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Chinese Philosophy: Fact or Fiction?

Jana ROŠKER*

Abstract

Contemporary theoretical streams in sinology and modern Chinese philosophy have devoted increasing attention to investigating and comparing the substantial and methodological assumptions of the so-called "Eastern" and "Western" traditions.

In spite of the complexity of these problems, the most important methodological condition for arriving at some reasonably valid conclusions will undoubtedly be satisfied if we consciously endeavor to preserve the characteristic structural blocks and observe the specific categorical laws of the cultural contexts being discussed.

Whenever sinologists speak of Chinese philosophy, they must inevitably consider the appropriateness of this term. Due to the fact, that the general theory and genuine philosophical aspects of Chinese thought have only rarely been treated by Western scholars, they namely continue to remain quite obscure for the majority of them. Therefore, we must examine the fundamental question (or dilemma) of whether it is possible to speak of traditional Chinese thought as philosophy at all.

Keywords: Chinese Philosophy, Methodology of Intercultural Research, Orientalism, Religion

1 Preface: a central question of intercultural methodology

Especially in contacts with scholars, who belong to other areas of humanities, sinologist are often confronted with the necessity of explaining to them certain specific features of traditional Chinese thought, its epistemological roots and its methodology. This interdisciplinary issue, however, has been preconditioned by a

* prof. Jana Rošker, Faculty of Arts, University in Ljubljana. E-mail: jana.rosker@guest.arnes.si

necessity to clarify and to define certain concepts and categories, which have been rooted in Asian traditions.

The comparison and understanding of so-called foreign cultures is always linked to the issue of differences in language, tradition, history and socialization processes. The interpretation of various aspects and elements of "non-Western" cultures by "Western" researchers always involves the geographic, political and economic position of the interpreter, as well as that of the object being interpreted.

Irrespective of the question as to where the concern for the "clarification" and "determination" of similarities and differences of both epistemological systems arises¹, the search for a dialogue has always been determined by constant attempts to supersede and resume the limits of knowledge, and walks a fine line between revelation and acceptance, narration and interpretation². The constantly growing number of studies in this area is due to, among other things, the increasingly urgent need to clarify the methodological foundations of the modern theory of science, which must keep abreast of the technological and political developments of modern societies.

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 a generally recognized fact among most present-day cultural exponents and communities. It has become clear to most people that "Western epistemology" represents only one of many different forms of historically transmitted social models for the perception and interpretation of reality (Sloterdijk, p. 89). 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. This perspective is especially important for post-Christian cultures (ibid), for it offers the possibility of the sort of creative, dynamic self-reflection necessary in order to go beyond the self-contained,

¹ In European sinology, most researches seek a solution to the "crisis of European philosophy". However, both "Western" and Chinese thinkers are motivated by the search for their own cultural identity through reflection of the "Other".

² Although (not coincidentally) the present time is characterised by intense debates on intercultural hermeneutics, serious inquiries into this topic are still quite rare in the "Western" world (which is hardly accidental either).

suffocating atmosphere of the post-modern era, indicating a way out of the cul-de-sac of a mechanically dualistic comprehension of reality, and providing new input and impetus for breaking the moulds of pre-determined cognitive patterns.

However, despite the growing number of issues related to "Western" cultural identity, nearly every "Western" incursion into the field of Chinese studies remains essentially comparative, because virtually all intercultural research is based on a cognitive reflection on a subject which has been expressed in terms of its respective language and culture.

Failing to take into account the specific conditions determined by different historical, linguistic and cultural contexts inevitably leads to misinterpretations of the object being examined. Unfortunately, in current intercultural research, it is still common to project elements of the contents and forms of discourse which have been overshadowed by the dominant political (and thus also economic) power, upon the object being considered. This is true even in the case of investigations and interpretations of contents which arose in different circumstances and in differently structured social and cultural contexts. This danger has also been recognized by a number of contemporary Chinese scholars engaged in researching and re-examining traditional Chinese philosophical thought. In the foreword of his book on traditional Chinese logic, Prof. Cui Qingtian 崔清田 writes:

“比較,是把中,西邏輯視為各自獨立的文化現象,顧及他們各自所由生成的文化背景,看到其中相同的東西,更要注意其中諸多因素的巨大差異,以及由此所帶來的不同邏輯傳統之間的共同性和特殊性.比較要求同,更要在求同的基礎上求異.注意求異,我們才能認識邏輯的多樣性,才能認識邏輯的歷史,也才能進一步探求邏輯的發展規律”。

"To compare Chinese and Western logic, means to look upon them as independent phenomena, each determined by its own culture. If we take into account their respective cultural backgrounds, we can still observe many of their congruities; but we must also pay attention to the large number of elements which constitute their decisive differences. Only on this basis will we be able to discern common features as well as the specific characteristics of particular traditional forms of logic. Comparing means searching for joint properties but, even more importantly, it means being able to distinguish the basic differences which underlie such conformities. Only by acknowledging differences can we comprehend the manifold nature of logic, its history and the laws of its development". (Cui Qingtian, p.9)

Despite the tendency towards openness and an interdisciplinary approach, the discourses of modern science and the humanities are still predominantly determined by the paradigmatic network which serves the interests of the "New World". Cui therefore criticizes the paternalistic discourses which still represent the generally accepted valuation criterion not only in Western, but also Chinese comparative research (the obligatory logical method for such evaluation, is, of course, that of "Western" formal logic, although this is never explicitly stated by the author³) as follows:

“比附,是把一種邏輯視為另一種邏輯的類似物,或等同物,置中,外社會及文化背景的巨大差異,也很少注意甚至無視不同邏輯傳統之間的特殊性,而是一味求同.一味求同,就會使人們以一種文化下的邏輯傳統為標準,搜尋其他文化中的相似物,並建構符合這唯一標準的邏輯.其結果是,使邏輯的比較研究走向了一種邏輯的復制或再版,而不是對不同歷史時期和不同文化背景下的不同邏輯傳統的深刻認識與剖析”。

“Viewing a certain type of logic primarily as something which should be similar to, or even identical with some other type of logic, cannot be considered as comparative research, but merely as imitation. Such procedures are incapable of taking into account the enormous differences between the methods of Chinese and Western logic, as well as the specific features which condition these methods. While this approach makes extraordinary efforts to discover the common traits of both methods, it adheres to only one logical tradition, with which all other forms of traditional logic, including the development of new methods, must concur. This form of comparative research in the field of logic is incapable of arriving at new recognitions or achieving a creative analysis of the manifold nature of different, culturally-bounded logical traditions. It can only produce plagiarisms and bad copies of already existing methods”. (ibid)

The same holds true for the more general question, whether traditional Chinese thought as such can be considered as a kind of philosophy.

³ The reason for such discretion is, of course, the paradigmatic Chinese politeness which prevents him from expressing his criticisms directly, but only indirectly and »between the lines«.

2 The term

We can begin by pointing out that the concept of philosophy has, of course, been understood differently in China than in Europe. The reason for this differing perception is to be found in the complex historical process which determined the specific development of traditional Chinese thought. Until the 19th century, there was no Chinese term for philosophy as an independent theoretical discipline and it was only with the recognition of, and confrontation with European and American ideologies (which also included works of the Western philosophical tradition) during this period that the term *zhexue* 哲學 came into being. The term was borrowed from Japan, where a systematic examination of Western ideologies had begun slightly earlier, during the Meiji period (*Piovesana*, p. 17). While this term is a translation of the Western concept of philosophy, etymologically it does not coincide fully with the Greek notion of the love of wisdom; however, it may express the essence of philosophical thought even better than the Western term, since its literal meaning is the teaching of wisdom.

