi*)"]
3.   The stage of *shou* (nurturing spirit): Nurturing one's spirit with tranquility to reach the state of right appearance (*jing*) (Guang Chengzi, see Zhuangzi *Nan Hua Jing*, chap. 10). [Corresponding to "Vital force is united with spirit (*shen*)"]
4.   The stage of *xu* (entering vacuity/emptiness): Only the Tao converges emptiness, and reaching the state of *xu* is called the fasting of mind (Zhuangzi *Nan Hua Jing*, chap. 4). [Corresponding to "Spirit is united with emptiness (*xu*)"]

Thus, the four stages of mind fasting are actually the process of regulating one's *chi* in the practice of spiritual cultivation in order to reach the holistic state of equilibrium, or return to the original state of non-being of *zhong*. This inner bound returning process from the dynamic transformation state of *zhong* back to the static, holistic, original face of *zhong* gives the meaning of self-competence; and the outward expanding process on the foundation of this self-competence leads to the development of social/communication competence. In other words, the inward spiritual cultivation is to move from creativity to receptiveness and then into *wu chi*, which is dictated by *cheng* and sensitivity on the ground of relational harmony (Chen & Starosta, 2004; Wu, 1976). As stipulated in *The Doctrine of the Mean*,

Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused it is called equilibrium (*zhong*). When these feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony. Equilibrium is the great foundation of the

world, and harmony its universal path. When equilibrium and harmony are realized to the highest degree, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish. (Trans. Wing-Tsit Chan, 1963b, p. 98)

It is obvious that from the perspective of human action equilibrium and harmony are the two sides of the coin of *zhong*, as equilibrium represents the state of non-being and harmony the state of the being-becoming of *zhong*. As indicated previously, the former is the original state of emptiness of *zhong*, or the so-called "the real, authentic, ultimate home" of human beings (Wang, 1982a), where the self spiritually endeavors to return to it through the process of *shou zhong*; while the latter refers to the dynamic state of the creative creativity of *zhong*, which is dictated by harmony. Thus, *shou zhong* in the process of human communication means the achievement of the state of harmony. The outward expansion and transformation of *zhong* that prescribes communication competence in social interaction is therefore defined by the concept of harmony.

3.3. *Shou Zhong and Social/Communication Competence*

According to Chai and Chai (1969) and Chen (2008), the ceaselessly dialectical interplay of *yin* and *yang* leads Chinese sages and philosophers to believe that the universe, including human interaction, is a great whole in which all things are forever transitional in the form of mutual and cyclic transformation. Moreover, harmony as the cardinal value of Chinese culture is the key to bringing continuity into the process and regulating the dynamic change of interaction in this holistic system, which is sustained by the elements of creativity, interconnection, and hierarchy in Chinese communication (Chen, 2001; Fung, 1983; Liu, 2011).

As Chen (2001) pointed out, the creativity of human communication is reflected in the endless process of the creatively creative nature embedded in the interaction between the two forces of *yin* and *yang*. Human communication is thus a suprasystem which contains different layers of subsystems in a holistic space. Figure 4 illustrates this creative feature of human communication. Because the suprasystem and each of the subsystems within it is itself a *tai chi* that consists of *yin* and *yang*, all the systems are by nature interconnected, interdependent, and therefore interpenetrated, interfused, and interdetermined (Chang, 1963; Liu, 1992). In addition, the "interconnection of components within the holistic system of human communication is based on the hierarchical structure of the relationship, which is confined by temporal and spatial contingencies" (Chen, 2009a, p. 75). Together, Fung (1983) argued that interconnected creativity and harmonious hierarchy are the two crucial concepts for understanding the nature of Chinese communication.

