

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLICATION OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

WITH REFERENCE TO THE CULTURAL SITUATION IN TAIWAN

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Abstract

In an age when it has become commonplace to encounter cultural differences, the problem of the latter deserves our close attention. With the help of phenomenology, the paper manages to illuminate the meaning of cultural difference. Beyond that, the paper wishes to show that phenomenology may also provide us with a solid ground, such that we can handle cultural difference in the face of the challenge of nihilism. The first part of the contribution is dedicated to a brief review concerning the question how

the problem of cultural difference has been hinted at in the thoughts both of Husserl and Schutz, and how it was overlooked by both of them. As next, the paper deals with the concept of appresentation, in order to see how it was originally developed in Husserl and then transformed by Schutz. The last part lays out the twisted experience of cultural difference displayed in the novel *Orphan of Asia*; within it, Nietzsche's ideas of nihilism are introduced, in order to evaluate how to face cultural differences appropriately.

Keywords: cultural difference, nihilism, Husserl, Schutz, appresentation.

Fenomenološka razlaga kulturnih razlik. Z upoštevanjem kulturne situacije na Tajvanu

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V času, ko je srečevanje s kulturnimi razlikami postalo nekaj običajnega, si tovrstna problematika zasluži podrobnejšo pozornost. Članek poskuša s pomočjo fenomenologije osvetliti pomen kulturne razlike. Obenem želi pokazati, da nam fenomenologija lahko zagotovi tudi trdno podlago, na kateri lahko kulturno razliko obravnavamo spričo izziva nihilizma. Prvi del mojega razglabljanja je namenjen kratkemu pregledu, kako je bil problem kulturne razlike nakazan v Husserlovi in Schutzevi misli in kako sta ga oba spregledala. V nadaljevanju se ukvarjam s konceptom aprezentacije, da bi ugotovil, kako je bil prvotno razvit pri Husserlu in kako ga je nato preoblikoval Schutz. Zadnji del predstavlja izkrivljeno izkušnjo kulturne razlike, kakor je prikazana v romanu *Azijska sirota*; v njem obravnavam Nietzschejeve ideje nihilizma z namenom ocenitve, kako se lahko ustrezno soočamo s kulturnimi razlikami.

Ključne besede: kulturna razlika, nihilizem, Husserl, Schutz, aprezentacija.

1. Introduction

Before taking up the issue of cultural difference in phenomenology, let me discuss briefly the cultural situation of Taiwan.

In the novel *Orphan of Asia*,¹ the author Zhuoliu Wu reveals the cultural situation during the colonial period between 1895 and 1945 by describing the life story of the protagonist called Hu Tai-Ming. The novel relates that no matter how much Tai-Ming moves around between Taiwan, Japan, and China he suffers from depressions of all kinds. In Taiwan, he witnesses the unequal treatment between the Japanese and the Taiwanese people; in Japan, he was discriminated by the Chinese students who study in Japan; his first stay in China ends up with the tragedy of being imprisoned, and ironically only thanks to his avowal to Japanese citizenship he is able to escape the danger. The second stay in China during the Second World War makes him witness the unbearable sufferings of the Chinese people. His final stay at home compels him to confront the exploitation by the colonizers and the absolutely absurd movement of imperialization.

Tai-Ming hopes to lead a humble, normal life. But it just seems hardly 267
achievable, insofar as the historical environment demands that he has to disguise himself from time to time and he has to be ready to make compromises to this demand. The entangled situation, which is a twisted experience of cultural difference, culminates in the scenario, when he escapes from the prison in Nanking to flee to Shanghai, and notices that his friend remarks unwittingly about how Taiwanese people are stuck between China and Japan, without being trusted by both sides:

[...] you have nothing to do against the historical trend, even if you are willing to contribute yourself to help, you are not trusted, they even suspect you to be a spy, viewed as such, you are no less than an orphan.
(Wu 2005, 211–212.)

1 *Orphan of Asia*, written by Zhuoliu Wu, was finished in the year 1945, shortly before the end of the Second World War. First published in Japanese in 1956, it was later translated into Chinese and published in Taiwan in 1962. The English translation was published in 2005.

Tai-Ming's experiences in China reveal that Taiwanese people are not only the orphans of Asia, but also oafs on earth. Due to the Japanese colonization, Taiwanese people are no longer genuine Chinese, they become untrustworthy for the Chinese people.

