

The Social Phenomenon of "Spiritual Emptiness Syndrome" in China: An Educational-Philosophical Perspective

Mingqi Jiang

Pudong New Area, Shanghai, China

Abstract: This paper begins with lectures delivered by two Peking University faculty members at different educational conferences. It first explores the connotations of two representative social phenomena that have attracted widespread public attention: "absolute, refined egoists" and "Spiritual Emptiness Syndrome" (SES). Taking their characteristics as clues, it logically deduces the common causes behind both phenomena. Secondly, it analyzes the causes from a philosophical perspective and explores solutions from an educational perspective. Finally, from the perspective of universities, it examines the special relationship between "spiritual emptiness syndrome" and higher education institutions, and attempts to offer possible recommendations for universities.

Keywords: Chinese Universities; Spiritual Emptiness Syndrome; Absolute and Refined Egoists; Educational Philosophy; Heart-Mind; Rationality.

1. Introduction

In recent years, widespread attention has been drawn to common problems facing contemporary Chinese university students, raised by two Peking University faculty members at different educational conferences. The first is the phenomenon of the "absolute, refined egoist," put forward by Professor Qian Liqun at the "Ideal University" Symposium on April 22, 2012. The second is the widespread phenomenon of "Spiritual Emptiness Syndrome" (SES) among Peking University students, raised by Xu Kaiwen, a former associate professor at Peking University, at the 9th New Oriental Family Education Summit on November 5, 2016. Interestingly, the two concepts share many points in common: both proponents are Peking University faculty members, and the subjects of their analyses are both Peking University students. Given that the two presentations were delivered relatively close in time, it is reasonable to conjecture that the subjects of their analyses were likely the same group—or at least the same generation—of Peking University students.

This study begins by interrogating the rationale behind the extensive public resonance garnered by these two articles. A pivotal factor lies in the unique status of Peking University students within the Chinese socio-educational hierarchy. From the perspective of personal utility, amidst an era where higher education has become ubiquitous, these students appear to have emerged as the primary beneficiaries of the prevailing credentialism. From the perspective of selection, viewing the entire education system as an experiment, Peking University students constitute its purest sample—with all extraneous variables eliminated, they represent the elite cohort most rigorously selected and molded by the contemporary Chinese education system to fully satisfy its prevailing standards and expectations.

Yet, according to Qian, "these individuals are driven solely by instrumental self-interest."^[1] According to Xu's research, 30.4% of Peking University students dislike studying, 40.4% believe life is meaningless, and cases of repeated suicide attempts are far from rare.^[2] These contradictory phenomena

have prompted deep reflection in the education sector and society at large: What kind of individual does the education system ultimately select for? And what kind of person does it ultimately produce?

In the wake of these two articles, scholars have examined the issue from institutional and sociological perspectives respectively. This paper seeks to offer an analysis through a philosophical and educational lens, and to propose potential remedies.

2. Conceptualizing Absolute, Refined Egoists and SES

To understand the root causes of the absolute, refined egoists and SES phenomena observed among Peking University students, we must first examine what these two concepts actually entail.

2.1. Analysis of the Connotation of "Egoism"

Qian defines the "absolute, refined egoist" as follows:

By 'absolute,' I mean that self-interest becomes the sole and absolute driving force behind all their words and deeds; everything they do for others is merely an investment. By 'refined,' I mean they possess high intelligence and considerable cultural refinement. Everything they do is rational, legal, and impeccable. They are surprisingly sophisticated and mature, deliberately displaying loyalty, skillfully cooperating and performing, and adeptly leveraging institutional power to achieve their own goals.^[1]

Qian's conceptualization of the "absolute, refined egoist" delineates highly intelligent actors who instrumentalize others for personal gain and reduce interpersonal relations to economic transactions. The immediate recognizability of this archetype in everyday life suggests that it has proliferated into a pervasive social phenomenon demanding urgent scrutiny. However, whether it is truly appropriate to label this type of

individual an “egoist” is, in my view, a question genuinely worth debating.

The term “egoism” originates from the Western thought in the 17th and 18th centuries.

During this period, great emphasis was placed on individual dignity, challenging family bonds, religious dogma, monarchical absolutism, and traditional norms and beliefs. Individuals reconceived themselves as new men in a new world, in pursuit of happiness, power, and knowledge. Consequently, everything could be sacrificed, except personal liberty, rights, faith, and opinions.[3]

It can thus be seen that the original connotation of egoism refers to a strong belief in self-awareness, which arises when individuals awaken to their autonomy, reject external dogma, and come into sharp conflict with feudal societies. This radical individualism bears similarities to utilitarianism. As advocated by Bentham[4] and Mill[5], utilitarianism, also known as universal hedonism, pursues the greatest happiness for the greatest number, and aims to increase one’s own happiness by promoting others’ happiness.[3] This form of utilitarianism, while appearing to be based on altruism, is fundamentally rooted in the recognition of every individual’s intrinsic pursuit of pleasure and happiness. It is neither an isolated, antisocial utilitarianism, nor a selfless, fully dedicated non-utilitarianism. Rather, it constitutes a utilitarianism grounded in universal individualism. As society evolves, we increasingly believe that only when the happiness of the majority can coexist without harm can each person attain genuine happiness. Accordingly, this utilitarianism provides a foundation for resolving the long-standing philosophical conflict between egoism and altruism.