Fang (1981) used "creative creativity" to describe the successive and interconnected movement between *yin* and *yang*, which gives rise to infinite interpretation, unlimited potentiality, and boundless possibility of *zhong*. Wang (1989) and Wu (1976) further delineated that what activates the interplay of *yin* and *yang* is the spiritual exertion of *gan ying* (the wholehearted co-responding between the two forces) dictated by *cheng* (perfect sincerity). In other words, the Chinese believe that "it is the sincere and honest mind that forms the basis of wholehearted" co-responding "between *yin* and *yang*, and unites the two opposite forces in

order to emit the continuous production revolving in the interconnected cycles of movement" (Chen, 2009a, p. 74). Xiao and Chen (2009) went one step further to conceptualize *gan ying* as an individual's organic ability to establish the interconnection between the two parties in human interaction, which also "endows an ethical and spiritual predisposition" and is "the sympathy and empathy toward other living beings as a whole, in which an ethically appropriate act and response is required" (Chen, 2009a, p. 4).

The development of social relationship from the dynamic interplay of *yin* and *yang* or between the two interactants does not imply a chaotic process. Because harmony is the ultimate end of *zhong*, a hierarchical structure of social interaction becomes the prerequisite for reaching this goal. In other words, the relational network woven through the process of interconnected creativity mirrors a harmonious hierarchy in it, which is characterized by order and balance between positive and negative co-responding (Xu, 1991). Moreover, according to Chen (2009b, 2011) and Wilhelm (1979), the stability of hierarchical relationships based on the mutually dynamic interaction of the two parties is dictated by the three elements of *shi* (temporal contingencies), *wei* (spatial contingencies), and *ji* (the imperceptible beginning of change). To put it in another way, a harmoniously hierarchical network of relationship is a function of recognizing the trace of change (i.e., *ji*) and behaving appropriately and effectively in the right time (i.e., *shi*) at right place (i.e., *wei*). This principle serves as the fundamental component of Chinese social/communication competence. More about this is discussed below.

From the perspective of *zhong* discussed above, social/communication competence therefore can be conceptualized as one's capacity to appropriately and effectively achieve a harmonious state of interaction in a specific context. According to Cheng (1987), the achievement of harmony is the end result of the dialectic completion of relative polarities between *yin* and *yang*. The synthetic unity of mutual functions of the two forces reflects the holistic nature of human interaction in different stages of transformation. Hence, lack of harmony infers the absence of the dynamic equilibrium, which results in the failure of human interaction (Chen, 2001; Liu, 2013).

This is to say that *zhong* as the most appropriate measure for the integration of the two opposite forces represented by *yin* and *yang* is the tool used to smooth the interdependent relationships among people. In other words, *zhong* is the axis of interaction between the two opposite forces of the universe, or the vessel that untangles all the contradictions caused by the movement of *qi*. Hence, *shou zhong* for being competent in social communication refers to the achievement of great harmony on the basis of being in the right time (*shi*) and the right place (*wei*) through the knowing of imperceptible movement (*ji*) of the interaction between the two communicators. Social/communication competence is therefore the ability to achieve a state of harmony by demonstrating the appropriate placement of time and space with the sensitivity to detect subtle changes in the process of human interaction (Chen, 2013).

Chen (2001) has tried to theorize the concepts of *shi*, *wei*, and *ji* in the context of Chinese communication. He perceived *shi* as the temporal contingencies in human communication. It demands the awareness of temporal relations to appropriately perform in different stages of interaction, i.e., to know how to manage interaction by appropriately initiating, maintaining, and terminating a conversation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Chen theorized that in Chinese

communication a person who knows *shi* will increase the degree of harmonious atmosphere and more likely be considered as being competent. *Wei* was conceived by Chen as spatial contingencies that refer to static factors, such as social and physical contexts, involved in interaction. Knowing *wei* means being able to recognize who, what and where components in the process of interaction management. *Wei* in Chinese culture is largely stipulated by the hierarchical structure of relationships mentioned previously. Thus, according to Chen, like *shi*, the increase of knowing *wei* will help interactants develop a harmonious relationship and therefore becomes a more competent person in Chinese communication.