The symbolism of the orphan, indicating Taiwan's situation being stuck between China and Japan, is not only true for the colonial period, but is also true for the current period, as long as we witness that the cultural characteristic of Taiwan remains unclear even today. Looking back at history, through the colonization of Japan from 1895 through 1945, Taiwan had been a place constructed after the model of modern Japan, but after the Chinese nationalist party KMT came or retreated to Taiwan in 1949, the whole island was transformed into Chinese style, at least at the surface level. In the 1960s, the island claimed itself to be the genuine representative of the Chinese tradition. But as time goes by, after losing the representative of China in the United Nations in 1971, the island turned out to be neither Japanese nor Chinese. Culturally speaking, both the Chinese and the Japanese cultures have had a strong impact on Taiwan, and additionally, the West has also exerted influence on the island. The result is that the cultural profile of the island remains unfortunately not very clear.

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Given the harsh situation, viewed from a different perspective, the Taiwanese people are free to shape a new culture with a large abundance of resources. In a word, there is no other place in the world like Taiwan, which would be situated more in a nihilistic vacuum, and which would have a better opportunity to demonstrate its creativity. Using the language of Nietzsche, one could say that, although Taiwan suffers from passive nihilism, it nevertheless has very good chances to turn the nihilism from a passive to the active one (Nietzsche 1988, 350 f.).

Now, let me return to the issue of cultural difference. The question of cultural difference has never been the main topic in phenomenological thinking, nevertheless it is not alien at all to some phenomenologists. Husserl, for example, dealt with the problem of cultural difference implicitly by distinguishing the home-world from the alien-world (Husserl 1973, 613).²

² See also Steinbock 1995.

Schutz, on the other hand, when clarifying the notion of life-world, also involved cultural difference in his theory. However, none of them have viewed it as an issue or explicitly explored its meaning, since for Husserl, the one world (*die eine Welt*) underlies the different home-worlds, and for Schutz, universal symbolism lays the common ground for different life-worlds. We see that they both are more concerned with what is common among cultures and leave the problem of cultural difference unnoticed in their thinking. In the light of all this, the question should be raised: How can the explication of cultural difference be construed in phenomenology?³

In order to treat this problematic, the first part of my exposition is dedicated to a brief review regarding the question how the problem of cultural difference was hinted at in the thought of Husserl and Schutz and how it was overlooked by both of them. The second part deals with the concept of appresentation, in order to see how it was originally developed in Husserl and then transformed by Schutz. The last part lays out the twisted experience of cultural difference displayed in the novel *Orphan of Asia*; within it, Nietzsche's ideas of nihilism are introduced, in order to evaluate how to face cultural differences appropriately. The paper holds that phenomenology not only helps to illuminate what cultural difference means, but also provides us with a solid ground to deal with cultural difference in the face of the challenge of nihilism.

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2. Life-world: universal or culturally different?

Husserl's discussion of cultural difference is, as indicated above, implicit in his distinction of the home-world and the alien-world. The notion of home-world, scattered around in *Husserliana* XV, refers to the normal life-world of

3 Dealing with cultural difference philosophically means that I am not concerned with the differences between particular cultures, such as the Chinese culture and the European culture, and how they differ from each other, for example, with respect to family structures or clothing styles. Inquiries of that sort belong to cultural anthropology, social psychology, or cultural psychology. Besides, what I understand to be cultural difference does not only refer to the great cultural traditions like those of China and Europe. I follow Alfred Schutz in holding that cultural difference also exists between different social levels, such as the subcultures of the adolescence and of the old age, between the working class and the businesspeople. Cf. Schutz 1962, 350 f.

the “homecomrades.” Normality is the result of tradition, which formulates itself from generation to generation, so that generativity (*Generativität*) is the key notion in the Husserlian descriptions both of the home-world and the alien-world. The alien-world is thus understood as the world, with which the homecomrades have no common tradition, that is, no common forerunners through generations (Husserl 1973, 431 f.). Since tradition and history shape cultural characteristics, the difference between home-world and alien-world can be logically viewed as a difference in culture. From the standpoint of a home-world, an alien-world is different.

270 Now, how does Husserl conceive of cultural difference? He deals with it by introducing the idea of the one world (*die eine Welt*). According to Klaus Held, this “one world” is constituted in the same way as the intersubjectivity that is clarified in the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations*. Just as the other subject (*alter ego*) is to be recognized through his body, especially through the similarity of his and my bodies, so is the forerunner of the other cultural world recognizable through basic human phenomena, such as birth and death. The experience of primal generativity (*Urgenerativität*) creates, so to speak, the bridge between culture and culture.⁴ Theoretically, the relation between the one world and the different home-worlds is analogous to the identity pole (*Identitätspol*) of the intentional object and all its different perspectives (*Abschattungen*). Since the basis of the synthesis of all of the divergent perspectives lies in the identity pole of this object, the one world is a “self” that functions among all the different home-worlds. Additionally, since the identity pole of an intentional object is an idea, which can be reached only by way of idealization, the one world is also an idea.⁵ As far as it

4 Cf. Held 1991, 323. Held stresses that the alien-world is that, to which the homecomrades of a certain home-world cannot get direct access. Only through analogical association, in this case through primal generality, is the alien-world to be reached. In this sense, the home-world is constitutive of the alien-world. Anthony Steinbock understood Husserl differently with regard to this point; he holds that home-world and alien-world are co-constitutive (Steinbock 1995, 179). I am not yet in the position to judge, whether his interpretation is closer to Husserl’s than that of Held; I find however that his idea is similar to that of Waldenfels who spoke of “Verschränkung von Heimwelt und Fremdwelt” (Waldenfels 1993).

