THE CHANGING STATUS OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

ABSTRACT

The article tries to stress the historical nature of the issue about the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy.” It argues that we are facing an era in which the question will no longer be whether the thoughts of traditional Chinese masters can be comfortably adopted by a foreign “family”; instead, it will be whether we can make the marriage of Chinese traditional thoughts and Western philosophy a constructive process through which philosophy, whether Chinese or Western, can be rejuvenated with renewed legitimacy under the title originally coined by the Greeks, namely the love of wisdom.

At the time of celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Journal of Chinese Philosophy, it seems appropriate to review the status of Chinese philosophy today with reference to its past in the last one hundred years or so. It would be particularly interesting and rewarding, as it seems to me, to revisit the century-old controversy known as the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy,” because to demonstrate the existence and value of Chinese philosophy was a major motivation behind the creation of the Journal in the first place, and despite the commendable achievements it has made, the controversy still continues, albeit with a different historical background now than it was before.

It is well known that “philosophy” is a Western term unknown to China until the nineteenth century. Given the obvious differences between the thoughts of ancient Chinese masters (zhuzi 諸子) and the archetypes of Western philosophy such as Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, whether the former can be retrospectively called philosophy or not became an issue. Because the original “baptism” gave the Western world a privileged right of language to use the term according to the way it was understood in the West, Western philosophy naturally
became the “legislator” against which the “legitimacy” of Chinese philosophy would have to be judged. While on the surface it is merely a matter of terminology, it actually involves rich layers of factors, including the definition of “philosophy,” the right of language, demarcation of academic disciplines, similarities and differences between the thoughts of ancient Chinese masters and Western philosophy, cross-cultural communication and dialogue, the status of indigenous culture, the issue about “the other,” and emotions attached to national pride.

Instead of trying to give a synoptic treatment of this complex issue, this article tries to make a specific point within the broad parameter. It tries to stress that the issue itself is historical in nature. It was never an issue before it was raised and will cease to be in the future. We are facing an era in which the question will no longer be whether the thoughts of traditional Chinese masters can be comfortably adopted by a foreign family, granted the right to use the name “philosophy” as its modern shelter; instead, it will be whether we can make the marriage of the two a constructive process through which philosophy, whether Chinese or Western, can be rejuvenated, gain new momentum and renewed legitimacy under the title originally coined by the Greeks, namely the love of wisdom.

I. The Dilemma behind the “Legitimacy of Chinese Philosophy”

From Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) in the early part of the last century all the way down to the present, generations of scholars in Chinese philosophy have made tireless efforts to demonstrate that, like its counterpart in the West, China had its long philosophical tradition. Through this accumulative and often collaborative effort, Chinese philosophy has not only become a well-established academic discipline in China, but it is also much more visible now in philosophical conferences, college and university curriculums, and philosophy publications in Western countries. Many American universities have hired specialists in Chinese philosophy and created Chinese philosophy courses accordingly. The employment rate of Chinese philosophy PhDs from the University of Hawaii has been consistently at a very high end. At a time when the philosophy job market is so tough that those who are luckily to get jobs almost feel thrilled that they will even get paid, this is truly impressive.

Yet on the other hand, the majority of mainstream Western philosophers remain skeptical, to say the least, about whether traditional Chinese thoughts can be called “philosophy.” The view that there is no
such thing as Chinese philosophy is ostensibly demonstrated in their attitude toward Chinese philosophy, though it is rarely, if ever, put in explicit arguments. Scholars in Chinese philosophy in the West are more often housed in departments of religious studies or East Asian studies than in philosophy departments. While one would expect the situation to improve along with the increasing globalization of curriculum, the reality sometimes shows the opposite. In 2006 a blog article on the Internet triggered widespread resonance among scholars in Chinese philosophy in the West. The article points out that after the retirement of several professors in Chinese philosophy at Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and University of California, Berkeley, the positions disappeared, consequently leaving top philosophy departments in the entire continental United States almost blank tablets with regard to Chinese philosophy. Students who want to pursue a PhD degree in Chinese philosophy are left with little choice except for going half across the Pacific to Hawaii, or all the way to Asia, where only a handful of universities offer graduate-level Chinese philosophy courses in English. The author of the article quite literally described the situation as a “crisis” of Chinese philosophy.3 Alerted by the blog article, the American Philosophical Association published a newsletter report in 2008 on “Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophy.” The statistic data reported in the newsletter provide a more synoptic picture of the crisis. According to one of the contributors of the newsletter, Justin Tiwald,