Modern Western democratic societies are built upon both egoism and utilitarianism. As Thomas Hobbes argued, all individuals are self-interested, and they possess a natural right to pursue their own interests, which ought to be regulated rather than denied.[3] Therefore, everyone is entitled to equal freedom, the right to pursue happiness, and the right to private property. Based on the principles that “all men are born free and equal” and “private property is sacred and inviolable,” modern Western democratic legal systems have been established to safeguard the fundamental rights of individuals as self-interested agents. In this sense, democracy is the recognition and protection of individual interests and autonomy.

Similar views can also be found in ancient China. For instance, Wang Anshi (n.d.) argued in *Yang Mo*: “Yang Zhu advocates self-concern; self-concern is the root of learning. Mozi advocates caring for others; caring for others is the branch of learning.” Through the distinction between the “root” and the “branch” of learning, he resolved the apparent contradiction between self-interest and altruism. He Lin interpreted this statement as follows:

A learner must therefore cultivate himself first. When self-cultivation is sufficient, one will naturally benefit others without deliberate effort. If, at the outset of learning, one’s self-cultivation is inadequate but one’s ambition is already fixed on helping others, this constitutes a “misuse of one’s mind”(*Miu Yong Qi Xin*). Though the intention is altruistic, one will

ultimately be incapable of benefiting others at all.[3]

It is thus apparent that both Chinese and Western traditions share a common conviction: the self must be established before one can attend to others. Self-interest is not an original sin, but rather the very foundation upon which shared happiness is built. Ancient Chinese thought frequently affirms that “people share the same heart-mind, and the heart-mind shares the same reason.” (*Ren Tong Ci Xin, Xin Tong Ci Li*) To extend one’s heart-mind to others, one must first “extend innate knowledge”(Zhi Liang Zhi) and “seek the lost heart-mind” (*Qiu Fang Xin*)—that is, one must first restore the original heart-mind. Only when the mind is oriented toward the light can genuine mutual understanding and shared virtue be achieved.

Returning to the question raised by Qian, it becomes clear that “egoism” as it originated in the West is not equivalent to the “egoism” Qian describes. The former refers to a basic self-awareness that every member of society ought to possess—the very foundation on which people are able to coexist harmoniously. The latter is closer to a narrowed misinterpretation of egoism in modern times, which holds that egoists are those who organize their lives around personal interests, place private gain above all other moral principles, and abandon others and society alike. Egoists of the first kind engage in social interaction on the basis of an independent sense of self; they tend to be independent, self-disciplined, and compassionate. Egoists of the second kind, by contrast, treat private benefit as the goal of every action; such people are often dogmatic and stingy, substituting personal gain and loss for moral standards and prone to taking petty advantages. To distinguish between these two fundamentally different forms of “egoism,” this paper will provisionally refer to the second type as “absolute, refined interest monists.”

2.2. An Analysis of SES

Turning now to SES: drawing on his long-term clinical experience, Xu summarized SES into seven major manifestations[2], listed below:

- (1) Its symptoms may meet the diagnostic criteria for depression.
- (2) Those affected experience intense feelings of loneliness and meaninglessness.
- (3) They usually maintain good interpersonal relationships.
- (4) They show little or no response to biological treatment.
- (5) They harbour strong suicidal ideation.
- (6) For most clients, such problems are typically not of recent onset.
- (7) Traditional psychotherapy yields limited therapeutic effects.

The above seven points can be summarized as follows: those suffering from SES are people who experience prolonged spiritual emptiness and loneliness, which in turn produces a negative attitude toward life and may even endanger their lives. The cause does not lie in physiological dysfunction, nor in psychological abnormalities arising from negative cognition of particular events, but rather in a serious state of psychological ill-health.

From point (3)—that they “usually maintain good interpersonal relationships”—we can infer that those with SES have grown thoroughly accustomed to their own condition and are able to build, on this basis, a life indistinguishable from that of ordinary people. Yet a lack of

independent views and judgment, a habit of evaluating matters solely by whether they accord with personal preferences and interests, and the absence of any objective or stable cognition of things (manifested in childlike moodiness and pronounced emotional fluctuations) should be regarded as the habitual state of this group.

2.3. The Relationship between “Interest Monists” and SES

Having clarified these concepts, we may now turn to the relationship between the “absolute, refined interest monists” and SES sufferers. As noted at the beginning of this paper, these two sets of characteristics appear almost simultaneously in the same group of people. Yet when we compare the characteristics of “absolute, refined interest monists” with those of SES sufferers, several obvious contradictions emerge.

First, according to Qian, “absolute, refined interest monists” should be a group whose faith lies in a short-term, extreme utilitarianism: they conduct their behavior, construct their interpersonal relationships, and direct their lives entirely around the gains and losses of personal interest. Such self-serving people tend to be stingy and calculating, often substituting personal gain and loss for moral standards as their criterion of judgment. Yet how could such people—those unwilling to relinquish even the smallest personal interest—suffer from SES and even be willing to give up their own lives?

Second, SES sufferers are characterized by a lack of independent views, a habit of substituting others' reasoning for their own, a negative attitude toward life, and an absence of any sense of life's value or meaning. How could such individuals actively pursue personal interests? Put differently: when a person believes their own existence to be utterly meaningless and that they live merely as a tool for others, why would they fret so deeply over the gains and losses of personal benefit?

