

# Introduction

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The present special issue is entitled *Thinking across the Borders: Philosophy and China*. It mainly contains selected contributions from the inaugural conference of the European Association of Chinese Philosophy (EACP), which was held in June 2016 at the Vilnius University in Lithuania. This interesting, vivid and successful meeting has provided new insights into a broad range of questions and problems, riddles and mysteries with regard to both Chinese philosophy and philosophy in China. It brought together many of the leading experts in Chinese philosophy from Europe, Asia, Australia and the USA. However, this first conference of the EACP, which was founded in Ljubljana in October 2014, was much more than just a successful academic meeting. It was the first one of its kind in Europe. It helped to shape a vigorous intellectual community here in the field of Chinese thought and Chinese intellectual history, with scholars and learners in proximity to each other, ready and willing to engage in Chinese philosophy as well as with other thinkers and doers throughout Europe, China and the rest of the world. We are especially glad that the selection of articles from the conference will be published in collaboration with *Problemos*, the journal published by the Department of Philosophy of the Vilnius University, which was hosting this inaugural EACP conference. Such a joint publication is a brilliant example of the sensible implementation and realization of existing possibilities to carry out fruitful academic cooperation and exchange throughout Europe, and as such, it has special significance at this time.

This inaugural conference, which covered topics related to the very broad area of ancient, classical and modern Chinese philosophy, was—inter alia—also another opportunity to reflect once more on these topics. Because whenever we speak of Chinese philosophy, we must inevitably consider the appropriateness of this term. Since the general theory and genuine philosophical aspects of Chinese thought have rarely been treated by Western scholars, they continue to remain quite obscure for the majority of the academic community. Therefore, from the very beginning of our common work, we must—once again—very briefly examine the fundamental question (or dilemma) of whether it is possible to speak of a certain stream of traditional Chinese thought as philosophy at all.

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In his article entitled “There is No Need for Zhongguo Zhexue to Be Philosophy”, Ouyang Min—like many other scholars—argues that philosophy is a Western cultural practice and cannot refer to traditional Chinese thinking unless in an analogical or metaphorical sense. He thus proposes replacing the term “Chinese philosophy” with the notion “*sinosophy*”. However, the original meaning of this notion, which represents a compound of the ancient Greek meanings for “China” and “wisdom” is, in fact, nothing other than the translation of the Western expression “Chinese wisdom” into ancient Greek. The philosophizing or abstract traditions within Chinese thought, on the other hand, go far beyond the sole notion or discourse of wisdom, and so cannot be reduced to it.

It is certainly not the intention of our association to reinterpret Chinese tradition in terms of Western conceptualizations; philosophy as an academic discipline has arisen from the essential human need to philosophize. This is based on a desire to raise and open, again and again, fundamental questions regarding the nature and the significance of our existence and that of the world we were thrown into. This need is something universal, as is, for instance, the ability to generate language. However, although the ability or potential to create language and thus linguistic communication is universal, each individual language and the grammatical structures by which it is defined, is culturally conditioned. Thus the expression “Chinese philosophy” does not refer to a geographic dimension of this universal term, but is rather an expression of the cultural conditionality which defines a certain form of philosophizing, or of a certain system of philosophical thought with a typical paradigmatic structure. As Carine Defoort notes, we are perfectly accustomed to using the terms “Continental” or “Anglo-Saxon” philosophy, denoting different types or genres within the philosophical tradition, but the problem with the term “Chinese philosophy” goes further.

The simplest, but most frequent argument against the notion of “Chinese philosophy” is based on the assumption that a philosophy as such designates a system of thought, which arose exclusively within the so-called European tradition. In this context, philosophy is thus defined as a theoretical discipline which is based on the specific and unique premises and methods of the Western humanities. According to this supposition, every system of thought which arose within the context of any other tradition is thus necessarily scientifically or academically unreliable (or at least irrational), and can thus not be regarded as philosophical.

In methodological terms, this argument is Eurocentrism par excellence, especially if we consider the etymology of the term “philosophy”. As every child knows, philosophy originally meant the love of wisdom. Can anyone seriously maintain that Plato, Socrates or Aristotle loved wisdom more than Laozi, Zhuangzi or Wang Shouren?

On a somewhat more complex level, the assumption that the word “philosophy” in the European tradition signifies a special love of wisdom also holds good; in our tradition, it means a kind of wisdom that deals with specific questions of metaphysics, ontology, phenomenology, epistemology and logic. None of these clearly defined disciplines were ever developed in traditional China. Nevertheless, though more subtle, this argument still lacks a rational basis. Firstly, because Chinese philosophy is, in fact, not a philosophy in the traditional European sense, but a different philosophical discourse, based on different methodologies and with different theoretical concerns. Secondly, because traditional Chinese thought also developed certain clearly differentiated and highly systematic forms of inquiry which, however, differ greatly from those which were generally developed within classical European discourse.