Of all of the U.S. and Canadian Ph.D. programs listed on the “overall rankings” page of Brian Leiter’s “Philosophical Gourmet Report,” there are only three specialists in Chinese thought whose primary appointment is in philosophy. In contrast, on my conservative but admittedly imperfect count, these same programs have ninety-nine full-time faculty who specialize in Kant (a ratio of 33 to 1), and fifty-eight full-time faculty who specialize in medieval philosophy (a ratio of about 19 to 1).3

This is certainly largely due to the fact that, generally speaking, there are profound differences between the Chinese masters and Western philosophers. For example, thinkers like Laozi and Confucius demonstrate little interest in offering clear definitions, logical reasoning, and systematic articulation for their views, and these are of central importance to Western philosophers. Their teachings are fragmented aphorisms, proverbs, or conversations recorded without much context. Worse, they are often so vague that they allow multiple, or sometimes even conflicting interpretations. Furthermore, their central concerns appear to be different. While Western philosophy is an intellectual pursuit of truth, a quest for knowledge, the Chinese masters are primarily interested in practical matters of how to live in the
world. They demonstrate little theoretical interest, and often appear to be hostile to such endeavor. One can surely read the Chinese texts philosophically, but this is different from saying that they are philosophy texts, just like we can “read” sports or the media philosophically, but that does not mean sports and the media are philosophies.

To demonstrate that China had a philosophical tradition, generations of scholars in the field of Chinese philosophy tried hard to interpret, or more accurately, reconstruct Chinese thought through Western philosophical concepts, with Western methodology, and within the Western framework of problematic. While this approach has certainly achieved some success (in the sense of convincing people there is such thing as Chinese philosophy), the success often comes at the cost of losing what is distinctive about the Chinese masters (imagine that a Zen kōan is turned into an explicit argument, a gongfu 功夫 [aka kung fu] instruction turned into a universal moral principle, or a performative use of language turned into a descriptive statement), and consequently, the more traditional Chinese thought is recognized as “philosophy,” the less valuable and less Chinese it seems. The “success” of this effort ironically blocks the accessibility of the real spirit of traditional Chinese thought.5

To overcome this tendency, many scholars in Chinese philosophy tried to restore what is unique and vital to Chinese philosophy. In his works as well as public lectures around the world, Tu Weiming repeatedly stresses that Chinese philosophy is a “religious philosophy.” He quotes Pierre Hadot’s work to point out that the Chinese practical orientation is not without its counterparts in the West, as ancient Greek philosophers also practiced philosophy as a way of life rather than pure intellectual discourses. Chung-ying Cheng makes a contrast between the “nonreductive naturalism” of the Chinese tradition and the “reductive rationalism” of the West,6 and argues that although they are very different, the former is no less philosophical than the latter. Roger Ames and David Hall draw heavily on American pragmatism to show that as a revolt against the intellectualist tendency of modern Western philosophy, pragmatism shares numerous insights with traditional Chinese philosophies. Henry Rosemont, Joel Kupperman, Donald Munro, and Chad Hansen also stressed, in their various ways, that characteristic to Chinese philosophical tradition, the practical orientation toward deep life wisdom (which is not the same as intellectual power) is exactly what makes it particularly valuable.7 On the other hand, some scholars are willing to restore the distinctive features of traditional Chinese thoughts by acknowledging that they are not philosophy in the Western sense of the word. Li Zehou 李泽厚, for instance, says that “China had no ‘philosophy’ in the Western sense.” Both Confucianism and Daoism are half-
philosophical and half-religious. What they emphasize is ‘jianlü 踐履 (practice).’ [The Song-Ming Neo-Confucian saying that] ‘gongfu is substance’ is not only a philosophical proposition; it is more an imperative about practice.” But from the mainstream Western framework, these emphases all look like they are showing exactly that Chinese philosophy, if at all existed, is an immature and confusing cluster of ideas in which theory and practice, philosophy and religion, logos and mythos, logic and rhetoric, concept and metaphor, and argument and narrative are not yet clearly separated.

In short, under the paradigm of the mainstream Western philosophy, scholars in Chinese philosophy have been involved in a dilemma that they either have to twist and cannibalize what is unique to traditional Chinese thought according to the Western philosophical framework, which will ironically show that there is hardly a philosophical tradition in China, or be faithful to China’s own traditions, but end up being kept out of philosophy.