Nevertheless, when we compare “absolute, refined interest monists” and SES sufferers with the Western notion of egoism introduced above, a connection between the two comes into view. To illustrate this connection in concrete terms, we cite below several examples Qian offered in his article.

The first example is drawn from Qian's account of how he taught his Lu Xun course at the university, which he shared at a national summer training program on general education for universities. He recounts:

After I had finished my lecture, a university teacher raised his hand and asked me to explain how teaching a course on Lu Xun could help students find jobs. I was struck dumb and at a loss for words; my heart sank completely. I have no wish to blame this young teacher, because his own students ask him the same question in his classes: “Is your course related to employment? If so, I'll come; if not, I won't bother.”[1]

The second example is Qian's literary typification of this kind of person. He recounts that one day in class he noticed a particularly enthusiastic student sitting in the front row, who responded promptly to everything Qian said and took the initiative to speak with him after class. At first Qian was on his guard, but the student's feedback was thoughtful and reasonable in every word, not perfunctory flattery, and Qian gradually let down his guard and grew fond of him. This happened once, twice, three times... until the fourth time,

when the student asked Qian to write him a letter of recommendation for studying in the United States. Qian readily agreed—and from that point on, the student never appeared again. Qian remarks:

Then I understood. All those nods and smiles and so on and so forth—every bit of it was an investment! This is precisely what Lu Xun called the “spiritual capitalist”: he invested, collected my recommendation letter as the return, and then it was “bye-bye,” because I was no longer of use to him.

Every action of his proceeded from self-interest and was meticulously calculated. Yet he was a man of high intelligence and high competence, and everything he did was reasonable and lawful... All the same, I truly felt deceived, and could find no way to give voice to my distress.[1]

How, then, can these two examples be connected to SES? Analyzing the commonalities between these two incidents, we find that beyond their shared orientation toward concrete interests, there is another similarity: all their behaviors are aimed at conforming to external standards in order to obtain the benefits that follow from meeting those standards. In other words, the interests they pursue lie outside the heart.

What, then, counts as “inner” and what as “outer”? In the first example, the young teacher views the purpose of teaching as catering to employment demands rather than as cultivating students—this is the outer. In the second example, the student treats earnest classroom engagement and a good rapport with his professor merely as means to obtain a recommendation letter, rather than as expressions of a genuine thirst for profound knowledge or reverence toward a renowned scholar—this too is the outer. In short, anything that is not communication between heart-minds, resonance between feelings, or the mutual inspiration and dialogue between personalities cannot be counted as belonging to the inner.

Interests may be broadly divided into two categories. The first category is external, concrete, tangible, and perceptible to sight and touch, just like those pursued by “absolute, refined interest monists”: “Such things can generally be divided into four kinds: first, pleasure or happiness; second, wealth or money; third, fame and honor; fourth, rights or power. All of these are perceptible to the senses.”[3] Generally speaking, external interests are rewards obtainable simply by conforming to certain rules; a sufficiently intelligent person need not even particularly desire them in order to acquire them through wit alone.

The second category of interest lies in the mutual solace between heart and heart, in the give-and-take of human exchange. This kind of interest has four characteristics. First, it must arise from a sincerely other-directed heart; if someone acts in this way deliberately for personal gain, it amounts to deception and the exploitation of others' feelings, and is bound to provoke aversion and backfire. Second, this kind of interest does not stand in a mathematically fixed correspondence with one's acts of goodwill; it can only be regarded as an “unexpected reward” that cannot be demanded or guaranteed, and indeed often attracts petty people looking to take advantage. Third, this kind of interest is usually manifested in the attitudes of others rather than in concrete objects; the accumulation and continuation of such attitudes may bring boundless rewards over the course of long years,

and ordinarily must be sustained through long-term interaction, though exceptions exist. Fourth, this kind of interest brings spiritual solace and contentment, allowing one to find value and meaning in life. In fact, the ancient Chinese often advocated benevolence (*Ren*), righteousness (*Yi*), propriety (*Li*), wisdom (*Zhi*), filial piety (*Xiao*), fraternity (*Ti*), loyalty (*Zhong*), and trustworthiness (*Xin*)—virtues that "cannot actually be sensed as concrete things and are only abstract moral ideals"[3]—and these are precisely the psychological foundation for attaining the second category of interest: they are things of the inner heart, the very place where the heart resides.

In contrast, when we look at "absolute, refined interest monists," it becomes clear that they overlook the existence of the second type of interest. "Absolute, refined interest monists" may obtain a great many external rewards, yet it is doubtful that they take much pride in what they do or feel much identification with it. They may move with ease within the rules of the game, but they rarely receive any spiritual resonance or solace from others. Such people lack the self-consciousness associated with self-respect and self-discipline, and lack any moral sense. Likewise, those suffering from SES, owing to the absence of self-awareness and subjecthood, lack any sense of control over life and any identification with their own conduct; they take institutions and rules as the trajectory of their lives and are made into tools for meeting others' expectations and reaching certain standards. Even if they are intelligent enough to fully master a life built on rules set by others, in that process their feelings, thoughts, and spiritual needs are entirely neglected.