»As a case in point, Lao Sze-kwang points out that the word philosophy (and, I might add, religion) is purely of 'western' origin and did not exist even in translated forms until as late as the Meiji in Japan, and from thence into China. However, equally important is the fact that these terms have existed for the past hundred years as translated terms and are now used by some in their translated forms to describe ways of thinking which previously were referred to as 'schools of thought' or 'teachings'. For good or ill, the 'East' now uses Western labels to describe and thus understand its own traditions. In this respect, cultural isolationism ended in the Far East over a century ago". (Allinson, 89, p. 5)

The same holds true for the substantive, "philosopher". Until the 19th Century, this notion was expressed in China by general terms like *xiansheng* 先生 (teacher) and *fuzi* 夫子 (or, in its abbreviated form, *zi* 子) (master)⁴. The terms *sheng ren* 聖

⁴ In its traditional usage, this term may come closest to the notion of "philosopher", given that in Liu Xin's 劉歆 categorization in one of the earliest general encyclopaedias from the Han Dynasty, *Hanshu* 漢書 also means scholars and literati. The *zi* 子- category thus contains the main works of all 9 principal philosophical schools (*jiu liu* 九流) from the classical period of ancient Chinese thought. We should also note that the original etymological meaning of this term is "son" or "child".

人 (holy man) or *xian ren* 仙人 (saint) are not appropriate, because they indicate ethical categories, similar to the term *junzi* 君子 (nobleman).

3 Arguments and counter-arguments

The opponents of the use of the term “philosophy” in order to designate traditional Chinese thought generally use three different arguments in order to sustain this view. We will examine each argument individually in the sections which follow.

3.1 Is philosophy a European issue?

The simplest and most specious argument (which, however, is still encountered with surprising frequency) is based on the assumption that philosophy as such designates a system of thought which arose exclusively within the so-called European tradition.

Philosophy is thus defined as a theoretical discipline which is based on the specific premises and methods of the Western humanities. Every system of thought which arose within the context of any other tradition is therefore unscientific and cannot be regarded as philosophical.

In methodological terms, this argument is Eurocentric 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* 老子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子 or *Wang Shouren* 王守仁?

On a somewhat more complex level, the assumption that the word “philosophy” in the European tradition signifies a special kind of 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. However, though more differentiated, 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 methodology and with different theoretical concerns and, secondly,

because traditional Chinese thought also developed certain clearly differentiated streams of inquiry which, however, differ greatly from those which generally developed within classical European discourse. Indeed, one could argue 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, and some of the principal binary categories, such as *yin yang* 陰陽, *zhi xing* 知行 (knowledge and action), *xing qing* 性情 (nature and emotion) and *jian bai* 堅白 (consistency and attribute). 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, for if philosophy is the love of wisdom, then philosophy as a scientific discipline with its rigid, almost technocratically 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 the love of wisdom.

“Whoever speaks about philosophy today in terms of the branch of knowledge being taught in universities, is generally referring to a small faculty in the humanities, where the real, concrete activity of the academic philosophers within that faculty is teaching the history of philosophy (this holds true for approximately 95% of all philosophers, who spend approximately 95% of their time doing precisely this)”. (Janich, p. 22)

3.2 The “stigma” of religion and of the social sciences

The second argument advanced by opponents of the legitimacy of the term Chinese philosophy is likewise based on a Eurocentric perception and interpretation of so-called oriental⁵ discourses, and assumes that traditional Chinese thought embraces only a portion of the wide range of contents and

⁵ In modern sinology, which has been trying - at least since E. Said’s classic study, *Orientalism* - to free itself from its own colonial tradition, the term “oriental” inevitably has an explicitly negative connotation and should therefore be placed between inverted commas as recognition of this fact.

concepts expressed by the term philosophy and that many discourses considered as philosophy in the Chinese tradition are, in fact, either religious discourses, or belong to the field of social theory. A superficial idea of Daoism or Chan Buddhism is usually placed in the former category, while a surface impression of Confucianism is generally equated with the latter.

With respect to this second objection, which considers certain central issues of Chinese thought to be forms of social theory, it should be pointed out that this argument equates traditional Chinese thought with the state doctrine which was dominant in China for almost two thousand years and that this supposed equivalence is, in itself, an inadmissible reduction of classical Chinese thought to an ideology which, though representing a key mechanism for preserving and representing the interests of the ruling classes, was far from being the only system of thought which had a decisive impact upon the social reality of traditional China. In addition, a more profound understanding of the Confucian system reveals that the Confucian school was not concerned solely with questions regarding society, politics and ethics, but that many of its central discourses dealt with phenomenological issues and the theory of knowledge⁶.