Obviously a key factor is that the expression of the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” already contains a presupposition that there is a standard against which the legitimacy is to be determined; and because the term is of Western origin, the standard must be Western philosophy, which is by default the lawful owner of the family name. Whether traditional Chinese thought can bear the family name would depend on how adequately it resembles its Western counterpart.

But is this presupposition reasonable? It is hard to say that Heraclitus resembles Descartes more than he resembles Laozi, or that Plato resembles Nietzsche more than Nietzsche resembles Zhuangzi. If the Western use of the term is taken as the standard because the term is Western in origin, then whether modern Western philosophy is legitimate would have to be judged according to its resemblance to its ancient Greek origin also. To see how problematic it would be, one only has to recall, as Hadot shows, how far Western philosophy has departed from its ancient Greek tradition in which it was more a way of life than pure intellectual discourses. This is the strategy implicitly behind Tu Weiming’s argument. If ancient Greek philosophy is philosophy, so is Chinese, because they are both ways of lives. From here one can go the other direction as well. One might say that like the notion of science has changed numerous times in history and often major changes of it are led by ideas outside of previous scientific paradigms, why cannot Chinese philosophy be a new paradigm of philosophy against which the modern Western paradigm of philosophy will be judged? What makes one paradigm “legitimate” and the others not? The term philosophy has never had a clear definition. In its Greek origin, it means, quite vaguely, the love of wisdom. Like the term science, which can either mean broadly the search for under-
standing of nature, or more narrowly a relatively stabilized paradigm of it, the term *philosophy* also has the original broad meaning as the search for wisdom, and more specifically the paradigms of it emerged in different periods of time. People often take a dominant scientific paradigm in their age as the universal standard for science; likewise a specific mode of doing philosophy can assume the position of being the “legislator” for philosophy. As modern philosophy of science has revealed quite convincingly that the legitimacy of a scientific paradigm depends largely on its vitality in the social and even political realm, similarly, behind the use of “philosophy,” there is what Foucault calls the “power” that comes from the vitality of the specific philosophical paradigm more than it does from inheritance of the original baptism.

In his discussion of this century-old issue, Chinese scholar Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 says that the so-called question of the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy “is a pseudo-question, because it may never have an answer.” I am not sure I agree with him because it depends on what one counts as an “answer.” If one expects a simple “yes” or “no” answer, obviously he is right. There is so much more involved in this question. But if dissolving a question through careful examination of the factors involved and, as a result, obtaining a better understanding of the nature of the problem can count as an answer, it would be a different story. But I think the statement he makes immediately after is very well said:

> Although it seems to be a pseudo-question, hidden behind it is a real history—because underneath the disagreements about academic institutional system, or categorization of knowledge, or criteria of their evaluation, etc., there attached too many complicated sentiments of the Chinese academic and intellectual circles ever since the modern era about whether they should merge together with the rest of the world or adhere to their original position.\(^9\)

What this points to is that the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy is not merely an academic issue. It is also a social-political matter that must be examined together with the historical background upon which it was raised. Obviously the ancient Chinese masters such as Confucius and Laozi all the way down to their successors prior to the late nineteenth century were never bothered about whether their teachings belonged to philosophy or not. When the seventeenth-century Western missionaries encountered the great ancient Chinese masters, they also had no problem calling the Chinese masters “philosophers.”\(^10\) The problem arose roughly around the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century when the modern West overpowered China with its military supremacy. China at that time was disengaged with the rest of the world as well as with its own tradition. The intellectual tradition that once served as its source of vitality were
treated as doctrines that maintained rigid social hierarchy and old customs, instrumental for resisting anything new and foreign. The fact that China was repeatedly defeated and humiliated by Western powers served as a demonstration that its cultural heritage had lost its legitimacy as “the intellectual prop of a living society,” as Joseph Levenson puts it, and became “a shade, living only in the minds of many, treasured in the mind for its own sake after the society which had produced it and which needed it had begun to dissolve away.”

Even though there have been many examples in which refined civilizations were conquered by barbarous cultures, such as the military Spartans subdued the Athenians, the warlords of the Goths overwhelmed the Christian Rome, and the nomadic Mongols brought down the entire Song Dynasty China, when the warships of European countries invaded China in the nineteenth century, it did seem ridiculous for the Chinese to respond with Confucian rituals and moral teachings and condemn the Europeans as barbarians. The Chinese gongfu, whether in the form of martial arts or any other forms of art, could be like a joke when confronted with steam engine and firearms. One only has to flip the pages of Arthur Smith’s book Chinese Characteristics to realize that in the eyes of most Europeans at the time, the cultural baggage showed exactly how pedantic and even silly the Chinese were.