When, then, the pursuit of interests outside the heart becomes a habit, those with SES may gradually forget the existence of the "self," and without realizing it become a machine called "absolute, refined interest monist." Only the black hole that has formed where the heart once was brings them a perpetual, inescapable sense of emptiness and desolation—a constant reminder that the life they have grown accustomed to is, in truth, a mistake. In sum, absolute, refined interest monists and SES not only have a probabilistic likelihood of overlap, but, deduced logically, are very likely to occur in the same group of people, because the two share a common cause: the absence of moral cultivation and the absence of self-awareness. When a person's inner moral consciousness is lacking, it is all too easy to take one's own five senses as the standard of conduct and judgment, and to act with oneself at the center. When a person lacks self-awareness and has no idealized goals for life, it is all too easy to take external, visible objectives as the direction in which to advance. From this perspective, the "absolute, refined interest monist" is very likely only an outward manifestation of the SES sufferer; at root, it still comes down to a lack of self-awareness and moral consciousness. Hence the "interest monist" is the appearance and "SES" is the substance; the "interest monist" is the branch and "SES" is the root. This is entirely tenable in logical terms; moreover, according to descriptions in other education-related writings as well as the author's own observations from lived experience, these two sets of characteristics are often distinctly embodied in the same person. The following discussion therefore focuses on the causes of SES and related issues, in the belief that once the problem of SES is resolved, "absolute, refined interest monists" will naturally diminish in number.

What is needed to break through SES is precisely both: the Western spirit of egoism that emphasizes self-awareness, and

the edification and immersive cultivation found in traditional Chinese culture—exemplified by practices such as "extending innate knowledge" and "seeking the lost heart-mind"—that emphasize the cultivation of the human heart. This already extends far beyond the scope of traditional psychotherapy. Only enduring, sustained education can achieve the effect of "transforming the people and shaping customs" (*Hua Min Cheng Su*); only education is the optimal path for extending one's innate knowledge and restoring one's original heart-mind. Education itself must also adhere to the principle that "education has no aim beyond itself," taking the cultivation of "living persons" as its primary purpose, and treating the fostering of rational judgment, moral consciousness, the consciousness of being a subject, and self-awareness as its foremost task—truly conducting educational activities with the student at the center.

3. An Analysis of the Causes of SES

Given the broad reach and large scale of the group affected by SES, its causes are inevitably complex. The following part attempts to analyze its causes from the perspective of social philosophy, and explore its rationality in the educational context from the perspective of educational philosophy.

Any discussion of philosophy inevitably invokes the two dominant ideological frameworks shaping contemporary Chinese society: Materialism and Atheism. Just as with the ancient Chinese concept of Taiji or Hegel's notion of "Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis," these seemingly contradictory elements often simultaneously manifest the Way of Heaven (*Tian Dao*)—which Hegel termed Divine Providence—from opposing yet complementary angles. Therefore, to truly comprehend the philosophical positions of Materialism and Atheism, we would do well to begin with their apparent opposites: Idealism and Theism.

3.1. A Brief Analysis of Idealism: The Heart-Mind is Principle (Xin Ji Li)

So, what is meant by "Heart-Mind"? He Lin provides the following explanation.

The term "heart-mind" has two meanings:

(1) the heart-mind in the psychological sense; (2) the heart-mind in the logical sense. The logical heart-mind is principle—this is the essence of the proposition "the heart-mind is principle." The psychological heart-mind, however, is a thing. For instance, sensations, illusions, dreams, deliberations, and volitional acts within psychological experience—as well as emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, pleasure, love, hatred, and desire—are all things. They are physical entities that can be studied geometrically, in the same manner as points, lines, and planes.

The logical heart-mind, on the other hand, is an ideal spiritual principle that transcends experience, yet serves as the subject of experience, action, knowledge, and evaluation. This heart-mind is the synthesizer of experience, the master of action, the organizer of knowledge, and the judge of value. That nature and human life are intelligible, that they possess meaning,

order, and value—all stems from this heart-mind, the very heart-mind that is identified with principle.[6]

He Lin's classification provides a useful criterion for distinguishing psychology from education. Psychology studies the heart-mind in the psychological sense, taking the sensory productions derived from the heart-mind as its research objects. These objects are taken as pre-given phenomena, and the primary purpose of psychological inquiry is to elucidate their causes and guide individuals out of cognitive misconceptions. Education, by contrast, takes the heart-mind in the logical sense as its object of cultivation. It is a process of shaping and constructing each individual's original heart-mind. Its scope pertains primarily to the methods and pathways through which the logical heart-mind is cultivated, rather than to the logical heart-mind as a self-subsisting entity. The purpose of education lies in establishing sound value rationality for humanity, rather than merely exploring the antecedent causes of existing entities. To put the matter plainly: the fundamental distinction between psychology and education lies herein—the former emphasizes analysis and elucidation, while the latter stresses the process of construction.