As regards the first objection, which considers traditional Chinese philosophical schools as being primarily forms of religious thought, we should bear in mind that transferring abstract terms from one socio-cultural area to another represents a very presumptuous and risky undertaking, especially for those cultural areas which developed cognitive traditions based upon structurally different economic and social conditions, and produced languages with fundamentally different semantic structures. This is even more so the case when dealing with terms which express abstract and complex ethical notions, such as the concept of religion, which is closely linked to the prevailing values system⁷. The

⁶ The Confucian Theory of Rectifying Names (*zheng ming lun* 正名論) is of enormous importance for the former, while the latter can be found in Confucian discourses on the categorical differentiations between actuality and its naming (*ming /shi lun* 名實論) and on the nature of true and false (*shi/fei lun* 是非論) etc.

⁷ The notion of philosophy is, of course, also a complex and abstract term. However, as we shall see later on, traditional Chinese thought implies most of the characteristics which represent the necessary contents or elements of this term, something which could not be said at all with regards to the notion of religion. A decisive argument in favour of the philosophical nature of traditional Chinese thought is that the Chinese themselves usually

ill-considered and baseless transfer of such notions from one socio-cultural context to another generally only results in misunderstandings which can be fatal for a proper comprehension of both of the traditions being discussed. Hence, even if it were possible to reduce classical Chinese thought to Confucianism or Daoism, it would still be difficult to affirm that we were dealing with religion in a general sense⁸.

Due to political and ideological reasons, moral and ethical premises were prevalent within most of the classical philosophical discourses of traditional China; however, this fact alone is not sufficient to assign the main philosophical schools of ancient China to the sphere of religious systems. Ethics and morals cannot be equated *a-priori* with religion as such. Much of classical Chinese thought, which proved to have a certain social relevance, proposed a pragmatic ethic which had completely utilitarian origins. The dubious, not to say false assumption as to the religious character of ancient Chinese social theories is once again founded, at least in part, upon a superficial understanding of the entire question, and therefore upon inadequate translations or Eurocentric interpretations of several of the main traditional Chinese philosophical notions. Many of the early pioneers of sinology⁹ often translated the principal, semantically multilayered

denote it with the term *zhexue* 哲學, (philosophy) and not *zongjiao* 宗教 (religion). Of course, one could still affirm that these discourses are religious and not philosophical because the Chinese were incapable of understanding such a sophisticated distinction as that between religion and philosophy, but such a position seems founded on both overweening arrogance and the crudest form of Eurocentrism.

⁸ Under certain circumstances, it could be claimed that Buddhism, as one of spiritual systems which decisively influenced traditional Chinese thought, represents an exception here. However, even most educated Buddhists are themselves in some doubt as to the adequacy of this viewpoint. Although Buddhism is clearly founded upon religious belief, hardly anyone asks whether this belief contains all the attributes which constitute the “common”, i.e. “western” understanding of the concept of religion. If so, then it represents a kind of atheistic religion; this is even truer for the school of *chan* 禪 Buddhism, which can be regarded as one of the most influential forms of sinicized, classical Buddhism in China.

⁹ We should not forget that sinology as a cultural discipline originates with the imperial and colonial traditions of the Western world and that the early pioneers of this academic field, who were often Christian missionaries, advanced their interpretations of traditional Chinese political, cultural and sociological ideas based on orientalist concepts. Likewise, the doubts concerning the direct, one-dimensional transfer of such concepts from one social-cultural context to another, and the dangers inherent in interpretations elaborated

concepts of classical Chinese thought with terms from the field of Western metaphysics or religions. Similarly, in early Western sinological works the concepts of *dao* 道 and *tian* 天 often appear as (sometimes even anthropomorphic) divinities, or in any case as superior powers determining human fate. Because these early works provided the first representations of ancient Chinese culture and civilization for the Western world, and because for many years the concepts contained in these translations and interpretations were never subjected to any fundamental criticism, they naturally had a decisive impact on the formation of the general awareness of this culture in Europe and America. However, a number of recent, in-depth studies have shown that very few traditional Chinese philosophers understood these notions in a religiously colored way, even when they were used to illustrate their ethical systems.