For centuries Western philosophy has played the role of a legislator, a teacher, or even a savior for other cultures. While some Western philosophers have perceived the need to learn about other cultures for the sake of the “white man’s burden,” much fewer felt the need to learn from other cultures. It was under the pressure of the material power from the modern West, generations of Chinese scholars from the beginning of the twentieth century worked hard to learn from Western philosophy and tried to fit their own intellectual tradition into the framework set by Western philosophy. As a result, we see a prevailing asymmetry between China and the West. You cannot find a philosophy department in China, or the entire East Asia for that matter, that has no professor specialized in Western philosophy, and no student in philosophy major can graduate in a Chinese university without taking substantial amount of Western philosophy courses. In the West, however, having a specialist in Chinese philosophy remains the exception rather than the norm for philosophy departments, and not only philosophy students, even professors of philosophy would feel no embarrassment for knowing absolutely nothing about Chinese philosophy.

There is ignorance, for sure, and perhaps arrogance as well. But deep behind it is the enormous material power released by the Enlightenment rationality which served as a proof of the supremacy of Western philosophy. This power dramatically changed the world,
forcing all non-Western cultures to give up their own traditions as something outdated and useless, if not harmful. For a while its sweeping power made almost all brilliant Chinese minds revolt against their own intellectual tradition. (Yet it is worth noting that among Western philosophers, there emerged not only radical critics of the West like Marx and Nietzsche, even Bertrand Russell, who was broadly taken as an outstanding representative of modern Western culture, had already in the early 1920s described the Westernized world as “the restless, intelligent, industrious, and militaristic nations which now afflict this unfortunate planet.”13)

The idea that the West was more advanced and China needed to shake off its own cultural past to catch up with the West was driven deeply into the collective subconsciousness of the Chinese. From the famous slogan “Welcome Mr. De (democracy) and Mr. Sai (science)” of the May 4th Movement in 1919 to the cry to embrace the Western “ocean culture” in the television series released in the 1980s titled “River Eulogy” (Heshang 《河殇》), the idea has been a persistent force in the modern patriotic movement in China. The side effects of this trend are still visible everywhere in the country. From reversed discrimination—a discrimination of Chinese as inferior to Westerners by the Chinese themselves—to blind worship of everything produced in the West, the colonization of consciousness is even reflected in the government-controlled media in China. “Being highly praised by Westerners” is often used ironically as an expression for national pride! Even in the revolt against the Western hegemony of power, as exemplified by a popular book in the 1990s titled China Can Also Say No! one can find peremptory reactions that ironically reflect the lack of confidence in China’s own cultural heritage.

It was with this historical background that seeking for the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy became an issue. It was as if traditional Chinese thoughts could remain relevant only through finding its way to be recognized by a respectable Western discipline, even if that meant to twist and filter them in order to fit the label. For some Chinese intellectuals, getting such a label was a pride, while for others, it was a humiliation. But in either case, the “legitimacy” was more a sign of power than a feature of the thoughts.

II. THE LEGITIMACY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

In the recent two decades, however, some profound changes have been taking place. Looking broadly, we find that the social-political background upon which the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy became an issue has already been fading. Along with its fast development in
economy, China is rapidly becoming a major player in world politics; and if British journalist Martin Jacques is right, this will soon extend to the culture realm as well. Meanwhile, the supremacy of the Western world has been challenged by various deep crises, including environmental deprivation, terrorist threats, widespread individualism, consumerism, psychological illnesses, and of course, the recurrence of global financial crisis. The “legitimacy” of modern Western Enlightenment ideas has been more frequently questioned around the globe. Although the human race has undeniably accomplished a great deal in the past two hundred years, especially in science, technology, and modern democracy, which should be largely attributed to the Enlightenment ideas of modern Western philosophers, the deep crises that came along can find their roots in the same ideas as well. Under the influence of these ideas, the natural environment became an aggregate of matter without intrinsic meaning, simply there for human control and manipulation; humans became “resources” and their development came to be measured by nothing but economic development and material consumption; competition replaced cooperation; rights replaced obligation; cultural and spiritual resources became commodities; and so forth. The scale and depth of the crises literally caused us to wonder how sustainable our mode of living is. Many damages we have been causing are irreversible, and many of our “solutions” are like quenching the thirst by drinking poison—exchanging long-term damage for temporarily relief (a typical example is the attempt to fix global financial crisis by bailing out banks, so that the whole economy can continue to be based on high loan and excessive consumption). The vicious circle runs like a swerve, with every recovery followed by a quicker return to deeper troubles.