The Idealism discussed herein is grounded in the logical sense of heart-mind—a heart-mind that, in Zhu Xi's words as cited by He Lin, "governs the body, is one and not two, acts as the master not the guest, and commands things rather than being commanded by them." [6] This logical heart-mind exists merely as a potentiality inherent in human nature for apprehending the world. It is only through continuous "transformative cultivation" (*Jiao Hua*) and praxis that this potential gradually crystallizes into conscious awareness and constructs value rationality. This is precisely the original intent of the Confucian concept of seeking the lost heart-mind. Consequently, the process of shaping the mind in the logical sense is precisely the pursuit of the rationality represented by the proposition "the heart-mind is principle, and the principle is heaven (*Xin Ji Li Ji Tian*)"—it is the pursuit of Truth itself.

The heart-mind in the logical sense is the point of departure for all human conduct, the ground upon which human beings perceive and make judgments about the world, the psychological foundation from which we seek to know and transform the world, and the locus of equilibrium between the self and the cosmos. It is only through the proper cultivation of one's value rationality that the capacity for moral discernment emerges, that self-consciousness and a genuine sense of subjectivity take shape, and that a true understanding of the world becomes possible—enabling one, at last, to construct from one's innermost convictions a considered vision of the life one wishes to lead, and thereby to arrive at happiness.

The most conspicuous feature of SES as observed among Peking University students is, simply, that they are unhappy. It bears emphasizing: these are, by virtually any measure, among the greatest beneficiaries of Chinese contemporary social and cultural conditions—exceptionally talented, in possession of resources that others can only dream of. And yet they are unhappy. An unhappy life may carry meaning for those who observe it from the outside; for the person living it, however, it is devoid of meaning altogether—and it is within this logic that the impulse to end one's life becomes, to those who experience it, entirely comprehensible.

That brings us back to a very old question: can material things produce happiness? We might say that material

conditions can bring happiness when they answer to what the heart-mind seeks, and cannot when they do not. Happiness, then, is a subjective state that arises from the heart-mind itself—not a byproduct or accessory of material possession. We must not put the cart before the horse, nor confuse cause with effect.

Going further, we can easily deduce logically that the SES seen at Peking University is very likely only a typical instance within this kind of population, and that such symptoms may already be widespread among Chinese youth—with the highly-educated social elite being the hardest-hit. I personally believe that an education grounded in this kind of idealism can ameliorate such phenomena.

3.2. A Brief Analysis of Theism

Turning now to theism: any mention of theism naturally brings to mind two concepts—divinity and religion. Generally speaking, religion has two highly visible external manifestations: religious organizations and deities. Religious organizations are cultural communities, bound by a shared belief in a particular spirit, that establish themselves with internal rules; clergy, missionaries, and the like all belong to such organizational forms. Deities, on the other hand, are the personified embodiments of a religion's spirit—figures such as the Buddha or Jesus Christ—upon whose character and spirit the founding and development of religions are built. Religious doctrines beneficial to people often manifest moral principles throughout, and thus become vital means for maintaining social stability and cultivating people's spirits. Christianity in the West, for instance, has played an immeasurable role in the cultivation of people's spirits and the guidance of their lives. It is in this sense that some scholars have said: "Religion is the substance of morality; morality is the function of religion." [3]

However, religion is not synonymous with religious organizations, nor does it require the existence of a deity. Religion originates from people's inner longing and yearning for the sacred and the beautiful. As one scholar puts it, "If one regards something sacred and valuable as worth pursuing, that is religion." [3] It is only when such a religion takes on concrete organizational aspect that a religious organization comes into being. And only when this "sacred and valuable thing" takes the form of a specific, great personality does a deity arise. Generally speaking, those who detest religion are mostly opposed to the dogmas and coercion of religious organizations; but in essence, religion is the pursuit of a beautiful spirit that "though one cannot reach it, the heart yearns toward it." Reverence for the divine is the longing for and respect toward great personalities—an expression of each person's choice of spiritual values. As the same scholar observes, "Westerners' prayers, though said to be communion with God, are in reality only deeply searching self-reflection" [3]. Religion arises from people's expectations and ideals concerning their own lives and their own characters; it is a natural outgrowth of human nature, something that everyone engages in without realizing it.

Nevertheless, the cultural expression of religion differs strikingly between China and the West. In Western societies, the long coexistence of religious authority and political authority has given rise to a dual structure of life: divinity (spiritual pursuit) and matter (material pursuit). The spirit of Westerners remains independent of material life, with spirit as the master and matter as the guest. Consequently, Westerners place particular emphasis on their own spiritual pursuits and

spiritual life.

The greatest contribution of theism to Western culture lies not in the shaping of a deity, but in the way it foregrounds the importance of the spiritual life. As Hegel put it (as cited in He Lin's *Culture and Life*): "The history of the world is the process of Spirit realizing and developing itself." [3] Hence, "Western material civilization is a natural manifestation of its rich spiritual life, not a groundless, isolated marvel." [3] Whether a nation and a people possess creativity is fundamentally determined by whether their spiritual world is sufficiently rich—and this is one of the important reasons why Western science and technology have led the world since modern times.