5 Cf. Husserl 1973, 181 f. In Held’s interpretation, this one world remains a cultural

can be determined, this was Husserl's point of view on the subject of cultural difference.

Schutz, on the other hand, integrated cultural difference as part of his theory of the life-world. Based on his concern to lay the foundations for the social sciences, he first conceived of life-world as the world of praxis and sociality. In his later writings, due to his increasing awareness of the significance of culture, he reformulated life-world as the practical, social-cultural world (Yu 1999, 159–172). For Schutz, every experience in the life-world is loaded with cultural significance that is revealed in an obvious way, for example, by way of evaluations, and every social-cultural group is necessarily segregated from alien groups by forming its solitary cultural norms. Every life-world is accordingly different from one another because of cultural differences.

Schutz did not exaggerate the differences between cultures, because he spoke of universal ideas almost in the tone used by Husserl. He introduced the concept of “universal symbolism,” which he described as follows:

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Everywhere we find sex groups and age groups, and some division of labor conditioned by them; and more or less rigid kinship organizations that arrange the social world into zones of varying *social distance*, from intimate familiarity to strangeness. Everywhere we also find hierarchies of superordination and subordination, of leader and follower, of those in command and those in submission. [...] There are everywhere, moreover, cultural objects, such as tools needed for the domination of the outer world, playthings for children, articles for adornment, musical instruments of some kind, objects serving as symbols for worship. (Schutz 1964, 229.)

home-world in spite of its character of universality. It is one cultural world among many others. The consequence of this interpretation is that this universal world is both universal and concrete. This confusion of Husserl's theory of life-world is also comparable to the one resulting from his definition of life-world both as ground and horizon (see Luhman 1986, 177).

Evidently, Schutz thinks that a universal cultural ground exists in all human societies, despite the cultural differences.⁶ This universal ground is common to all sociocultural worlds, because it is rooted in the human condition.

Schutz's position concerning life-world and cultural difference was ambiguous. On the one hand, he spoke emphatically of the importance of cultural difference for the life-world; and on the other hand, he appealed to some ideas of cultural universals. In any case, he obviously shared with Husserl the thought that there exists a universal ground for all cultures. This being the case, Schutz neglected the theme of cultural difference, too.

3. An elaboration of cultural difference through appresentation

In order to explore cultural difference in phenomenology, particularly by continuing the basic tendencies of both Husserl and Schutz, we may raise the question of what is specific to appresentation in this context and how this phenomenological concept is applicable to the problematic of cultural difference.

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In the situation, in which two things are completely identical, such as “2” and “2,” there is no difference. At the other extreme, if two things have no connection at all, for example, “two kilos” and “blue sky,” there is simply no sense in talking about difference. We assume, therefore, that difference is difference, only when two or more distinctive items are compared against a common background, and so appresentation can be used well to explain cultural difference. We have seen that appresentation is coupled with presentation, and together they make a “functional community” (*Funktionsgemeinschaft*). Presentation (in Schutz: “the appresenting item”) is common to all human beings, in spite of all kinds of cultural differences, whereas appresentation (in Schutz: “the appresented item”) is apparent only to a certain culture. The color red, for example, can be universally perceived, but this color may not have the same meaning or evaluation in different cultures. For the Chinese, this color signifies delight or joyfulness,

6 Lester Embree developed a similar scheme called “basic culture” that is “below that of categorical forms, common-sense constructs, and thinking or interpreting, and above that of the sensuous perceiving of natural things” (Embree 2002, 88).

whereas in another tradition this color may be associated with blood and is therefore frightful rather than delightful. Every perception has its cultural significance, as Gurwitsch put it (Gurwitsch 1974, 20, 143). But the cultural meaning or valuation is different from culture to culture. In the eyes of the Chinese, the color red would mostly be coupled with a positive value, but would not necessarily be so for an American person. A religious symbol, a cross, for example, would stimulate the feeling of holiness for a Christian, but no such feeling would be aroused in a Buddhist. But does it follow that the Chinese and the American perceive different colors, and that the Christian and the Buddhist perceive different figures? To insist that they do would be ridiculous.

