

Introduction: Humanism, Post-Humanism and Transhumanism in the Transcultural Context of Europe and Asia

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This issue of *Asian Studies* delves into the challenges inherent to humanity and the human condition. Over the course of centuries, these challenges have laid the groundwork for conceptual frameworks commonly referred to as humanism, which have undergone development within a multitude of cultural contexts. Numerous analyses and critiques of these frameworks can be found in many papers contained in this issue, especially regarding the dynamics between humans and non-humans. These discussions have arisen from various regions around the globe, often labeled as post-humanism and transhumanism, among others.

Humanism is often described as a discourse based on the idea that the human being is the measure of all things, often referring to the saying of the pre-Socratic Protagoras, known in philosophy as the *homo mensura* thesis. But is the human being really the measure of all things? Even if this were once true, it is certainly no longer the case today, or only to a very limited extent. We live in an era of neo-liberal economic monoculture in which most of our activities, even if they belong to the realm of pure artistic or theoretical creativity, are evaluated on the basis of the financial criterion of profit, which is fast becoming the most important and almost the only standard of social justification (Rugelj 2021, 116). As the Italian philosopher and writer Nuccio Ordine points out (see Šček 2021, 3), the fundamental problem of the 21st century is a humanistic one—we are trying to get rid of man! And as a counterbalance to a world without man, Ordine offers an ancient prescription: “Not less, more humanity will save the world” (ibid.). But a world without human beings, guided by an entrepreneurial and anti-humanist ideology, is also reflected in the contemporary education system, which is the only one that could offer the younger generation (those on whom this world is actually supposed to be based) not only knowledge, but also qualitative insight into the meaning of freedom and autonomy. But of course the aim of teaching and study programs is not to create free people, but to “sell degrees to customers who buy degrees” (ibid.). The logic of enterprise does not produce cultured citizens, but

professional experts for the labor market” (ibid., 5). The entrepreneurial logic does not need historical memory, nor intellectual exchanges that go beyond the narrow confines of national and utilitarian economic interests and therefore make a person truly human. But it is precisely the loss of memory and of the possibility of intercultural dialogues that is a dangerous phenomenon, which sooner or later—unless we humans decide otherwise—will deal humanism a final, fatal blow. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the greatest contribution of Renaissance humanism was precisely to rescue Europe’s ancient past from oblivion and to integrate it into the foundations of the new age and modernity.

However, this issue starts from the premise that the traditional European concept of humanism is outdated in its present form and can therefore no longer serve as the conceptual basis of modern, technologically and socially highly differentiated and globalized societies. At the threshold of the third millennium, the related idea of the autonomous subject, which took shape in 17th-century Europe in the development of Enlightenment thought, has often been questioned because it was based on the notion of an abstract, isolated, supposedly self-sufficient individual self that was posited in an unbearable anthropocentric position, conquering and exploiting both non-human beings and nature as such. It has also often been pointed out (see, e.g., Hohmann 2021) that the subject-object distinction has functioned both as an organizing principle and as a clear separation since the Enlightenment. In today’s complex and interconnected world, entities must therefore be seen as entangled and intra-active. There is no subject versus object, but rather alliances that shift, merge, and are unstable, and whose agency is subject to constant change (ibid., 12). In this context, many contemporary theorists (e.g. Demenchonok 2009) also problematize the idea of the supposed universality of human rights, which was based on the Enlightenment conceptualization of the subject based on the notion of universal necessity. Hence, in this outdated form, the conceptualization of the human rights can no longer serve as a suitable discourse that can provide an axiological framework for human action and the meaning of human existence.

Human rights, of course, remain a crucial concept that defines humanity. However, it is important to acknowledge that the current framework of human rights is limited in its scope, as it is still rooted in a Eurocentric and post-colonial axiological framework. This framework provides normative standards for evaluating humanism and human beings that do not necessarily reflect the diversity of human experiences. Thus, it is imperative to broaden and expand the concept of human rights to encompass a wider range of human experiences that go beyond the abstract and isolated individual. This expanded framework should also recognize the importance of communities, relationships, and attitudes towards non-human

beings. In essence, the ethics and axiology that underlie the contemporary idea of human rights need to be re-examined, expanded, and modified.

It is important to clarify that broadening and expanding the concept of human rights does not suggest that we should neglect or overlook the plight of any human being, including the most isolated, lonely and marginalized political prisoners, or those living in unjust and unequal conditions that undermine their fundamental human rights. Every person's life is priceless, and it is crucial to persist in advocating for human rights while remaining mindful of the fundamental significance of upholding the dignity and well-being of all individuals.

On the other hand, we must not forget on this way that the ideas of subjectivity and humanism belong to the central axiological foundations of modernization and represent an important part of the European heritage of ideas, on which the spiritual, legal and ideological paradigms of modern social systems are still based.