Unlike the Western way of life, under China's cultural tradition of the unity of politics and religion (*Zheng Jiao He Yi*), Chinese life is a monistic material existence. "When the Chinese burn incense and chant the Buddha's name, they are merely bargaining with ghosts and gods as if doing business, with no element of self-reflection." [3] The spiritual life of the Chinese has often been regarded as an appendage and auxiliary to material life; its status has been greatly diminished, and the attention given to it greatly reduced. The ideal of the "gentleman" (*Jun Zi*) was frequently advocated in ancient China precisely because China has had no fixed religion and no fixed deity—so each person must rely on their own cultivation and self-discipline to maintain moral character, and must themselves discover and seek out great personalities around them as the motivating force urging them forward; this is a profoundly difficult process. More often than not, people turn instead to placing their faith in external matter as the subject, taking the pursuit of material things, economic gain, and wealth as their religion, and abandoning the pursuit of great personality. From this perspective, atheism itself is also a form of religion; it is only that the absence of a deity makes great personality no longer the goal of pursuit, and those who believe in this religion frequently lose direction and become extremely utilitarian and materialistic.

3.3. Materialism, Atheism, and Their Educational Implications

Having clarified Idealism and Theism, let us turn to the relationship between philosophy and education. Dewey offered a classic formulation: "If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education" [7]. Philosophy is humanity's interpretation and idealized understanding of the nature and the essence of human existence; education, in turn, serves as a basic means of implanting philosophical concepts into the heart-mind, shaping culture, and accomplish the work of "transforming the people and shaping customs" (*Hua Min Cheng Su*). From an educational perspective, one might even say that education is the substance (*Ti*) of philosophy, and philosophy is the function (*Yong*) of education—the two constituting an integrated unity of substance and function. It thus becomes a matter of paramount importance which philosophy education proceeds from.

Contemporary Chinese materialism, notwithstanding its emphasis on dialectics, cannot but acknowledge a mechanizing tendency in the practice and dissemination of culture carried out under its guidance. This can be illustrated with Shi Zhongying's tripartite division of the worlds—"the

natural world, the social world, and the humanistic world." [8] In exploring the natural world and in constructing human society, Materialism and historical materialism possess powerful explanatory and guiding force. The problem is that even the most correct philosophy has its sphere of applicability. Just as it would be utterly absurd to extend the cognitive mode of Idealism into the domain of the natural sciences, so too, when Materialist philosophy is brought to bear on the heart-mind, it inevitably gives rise to the "reification of the human being" (*Wu Hua Ren*). Materialism takes objective matter as the origin of the world, with matter as the master and spirit as the guest. What, then, are the consequences when such a philosophy is applied to cultural transmission and education? As we can see, people's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts come to be regarded entirely as appendages and derivatives of institutions and matter—as though good grades, the avoidance of wrong turns, and favorable material conditions would automatically secure a person's happiness and joy. This philosophy overlooks the fact that the heart-mind has its own logic, one that cannot be equated with the laws of the material world or the workings of human society. To establish Materialism as the sole orthodox philosophy is, without question, to violate the Yin-Yang logic of the Way of Heaven (*Tian Dao*); its harm is no less than that wrought by the Western Han dynasty's policy of "Dismissing the Hundred Schools and Venerating Confucianism Alone" (*Ba Chu Bai Jia, Du Zun Ru Shu*), which turned Confucianism into dogma and destroyed its authentic spirit.

Turning now to the role of Atheism in education: the most fundamental distinction between Atheism and Theism lies in whether the pursuit of great personality is taken as a faith and purpose of human life. As discussed above, Theism is not equivalent to feudal superstition, but rather represents people's choice of spiritual values and their longing for and pursuit of a complete personality. Likewise, the original meaning of prayer is not to bargain with ghosts and gods, but to undertake a deep and intense self-reflection—a process that is in fact the very process by which moral consciousness is established.

This bears much in common with the way the ancient Chinese revered the great character of Confucius—"learning without satiety, teaching without weariness" (*Xue Er Bu Yan, Hui Ren Bu Juan*), and "education without discrimination" (*You Jiao Wu Lei*). The Confucian tradition likewise speaks of "examining myself daily on three points" (*Wu Ri San Xing Wu Shen*); this practice of self-reflection is itself the process by which moral consciousness is established.

Thus we may say that the establishment of moral consciousness and self-awareness requires the guidance of great personality, the constraint of behavioral norms, and the cultivation of a habit of deep self-reflection born of sincere identification and reverence—none of these can be lacking. Atheism may be quite serviceable when applied to the exploration of the natural world and the construction of human society, but when it comes to the transformative cultivation and formation of human beings, if the pursuit of a great and well-rounded personality is not taken as its aim, then what is the aim of education to be?

It would seem to be much as education is today: pursuing the demands of the system, pursuing social standards, pursuing the expectations of others... pursuing anything that yields tangible benefit. People have long sought to reverse this state of affairs by reforming the system and shifting the

standards, yet however much they reform, the results remain meager. The reason is that no matter how the standards change, they remain external standards—standards that can be catered to; and no matter how the sieve is woven, it remains a sieve, with no regard for the persons being sieved.

Education should not be built upon standards, nor should it be a layered set of sieves. The morality, character, and self-awareness that education ought to attend to are immeasurable elements; they cannot be coerced into being through testing, examination, and the meeting of benchmarks. The environment that gives rise to them must be one of cultural immersion and humanistic cultivation, requiring moral influence and instruction born of empathy and shared understanding. This can only be achieved through a fundamental change at the level of educational philosophy itself.

