

Michael Seeber

Yang-Shan Meets San Sheng Or The Art Of Mentoring

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I would like to tell you a tiny ancient Chinese story or anecdote. It is a *koan*. A *koan* 公案 is a very short and concise paradoxical statement or question used as a discipline in Zen meditation. The effort to “solve” a *koan* is intended to exhaust the analytic intellect and the egoistic will, preparing the mind to entertain an appropriate response on the intuitive level.

Koans (from Chinese kung-an, literally “public notice,” or “public announcement”) are based on anecdotes from Zen masters. There are said to be 1700 *koans* in all. The Blue Cliff Record (Chinese: 碧巖錄 *Biyán Lù*; Japanese: 碧巖錄 *Hekiganroku*) is a collection of 100 famous Zen Buddhist *koans* originally compiled in China during the Song dynasty in 1125, and then expanded into its present form by the Zen master Yuanwu 圓悟克勤 (1063 – 1135). Accompanied by commentaries and verses from the teachings of Chinese Zen masters, it is considered one of the great treasures of Zen literature and an essential study manual for students of Zen.

Here it is:

Yang-Shan meets San-Sheng.

Yang-Shan asks San-Sheng: “What’s your name?”

San-Sheng answers: “Yang-Shan.”

“Yang-Shan it’s me!”, says Yang-Shan.

“Well, in that case”, answers San-Sheng, “my name is San-Sheng.”

Yang-Shan bursts out in a never-ending laughter, which echoes from the Emerald Rocks.

“*Substance*“ or “*essence*“ (in Latin *substantia*; in ancient Greek *hypóstasis*, *ousía*), in German ‘*Das Wesen*’, is one of the base concepts of occidental, western philosophy and thinking. The German word *Wesen* – in Old High German *wesan* – initially stood for to *stay* or to *live in one place*, *duration*. It refers to *house* and *household*, *property* and *ownership*, to that which *lasts* and is *stable*.

Aristoteles describes it as that which lasts in the permanent flow of transformation. The Latin word ‘*substare*’ has the meaning of ‘to persist’, ‘to insist’. ‘*Substance*’ therefore is what is ‘identical to itself’, ‘persists in itself’ and ‘separates itself from the other’.

The ancient Greek *hypóstasis* means not only ‘essence’, but also ‘to resist’. ‘*Stasis*’ means ‘to stand’, but also ‘insurgence’, ‘dissension’ and ‘clash’. In its origins, ‘*substance*’ or ‘*essence*’ is not peaceful or amicable. Only something which persists in itself, which has its own identity and which resides within itself – which is the main feature of ‘*essence*’ – can run into conflict with something else.

The western concept of thinking is far from being peaceful and friendly. In its origin, the *kanji*, the Chinese sign for ‘being’ or ‘to be’: 有 *you*, in Japanese 有る *a-ru*, was a pictogram for a hand holding a piece of meat. *You* or *aru* also has the meaning of ‘to have’ or ‘to own’. But Taoist thinking invests a lot of negation into making clear that ‘existence / being’ (das Sein) has nothing to do with persisting in itself, owning its own identity or residing within itself.

The wise man wanders within the 'non-existence', 'Nicht-Sein', the 'nothingness': 無有 *wu you*. Hence 'non-existence', 'nothingness' is associated with 'wandering', 'rambling', 'not-residing'. The wise man wanders where there is no door and no house: wu men wu fang 無門無屋. He is compared with a quail, which does not have a nest or home. As the Japanese Zen master Dôgen teaches: *A Zen master should live like the clouds without any place of residence, and like the water without any fixture.*

"The good wanderer does not leave any trace", says Lao-tzu. A trace always indicates a certain direction. It points to someone who acts and has an intention. The wanderer Lao-tzu, however, does not have any intentions and does not pursue any objectives. He goes to nowhere. He goes without having any direction in his mind. He just fuses completely with his path, which leads to nowhere. Only within the being (im Sein) can traces occur.

Contrary to European thinking, the fundamental topos of Asian thinking is not 'being' (das Sein), 'existence', 'substance' (die Substanz). It is 道, *dao* in Chinese, *michi* in Japanese. The Asian *dao* or *michi* lacks any stability, which would be the prerequisite for traces to occur. It is not a path which leads to a destination. The European concept of path is always connected with the idea of a final result, or in the wording of the ancient Greek philosophers, of a *telos* (τέλος). The Asian concept refers to a path along which 'something happens', along which something becomes 'feasible'. Which means: there is something proceeding but there is no progress.

Let us finally come back once again to our wanderer, who does not reside anywhere. The wise man, who is of course a wanderer, does not even have a name, he is unnamed, name-less: 無名 *wu ming*. And, on top of that, he does not even have an Ego: 無己 *wu ji*. There is an old Buddhist saying which I like very much: "Cut out your soul (i.e. the Ego) and allow a plum tree to bloom instead of it."

This probably sounds very esoteric. In my opinion it is not. I am not a Buddhist and I do not practice Zen meditation, but I sympathize with both very much. In my daily work as well as in my private life, the concept of *dao* has proven quite helpful in managing complex challenges, especially in coping with creative problem solving processes involving more than one person.

But today I don't want to talk about our daily work as filmmakers, writers, teachers, mentors, managers or about tools, rules, tricks and recommended solutions for certain creative problems. Instead I want to talk about different ways of thinking and different attitudes. Namely, as you may have already realized, about some differences in European and Asian thinking and attitudes.