There is therefore a danger that even those aspects of humanism, autonomy and the free subject which have proved their absolutely positive and progressive charge in the course of historical developments will be drowned in the flood of utilitarian neoliberal discourses, which, because of the increasing diffusion of the concept of the subject, all the more easily put the material laws of market developments before the integrity and dignity of the human being as an individual who, by virtue of its being, is embedded in a social community and in his natural environment (Dirlik 2003, 276–77). Both humanism and the autonomy of the subject on which it is based are axiological preconditions for the preservation, enhancement and development of egalitarian social systems based on a balance between humanity and nature (Nelson 2023, 40). Indeed, egalitarian social systems based on a structure of social justice and ecological awareness are the fundamental prerequisites that enable this kind of integrity and quality of human life (Böhme 2008, 22–26). Therefore, the concepts that maintain and develop such integrity and quality need to be revitalized, updated and adapted to the needs of our times (Lee 2014, 7). In today's globalized world, they need to be placed in a fruitful relational, dialogical and dialectical relationship with similar and related heritages of non-European cultures (e.g. Sernelj 2014; Chai 2023). This relation, however, reveals the power inequalities that underlie attempts to include culturally marginalized bodies of thought within established disciplines (Burik 2023) and raises issues relevant to the globalization of knowledge. In this context, this issue focuses on the exploration of Chinese (and partly also on Japanese and Vietnamese) culture and philosophy.

The issue is ordered into four sections. It opens with a section elaborating on digital technology and artificial intelligence in transcultural, Chinese-Western

perspective. In the first contribution, Paul D'Ambrosio writes about "AI Ethics Beyond the Anglo-Analytic Approach: Humanistic Contributions from Chinese Philosophy". The author argues that classical Chinese philosophy provides valuable insights for addressing the human-centered challenges in AI. Instead of advocating for mathematical solutions or conceptualizing individuals, emotions, agency, and ethics in rigid and mechanistic terms, Chinese philosophy emphasizes the concepts of transformation, interconnectedness, and interdependent growth. By programming and utilizing AI in ways that do not oversimplify the complexities and conflicts of the world, we can leverage it as a tool to comprehend and navigate this complexity—an approach rooted in humanistic values. In this regard, Chinese philosophy can serve as a valuable and collaborative ally.

The second paper in this section is Jana S. Rošker's "Dissolution of the Self: Digital Technology, Privacy and Intimacy in Europe and the Sinophone Region". Her article investigates the correlation between digital technology and the concepts of privacy and intimacy in both Europe and the East Asian region, with specific attention given to the evolving nature and understanding of human personhood.

The second section of this issue delves into the diverse connections between human and non-human entities. It comprises four papers, starting with a contribution by Hans-Georg Moeller titled "Early Confucian 'Human Supremacy' and Its Daoist Critique". Moeller shows how and why numerous Daoist works, particularly the *Zhuangzi*, contain numerous narratives that embody a Daoist perspective challenging the notion of "humanist supremacy" and, more specifically, its implications in sociopolitical and moral contexts. The paper clearly shows that this Daoist anti-humanism is part of a broader endeavor aimed at fostering a state of human tranquility and well-being, prioritizing therapeutic aspects over ideological ones.

In the next paper titled "The Impact of China's Biopolitical Approach to Covid-19 on Pets", Thomas William Whyke, Joaquin Lopez Mugica, Sadia Jamil and Aiqing Wang utilize the concepts of biopower and uses and gratifications theory to analyze the treatment of pets in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focuses on a specific incident of a COVID-19 corgi killing carried out by a health worker in Shanghai and examines its reception on social media platforms. The findings indicate that the strong negative response on Weibo towards the corgi killing can be attributed to the influence of biopower, which prioritizes human life over animal welfare within China's COVID-19 approach. Consequently, social media has played a crucial role in empowering animal advocates and involving them in the emergency management of pets.

This paper is followed by Gloria Luque-Moya's article "Toward a Harmonic Relationship between Humans and Nature: A Humanist Reinterpretation of Early Confucian Philosophy". In response to the pressing environmental crisis, the author puts forth a proposal to revive early Confucian philosophy as a means to cultivate a more desirable approach to our interaction with the environment. Early Confucianism embraces a humanistic perspective that advocates for a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Consequently, this article aims to delineate a unique outlook on nature and the role of humans that is evident in early Confucianism, with the intention of reevaluating and addressing our present ecological concerns.

The subsequent paper is titled "Why the Chinese Tradition Had No Concept of 'Barbarian': The Mercurial Nature of the Human and Non-Human in Chinese Metaphysics". Its author is Xiang Shuchen, who contends that Chinese metaphysical thought, in contrast to the ancient Greek tradition, is rooted in a process-oriented paradigm that highlights the interconnectedness of all "things" with their ever-changing environment. A significant consequence of this perspective is that the distinction between the human and non-human realms is much more fluid. According to the Confucian viewpoint, an individual only truly embodies their humanity through the process of acculturation, wherein one's growth is shaped by participation in public symbolic practices. This transformative journey molds individuals into socially-oriented beings who consider the needs of others. Unlike the Greek tradition, which distinguished between the civilized and the barbarian, the Chinese tradition does not apply the concept of the "barbarian" due to its recognition of the continuous and evolving nature of humanness, and the importance of acculturation.