The case can obviously be better explained, if we say that, at the level of bare perception, they share something in common, whereas at the cultural level, they have different interpretations. Or put in the phenomenological terminology, their appresentational references (in Schutz: “appresented references”) are different, whereas the presentation (in Schutz: “appresenting item”) is the same. By using the perception of Persian calligraphy to describe this situation, Schutz asserted:

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A calligraphic ornament (for example, a Persian manuscript of a verse from the Koran) is, for those of us who can't read Persian, apperceptually and only apperceptually perceived as a pattern of this and that ornamental configuration, perhaps in addition as the stylized letter of a language unknown to us, perhaps in addition as belonging to Arabic. But no pairing to an “appresentational” or “referential scheme” has occurred. (Grathoff 1989, 236.)

Schutz explained that everyone is more or less an expert in a certain field, because he and a few like him own certain knowledge that most other people do not share. This is because of the specific personal background. If a person is educated as a medical doctor, they would be accustomed to looking at the human body from a medical viewpoint. They have knowledge, to which non-medical people have no direct access. But they have a professional circle, and within this circle they may feel “at home” with respect to knowledge, that is, they can communicate with these people more easily. Now, the same

happens to the mutual relationship between different cultural circles. Every culture has its own traditions, according to which some historical events are highly appreciated. They celebrate festivals that are absent in other cultures. Such things belong to the stock of knowledge that is commonly shared by the members of this culture, but that is alien to strangers. Many things, many value-systems are so natural to the related members that they may not seem to be cultural anymore. Is the cultural not also natural, and is the natural not always culturally interpreted, as Merleau-Ponty suggested?⁷ We only need to take into consideration that every river has its name and every mountain as well. But maybe they seem to be so natural that people forget these phenomena are nevertheless still cultural and, moreover, that they are different from culture to culture. In fact, no culture can claim that its way of valuation and of course appresentation is universally valid. Husserl was also aware of the relative value of every cultural world, which he also named the “concrete life-world” (Husserl 1976, 136). But he reminded us of the fact that, however different cultural interpretations are, all human beings are nevertheless living in the same life-world, because their perceptions remain the same. This is the common world for all. The life-world thus understood can be described as the “pre-cultural world” (Carr 1974, 195).

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Some phenomenologists have found Husserl’s conception of life-world to be untenable. Gurwitsch, for example, insisted that the life-world is essentially a cultural world as well as a practical world. He said:

In the life-world we do not encounter—at least not in the first place—mere corporeal objects, pure perceptual things. [...] What we encounter are cultural objects, objects of value, e.g., works of art, buildings which serve specific purposes, like abodes, places for work, schools, libraries, churches, and so on. (Gurwitsch 1974, 143.)

7 Cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962, 347 f. Merleau-Ponty expressed this point even more clearly when he said: “Moreover the distinction between the two planes (natural and cultural) is abstract, everything is cultural in us (our *Lebenswelt* is ‘subjective’) (our perception is cultural-historical) and everything is natural in us (even the cultural rests on the polymorphism of the wild Being).” (Merleau-Ponty 1986, 252.)

And also:

Accordingly, the life-world, to which we gain access by the subtractive procedure in question, does not consist of mere corporeal objects in the sense just mentioned. On the contrary, it is a world interpreted, apperceived, and apprehended in a specific way. In a word, it is a cultural world, more precisely, the cultural world of a certain sociohistorical group, that of our society at the present moment of history. (Gurwitsch 1974, 20.)

What Gurwitsch meant by “subtractive procedure” will soon be explained below. For the moment, I think Gurwitsch was right in holding that we encounter cultural objects in the daily life-world, and that all cultures differ from one another. Nevertheless, he overlooked the phenomenon of cultural difference. Is this because the issue of cultural difference is trivial and therefore irrelevant? Schutz, on the other hand, recognized this problem and had some discussions with Gurwitsch about it in the correspondence they exchanged during the 1950s. I strongly believe that, as long as we understand the life-world as a cultural world, we can never dismiss the problem of cultural difference. But how are we to interpret cultural difference at all? Ironically, the Husserlian notion of life-world might offer us some solid ground for interpretation. We have seen that without commonness between cultures we cannot appropriately talk about the experience of cultural difference. Only when we say that, for example, Chinese people and the American people perceive the same color red, can we compare how differently this color is valued in each culture. And, as indicated above, the difference can be clarified in terms of appresentation, because appresentation is always coupled with presentation, with something that is directly perceived.