The inherent problems of the philosophical foundation of the modern Enlightenment West are well diagnosed in a book published in 1996, titled *After Philosophy, End or Transformation*. With an impressive assembly of most influential contemporary philosophers in the West as its contributors, Anglo-American as well as continental European, the book presents synoptic reflections on various deep flaws of Western philosophy. In the “General Introduction,” the editors of the book highlight the most problematic conceptions at the very core of modern Western philosophy:

First on the list is the conception of *reason*, which is supposedly the ultimate foundation for necessary and universal knowledge. Oppose to this fictional reason the editors point to the “contingency and conventionality of the rules, criteria, and products of what counts as rational speech and action at any given time and place,” which are irreducibly plural and incommensurable, irremediably “local,” contingent on different “games of language and forms of life.” Next is the
conception of the sovereign rational subject—atomistic, autonomous, and ideally self-transparent. Oppose to this is the recognition of “the influence of the unconscious on the conscious, the role of the preconceptual and nonconceptual in the conceptual, the presence of the irrational,” the recognition of “the intrinsically social character of structures of consciousness,” the historical and cultural variability of categories of thought and principles of action, their interdependence with the changing forms of social and material reproduction,” and the recognition “that ‘mind’ will be misconceived if it is opposed to ‘body,’ as will theory if it is opposed to practice.” Third on the list is the conception of “knowledge as representation, according to which the subject stands over against an independent world of objects that it can more or less accurately represent.” Oppose to this is the fact that as much as “[t]he object of knowledge is always already preinterpreted, situated in a scheme,” “the subject of knowledge belongs to the very world it wishes to interpret.” Last but not least is the separation of the literal, logical dimension of language from the rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions of language, achievable only “at the cost of ignoring or suppressing” the “strategies and elements of metaphor and other figurative devices that are nevertheless always at work in philosophical discourse.”

The focus of the book’s critical reflections is exactly the fundamental assumptions and methodology of the mainstream modern Western philosophy. These critical reflections lead the authors of the book to the understanding that (Western) philosophy is facing either an “end or transformation” (hence the subtitle of the book)—a situation somewhat analogous to the dilemma that Chinese philosophers have had since early last century.

For some, like Rorty and Derrida, this means after philosophy, period: The Platonic tradition has “outlived its usefulness.” For others, like Habermas, philosophy is to be aufgehoben, as Marx put it, into a form of social inquiry. For still others, like Gadamer and Ricoeur, it means philosophy’s continuation through its transformation into philosophical hermeneutics; or in the case of MacIntyre and Blumenberg, into a kind of philosophical historiography. And finally, for some, like Davidson and Dummett, philosophy continues in the altered yet not unfamiliar form of a theory of meaning.

Of course these philosophers do not represent all, or even most of the professional philosophers in the West. One reason for their being influential is, I suspect, exactly because they stand out as different from and more sensitive than the majority. Similar to the emergence of the issue of the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” which entailed a theoretical dimension and a social-political dimension, the crisis of Western philosophy also involves these two dimensions. Without
enough pressure from social-political changes, the crisis might be *perceived* but not *recognized*. Philosophers may feel on the one hand a sense of being insecure, of being out of touch and left out, hence the need for self-defense, and yet on the other hand, still not motivated to seek for viable solutions. For many mainstream professional philosophers in the West, the intellectual game would just continue the way it has been played for centuries. An article in the *Inside Higher Ed* titled, “The Crisis of Philosophy,” by Jason Stanley at Rutgers University shows an interesting defensiveness that is characteristic of defenders of an old scientific paradigm facing deep crisis. Stanley begins the article by acknowledging the widespread recognition of the need for humanities to be sensitive “to the risks of colonialist methodologies” and “advance a more sympathetic understanding of the differing veils humans adopt.” He then moves on to admitting that

Philosophy stands apart from this emerging consensus about the purpose of the humanities. Its questions—which concern the nature and scope of concepts like knowledge, representation, free will, rational agency, goodness, justice, laws, evidence and truth—seem antiquated and baroque. Its central debates seem disconnected from the issues of identity that plague and inspire the contemporary world. Its pedantic methodology seems designed to alienate rather than absorb. Whereas humanists have transformed into actors, using their teaching and research as political tools, philosophers have withdrawn ever more to positions as removed spectators, and not of life, but of some abstracted and disconnected realm of Grand Concepts.¹⁸