The fourth section of this issue deals with political theory and ethics in the context of humanism, post-humanism and transhumanism in China. It opens with Richard Stone's article "The Politics of Pure Experience: Individual and State in *An Inquiry into the Good*". The author explores the political implications inherent in Nishida Kitaro's theory of pure experience as presented in *An Inquiry into the Good*. His analysis is a response to the diverse and contrasting claims made about the political meaning and risks associated with Nishida's early philosophy. The author contends that while it is prudent to approach such claims with caution and consideration, a balanced evaluation reveals that Nishida's early philosophy was essentially apolitical. Nevertheless, Stone goes on to argue that being apolitical does not imply that Nishida's work lacks political consequences. On the contrary, the defining feature of Nishida's early political philosophy is its ability to enable readers to transcend political issues.

This paper is followed by Maja Maria Kosec's contribution, titled "Humanization of Chinese Religion: From Heaven (*tian* 天) to Ritual (*li* 礼) in Xu Fuguan and Li Zehou". This article offers a critical comparison between the interpretations of Li Zehou and Xu Fuguan regarding the emergence of new religious and moral concepts and beliefs during the period spanning from the Shang to the Western Zhou dynasty. The author elucidates the factors underlying the significant divergences in their approaches and demonstrates that these disparities primarily stem from fundamental differences in Li's and Xu's respective methodologies. Furthermore, the author contends that these divergences underscore the significance of comprehending diverse methodological approaches, as they facilitate a more profound and intricate comprehension of the process of humanization within Chinese religion.

The next paper, "A Humanist Reading of Wang Chong's Defence of Divination", was written by Mark Kevin Cabural. The author presents a fresh perspective on the ideas of Wang Chong by incorporating Chung-Ying Cheng's understanding of inclusive or intrinsic humanism. Specifically, the author highlights how this form of humanism is evident in Wang Chong's advocacy for divination. Furthermore, the author delves into the significance of onto-cosmological humility in divination and inclusive humanism, while also examining how this disposition or virtue is reflected in contemporary scientific literature. By proposing a humanist interpretation of Wang Chong's defence of divination, the author not only suggests a novel perspective but also asserts that onto-cosmological humility can serve as a guiding principle for responsible actions and personal transformation. This extends to the way humans interact with other beings and the universe as a whole.

The last section of this issue is titled "Comparative Approaches" and it comprises two contributions. The first one is titled "Marxist Anthropology Through the Lens of Philosophy of Language: Engels, Li Zehou and Tran Duc Thao on the Origin of Humankind and Human Language" and was written by Yang Xiaobo. The author highlights the Marxist perspective that distinguishes human beings from animals based on their ability to create and utilize tools, which is closely connected to the development of language and consciousness. Within Marxist anthropology, there is an effort to trace the origin of humanity by examining the emergence of tools, language, and consciousness. This approach encompasses a philosophical dimension concerning language. By exploring and comparing the hypotheses of Engels, Li Zehou, and the Vietnamese scholar Tran Duc Thao regarding the origins of humankind and human language, Yang's article aims to offer fresh insights into Marxist anthropology from the perspective of the philosophy of language.

This special issue concludes with Mateusz Janik's article "On Small and Large Vessels: Anthropological Difference According to Matteo Ricci and Zhu Xi", in which the author undertakes a comparative analysis of Song Neo-Confucian and late Ming Jesuit perspectives regarding the exceptional nature of human beings and the involvement of non-human entities in shaping the discursive foundations of anthropological distinctions. The focus lies on the arguments put forth by Zhu Xi and Matteo Ricci, both advocating for the notion of human exceptionalism. The paper is grounded in a historical context, considering the unique encounter between Jesuit missionaries and the Confucian tradition in China. This encounter brought together the scholastic tradition, influenced by Aristotle's philosophy, and Confucian teachings. Across Chinese and Western philosophical discourses, the concept of the non-human other has played a significant role in defining the very essence of humanity.

In conclusion, this special issue on *Humanism, Post-Humanism, and Transhumanism in Transcultural Perspective: Asian and European Paradigms* has offered a diverse and comprehensive exploration of these complex philosophical concepts. Through the lens of transcultural perspectives, the contributors have delved into the intersections and divergences between Asian and European paradigms. As we have seen, the articles presented in this special issue have shed light on various aspects, ranging from the historical development of humanistic thought to the ethical implications of post-humanist and transhumanist ideas. By examining the works of prominent thinkers from different cultural backgrounds, this special issue has provided a platform for critical analysis, fostering a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of humanism and its evolution into post-humanist and transhumanist discourses.

Moreover, this special issue has underscored the importance of considering cultural diversity and contextual factors when engaging with these philosophical frameworks. It has demonstrated the rich tapestry of ideas that emerge when transcultural perspectives are taken into account, allowing for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to the study of humanism, post-humanism, and transhumanism. By bringing together Asian and European paradigms, this special issue has contributed to the ongoing dialogue on the nature of humanity, the boundaries of human potential, and the ethical implications of emerging technologies. It is our hope that the insights gained from this collection of articles will inspire further research, fostering cross-cultural understanding and interdisciplinary collaboration in the realm of humanistic studies.

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