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As mentioned above, there has been some criticism of Husserl’s emphasis on bare perception, that is, that the perceived world is a product of abstraction and therefore artificial. Gurwitsch explained the objection as follows:

Although a cultural object exhibits its sense as a property pertaining to it and essentially determining and defining it, an abstraction is possible through which cultural objects are reduced to mere corporeal things

(*pure dingliche Realitäten*); and, accordingly, the life-world, originally a cultural world, becomes a world of mere things (*Dingwelt*). Though it is attained by an abstraction, the thing-world has, according to Husserl, priority with respect to the cultural world. That is, the cultural world presupposes the thing-world. That is, the cultural world presupposes the thing-world as a substratum. [...] In other words, the phenomenological account of cultural objects takes its departure from the thing-world and traverses the same path as the abstraction just mentioned—but in the opposite direction. (Gurwitsch 1974, 21–23.)

276 It remains unclear what Gurwitsch meant by “abstraction.” Was he referring to scientific abstraction? If not, then what did he mean? In this context we might take into consideration Heidegger’s distinction between *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit*, since Gurwitsch referred to it in some passages (cf. Gurwitsch 1974, 19). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger used three concepts, “conspicuousness” (*Auffälligkeit*), “obtrusiveness” (*Aufdringlichkeit*), and “obstinacy” (*Aufsässigkeit*), to explain how something useful might in the end simply turn into something for pure perception, something that is distant from our care and just shows up as something to look at. Heidegger also criticized Descartes in the same way, as the latter viewed the physical world around us as *res extensa* rather than as an intimate surrounding life-world. This way of treating objects around us is a symptom of the forgetting of Being (Heidegger 1993, 96 f.). Although Heidegger did not express it openly, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that Husserl had the same tendency, since he laid so much stress on *die vorhandende Welt*—the bare perception of objects (Husserl 1952, 186).

Now, my question is: Can the criticism of Heidegger really hold good for Husserl, concerning the latter’s emphasis on bare perception? I tend to deny this way of reading Husserl, because bare perception is not a product of scientific abstraction, especially not that in objective natural sciences. We should not forget that Husserl in his transcendental phenomenology strongly disapproved of modern objective sciences and suggested a return to the life-world, the world of bare perception that has a universally intersubjective validity. Even when we follow Heidegger’s distinction between *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*, we can see that such a criticism is not applicable to Husserl. If Gurwitsch followed

Heidegger in this respect, then we have to say that his criticism does not hold good for Husserl, either.

We may contend that in the life-world the substratum of perception is simply indispensable. According to Husserl, we must first intentionally perceive a “thing,” so that we may locate a specific meaning of it, whatever that meaning is. Such a conception of perception might seem questionable in the eyes of Heidegger as well as Gurwitsch, because in a familiar milieu, we may perceive something as a cultural object without further questions. Such a situation can best be explained in the words of Embree, who put it as follows:

Familiarity with how the world as we initially encounter it is full of cultural objects equipped with values and uses as well as belief characteristics facilitates reflecting how evidencing can justify believing, valuing, and willing. (Embree 2002, 90.)

But in the situation of encountering something unfamiliar, we are unable to catch the cultural meaning of “cultural objects” easily, even though we still perceive these objects as objects intentionally. In terms of presentation and appresentation (in Schutz: “appresenting” and “appresented”), we may say that each sociohistorical group has its own appresentational system of reference, which is not shared by its outsiders. Nevertheless, both the people of the in-group and of the out-group share the system of perception or, in Schutz’s terminology, the apperceptual system.⁸

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It is an obvious fact that our experience of culture today is no longer limited to a single culture. We all too often encounter things that are not easily comprehensible. Should we suggest that they are not cultural? If we recognize them as cultural, but cannot explain what functions they serve, for example, the atlatl from an ancient indigenous tribe in North America (cf. Embree 1997, 141 f.), we encounter the issue of cultural difference.⁹ In such cases, I hold that

⁸ Schutz distinguished between apperceptual, appresentational, referential, and contextual or interpretational schemes to explain various orders involved in the appresentational situation (see Schutz 1962, 297 f.).

⁹ In the article “A Gurwitschean Model for Explaining Culture, or How to Use an Atlatl,” Embree offered a fictional story about a student of archaeology, digging out something, with which he is very unfamiliar. He can only describe it as “a stick of wood

the Husserlian conception of perception is more helpful than that of Heidegger or of Gurwitsch. And I believe that his phenomenological concept of appresentation can offer us a useful instrument to clarify that conception. In sum, people from all cultural backgrounds share the level of perception, they all live in the same life-world as understood by Husserl, while at the same time possessing their own appresentational schemes and living in their own life-world as understood by Schutz.