Both of the above-mentioned concepts contain cosmological, as well as social connotations:

“In general, it can be said that the concept of heaven (*tian*) as an ontological category can refer to Nature, as well as to society and to each individual. The same holds true for the concept of *dao*.”

Dao also represents an objective category and one of the fundamental subjects of philosophical debates and philosophical thought. In Chinese philosophy, *dao* represents the essence of the universe, of society and of every personality. Simultaneously, it can also represent the moral substance which embraces humanity, justice, rituality, loyalty and similar contents”. (Liao 1994, pg. 46)

Of the most influential classical Chinese philosophers, only the Confucian Mencius (*Mengzi* 孟子) and Mo Di 墨翟, the founder of the Moist school, could be regarded as religious philosophers (though with certain qualifications). Although the Moist school is better known for its logic and epistemology, Mo Di’s “anti-Confucian” ethics was more religious than rationalist in nature. According to Mencius, heaven is not nature, but represents the highest embodiment of morality. (*Gong*, pg. 22)

through the lense of Eurocentric logic, had not been developed sufficiently to have any impact on their own work.

»... For Mo Di, 'tian' represents a kind of external law which controls human beings and determines their destiny; therefore, it is the subject of human awe, and of human desire. However, this concept also contains strong moral connotations. It is precisely this moral nature of heaven (tian) which determines its predominance over mankind. (Liao, pg.46)

The perception of ancient Chinese thought as a religion is often based on superficial and inaccurate translations of major philosophical works into Western languages. Because the authors of these instant translations generally do not have an adequate command of the semantic and grammatical structures of classical Chinese their translations are generally characterised by an excess of poetic licence and a lack of genuine insight into the intrinsic structure of the original texts. This has also contributed to creating the common prejudice that traditional Chinese thought is not of a rational-analytic but primarily of an intuitive-literary nature.

Another reason for the forced inclusion of traditional Chinese philosophy into the category of "religion", is the tendency to categorize things and concepts according to their most obvious superficial characteristics, even if these are merely formal and bear little relation to the real contents which form the semantic core of the object in question. Societies where monotheistic religions such as Christianity or Islam dominate, tend to see a "House of God" in any structure in which rituals for the worship of certain entities or idols are performed. Unfamiliar ceremonies or rituals are therefore automatically seen as expressions of a religious faith, and for this reason Chinese temples are viewed as holy institutions that are the equivalent of Christian churches, Islamic mosques or Jewish synagogues. Because there are many Confucian and Daoist temples in China, Confucianism and Daoism are often classified as religions. This false analogy also results from an ignorance of Chinese socio-cultural contexts, given that the function of these temples is actually quite different.

As is well known, Confucianism is a system of ideas which had (and still has) a decisive impact upon Chinese society. This influence manifested itself in primarily in two ways: first, as a framework of values for general ethical premises and, second, as the sole and exclusively valid state doctrine. Since the transmission of the basic rules of the hierarchical power structure from one generation to the next represents one of the crucial principles (which is common to both these

functions), Confucianism also signifies the fundamental discourse which formed and directed the most representative patterns of classical Chinese socialization and the traditional educational system. Therefore, in Chinese culture, Confucius is also important as a symbol of the teacher's authority. Those who are unfamiliar with the elementary contexts of Chinese tradition, can be easily misled into assuming that Confucianism was a religion, and Confucius himself a metaphysical divinity, given the vast number of Confucian temples and idols which form the object of common worship. However, a more profound knowledge of the cultural and conceptual background of Confucian ethics¹⁰ reveals that most of these temples (together with their statues, sacred objects and idols) were erected to praise the symbol of the Great Teacher and are therefore an expression of the principle of authority within a clearly differentiated system of common social values. They have nothing to do with worshipping a divinity, nor with any kind of supernatural or metaphysical powers.