It must be acknowledged that to advocate Theism in a country without a tradition of religious faith does indeed risk falling into the pitfall of superstition, and this paper has no intention of introducing Theism directly into education. The purpose of expounding the spiritual content of Theism has been to illuminate its essential spirit: the pursuit of great personality, the emphasis on personality cultivation, and the importance of establishing a moral sense in human beings. We need not mechanically transplant Theism into Chinese education, but we should indeed take seriously the spiritual content that Theism represents, restoring "the heart-mind" to its place as the subject within educational philosophy, rather than devoting ourselves to studying how to cultivate human beings as mere instruments.

The purpose of expounding Idealism has been to emphasize the pivotal position and role of the heart-mind in the human world, to clarify the differences between the logic of the heart-mind and the laws of the material world, and to insist that education must return to the pursuit of the heart-mind and of reason—rather than treating human beings as tools for one another and subjecting them to assembly-line production, pursuing only skills and outcomes while neglecting the cultivation of rationality. In the final analysis, education that proceeds from either of these two philosophies aims to shape the heart-mind and the spiritual world of the human being, and to establish the self-awareness and moral perception by which a person becomes truly human. I personally believe this is precisely the fundamental way to reverse the wide proliferation of SES and "absolute, refined interest monists" in this land of China.

SES involves a wide range of populations, and its causes are inevitably complex; the limits of this paper's length preclude a comprehensive analysis encompassing institutional, cultural, psychological, familial, social, and historical dimensions. The philosophical cause is only the deepest root of all such phenomena and institutions—not their sole cause—and it is hoped that those with the dedication will continue to probe this question more deeply, in the interest of a more complete account.

4. Diagnosing and Addressing Spiritual Emptiness in Chinese Universities

Life is a journey, and education a continuous process; addressing SES is not the sole responsibility of universities, nor can any single paper hope to be exhaustive on the subject. The discussion that follows will focus primarily on the particular relationship between Chinese universities and SES,

and will attempt to offer some practical recommendations.

4.1. The Particular Relationship Between Chinese Universities and SES

The phenomenon of SES first emerged within Chinese universities, and universities remain the hardest-hit area. Let us attempt to analyze the reasons as follows:

(1) From primary school through high school, the system of evaluation remains relatively fixed: grades and rankings serve as the sole criterion for measuring students. Upon entering higher education, however, this emphasis on grades and rankings gradually fades, while the wider sphere of social life catches many students off guard. The impact is particularly devastating for those students who had been suffused with a sense of superiority throughout their schooling—when they suddenly discover that academic study is no longer the whole of life, and that they may have nothing else to offer beyond their studies, the shock to their spirit is enormous.

(2) The principal task of general education is to transmit known and established knowledge to students; the answers to examinations are generally fixed, so learning becomes, to a large extent, a mechanical labor of repetition and memorization. At the higher education stage, by contrast, teachers must lead students to the frontier between the known and the unknown; catering to rules and mechanical rote memorization can no longer meet the demands of higher education. Individual creativity and critical awareness become the new criteria of assessment—a tendency all the more pronounced in the most elite universities. Yet such qualities are not what universities use as their criteria for selecting students. Some students, lacking critical thinking and creativity, find that they can no longer navigate their studies with ease, and this fills them with panic.

(3) Upon entering universities, students are immediately confronted with employment pressure, which compels them to begin reflecting on questions of life's direction and meaning. The notion many top students once held—that doing well on examinations alone would guarantee a smooth life—becomes far less viable. In their earlier years, life may never have granted them any real power of choice; they may now discover that they cannot, at root, take command of their own lives. This leads students to doubt the life they have led, and when such doubts find no outlet, they transmute into a sense of emptiness.

To summarize these three points: after students enter universities, their previous patterns of living and modes of cognition undergo an earth-shaking transformation, and their lack of capacity to cope with such change is the direct trigger of SES. But SES is not caused by university education itself; it is merely that students only become aware of the problem at the university stage.

Yet even if universities are not the root cause of SES, they must shoulder the responsibility of "mending the fold after the sheep have been lost" (Wang Yang Bu Lao)—that is, of taking remedial action after the fact.

4.2. Recommendations and Methods for Chinese Universities

This paper offers three recommendations for Chinese universities:

First, universities themselves must develop a rational consciousness; they must approach external judgments and standards with a rational, considered attitude—

exercising their own discernment and choice rather than becoming a vassal of society at large. One important reason that the issue of student SES has drawn such widespread attention is that it has come to threaten the lives of many elite students; yet there are matters that, however calm they appear on the surface, already conceal a vitality long since faded. Higher education institutions—and universities in particular—are organizations whose very life force consists in the pursuit of reason and truth. The contemporary university, however, increasingly fits the description of an "absolute, refined interest monist": on the one hand, it loudly insists that universities must not be commercialized or instrumentalized; on the other, it desperately chases rankings, social recognition, and parental expectations, as though it had long forgotten what reason is and what the pursuit of truth means. This may be called the SES of universities. Reason is the life of the university; the death of the rational spirit is the death of the university itself. If today's universities are already lacking in rational spirit, in judgment, in independent consciousness, and in moral sense—taking social rules as their law of survival and social demands as their educational goals—how then can we expect students to receive the cultivation of reason and the moral influence of education within them? Therefore, if higher education is to address SES, the most pressing task is to first make this institution itself rational. Once a rational campus culture begins to take shape from the side of the university, it will naturally come to influence students.