As indicated above, the life-world has a cultural aspect, not just a natural aspect. We may consent to this criticism, if our life-world experiences take place exclusively within a limited cultural circle and neglect the alternative possibilities. I mean that this kind of criticism falls short of the obvious fact that we are now living in a multicultural, transcultural, or intercultural world; and I find it meaningful to take up the Husserlian and the Schutzhian position to explain our modern experiences of cultural difference.

278 Granted that encountering differences between cultures has become commonplace and the respect for cultural difference has been pleaded-for loudly today, the twisted experience of cultural difference that happened in the past, in particular during the time of colonialism should never be completely forgotten. As long as there exists an imperialistic attitude towards other cultures, there is the danger of falling back to the twisted experience of cultural difference. And it is exactly in this context that we need to take seriously the problematic of cultural difference and to explicate it appropriately. Taiwan, for example, is particularly in need of a proper treatment of cultural difference. For the sake of illuminating the twisted experience of cultural difference more vividly, let me resume the narrative of the novel *Orphan of Asia* as first.

less than a meter long with a small protuberance at one end” or at most “a piece of equipment of some sort from the caves.” Only after inquiring about it with a professor does he come to know that it is a weapon to kill a giant bison or even an elephant (Embree 1997, 142). Even though Embree concludes that, “[a]t the same time, the student (and the reader) can be said to have begun to enter an other cultural world” (143), and remarks that, “as a cultural object, i.e., concretely, the moon of the Indians is not the moon of the British” (168), the main theme of his article remains the attempt to explain the encountering of cultural objects rather than cultural difference.

4. *Orphan of Asia* and the problem of nihilism

In *Orphan of Asia*, Wu Zhuoliu depicts the colonial situation by describing a person named Hu Tai-Ming whose life story is full of unsolvable contradictions. Hu Tai-Ming is originally a descendant of landowners who have been literate for generations. Hu Tai-Ming learns a lot of Chinese classics in a private school, through which he becomes well acquainted with the traditional Chinese worldview. Later, he visits the modern school established by the Japanese colonizers. Such an educational background constitutes a cultural tension that for Tai-Ming can never be resolved: there are endless conflicts in his mind between the worldviews introduced by the Japanese colonizers and the Chinese tradition.

After Tai-Ming finishes his learning at a normal high school, he teaches in an elementary “common school” near his hometown. There, he witnesses the unequal treatment between the colonizer and the colonized. The inequality is obvious with respect to the salary as well as the status.

In order to escape from this kind of unbearable colonial conditions, Tai-Ming makes the decision to study in Japan. Once there, he enjoys his stay very much, especially since he is no longer confronted with the kind of discrimination he suffered in Taiwan. Everywhere he goes, the Japanese people in Japan are friendly to him. However, he is bothered by another kind of embarrassment—the inferior complex of the Taiwanese people as well as the discriminative attitude from the Chinese people. As soon as he arrives to Tokyo, his Taiwanese friends suggest to him to introduce himself as someone from Fukuoka, a place in Southern Japan, because the accents of both Taiwan and Fukuoka sound alike. Tai-Ming finds this suggestion quite unacceptable, because it reveals an inferior complex. The colleague who suggests to him to disguise himself before the Japanese even suggests doing the same in the face of the Chinese people. Anyway, he “should” hide from himself as a Taiwanese, no matter where he goes.

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Back in Taiwan, after his studies in Japan, Tai-Ming faces the colonial miseries just like before. For example, the sugar company means to construct a railway system, in order to transport sugar cane. They destroy the tomb of the ancestors of Hu’s family, without notifying any of their members in advance. The whole family is furious about this, yet they have no chance to claim their

own rights, even when they appeal to the court. This case shows how weakly the Taiwanese people are protected by the law.

Since Tai-Ming does not create a career for himself back home on the island, he decides to go to China to try his chances there. He does have a good time during the first few years, he gets married, has a child, works as a Japanese teacher in Nanking, etc. Unfortunately, as the Sino-Japanese war is approaching, the situation of the Taiwanese on mainland becomes worse day after day. After the breakout of the war, the Chinese government becomes hostile to the Taiwanese people, many of them are arrested without any reasons. Tai-Ming, with no exception, is also under arrest. Fortunately, he is rescued by two of his former students, who drive him to the river harbor of Nanking, where a ship owned by a Japanese allows him to come aboard, because Tai-Ming explains to the owner that he has Japanese citizenship. This is extremely ironical, because Tai-Ming never considers himself to be Japanese, but in order to escape from the persecution by the Chinese government, he has to insist on his Japanese affinity. Tai-Ming's experiences in China reveal that Taiwanese people are not only orphans of Asia, but also oafs on earth. Due to the Japanese colonization, Taiwanese people are no longer genuine Chinese, nor are they genuine Japanese.