From this one might expect him to say that philosophy should change. It needs to pay more attention to the real life. But to the contrary, he claims that there is nothing wrong with philosophy. “[P]hilosophy has not changed. David Lewis writes very differently than Nietzsche. But the unusual figure was Nietzsche, and not Lewis. The great philosophical works have always been difficult technical tomes, pursuing arcane arguments in the service of grand metaphysical and epistemological conclusions.”¹⁹ To be fair, Stanley is not defending pedantry for its own sake (i.e., not *because* it is out of touch with reality). He is rather defending the value of continuing the tradition of using timeless methods and asking timeless questions because they satisfy our child-like curiosity. Stanley is quite right about Nietzsche, and not Lewis, being the unusual figure, but strangely he seems to take for granted “usual” is equivalent to “right.” Like the slaves in Plato’s allegory of the cave, he refuses to entertain the possibility that the usual might be the shadows in the darkness, except that in this case, the darkness might precisely be caused by the Platonic rationality. While the “child-like curiosity” that he defends sounds innocent enough, it would not be so if the practice of it leads to the opening of a Pandora’s box. Even
if the realm of the pure Grand Concepts were harmless, looking at the global condition, we can’t say that philosophers still have endless time to dwell in it. Of course, as individuals, they have the right to be disinterested in anything or even everything, but in choosing to stay insensitive to the need to transform, they are losing the legitimacy for entitling themselves “lovers of wisdom,” which is what “philosopher” means in its Greek origin.

III. Where Chinese Philosophy Can Display Its “Legitimacy”

If my argument in the previous sections is sound, then the “legitimacy” of a philosophical tradition should be viewed not so much from the original baptism of the term than from its vitality. We are entering an era in which the problem of legitimacy will be more on the Western philosophy side than it is on the Chinese side. Indeed, in the recent two decades we have seen more and more Chinese academic institutions use the term “guoxue”—Chinese traditional learning—for the study of the masters. It indicates a shift from placing the study solely under the label of “philosophy.” There is literally a guoxue craze in China marked by the emergence of enormous amount of publications, high-audience rating television programs, and the establishment of numerous higher learning institutes dedicated to guoxue. The label “Chinese philosophy” is still widely used there, but it is becoming more an umbrella under which Chinese traditional learning engages with Western philosophy than the name of its sole asylum.

This significant change indicates a practical arrangement for addressing the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy. On the one hand it restores the integrity of traditional Chinese thought by dedicating a special category, namely guoxue, to its study. The craze for it is a clear indication of its renewed legitimacy in the country. On the other hand, the new system still keeps Chinese philosophy as an academic category and institutional discipline, showing a commitment to study the corps of Chinese classics philosophically and to engage in cross-cultural philosophical dialogue, leaving the space in which traditional Chinese thoughts can both contribute to world philosophy and transform itself in the process. Interestingly, behind these two labels (i.e., guoxue and Chinese philosophy) is usually the same team of scholars, some more oriented to what is in the West called sinology and others more oriented to philosophy. This ambiguity may seem confusing, but it actually allows necessary elasticity for creative energy and vitality.

In terms of the content of their studies, there is also a new trend. During the early time of the last century, philosophical reading of the
history of Chinese thought was, as Hu Shi puts it, framed as addressing “How can we [Chinese] best assimilate modern [Western] civilization in such a manner as to make it congenial and congruous and continuous with the civilization of our own making?” While this continues to be a primary direction, scholars in the field of Chinese philosophy have become more conscientious in the direction of asking “How can traditional Chinese thought contribute to world philosophy?”

In comparison, the West’s receptiveness toward Chinese philosophy is much more passive. Granted that the attitude of the mainstream Western philosophy toward Chinese philosophy has in general improved over the last a few decades, it has shown little initiative in reaching out to the Chinese side. Their limited acceptance of Chinese philosophy remains largely due to being “politically correct” than to genuine interest in having dialogue with the Chinese tradition. In some cases, it is more a response to the increasing demand of the market (students’ and readers’ interest) than to the realization that Chinese philosophy is a rich resource for inspiration. To quote Ge Zhaoguang again, “The arrogance of Western philosophy toward Chinese philosophy is on the one hand a subconscious expression of the dominant discourse of the modern West toward the East, and on the other hand a subconscious self-enclosure for protecting the traditional Western territory called ‘philosophy.’”