Indeed, one could argue in the same manner that traditional European philosophy is not a complete philosophy, since it never developed any of the most significant philosophical categories and methods which form the core of traditional Chinese theoretical discourse, such as the method of correlative thought, binary categories or the paradigm of immanent transcendence. If we wished to be provocative, we could even invert the argument and state that the opposite was true, that it is European thought which cannot be considered as true philosophy. If philosophy is truly the love of wisdom, then philosophy as a scientific discipline with its rigid, technocratic delimited categorical and terminological apparatus (precisely that discourse which, in Europe and throughout the world, is considered as philosophy in a strict, essential sense) cannot be regarded as philosophy at all. At best, it can be considered as “philosophology”, in the sense of teaching, researching and writing *about* the love of wisdom.

In her famous article “Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy?”, Carine Defoort also states a position which is not grounded upon an absolute denial, nor on an absolute affirmation of the question. In this context, it could be said that the tradition of the “Chinese masters” (*zi*) is comparable with the wider Western philosophical tradition (and not merely its modern variant), to a degree that “allows us” to denote it as philosophy, since these discourses are, after all, posing questions of deep human concern while substantiating the ideas they contain with rational arguments. On the other hand, this position points to the fact that the Chinese themes and forms of reasoning are sometimes so fundamentally different from those of their Western counterparts that they offer a unique opportunity to question, in a critical and indeed *philosophical* manner, the currently prevailing notion of “philosophy” itself.

Sinologists, especially when in contact with scholars belonging to other areas of the humanities, are often confronted with the need to explain certain specific features of

traditional Chinese thought, its epistemological roots and its methodology. This inter-disciplinary issue, however, has been preconditioned by a necessity to clarify and define certain concepts and categories, which are rooted in East Asian traditions.

Over the past few decades, the previously “absurd” assumption that the “Western” theory of knowledge does not constitute the sole, universally valid epistemological discourse, something which would have been unthinkable for the majority of “Western” theorists less than a century ago, has now become generally recognized among most present-day cultural exponents and communities. It has thus become clear to most that “Western epistemology” represents only one of many different forms of historically transmitted social models for the perception and interpretation of reality.

Recognizing the comprehension, analysis and transmission of reality based on diversely structured socio-political contexts as a categorical and essential postulate offers the prospect of enrichment. Hence, instead of following the rudimentary horizon of Western discursive patterns and problems, we should try to approach the Chinese tradition from the perspective of language and writing, to which it belongs. If we try to follow the inherent laws of its specific concepts, we can gain a completely different, much more autochthonous and much less “exotic” image of this tradition. But how can we bridge the abyss between different cultures, if we no longer possess a generally valid, commonly shared horizon of problems? Certainly not by trying to “think like the Chinese,” in the sense of using some different form of logic. We should instead, as proposed by Chad Hansen and Heiner Roetz, seek to establish a methodology of intercultural research in accordance with the principles of the so-called “hermeneutic humanism”.

Here it should be remembered that humanism is the keynote in Chinese philosophy: people are the focus of Chinese philosophers, and human society has occupied their attention throughout the ages. For centuries, Chinese philosophy has, similar to other philosophies all over the world, been the central driving force for creating ideas and shaping knowledge which forms and develops human understanding, launches curiosity, and inspires creativity.

This creativity is certainly also reflected in the present special issue of our journal *Asian Studies*. It offers the reader an immensely broad, but at the same time profound insight into the complex universe of Chinese philosophical thought, covering a wide scope of different contents that are linked through the common thread of the specifically “Chinese” worldview.

The issue is divided in four sections, dealing with a wide assortment of different fields, ranging from traditional Chinese ethics, through political science and law,

moral cultivation, aesthetics and epistemology, to questions pertaining to history and the relation between tradition and modernity. The opening section is entitled *Confucian Ethics, Politics and Modern Law*. The first two essays in this section deal with the important relation between tradition and the present era, elaborating on the question of how to reconcile ancient Confucian ethics, which still has a lot to say to the present globalized and often alienated world, with the modern idea of normative law that is based upon the concepts of justice and equality. Both authors have treated this significant and topical question through the lens of the question whether it is right to cover up for family members who have committed a crime. Moreover, both deal with this question on the basis of a famous story from the *Analects*, in which Confucius clearly defends this position. In this context, Yong Huang, the author of the essay entitled “Why an Upright Son Does Not Disclose His Father Stealing a Sheep: A Neglected Aspect of the Confucian Conception of Filial Piety” raises several important questions regarding the correct interpretation of the anecdote, and some crucial terms it includes. He offers a detailed analysis of the related passage, embedding it into current scholarly debates evolving around the topic. Wei-Chieh Tseng, the author of the second article, entitled “Struggle for the Right to Cover Up for Family Member: the Significance and Value of the Confucian Thought ‘Cover Up for Family Members’ in Modern Law Society”, discusses almost the same topic from a different angle. Nevertheless, both authors—although each in his own way—relate the discussion to the discourse of normative modern law and its underlying philosophy. However, in contrast to Huang’s profound and complex analyses, Tseng illuminates a more general dimension of the problem, introducing and summarizing the main points of the dilemma in the wider context of this debate, which is actually rooted in a paradigmatic contradiction between the Confucian and Legalist theories. The section closes with Du Lun’s essay “The Early Zhou Period: Origin of the Idea of Political Legitimacy and the Political Philosophy of Confucianism”, explaining and interpreting some crucial documents of the Early (Western) Zhou Dynasty found in the “inscriptions on ancient bronze objects” (*jīn wén* 金文). In this way, the article discusses whether concepts such as the “mandate of heaven (天命)”, “respect virtue” (敬德) and “protecting the citizens” (保民), really originate from that time. The evidence suggests that in fact these concepts might be rooted in a much earlier period than assumed in previous research.