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Tai-Ming's flight back to Taiwan is warmly accepted by his family. But the general situation in Taiwan is not at all better than before he left for China. The so-called *kominka* movement (皇民化運動), that is, the movement of imperialization, is at that time just at its peak. Some people are eager to change their family names into Japanese, in order to become Japanese. They are convinced that by becoming Japanese some profits may be gained, for example, their children may have the opportunity to visit better schools. Without showing loyalty to the Japanese, they become disadvantaged.

Tai-Ming finds this is a big tragedy, but under the colonial situation, he cannot but put up with all these happenings. As Japan is more and more involved in war, Tai-Ming is finally called to serve the army. He is sent to Canton, where he has to put on the uniform of a Japanese soldier. Mentally, he can never accept the role he plays in the face of the Chinese people. His sympathy for them is obvious each time he witnesses their bitter suffering.

As long as there are court-martials going on, Tai-Ming is called upon to act as a translator. On one occasion, eight young men suspected of resistance are

arrested, they are sent to the court. No matter whether there is evidence for their resistance activity, they are to be executed. For each case, Tai-Ming, as a translator, cannot but get involved, but the more executions he witnesses, the more unbearable it becomes for him because of all this. Particularly, when he sees how courageously these young people behave prior to the execution, he feels completely haunted. He becomes seriously ill and is sent back to Taiwan, after being diagnosed as useless for the army.

Once again, back in Taiwan, Tai-Ming recovers physically, yet he never recovers from the psychical impact. The author of the book *Becoming "Japanese"* describes the situation of Tai-Ming thus: "[...] the movements between Taiwan, Japan, and China are imbued with a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, and the loss of sense of grounding" (Ching 2001, 196). With his heightened sensitiveness, he no longer can absorb the impacts from all sides, particularly at the moment when he witnesses the death of his younger brother due to harsh force-labor; he becomes insane.

Tai-Ming's mental breakdown testifies to how agonizing "the loss of sense of grounding" is. His Taiwanese identity is extremely fragile, since, on the one hand, he is forced to depart from his cultural roots, which are originally based on the traditional Chinese culture. And, on the other hand, the relationship with the Japanese culture is never firmly established, since the gap between the colonists and the colonized is never overcome. Finding himself stuck between China and Japan, Tai-Ming can hardly hang onto any value systems; he can hardly find a place for himself to settle down, even in his hometown in Taiwan. With the terms of Nietzsche, he suffers from the passive nihilism, which will be explicated as next.

In Nietzsche's philosophy, nihilism operates as the negative force that denounces the vitality of life. Characterized by Nietzsche as the will to power, the active power of life should be employed without reservation in the form of subjugation or domination, which belongs to the masters and the noble people. By contrast, the reactive power of life, which is based on resentment or guilty consciousness and demonstrated in the weak or recessive lifestyle, belongs to the slaves and the humble people. The reactions can be seen to be the sign of weakness, and the nihilistic will (the will to nothing) counts as the opposite of the will to power. In this sense, nihilism can be viewed as the principle that

protects the weak, the sick people who carry reactive lifestyle. And such a lifestyle not only wants to preserve itself, but also pursues its ultimate triumph. As Nietzsche puts it in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

The sick are man's greatest danger; not the evil, not the beast of prey. Those who are failures from the start, downtrodden, crushed—it is they, the weakest, who must undermine life among men, who call into question and poison most dangerously our trust in life, in man, and in ourselves. (Nietzsche 1967, 122.)

This shows that the reaction, under the protection of life-depreciating and life-negating principles, undermines the active power of life.

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Understood as such, nihilism is basically the negative nihilism or reactive nihilism (Deleuze 1983, 146). However, in Nietzsche's thought, nihilism is ambivalent. It is not only limited to having negative functions, but it also has a positive side, since he speaks of the active nihilism (KSA 12, 350). Active nihilism is the sign of vigorous vitality. The life of the vigorous is so strong that the established value systems and institutions are no longer able to cope with the demands of vigorous life, such that the authority of these systems and institutions are undermined. As long as there exists an active nihilism, there is also the passive nihilism (KSA 12, 351), which is the sign of the weak lifestyle. Even though this kind of nihilism is close to negative nihilism or reactive nihilism, the specialty of the passive nihilism lies in the fact that the people with weak will suffer from the loss of the value systems and the relevant established institutions. They suffer the most when the distinctive values in the value system contradict each other, the consequence of which is disorder and chaos. While the passive nihilism mourns the loss of the established orders, the active nihilism is delighted to break with them and looks for innovative ones to replace them.