It seldom occurs to a Western-minded philosopher that in the world today, not to include Chinese philosophy in their resource pool can be more unfortunate for Western philosophy than the other way around.

Looking back at the contributors of the volume *After Philosophy*, we can make two relevant observations. First, we notice that while they contributed to the deconstruction of the myth of modern Western philosophy, they offered relatively few constructive ideas, and because of this, their deconstruction entails the danger of slipping into “a deep suspicion, hostility and ridicule of any aspiration to unity, reconciliation, harmony, totality, the whole, the one.” It leaves an abyss from which radical relativism and nihilism will breed, and pluralism would become not only a description of the existential condition of our age, but also an ending mark for dialogue. If we are inevitably thinking and living within the confines of our cultural and religious backgrounds, as they argue, then ethnocentrism or any other forms of centrism would just be considered natural and inevitable.

Second, we notice that while their emphasis on plurality, contingency, the inseparability of the mind and the body, the subject and the object, the individual and the social-historical, and so forth, have led them to explore these marginalized or neglected territories, their aims are still mainly confined in uncovering, redescribing, or understanding the human condition, but not in how to transform it. Their diagnoses
of the problems of Western philosophy remain largely in the realm of “knowing that” (e.g., that it fails to recognize that mind and body, theory and practice, etc., are inseparable), but not “knowing how.” It is as if in this regard they are wearing the same fetter that they want to break. This reminds us of the remarks made by Hall and Ames—in talking about the dichotomy of theory and practice, they said that the dichotomy “has so long been presupposed in our [Western] tradition that the philosophical categories that form the inventory of our speculative notions are themselves construed with reference to this dichotomy.” “[I]t is doubtful whether the resources available within our own cultural tradition are adequate to resolve successfully the crucial dilemmas associated with attempting to think one’s way through to a sufficiently novel understanding of thinking.”

In cases like this, traditional Chinese philosophy can offer constructive help. Take the concept of *gongfu* as an example. During the Song-Ming Period in China, the word “*gongfu*” was widely used by the Neo-Confucians, the Daoists, and the Buddhists alike for the art of living one’s life in general (for which martial arts serve as a good example), and they all unequivocally spoke of their teachings as different schools of *gongfu*. While this may be conceived as a reason for rejecting these schools of thought as philosophy, it is in fact the opposite, for this is exactly a lens from which we can see how Chinese thought can enrich Western philosophy. First, it can help us to better define an important field of philosophical study that is yet undeveloped in the West. Beside the traditional major constituents of philosophy, such as metaphysics, which studies humans as “beings,” epistemology, which studies humans as “knowers,” and axiology (ethics and aesthetics), which studies humans as “value bearers,” there must be a field devoted to the study of humans as practitioners or agents. There are branches of Western philosophy that study human action, such as praxiology and action theory, but a general feature shared by these theories is that they tend to take it for granted that human agents are choice makers. Little attention is directed toward the cultivation and transformation of the agent. A *gongfu* master does not simply make good choices and use effective instruments to satisfy whatever preferences a person happens to have. In *gongfu* practices the human agent is never simply accepted as a given. While an efficacious action may be the result of a sound rational decision, an action that demonstrates *gongfu* has to be rooted in the entire person, including one’s bodily dispositions and sentiments, and its goodness is displayed not only through its consequences but also in the artistic style one does it.

*Gongfu* also provides a perspective from which philosophical concepts, ideas, theories, and even traditions can be seen as recommendations or instructions rather than representations or descriptions of
reality. As Richard Rorty has suggested, our theories can be “levers,” and not merely “mirrors” (although he apparently contradicted himself when he claimed that philosophy would no longer be useful once the dream of seeking for objective Truth is shattered). The perspective will allow us to see that, for example, in labeling traditional Chinese thought as philosophy, we are not merely describing a fact, which will be judged as either true or false; we are, as J. L. Austin would say, doing things. We are adjusting our attention, mobilizing our energy, and setting up the aim of philosophy not only at forming theories but also becoming masters of the art of life. From the gongfu perspective, even John Locke’s and Leibniz’s conflicting claims about human knowledge may serve as complementing guiding instructions. The perspective differs from that of morality in that morality is commonly conceived as a matter of setting up obligations and constraints, whereas gongfu instructions aim at enabling human agents with abilities. From it, we can more easily appreciate the relevance of uncodifiable style of a good life, and less likely be obsessed with abstract universal principles. Likewise we can understand better why the Chinese masters used ways of presentation that sometimes appear at odds with rationality.

