

## Prof. Ole Döring On Education

*This is the edited transcript of Prof. Döring's presentation, as delivered to Panel 4, "The Beauty of True Human Nature," of the Schiller Institute's Nov. 13-14 conference, "All Moral Resources of Humanity Have To Be Called Up: Mankind Must Be the Immortal Species!" Prof. Ole Döring, PhD, is a Sinologist and a philosopher in Germany. He is an expert on the ethics of technology, culture and health, and has been travelling back and forth between China and Germany for 25 years. He holds a full professorship in the Foreign Studies College at Hunan Normal University in Changsha, China; is an Associate Professor in the Department for Global Health at Peking University; and an Adjunct Professor (Privatdozent) at the Karlsruhe Institute for Technology Futures (KIT) in Karlsruhe, Germany.*



Schiller Institute

Prof. Ole Döring

civilizations; that in this we depend on a collaborative relationship with China. To put this into a philosophical perspective, let us start with some context, called the first of four parts of my presentation.

### 1. Preparing the Soil for Spring

Just go back a few decades. After 1979, China opened up, and set out to learn, to get better. *How* this would be accomplished and what it actually meant, was not clear at that time. That, however, was the beginning of

an unprecedented learning exercise.

In fact, much of the breathtaking achievements in common wealth that we are all witness of, carries a sub-text that sounds like "Let's find out, how, not just to get better, but also, what that really means and how it is done best!"

This self-reflection took place behind the scenes, in connotations, in science, among the political leadership, while performing increasingly well in building the economy, infrastructures, and knowledge.

How these achievements could gradually serve greater social ends remained open. The method of success was seen in some of the wagons of the train that Deng Xiaoping had ingeniously invented, directing all resources towards the driving locomotive power of individual creativity. The task at hand was to repair, to survive, and to consolidate, as life went on. Self-reflected learning and adjustment of the course continued, and grew better in the wake, as well.

Then, starting two decades later, in the 1990s, viable growth of power was the next step, on the global scale. It was the time to establish China at the appropriate level among the nations. China's aspirations grew through the international institutions, like the WTO and the framework of the United Nations, so that it now assumes proper responsibilities in global governance and masters the instruments of international diplomacy and law.

Thank you very much. Speaking live from Berlin, greetings to you, all over the world! Thank you to the Schiller Institute for providing this fascinating opportunity to reach out and interact with so many people all over the world.

It looks like, when considering the last two talks which I just heard, that talking about China seems prone to bring a kind of fresh and hopeful perspective into the entire discussion, and I can only second my previous speakers in their perception of Chinese education; or rather, of the generations that are now receiving, and really, reinventing education in China.

I'm teaching in China in several universities for many years, and am a full professor at Changsha University in southern China, and I can only say that my students there are extremely eager, extremely bright, and they are not at all under the impression that they know enough.

My German students sometimes could really benefit from such an attitude, and the ability to make use of it.

Today, I would like to argue for a dialogue of

Recently, Dual Circulation [emphasizing growing exports (international circulation), while expanding domestic demand, powered mainly by rising consumption (internal circulation) —ed.] marked the next step in this process. The timing was forced by foreign aggression and started probably slightly prematurely. Yet, it is a sound continuation of the learning approach.

As a sovereign nation, China reclaims control after two decades of strategic opening. For example, it disengages unhealthy connections with commercial providers of education services, redirects and aligns authority over education to the sovereign, thereby exercising responsibility for social welfare and public health as well as care of disadvantaged citizens for equitable access to proper education, securing the standards of balanced growth, in its own terms and by its own means.

China would and could never be a nation that is satisfied with “copy and paste” approaches, neither on the small scale of production, nor by importing blueprints for science and education industries, nor regarding its political system. It wants to do it right. That is understood as learning to get better. This rationale naturally includes that failures and errors must be conceded and mended properly.

Responsibility is a social asset that resonates with trust and affects all policy areas. Evidently, the stakes are high, considering the competitive environment that is fueled by campaigns sowing distrust and undermining China’s public “face,” and that are mostly based on ignorance or hostility.

## 2. Governing Growth

How can *civility* prevail? After systematic regulation and legislation started in the 1990s, as an exercise in social engineering, experimenting with different policies of leaning toward participation and authority, huge infrastructure initiatives were rolled out, with the Belt and Road Initiative, and domestic development. That was soon combined with attention to soft skills—the importance of trust and collaboration across cultures and strata. Skillful social engagement is instrumental. With more well-educated, diversified and demanding populations to be accounted for, a new deal is required. It combines responsible innovation in the public and private sectors of social goods—first of all, in education.

This way enables continuation of learning and adjustment. Other sectors will follow that path, such as health and environment, that have suffered a lot from neoliberal global monoculture. Other areas will be particularly sensitive, such as control over commercial, digital, and AI technologies. As long as the social contract holds, stability can be maintained. It is possible that this course *will* be maintained by integrating ever increasing populations as beneficiaries.

This is how, ever since the educational reforms inspired by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) in China during the Song Dynasty, cultivation and power have been enshrined as the Yin and Yang of China’s prosperity as a country. Mandarins installed meritocracy as a model for legitimate rule, vitalized by education as the motor of social mobility. This was not mere academic philosophy but philosophical insight at work for social goods. This ultimate *tertium comparationis* [the quality that two things which are being compared have in common —ed.] for all Reason-guided thinking is missing today, if we seriously wish to get beyond the silos of thinking in terms of nations, languages, stakes, disciplines—and connect cultures according to the beauty of true human nature.

