

Introduction

Selusi AMBROGIO

Guest editor

This special issue of *Asian Studies* (Volume 13, Issue 2) is dedicated to a relocation of Chinese thought outside of closed definitions and disciplines so as to return to this rich and varied tradition to its authentic, inclusive power. The introduction of Western systems of knowledge classifications, based on Melvil Dewey's (1851–1931) library system introduced in China in 1909 (Makeham 2012, 5), imposed entirely different models from the earlier imperial classifications. Moreover, the Dewey decimal model presents philosophy under nine categories (metaphysics; epistemology; parapsychology and occultism; psychology; logic; ethics; ancient, medieval, and eastern philosophy; modern Western philosophy), each with nine subcategories. Therefore the history of philosophy is split into two groups: thinking produced before the 19th century and that which followed. Eastern philosophy is actually the first subcategory of the first historical period (decimal no. 181). This view is highly conservative, and implies that Chinese and Indian philosophies are ancient but unprogressive and not rationally advanced compared to Western philosophy. It is perhaps unnecessary to say that this difference becomes irreconcilable when these Asian philosophies are compared with modern Western philosophy, as the supposedly pre-philosophical nature of non-Western philosophies is implied in the classification.

Comparative and transcultural philosophy, as well as philosophical studies in their respective cultural contexts of reference (i.e., Area studies), have expended much effort in rejecting this classification and discrimination, highlighting the epistemological injustice implicit in the study and classification of other cultures based on criteria embedded in a specific tradition. However, this is still a much neglected awareness in the philosophical arena. In this issue, the selected authors have further attempted to question any classification of Chinese philosophy. In the following contributions, the argumentation transcends the borders dictated by various different perspectives, such as geography, doctrine, conceptual field, and literary genre. This is why the authors position themselves on a lexicon that expresses a “trans-” argumentation (i.e., trans-cultural, trans-disciplinary, trans-genre, trans-linguistic, trans-human). This liminality, which does not merely stand on the edge—i.e., inhabiting the edge of instability—but considers the limit a door from which to go back and forth, is undoubtedly the hallmark of this special issue.

Studying conceptual limits to cross them, overturning the “road signs” of categories, and mocking the prohibitions between genres and disciplines is the nature of doing philosophy, or at least it should be.

This issue is divided into three sections: “Translating and Transreading between China and the West”, “The Aesthetics of Life in the Chinese Tradition”, and “Comparativity and Compatibility of Systems in Contemporary China”. In the first article, Huiwen Helen Zhang and Peter C. Perdue investigate and compare the writings on China by two German authors, Richard Wilhelm and Alfred Döblin, in which an effective process of trans-reading and rethinking identity through contact between traditions is present. Wilhelm was an important sinologist and translator of philosophical texts into German, while Döblin was a modernist writer of fiction, particularly dedicated to disseminating Chinese thought in Germany. Both shared the idea of the necessity of knowledge and questioning, and saw China as a civilisation capable of producing a renewal of German thought. Particular attention is paid to pivotal figures such as Confucius and Liezi, whose thoughts richly permeate the two authors’ production and influence their perspectives.

In the second article of the first section, Piotr Machajek and Martyna Świątczak-Borowy tries to make use of Li Zehou’s disruptive dictum of “Western learning for substance, Chinese learning for function” (*xiti zhongyong* 西體中用) as an interpretative framework that might be applied on different intellectual contexts and topics. They engage Sungmoon Kim’s political theory and Yan Lianke’s fiction writing through this concept. The authors thus demonstrate what we have anticipated—the transversal and trans-genre nature of the Chinese tradition. Li Zehou’s perspective is illustrated in its critical and iconoclastic nature while suggesting its deeply hermeneutic value and philosophical productivity. The article proceeds by providing a detailed analysis of Sungmoon Kim’s attempt to make democratic liberal institutions and Confucian identity converge. In the last section, Yan Lianke’s mythorealism is illustrated in relation to Li Zehou’s perspective.