The same can be said of Daoism. Chinese tradition developed two kinds of Daoism: the so-called philosophical or classical Daoism (*daojia* 道家), and religious or popular Daoism (*daojiao* 道教)¹¹. As its name¹² indicates, the latter is definitely religious in nature, since its basic ideology contains most of the essential elements which constitute a religion (*Yang, C.K., p. 197*). These elements do not apply to classical or philosophical Daoism which, according to all general Chinese categorizations, belongs to the philosophical schools of ancient China. And though Laozi 老子, the famous (putative) author of the *Book of the Way and its Virtue* (*Dao de jing* 道德經) has been elevated by religious Daoism to a divinity who is worshiped by prayers, rituals and other ceremonial procedures, his book does not include any of these elements. The same can be said of the second great representative of the classical or philosophical Daoism, Zhuangzi 莊子.

¹⁰ The teachings of Confucius are absolutely anti-metaphysical. This tendency towards a highly pragmatic agnosticism can be found in most of the writings which have been attributed to Confucius.

¹¹ Some current theorists have abandoned this distinction, because the systems are interconnected to some degree. However, we should not forget that philosophical and religious Daoism originated from different, and even mutually contradictory premises. For this reason, we will continue to maintain the categorical distinction.

¹² Also in the Chinese.

Therefore, when dealing with ancient Chinese thought, we must make a clear distinction between Daoist theory and Daoist religious practice. However, while this distinction is absolute and unequivocal in Chinese terminology, as demonstrated by the existence and application of these two concepts, and their expression in these two currents since the first century AD, it was simply lost in most Indo-European translations. These two, divergent currents are, in the Western¹³ world, widely known under the common name of Daoism, which helps explain why the uninitiated public still views Daoism as a form of religious, rather than philosophical thought.

3.3 The problem of universality and necessity

While universality and necessity have been understood as basic assumptions of Western philosophical thought, traditional Chinese philosophy has, for the most part, been seen as a discourse which deals with concrete and contingent issues.

However, this assumption also originates from an overly-superficial knowledge of the subject matter. The assumptions of concrete and contingent in crucial methodological and cognitive premises are valid (though only within certain limits) only for the works of early Daoism and related currents. The widely-held view as to the normative ethical tendency of the most influential philosophical schools, Daoism included, was what deterred modern Western scholars for many decades from undertaking a more profound and methodologically more appropriate analysis of the principal works. In this regard, Chad Hansen stresses the almost total omission, until recently, of those elements of linguistic theory which underpin classical, and especially Daoist, discourses:

“Traditional neglect of the theory of language has led scholars to stereotype Chinese philosophy as strong in ethics and weak in analytic philosophy. This is misleading. Chinese normative ethics is embarrassingly weak. Its main strength lies in a novel moral psychology (novel, that is, from the western point of view) The preoccupations of modern analytic philosophy are precisely where Chinese philosophers make some of their most interesting contributions. The results of their theory of language and mind, furthermore,

¹³The terms “Eastern” and “Western” as categorical interpretative models, are not used in the present work in a rigid political or even geographical-cultural sense, but as notions arising from the distinction between a transcendent and immanent metaphysic.

profoundly influence Chinese normative ethical dialogue and their view of education. The Chinese theory of language is the key to understanding Chinese philosophy in general". (Hansen, p. 75)

The issues of universality (pubianxing 普遍性) and necessity (biranxing 必然性) are crucial problems in various epistemological studies in classical Chinese thought. The fact that they were almost completely excluded from the dominant ideologies and state doctrines is a political, and not a theoretical issue. In this respect, we should not forget that various normative ethical problems which came to the forefront of ideological investigations in Europe, had once been treated as philosophical questions, such as ontology and metaphysics, the question of God in the Middle Ages, and so forth.

An indirect proof of the existence of the principles of universality and necessity in classical Chinese philosophy can also be found in the Chinese language, which provides perfectly comprehensible and fluent translations of the notions, terms and concepts relating to these issues used in European philosophy.