Self-centered cultures of philosophy did not fare well, in their passage into the globalized 21st Century. As a corresponding cultural horizon with our global realities, philosophy proper can be reinvented and become an inspiration for humane cooperation. This is a shared task. A unified philosophical curriculum that integrates the classical scholarship of world philosophies, such as Chinese and European traditions, does not yet exist in academic institutions, neither in China nor in Germany, nor here in the United States. The need for and potential benefit from such a Renaissance is so strikingly obvious and the material and political investments required so marginal, that Reason will not serve as an explanation for its absence. We can do it, when we do what these philosophical traditions have always done, initially: Pursue, explore, and criticize enlightenment.

The future is an open book. We should be writing it together, in a common language, honest and true. Which language could that be, integrating and expressing all knowledge that is borne within our natural tongues and horizons of cultural experience?



Mèng Kē (Mengzi, or Mencius, 4th Century BC)



Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716)

“Now, I am so tired. *I have been helping the corn to grow.*

His son ran to look at it, and found the corn all withered.

There are few in the world, who do not make an effort for the corn to grow.

Some find it useless to care, stay at home and do not weed the weeds.

Those who add effort to make it grow, pull out their corn.

What they do is not only without benefit, it is even harmful.

(The *Mengzi*, Gongsun Zhou, 2A2.16)

### 3. Sustainable Growth

Let us consult that knowledge. The book of the Philosopher Mèng Kē (Mengzi, or Mencius, living in the 4th Century BC) claims and provides ample evidence for being justified in this claim that “I understand words. I am good at nourishing my intelligible spirit (*Qi*).”

The Philosopher Mèng Kē indicated that this should be the language of philosophy, that enables reflection, and guided action, from one ultimate connecting source of reasoning. In his time, he argued against utilitarian behaviorists such as the philosopher Gao Zi (Gao). His main point was that understanding human nature, ontology, epistemology and ethics, means to claim responsibility for human action, and match aspirations with competence. The root knowledge and the driving motives are self-regulated.

He tells us a parable, the story of the man from the state of Song, who went to—and this is the name of the story:

#### **Pull the Sprouts To Make Them Grow** (**予助苗長**)

There was a man in Song, who was annoyed that his growing corn was not longer, and so he pulled it up. Having done this, he returned home, looking very stupid, and said to his people,

This is a very important allusion to the way in which we need to *balance* education, in the sense of engineering; and education, in the sense of humanness. This story is an illustration of a well-explained philosophy. Human intelligence *can* transform natural intelligibility, by providing a perspective—of righteousness, of propriety, of balance, and healthy relationships. It explores the possible unity of knowledge and action, the connectivity of technology and life, how to achieve a balance between proper nourishment and avoiding harm due to overly eager effort.

Asked to define the essence of that connectivity, Mèng Kē says:

This is *Qi*—the proper intelligible spirit: It fuses together *Yi* (Righteousness) and *Dao* (Way). Without *Yi*, there is starvation. The *Qi* assembles righteousness (*Yi*), for creativity, for life, for giving birth, for producing—and it cannot be obtained by assembling the *Yi* with effort—so, no forced innovation.

When action disagrees with our heart (*Xin*), it starves.

This is why I say “Gao Zi has never tasted the knowledge of Right, because he *externalizes* it.”

In all affairs we cannot do without adjust-

ment (*Zheng*), so that the heart does not forget, and growth comes without an effort.

Intellectuals such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Matteo Ricci found a deep, sympathetic reason in these tidings they received about Chinese philosophy at their times. That was taken up by German Weimar classics, especially Schiller and Goethe, in their philosophical thoughts about pedagogy and education.

There is an intrinsic connection in the aspiration for Truth, Beauty and Good. It is a hope and a promise, for those who choose the path of *Bildung* [German: learning or culture—ed.] (*Xue*)—cultivating learning, becoming the human being whom we *can* want to be, expressing our inner knowledge while learning from reflected experience and guidance. Ethics resonates from within.

Schiller's *Spieltrieb*, the drive to play, keeps us on the move, as we exercise and re-assess the rules of the “game” of life, along the path of cultivation. This recipe for sustainable growth is not limited to economy, or prudential plotting, but it is cultivated by humaneness

and cultivates humaneness, in an open process of all humankind.

In the *big picture*, China started to learn *from* others in the 1970s, began learning *with* others in the 1990s, and provides opportunities for *mutual* learning while advancing the quality of the learning that matters. What can countries such as Germany offer to China, so that it doesn't submit to the temptation to learn *for* others?

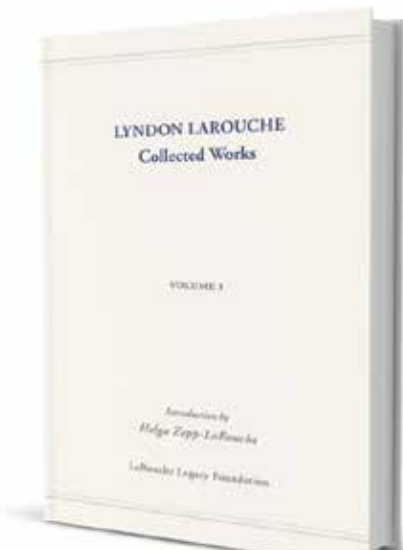
Let us heal and nourish our roots as humans! Let us embrace our “proper intelligible spirit” and allow it to “boundlessly flow.” 浩然之氣! (Hào rán zhī qì, awe-inspiring!) This is a call that actually connects Schiller with Confucius, in that they both believe that this process is intimately connected with Joy.... *Freude* in German, *Xiyuè* in Chinese.

This is a deeper sense of joy ... the spark of the gods—*Götterfunken* in Schiller. This is, in a way, corresponding with the *Qi*—what we *feel*, when we exercise the assembly of knowledge—the *Dao* and *Yi*, the Way and Righteousness.

Thank you for your attention. I'm here for any comments or questions you might have.

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