The second section deals with *A Specific Path to Chinese Modernization: The Term Datong and Kang Youwei’s Datong shu*. It opens with Bart Dessein’s “Yearning for the Lost Paradise: The ‘Great Unity’ (*datong*) and Its Philosophical Interpretations”. In this article, the author explores the term *Datong* (Great Unity) through the lens of different pre-modern interpretations, focusing in conclusion upon its

role in the evolution of Modern Confucian discourse. In his article entitled “A Tale of Two Utopias: Kang Youwei’s Communism, Mao Zedong’s Classicism and the ‘Accommodating Look’ of Marxist Li Zehou”, Federico Brusadelli, on the other hand, analyses the utopian and reformist dimension of Kang Youwei’s work *Datong shu*. The article focuses on the interpretation provided by Li Zehou, one of the most influential contemporary Chinese philosophers.

The next section includes three articles, and deals with a broader range of ancient Chinese philosophy, seen through the lens of new discoveries and innovative approaches to its interpretation, including comparisons not only between the most important representatives of the time, but also between ancient Confucianism and early modern German philosophy. It is entitled *Classical Pre-Qin Philosophy: Comparative and Analytical Perspectives*. It opens with Matthew James Hamm’s contribution, entitled “The Distance of Heaven: An Analysis of the Guodian Wu Xing”. In this essay, the author aims to prove that the Guodian text on the five conducts (*Wu Xing*) consists of two separate but related essays that mirror the distinction between goodness (the harmony of four conducts) and virtue (the harmony of all five conducts). The second article in this section, “In the Shadow of the Decay. The Philosophy of History of Mencius and Xunzi”, was written by Dawid Rogacz and pertains to the relatively unknown realm of the classical Chinese philosophy of history. The author analyses the debate between Mencius and Xunzi from the viewpoint of their opinions on the nature of the historical process, aiming to illuminate the main differences between the two perspectives and clarify which had more impact on the later official Confucian philosophy of history. Anja Berninger, the last author in this section, focuses in her contribution “Kant, Xunzi and the Artificiality of Manners” upon another important aspect of classical Confucian philosophy, namely on the rules and laws of classical ritual, especially regarding the meaning and social significance of manners and etiquette. In order to illuminate the important social function of these general social standards and their ethical dimensions, the author compares ancient Confucian approaches to this topic with Immanuel Kant’s views about the ethical significance of manners.

The subject of the last section, entitled *Unity of Skill and Art through the Lens of Zhuangzi’s Philosophy*, examines classical Chinese Daoism, focusing on different aspects of the work of its most famous representative, Zhuangzi. While Dušan Vávra in his essay “Skilful Practice in the Zhuangzi: Putting the Narratives in Context” aims to shed additional light on the eclectic nature of the text in question, proposing an alternative methodology of its reading, Loreta Poškaitė focuses on the aesthetic dimension of the same work. In her article entitled “The Embodiment of Zhuangzi’s Ecological Wisdom in Chinese Literati Painting (*wenrenhua* 文人畫) and Its Aesthetics”, she explores the relation of Daoist (and especially



Zhuangzi's) ecological ideas with regard to inter-penetration and "communication-without-communication", with a focus on traditional Chinese landscape and bamboo painting. Through the analysis of this linkage, the author aims to explain how certain influential ideas have impacted or represented the relationship between the artist and the world in Chinese figurative aesthetics.

Although the scope of this special issue is rather wide, I firmly believe that polylogues among different forms of intellectual creativity, as offered by the authors, are a good basis for further debates. As such, I hope our readers will enjoy this issue and find it inspiring for their thoughts and future debates about various intriguing ideas found in Chinese philosophy. The contributions included in this issue are much more than simple new presentations of past ideas or interpretations of some particular philosophical problems that arise on a local level, in the scope of some "exotic" system of thought. If we consider their real value and significance within the framework of present global developments, they also enable us to carry out a better grounded and deeper reflection on the question what role contemporary reinterpretations of classical Chinese philosophy will play in the future processes of global developmental.

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