4 Conclusion

As we have seen, the problems arising here are primarily of a methodological nature. Every methodology represents a system of dismembering, re-constructing and transmitting reality. Irrespective of their specific differences, every functioning methodological system is based upon a pragmatic core, which provides this dismemberment, re-construction and transmission with a coherent structure. Concrete methodologies, such as specific forms of human communication, are naturally closely linked to social relations of power. Therefore, it is no accident that the methodology of the social sciences and humanities, as they have developed through the history of Western theoretical discourses, provides universally valid criteria and principles for humanistic and social studies the whole world over. Like the English language, which in recent decades has become virtually the sole, generally valid means of verbal communications throughout the world, a similarly standardised methodology also provides us with a basis for understanding in academic discourses. However, the consequence of such an exclusive focus upon the paradigmatic and presumptive foundations of

these methodologies can also be seen in the exclusion of categorical patterns which belong to differently structured methodological systems.

Therefore, in researching Chinese philosophy, Western sinologists find themselves *ipso facto* in the role of comparative researchers: firstly, because of the aforesaid automatic domination of Western methodological systems within the contemporary social sciences and humanities, and secondly, because of their own linguistic and non-linguistic socialisation, which cannot be cast off like worn out clothing.

In recent years, however, Western sinologists in dealing with Chinese philosophy have also increasingly concentrated upon certain elementary questions, regarding intercultural hermeneutics¹⁴.

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 logic. Hansen himself explicitly rejects this possibility. Instead, he seeks to establish a methodology of intercultural research in accordance with the principles of so-called "hermeneutic humanism" (*Roetz, p. 70*).

"According to this hermeneutic principle of translation, we should, when faced with several possible interpretations, choose the one that reveals a 'pattern of relations among beliefs, desires, and the world... as similar to our own as possible'. The imputed similarity is not a similarity of beliefs - for these are seen as relative to a context - but of interrelations among beliefs, and between beliefs and a specific cultural background". (ibid)

This universalistic assumption leads to a conceptualistic shift: according to Chad Hansen, it is the very acceptance of the supposition of the existence of a

¹⁴ Important methodological approaches in contemporary sinological research have been developed by Robert E. Allinson, Chad Hansen, Christoph Harbsmeier, Hans Lenk, Hans-Georg Möller, Donald Munro, Gregor Paul and others.

common logic that offers the possibility of different views upon different worlds, which have been formed against the background of specific linguistic, cultural and historical conditions¹⁵.

With respect to Western sinological research in traditional Chinese philosophy, Hansen's methodological assumptions can be explicated in concrete terms as follows:

"Whenever we interpret Chinese philosophical texts, we should not give them a meaning that confirms our own conviction, but rather the meaning that would be the most plausible for us if we shared what might be called the Chinese ontology. Thus, a correct interpretation must always be backed up by a basic theory concerning that background ontology. This is what Hansen calls the 'principle of coherence'." (ibid, p. 71)

However, we could probably affirm that current comparisons of Chinese and Western traditions are, to a certain degree, already based upon an awareness of the problems just described, particularly with respect to comparative studies of language within cultural contexts. In this regard, comparative philosophy is no longer only:

»a cabinet of curiosities for different philosophical word descriptions and esoteric fields of study, but has gained systematic relevancy for analytical and foundational disciplines with considerable import for all other philosophical fields. Ontology can no longer be separated from epistemology, epistemology from the philosophy of language, and philosophy of language from the philosophy of culture and institutions, including 'life forms'. And this is true whether or not one would like to naturalise epistemology *sensu* Quine...« (Lenk, p. 4)

Hence, intercultural dialogues are not only possible, but also a most sensible thing to do. If we consider their value and significance within the framework of contemporary global developments, we can with an easy conscience ask ourselves

¹⁵ In debates on the problems of the universality and cultural determination of logical thought, the definition or interpretation of the term logic, to which the particular argumentation refers, is generally missing. Unfortunately, Chad Hansen is no exception here.

what role will be played, and what share modern and adequate reinterpretations of classical Chinese philosophy will have in this process.

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