Let's think about a question which might even have some relevance to your daily work: the question of effectiveness or effectivity. *Effectiveness* and *strategy*: in taking a closer look at these two terms, we will probably discover an important difference between the European and Asian concepts. The European interpretation of effectiveness can be described like this: To be efficient I construct an ideal model (or a working model or a model case), for which I draw up a plan and upon which I set a goal. Having done this, I start to act according to this plan and referring to this goal. So first a model has to be constructed, then this model has to be implemented.

For example, we can think of a general who, in his tent or office, draws up a plan for his operation before he enters the battlefield to implement his plan. Or an economics expert who draws a growth curve for the optimal development, and then has to think about how to apply it in reality. Or, more generally, the European way of political thinking: first we draw ideal forms of government, then we

try to implement them. This approach began with Plato, and in most cases the implementation was done by force, i.e. through revolution. It's the old question of theory versus practice. Both terms are so common for us in the West that we don't normally question them. Nevertheless, we are familiar with the notion that some things get lost between theory and practice: practice can never rise above the standard of theory.

From an historical point of view, the approach of constructing models has been one of Europe's strengths. Since we have mentioned the European general who draws up his plans before entering the battlefield, this is a good moment to switch to his colleagues in China and to the 'Art of War' in old China, which does not have any equivalent on the European side. Even in ancient Greece nothing was ever written like the famous Chinese writings on the 'Art of War' like those of Sun Zhu or Sun Bin, both written between 500 and 400 BC.

Reading these texts, it quickly becomes quite obvious that at least two of the most concise terms of this strategic thinking do not fit to the differentiation we have made between constructing a model and implementing it. On the one hand, there are terms like 'situation', 'configuration' and 'terrain' (*xing*). On the other hand, there is the concept of *shí*, which we could translate with 'potential of a situation'. This means the strategist will start from a certain situation – not from a situation he has previously constructed as a model, but from the situation he is currently in – and try to find out where its potential is and how he can use it. In principal, strategy in the Chinese sense is nothing other than discerning the favourable moments and using them for one's own aims.

Therefore, the 'Art of War' does not start with planning; it starts with an evaluation of the potentials of a given situation. The result of such an evaluation is not a plan of operation, but a graph of the potentials of a situation between the enemy and me, which indicates in every point the proportion of the forces involved. Analyzing the potential of a situation means determining the variables of a situation in terms of their use or benefit. A good strategist does not draw up plans, but rather explores the situation and its specific factors to determine what could be useful to him. His intension is to let the useful factors grow and decrease the factors which are favourable to his enemy. Thus he involves his enemy in a process which brings the latter to find himself helpless, broken up and bewildered – *dé-contenancé*, having lost his own potential.

The good strategist starts his battle only when the enemy is already beaten. This is rule number one of Chinese strategy: Start fighting only when I have already won. As long as the fruit hanging on the tree has not ripened, I will support its ripening. Then when it's ripe and is ready to fall down, I only have to pick it up from the ground. The big victory is invisible.

Here we have reached the most important point regarding the gap in which we are interested in our reflections: The way of thinking in terms of processes (or ripening) which has been developed by the Chinese differs enormously from the artificial thunder of effectiveness – the clearly visible but forced effectiveness, which is only a seeming effectiveness, a pseudo-effectiveness.

Mengzi, in Europe known by his Latin name Mencius, was one of the most significant philosophers succeeding Confucius and pursuing his work. He lived in the Han-Dynasty in the 4th century before Christ. His concept of strategy is even more subtle than the military strategies developed by Sun Zhu and Sun Bin. Mengzi tells the following story: In the evening, after a full day of work, a farmer returns to his home and says to his children that he has worked very hard and spread out all the sprouts on his field. To spread out the sprouts, one after the other, plant by plant, on the entire field, is of course very exhausting; and when the children went to the field the next day to see the results, every plant was withered.

This is an example for something you must not do says Mengzi. You want the plant sprouts and

you spread out the sprouts! You want to produce effectivity in a direct way, referring to the goal you have set. But by doing it this way, you completely fail because you have enforced the effectivity! Because the sprouting of the sprouts is of course conditional upon the situation: the grain which lies in the ground. What shall the farmer do? Every farmer knows it: neither pull the sprouts nor simply watch the grain sprouting. He weeds and loosens up the ground around the plant. He waters the plant if necessary. He does not get impatient and he avoids dullness. He just supports the sprouting. The good farmer just lets the process slide, without letting it loose.

For the Chinese way of thinking it is immediately clear what Mengzi's little story teaches us: Do not interfere, do not exert yourself, but adapt yourself to the process and go with it. Don't lead, but assist – humbly, without attracting fame or attention. Support what comes from alone. Don't push the river; it flows.

Here we close our circle and come back to the beginning of our rumination. In the Chinese concept it is not the Ego which strives for a goal. On the contrary, the preconditions themselves, if used in the proper way, lead to this goal. It's the preconditions which work for me. Chinese thinking starts from the situation and not from the Ego.

Do you remember San-Sheng? San-Sheng calls himself by the name of another person. He subverts his own name. By doing so he makes himself into a nobody and throws himself far out into the space of emptiness where there is no difference between the Ego and the other one. This at-the-same-time-being-me-and-the-other produces an open, open-minded and friendly self. Yang-Shan's laughter has its origin in that abandon, which releases the Ego from its rigidity. Yang-Shan laughs wildly. He laughs himself into that indifference, which is the place of an 'archaic friendliness' that is rooted in selflessness and a boundless openness.

The old Zen saying: "Neither host nor guest. Obviously host *and* guest" expresses the same movements. The archaic hospitality has its origin in a place where no difference exists between host and guest. The guesthouse of archaic friendliness is owned by nobody.

Mentoring takes place in the guesthouse of archaic friendliness.

Thank you very much for your attention.