Second, universities must cherish and value their talented faculty, diversify the criteria by which teachers are evaluated, and respect the standing of the teaching profession. If a university wishes to change the psychological state of its students, it must first thoroughly respect its own teachers. The university is not a factory, and the teacher is not an employee. If a school treats its teachers as mere transmitters of textbook content—granting them only the status, recognition, authority, and material benefits owed to such a role, and judging their pedagogical outcomes solely by quantifiable measures—then it cannot expect them to contribute much to the cultivation of reason or of moral character. As the classical saying goes, "people share the same heart-mind, and the heart-mind shares the same reason": only when teachers are treated justly, when their efforts are recognized, and when their standing is fully respected will they be able to devote more of themselves to teaching and to the formation of human beings. Moreover, education is inherently a delayed and lagging endeavor; the work of a teacher, like the character of a student, can hardly be subjected to quantitative monitoring, and can only prove its worth across the long stretch of time. The excessive pursuit of quantifiable and data-driven outcomes is precisely the means by which the university, in order to cater to external standards, instrumentalizes its teachers to serve its own ends—and once this logic is brought to bear on teachers, it is reflected onto students in turn. Students are either neglected because their teachers are too busy meeting benchmarks, or treated as the tools by which teachers complete tasks for the sake of self-preservation. In this way, at every level, a vicious cycle takes shape. In a word: a university that does not treat its teachers well cannot possibly cultivate students with humanistic sensibility.

Third, universities should integrate humanistic education into their teaching, establish creative and exploratory courses, and build a human-centered, diverse

campus culture.

For one, with respect to teaching: the teacher's task is to enable students "to know heaven and to use things" (*Zhi Tian Yong Wu*), and thereby to establish their self-awareness.

(1) The cosmos is divided into three realms—heaven, humanity, and things—and the self is formed through the human being's mediation between heaven and things. "Knowing heaven" (*Zhi Tian*) and "aspiring to heaven" (*Xi Tian*) are precisely the processes of illuminating the Way, restoring one's original heart-mind, pursuing truth, and building value rationality. The realization of "knowing heaven" in the teaching process requires that teachers, beyond imparting the knowledge of their particular discipline, also present to students the scientific spirit, the rigorous attitude, the noble character, and the tenacious perseverance that the discipline embodies—thereby restoring the original cultivating function of teaching, in place of the dry and rigid practice of knowledge-instillation. To achieve this requires, first, that teachers deepen their understanding of their courses and grasp their essence; second, that teachers possess sufficient patience to "teach without weariness" toward their students, and to learn as much as possible about students' lives and needs; and third, that flexible curriculum design replace the prevailing knowledge-centered curriculum with one designed around students' cognitive logic—transforming the classroom into a place of communication and interaction between the spirits of teacher and student, dissolving the oppositional relationship between them, and conveying the course material in an empathic spirit of shared understanding. Only when students genuinely experience the spirit and content the teacher seeks to transmit will the teaching truly accomplish the transformative cultivation of personality.

(2) Only when "using things" follows upon "knowing heaven" can the authentic truth of Heaven's principle (*Tian Li*) be made manifest—what is meant by "the investigation of things to extend knowledge" (*Ge Wu Zhi Zhi*). "The investigation of things" (*Ge Wu*) is not the mechanical repetition undertaken to learn a particular skill, nor the endless repetition of experiments toward some external aim. Rather, it is exploration and cognition of the world in which we live, undertaken from the standpoint of the human being—it is the transformation of the material world that human beings undertake in order to satisfy their inner curiosity, according to the ways they themselves consider ideal. In this process, then: first, human beings must possess full autonomy over what they investigate; second, before investigating they should have already attained a degree of understanding, along with some idealized methods and conceptions of their own, which can then be tested through practice. Such creative and exploratory courses are driven by students' curiosity, with imagination as their content; they value process over result. The teacher must attend, during the process, to the fine moral qualities the student displays and to the places where the student falls short, addressing each case on its own terms in moral edification; in this way, over time, moral consciousness arises of itself.

For another, with respect to campus culture: in accordance with the principle that "education has no aim beyond itself," education is the process of bringing a student's "self" into being—much more an art of patient guidance, encouragement, support, and assistance. Since "the human being is not a tool of the human being"[3], there can be no single unified standard by which to measure human worth. Higher education institutions—and universities in particular—urgently need to

reclaim the spirit of Cai Yuanpei's dictum of "freedom of thought, embracing all" (*Si Xiang Zi You, Jian Rong Bing Bao*)[9]: embracing diversity, tolerating failure, and respecting difference; providing students, as fully as possible, with resources suited to them, and allowing them to chart their lives according to the directions they themselves consider ideal. Universities should reduce examinations and de-emphasize the consciousness of competition; they should communicate their guiding vision to students more directly, so that students may know with certainty that, in the university, so long as they live earnestly, they will be recognized.

In a world without the guidance of deities and without the moral influence of the spirit, the excessive competition triggered by the scarcity of social resources has led people to take external matter as their religious faith—this is the most fundamental cause of the emergence of SES and "absolute, refined interest monists." Only an education that sets out from the human heart-mind and from human nature to cultivate human reason and moral consciousness, and that builds sincere communication between one heart-mind and another, can dissolve this condition.

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