Ji as the first imperceptible beginning of a movement reveals the trace of possible direction of an ongoing interaction (Wilhelm, 1990). To know what is evident and what is hidden in interaction requires the ability of sensitivity that promotes the interactant's positive emotion for being more open-minded and able to detect, respect, recognize, and even accept the differences between the two parties caused by temporal and spatial contingencies (Chen & Starosta, 2004). As discussed previously, Wang (1989) and Wu (1976) claimed that the ability of knowing *ji* or sensitivity is fostered by a sincere and honest heart, i.e., *cheng*. Only through *cheng* can the two interactants be united as one through the recognition of the trace of movement to act appropriately in the right time and at right place. Hence, *cheng* is the force to integrate *shi*, *wei*, and *ji* through sensitivity. In other words, *cheng* is the key to fusing creativity and sensitivity, as the former serves as the generator of *shi* and *wei*, and the latter is the foundation of *ji*. It is also the key used to unlock the door that separates non-being (*wu chi*) and being (*tai chi*). The nature and function of *cheng* is explained in *The Doctrine of the Mean*,

> Sincerity is the way of heaven. The attainment of sincerity is the way of men. He who possesses sincerity is he who, without an effort, hits what is right, and apprehends with the exercise of thought… (Chap. 19. Trans. James Legge, 1955, p. 26)
> It is only he who is possessed of the most complete sincerity that can exist under heaven who can give its full development of his nature. Able to give its full development to his nature, he can do the same to the nature of other men. Able to give its full development to the nature of other men, he can give their full development to the natures of animals and things. Able to give their full development to the natures of creatures and things, he can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth. Able to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he may with Heaven and Earth form a ternion. (Chap. 22. Trans. James Legge, 1955, p. 28)

Finally, *cheng* sets in motion *gan ying* (the wholehearted co-responding) to unite *yin* and *yang*, or the two interactants, which connotes a strong moral and spiritual orientation in Chinese communication. Xiao and Chen (2009) argued that this is the major difference between Eastern and Western communication, especially when it is applied to conceptualize the concept of communication competence. The authors criticized that communication in Western society is highly goal and skill oriented and emphasizes assertiveness, confrontation, directness, and expressiveness. Thus, when conceptualizing the concept of communication competence, Western scholars tend to neglect the moral dimension (see Deardorf, 2009; Nakayama & Martin, 2013; Sorells, 2013). Xiao and Chen proclaimed that without knowing the important

role that moral and ethical components play in Chinese communication, one could never be able to be competent in interacting with Chinese people.

4. Summary and Conclusion

This paper attempts to unveil the nature of *zhong* in Chinese culture. It argues that *zhong* is the measure of self and social/communication competence in the process of Chinese interaction. *Zhong* is examined from the perspectives of metaphysics, time and space, and symbolic function, from which the static and dynamic states of equilibrium defined by *zhong* are manifested. The state of the static equilibrium of *zhong* represents *wu chi*, or non-being/pre-being, which is occupied by emptiness, nothingness, or vacuity; the state of the dynamic equilibrium of *zhong* represents *tai chi*, or being-becoming, dictated by the process of creative creativity. Time and space emerge through the interplay of *yin* and *yang*, and the creation of symbol in the matrix formed by time and space constitutes the formation of human culture, in which communication activities are activated.

Zhong therefore becomes the measure of self-competence and *shou zhong* is the way of achieving self-competence and social/communication competence in Chinese society. Self-competence is the process of spiritual cultivation that leads the self to return to the state of static equilibrium; social competence is the ability to act appropriately and effectively in interaction in a specific context. *Zhong* prescribed that *cheng*, which is realized through the spiritual and moral process of *gan yin*, is the key to unlocking the door between *wu chi* and *tai chi*.

From the perspective of human interaction *zhong* dictates that Chinese communication is a holistic system networked by interconnected creativity and harmonious hierarchy. Knowing *shi*, *wei*, and *ji* on the basis of moral principle is the prerequisite for being competent in this holistic system of Chinese communication. This emphasis of moral principle distinguishes Chinese communication from Western communication. In other words, in addition to the aspect of effectiveness, the Chinese put much more emphasis on the appropriateness of interaction. To know this distinction between East and West is crucial for establishing a successful and productive life in the new age of human society. The impact of globalization on human society in the new century demands a new way of life that demonstrates the essence of multicultural co-existence. To understand the differences among cultures and further develop an integrated model of communication based on the ambicultural approach should be a viable way for diminishing the problem of cultural dichotomy in order to achieve the goal of multicultural co-existence (Chen, 2009c; Chen, M. J., 2002; Tu, 2014).

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