Furthermore, the study of gongfu as a philosophical field and the application of gongfu perspective can lead to the development of distinct philosophical theories, such as “gongfu ethics,” “gongfu epistemology,” and “gongfu philosophy of language.” Through the gongfu lens the otherwise familiar landscapes will all look somewhat different. It can also likely serve as a leading thread through which various insightful new themes developed in the West may get synthesized into a coherent constructive account—I have in mind themes such as the therapeutic works of Nietzsche and late Wittgenstein, the revival of virtue ethics, Gilbert Ryle’s distinction between “knowing what” and “knowing how,” Austin’s work on speech acts, Merleau-Ponty’s study on the body, Michael Polanyi’s tacit knowledge, Foucault’s “arts d’existence” (aesthetics of existence) and “la technique de soi” (technology of the self), Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach, and of course the practical philosophies we mentioned earlier, namely praxiology, action theory, pragmatism, and many, many more.

What I sketched above about gongfu is an example of how engaging Chinese resources philosophically can legitimize both Chinese and Western philosophies. By this short sentence, I try to encompass three points: The first point is about the particular gongfu example—it illustrates that when those philosophers swept traditional Chinese thoughts out into the realm of religious studies or area studies, they blocked their access toward the vision of “practical holism,” as Hubert
Dreyfus calls it. They eclipsed the practical dimension of human life and the need for self-transformation, about which Chinese philosophy happens to contain particularly rich and insightful resources.

The second point is a more general one—the example shows that comparative philosophy is cross-cultural fertilization, which can effectively revitalize both sides. For the sake of getting new energy and resource, Western philosophy should first recognize its own locality in order to reach its universality. It should shake off its colonialist attitude, stop thinking that broadening its own scope to enclose Chinese philosophy is adopting a homeless child or granting someone asylum. A more realistic and constructive attitude is to conceive it as an opportunity for a good marriage—not forced by any political or material power, but a union of two free individuals for the benefit of both. What is most important is not who gets to use which “family name” but what will be most conducive for a productive interaction and for producing “children” of true “love of wisdom.”

The third point is about the word *legitimize*. I deliberatively choose the verb form here, indicating that it is better for us to conceive legitimacy as *created* rather than *discovered*. It is unfruitful to discuss the issue with the essentialist approach, trying to answer whether the corps of Chinese classics *is* philosophy or not. It is more fruitful to think that it is up to us philosophers to *bring* vitality, and hence legitimacy, to philosophy today, Western or Chinese. In the practice of reading Chinese thoughts philosophically and engaging it in dialogue with Western philosophy, we are creating (or re-creating) Chinese philosophy and revitalizing Western philosophy.

This view entails that philosophy would be better served when we take it as an evolving concept for human search for wisdom. This view may entail a danger, as Carine Defoort points out, of stretching the concept of “philosophy” so broad that it “encompasses almost everything,” which would of course make it “mean almost nothing.” But I don’t think we are anywhere near this danger yet. In the current situation, our major concern is the opposite—the overly conservative self-enclosure in Western philosophy that could suffocate the very legitimacy of philosophy that we try to protect.

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2. The first person who used what is now the standard Chinese term for philosophy, zhuxue 哲學 (the learning to become wise), was a Japanese scholar named Nishi Amane (1829–1887) in his *Hyakuichi Shimron* (Chin.: *Baiyi Xinlun* 百一新論) (1874).


5. In saying this, I do not mean that there is nothing in the Chinese tradition that truly resemble mainstream Western philosophy (including the pure interest in pursuing theoretical knowledge), nor do I mean that these elements have no value. What I mean is that the recognition of these should not block our vision about what is more distinctively Chinese, which is not only valuable because of its Chinese-ness, but more importantly because it can contribute to the advancement of world philosophy.


10. For example, the first English version of the Analects has the title *The Morals of Confucius, A Chinese Philosopher*. It was converted by a British named Randal Taylor from the Latin version of *Confucius, Sinarum Philosophus* (*Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese*), originally translated by Belgian Jesuit missionary to China, Philippe Couplet (1623–1693) and a group of Jesuits and the French version of *La Morale de Confucius, Philosophe de la Chine* (1688) by Pierre Savouret.
17. Ibid., 2–3.
19. Ibid.