Obviously, Nietzsche highly praises the active nihilism. For him, it is the necessary means to destroy Platonism, which is the ground of Western thought and civilization. Either in the original form of philosophy or the transformed style in Christian religion, Platonism is viewed by Nietzsche as the principle that demolishes the vitality of life. Until Platonism is destroyed, the vitality of life can never be retrieved. There are tensions between life and the life-transcending ideas, such as the truth in knowledge, the good in morality, and

the God in faith, which make up what Platonism is all about. In Nietzsche's eyes, vitality can be tremendously suppressed by all these ideas, and the suppression leads to the reactive nihilism mentioned above. In case of reviving the will to power, one will have to overcome this kind of nihilism. Moreover, by taking up the active nihilism, all these life-transcending ideas or values can be negated, such that they are not life-suppressing.

With the three types of nihilism, the active, the reactive, and the passive, let me analyze the narrative of the *Orphan of Asia* by raising the following question: How far can Nietzsche's revolt against Platonism, the core of Western thought and civilization, be an inspiration for the protagonist of the novel, Tai-Ming? Obviously, Tai-Ming suffers from the passive nihilism, his becoming insane at the end of the novel is mostly a symptom of such sufferings. He is not only relinquished by his cultural origin, China, but also disregarded by the colonizer, Japan. He is agonized and stuck in-between without a way out.

Being abandoned by both sides can be viewed as being miserable, yet does the agonizing situation not provide him with a chance to reconsider his own relationship with these two cultures? Is it not possible for him to learn from Nietzsche? That is to say, instead of retaining the passive nihilism, why not assume the active nihilism? Since it is for him no longer possible to stick to the Chinese original culture, and since he likewise cannot embrace the colonial culture of the Japanese, he is unwittingly forced to break with these two cultures. Harsh as it may seem, he nevertheless wins a good chance to revive his vitality, to reconsider his relationship with these cultures, and to work out an innovative model. To stay suffering from the passive nihilism is not the only option, to assume the active nihilism to break with the old and create the new counts as an alternative. At least, by taking up a distance and practicing reflective thinking, he may settle down into a new relationship with the two cultures that nourished him first, but tortured him later. In this way, we may also say that he acquires a new perspective to handle the problem of cultural difference.

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5. Conclusion

In our age, we all too often encounter happenings, things, or objects that we do not comprehend immediately. They are alien to us, because they break

with the customary frame of life. But can they be deprived of the cultural meaning, only because they are different from us? Anyone who takes up the ethnocentric position holds such views, but such a position can involve a kind of imperialism that is undesirable in this multicultural and transcultural age. The problem of cultural difference is therefore significant and is worth paying attention to. Only when we know about the meaning of cultural difference, we may hold an appropriate attitude to deal with cultures. To negotiate what a different culture can mean to us, how to appreciate it, and what to learn from it. A healthy development of culture can be said to be built on an appropriate way of handling cultural difference.

As shown in the present paper, encountering a different culture can happen in a miserable way. This happens most obviously in the colonial situation. As Fred Dallmayr points out, since the beginning of the colonization in the early 16th century, “the Spanish authors speak well of the Indians, but with very few exceptions they do not speak to the Indians” (Dallmayr 1996, 7). Thus:

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According to Todorov, the Spanish–Indian confrontation was a failed encounter from the start, because it was predicated on two alternative strategies: either complete assimilation or complete rejection and subjugation. These two alternatives, he muses, are not confined to the Spanish conquest, but are the prototype of the behavior of ‘every colonist in his relation to the colonized’ down to our own days. (Dallmayr 1996, 6.)

A phenomenologist who is concerned with the questions of intercultural issues reminds us that: “[o]ne should not oversee the fact that all cultures share the same humanity” (Holenstein 1998, 293).

Husserl holds that there is a world, the life-world that is universal to all human beings, no matter what social class or ethnic group they may belong to. This idea corresponds to what Holenstein speaks of when he mentions “the same humanity.” On the basis of the universal life-world, or the same humanity, we can take on a reasonable attitude towards the experience of cultural difference. On the one hand, we can affirm the commonness among all human beings, and, on the other hand, we can also affirm the differences, resulting from different cultures. In this way, we not only elude the egoistic

position that depreciates the cultures of others, but also preclude the negative attitude towards one's own culture, like the colonized people tend to do.

In the interaction between human beings, in addition to experiencing the difference between them, people can also experience the commonness between cultures. This commonness is revealed through the universal life-world, upon which people can interact with each other. In other words, difference and commonness co-exist with each other, none of them can be disregarded. With phenomenological terminology elaborated beforehand, it can be said that people from all cultural backgrounds share the level of perception, they all live in the same life-world as understood by Husserl, while at the same time possessing their own appresentational schemes and living in their own life-world as understood by Schutz. Seen as such, phenomenology not only helps to illuminate the meaning of cultural difference. Additionally, it also helps us to build an appropriate attitude when dealing with cultural differences.

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