On the other hand, Xu Zhemeng gives us an intellectual history of the introduction of the concept of logic in China and its terminological renderings, highlighting how the translation process is always thinking with and across cultures. The first translation of the term was *mingli* (名理), in Li Zhizao’s 李之藻 *Mingli tan* (名理探) (Investigation of Name-Patterns) and dates back to 1630s. Although this translation has been somewhat ignored due to the lack of success in the late Ming period, the author argues that this terminological choice is rich in philosophical and intercultural characteristics that the more common phonetic translation with *luoji* (邏輯) certainly cannot express. The term emerges in the context of introducing European philosophical culture into China, notably Aristotle,

intending to support and spread Christianity as a culturally advanced doctrine. The analysis of the term *mingli* provides a vivid insight into the contact between Ming-era Chinese philosophy and Greek-European philosophy.

The second section of this issue presents four articles related to the question of the aesthetics of life and the resulting artistic practices, from painting to cricket-fighting. Timo Hendrik Ennen offers us a reflection on the concept of conflict between cultures and philosophical ideas and how this conflict is the very essence of a living and effective philosophy. In the second part of his article, he offers an investigation into the *Xinxue* (心學) School's view of the subject, agentivity and thus life. This investigation is developed in a constant and close comparison with Western philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Husserl, bringing out the productivity of the conflict between these perspectives on the definitions of subject and life.

In his article, Fabian Heubel engages with modern Western culture and Laozi on the concept of hardness, strength and masculinity. Through the figure of the ravine from *Laozi* (6), the author challenges Western education and politics, together with the concept of modernity that the West has imposed over the globe. A pivotal question guides the whole argument: "Is it possible to imagine a way of modernisation that is compatible with the Daoist praise of softness?" Softness implies continuous change and vitality, adaptability and flexibility. The best example of this softness provided by Daoism is breathing.

Téa Sernelj focuses on the Qing painter and thinker Shitao's 石濤 theory of painting as expressed in his masterpiece *The Remarks on Painting* (*Huayulu* 畫語錄). Shitao contested the traditionalist school of painting that advocated imitation of past models rather than creative innovation. Instead, Shitao advocates a subjective and inner dimension in creation that can revive painting and make it regain an authentic and vital vein. A "method of no method" (*wufa zhi fa* 無法之法) is the outflow of imitation towards creative flow and deep vitality.

Yang Xiaobo, on the other hand, takes us into the world of cricket-fighting and the writing of "cricket books" (*xishuai pu* 蟋蟀譜) that rose to the level of Classics. The author demonstrates how this social practice's hermeneutic and philosophical value goes far beyond the dimension of mere leisure. It is one of the Chinese philosophical practices that aims to seek an overall meaning of the cosmos through daily experiences, taking us from the "humble thing" to the "great *Dao*" through a philosophy of emotions that the author argues through Li Zehou's vision.

The third and final section, centred on comparativity and compatibility, is opened by a contribution by Thomas Moore that addresses an ambitious and topical

comparative project: reading Confucianism in comparison with the Laclauian Conception of Democracy. The author considers the Confucian theory of the virtuous king as similar to the modern concept of the virtuous leader by Ernesto Laclau, whereby the sovereign-subjugate relationship could be reread as the people making a radical investment in a virtuous leader who can guarantee stable and effective social harmony.

Dawid Rogacz, engaging in political analysis, proposes a novel reading of Maoist Marxism from a transhuman perspective. If we usually link the vision of an alternative life or future beyond man to science-fiction, then in Maoist theory this same trend was present and well-articulated within an overall vision of the relationship between man and the cosmos. According to the author, Mao's thoughts reflected both European and Chinese influences in an original system often positioned far from canonical Marxism. Mao's youthful thinking, driven by ideas about immortality, alternative spaces, the destruction of Earth, and the power of humans, would guide the entire development of his later thought.

Jana S. Rošker authors the last article in this issue and sets the ambitious (though always necessary) goal of re-inventing Chinese Philosophy. The author examines and questions the open problems of comparative and transcultural philosophy, which she proposes to remedy through her sublation method, an innovative theory of intercultural philosophical creation constructed from (and beyond) the Hegelian concept of sublation.

Some of the papers in this volume were presented at the Fourth Biennial Conference of the European Association for Chinese Philosophy (June 16-18, 2023), organized by me at the University of Macerata, which gathered nearly 120 speakers from 95 universities on four continents. On that occasion, the papers collected here by Timo Hendrik Ennen (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology) and Thomas Moore (Sheffield University) were awarded the EACP Young Scholars Award in first and third place, respectively.

Reference

Makeham, John, ed. 2012. *Learning to Emulate the Wise: The Genesis of Chinese Philosophy as an Academic Discipline in Twentieth-Century China*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.